**The Gold Standard**

**Summary**

Sequel to "To Soothe A Savage Beast"

This is an AU version of S1 & S2 of Once Upon A Time.

Once a curse shattered families, lives, hearts. Now the Gold family must break it, though some of them don't even know they're related, or remember who they are, or have magic. But what magic broke, magic can restore. A story of family, love, redemption.

**Notes**

Belle loses her heart to the most unlikely sorcerer, Rumplestiltskin, and learns to see him through new eyes. But can it last?

Interestingly enough, the title for this chapter came from one of my favorite musicals, Les Miserables, from a song from that soundtrack. But I felt it suited Belle and Rumple too here.
See the end of the work for more notes.
A Heart Full of Love

It had been two months since Belle had made the bargain with the Beast, otherwise known as the dark sorcerer, Rumplestiltskin. Two months of being half-chatelaine and half-maid, two months of slowly growing to realize that the man she had made that fateful bargain with was a man, and not the horrible heartless monster everyone else believed him to be.

It had dawned on her gradually, from the day he let her out of the dungeon and gave her a pleasant room in the castle, which he certainly didn't have to do, to the day he'd teased her after she'd broken that cup from that expensive porcelain tea set. She'd expected him to fly into a rage and scream at her, lock her up, or beat her the way her father sometimes did to servants who failed in their duties. Or transform her into wind or seven notes of music. He was, after all, a powerful sorcerer, the most powerful, some said.

But all he'd done was look up and shrug, saying, "It's just a cup."

Those four words had told her more than the most eloquent statement about what Rumplestiltskin cared about. And despite his collection of unique and magical objects, it wasn't things. No man who was a miser, who hoarded possessions would have taken so calmly the destruction of one of his artifacts. No, for all that he had been and done, Rumplestiltskin was not like the nobles she had known in her father's kingdom, the nobles who would have beaten a servant or peasant to death for breaking a cup, or spilling wine on their shirt, or getting mud on their fancy new boots. Those people valued their possessions like they would their children, sometimes more so.

But not him. Not the "beast".

She could not fathom why that was . . . unless . . . he had once come from the common people. Not having wealth tended to make you value things other than what money could buy. Sometimes the poor learned the value of a smile and appreciation for a job well done before a noble would think twice. Belle had learned that hanging around the castle kitchens, from the head cook, Tansy, and her helper, a girl called Alice Carstairs, a pretty country girl sent up to the city to make her fortune. Alice, who like Belle, always had her nose in a book, because the squire's daughter was allowed to daydream. Sometimes, after her work was done.

Belle missed Alice, more sometimes than she missed her father, truth be told. And much more than she missed the arrogant Gaston, her betrothed. Actually, that had been Maurice's idea. He had declared his bookish daughter would waste away into a ghost unless he arranged a marriage for her. Belle would have rather faded away than be married to that popinjay, who loved best to hear the sound of his own voice crowing. But, like so much else, a woman's fate was not her own. Unless chance dictated otherwise.

When chance had, Belle had taken it for all she was worth. She knew her father had been horrified at the prospect of his only daughter being enslaved to a wicked sorcerer like Rumplestiltskin. But Belle had been more horrified at the prospect of being Gaston's wife, forever at the mercy of his handsome narcissistic self. She did not want to be a showpiece a man could dangle on his arm and show off to his friends. She wanted to do something useful, to be something besides an empty-headed pretty fool.

Now she had. She, Belle of the House of Beauchamp, had singlehandedly saved her kingdom from the ravages of the ogres and their kin. By making a bargain with the Dark One in exchange for the lives of her people and her father. It wasn't something a woman was called upon to do . . . or even should do according to the code of behavior she lived under. But Belle had flouted convention
before, and doing so then had seemed like the only way to still have a kingdom left.

Her people mattered, her friends mattered, her father mattered more than some stupid rules or her own happiness. She had been taught her duty as a princess as a child by her mother, Alina. Her beautiful gentle mother, who had died when Belle was seven, of a fever no doctor could cure. Since then Belle's mother had been the head cook and the kitchen staff at the palace, who always had time to listen to a young girl's concerns and troubles and always time for a hug or a bite of a sticky bun fresh from the oven. From Tansy Belle had learned how to season a roast and bake cookies and pies. And to love the simple hardworking people who made up her kingdom.

Tansy and Alice as well had taught her that work was work, no matter who did it, and doing it should be done well. Thus she did as Rumplestiltskin bade her, and kept his house and his collection tidy. She also baked and cooked for him, when she found out the famed sorcerer had been living off of bread, butter, carrots and lentil soup, for the most part. That was fine for farmers and peasants, but who would have thought the sorcerer that could spin straw into gold would be eating such fare?

"I'm used to it," was all he said to her one day when she asked why.

"Used to it?" she had asked, but he had walked away, leaving her to ponder how in the world someone like him got used to eating like a peasant? Unless . . . once he'd been one? Once . . .

That night she made a roast beef, with pan gravy and tender asparagus and new potatoes. The items had appeared upon request in the pantry after she'd stood there and said something like, "I wish I had some asparagus and potatoes." That was how she discovered the larder would provide her with most anything she wished or needed.

She also made a strawberry pie.

She would never forget the look of sheer astonishment when she had set the dishes before Rumplestiltskin at supper. He looked like some new page boy at one of her father's feasts.

Then it had been her turn to gape when he told her to sit down and eat it with him. Servants eating with their masters was just not done, not in any kingdom she knew of! Except here, where it appeared the only rules was the whim of the master.

"You want me—your—servant—to eat with you?" she had sputtered.

"Yes. Now sit down."

"But . . . I'm not . . . you can't . . ."

"It's my home, Belle, and I can do what I like and when I like it," he had answered, unfazed. "Now sit and eat before this lovely roast goes all cold. I'm sure you're hungry, with all the work you do around here."

Utterly flummoxed, she had obeyed. The dinner had been superb, she had learned her lessons well from Tansy and Alice, and no one who'd learned under them could fail to be a good chef.

Her sorcerer—since when had he become hers—was mightily impressed. "This is marvelous, dearie. You must do it again some time."

"Oh, I can do it every night. I can cook more than this."

"Can you?" he raised an eyebrow. "How did a princess learn to cook like a master chef?"
She giggled. "Because I was a very unconventional princess, with no mother and a father who was busy all day and didn't have time to smother me with etiquette lessons. So I took cooking lessons instead, belowstairs with my head chef and her helper, my friend Alice."

"Ah. I see. Well, that's all the better for me," he smirked, his odd eyes twinkling. Then he asked, with all the curiosity of a child, "What's for dessert?"

"You'll see," she had teased, liking the light in his eyes, which she had grown used to over time.

He had adored her pie, and Belle had admitted it was her favorite too.

"We should have it every night then."

"Wouldn't you get bored having it all the time?" she queried.

"Hmm . . . yes, I suppose I would. How about every other night? Every week?"

She burst out laughing. "It's clear you're no noble with that attitude." Then she gasped at her boldness.

"I never said I was, dearie," he snorted when she would have apologized.

"What were you then?" she dared to ask.

"Figure it out. I'm sure you're smart enough to do so," he had replied maddeningly.

It had taken her two weeks to be reasonably sure . . . but she had guessed from the first moment he'd sat at the wheel, spinning with the ease of long practice. Magic or not, no one became so proficient without hours of time spent doing this same thing over and over. Belle knew how to spin, because it was considered a womanly art here, but she knew that in other kingdoms, men could spin and sew too, and made their livelihoods doing so.

"You . . . you're a spinner," she said hesitantly one morning as she dusted a section of the curio cabinet.

"The best in my village, once upon a time, dearie," he replied, deftly twirling the wheel about.

She watched him spin, absorbed by the way his long fingered hands took the straw and stroked it onto the wheel, his foot pumping the treadle in one continuous motion. He made it look so easy. The mark of a master. His delicate hands drew out the spun straw into a long glittering thread and twisted it deftly onto a spool. It was like a dance, where the partners were old friends who knew every step.

It was hypnotizing, peaceful, and Belle could have watched him all day.

Except dinner wouldn't wait and she was hungry.

That night they had tender chicken and dumplings, with new peas and carrots, swimming in a rich gravy that Rumplestiltskin damn near licked his fingers over. That and the round loaf of freshly baked bread.

"What's the occasion, dearie?"

"I just . . . felt happy today is all," she said, blushing slightly and looking down at her skirt. It was blue, the color of blue belles, he'd said, and soft as clouds. He'd spun the cloth, chosen it because it matched her eyes, and given it to her without a word. Grateful beyond measure, she'd made it into a
dress, not fancy, but not plain either, just right for a servant who wanted to look good for her master. Since when had she wanted to impress him? she wondered.

"Ah. Then I must keep you happy more often," he'd chuckled, and toasted her with his wine glass.

"I . . . I made angel food cake for dessert. With raspberry sauce," she'd stammered.

"Sounds divine. I'm not picky, dearie. You ought to know that by now."

"I know. But most . . . most nobles are. Tansy had to cook six dishes every day to keep them all satisfied. And even then, some still complained."

"Humph! Spoiled wretches! They ought to try eating dandelions and straw."

"Did you?" she asked, her eyes wide as she waited for his answer.

"You'll eat almost anything when you're starving, dearie. Rats, leather, it all tastes good when your belly's touching your backbone."

She was horrified. "You ate . . . rats?"

"And it was considered lucky we could," he answered calmly. "During the Ogre Wars, food was a commodity—and it was one most of the villages didn't have. So . . . we made do."

"M-Made do? But that's . . . horrible! Why didn't your lord help?"

"The duke? He was busy fighting a war, dearie. Had no time for the villagers, except when he needed new bodies to shove into the war machine. Then he came calling. Otherwise . . . we shifted for ourselves." Rumplestiltskin shrugged.

"I would never . . . let my people be reduced to eating . . . rats!" she cried, scandalized.

"You wouldn't," he agreed. "But they're not all like you, Belle. Most don't care one way or the other. It's how the world is."

Not my world! She had thought fiercely. But she had known he spoke the truth.

And she had wondered, alone in her room that night, if that was what had made him what he was?

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

As the weeks passed, he gave her more and more freedom inside the castle. Now she had full run of the library, which was fantastic, a treasure trove of books and knowledge just waiting to be explored. "Where did you get so many books?" she'd asked one fine spring morning.

"I made deals with people for them. Traded for them. Bought them."

"How did you learn to read? I mean . . . most commoners don't . . ."

"You're right. But I was bright lad and my best friend growing up was old Simon, a hedge healer. He used to be a monastery boy, and the monks taught him the power of the written word. He in turn taught me. Words are power, dearie. They can change the world."

"Ideas are power."

"Ideas are words put into action. Every good sorcerer knows that."
"But you can use magic without saying a thing."

"Sometimes. But the most powerful spells we write down," he said, then changed the subject. "Feel free to use the library, Belle. No knowledge is ever wasted."

She found plenty of new ideas in those books and plenty of tales too. She cherished them, for they allowed her to escape into unknown realms and become someone different for an hour or two. But one idea she had blooming in her heart was not in any book.

And it concerned her master—the heartless beast.

From then on they had many discussions—over books and other things, and he seemed not to mind that she was opinionated and had more on her mind than sewing, raising babies, and picking out clothes for tomorrow. He delighted in her sharp wit, and parried her stabs with his own equally cynical remarks. She found him strangely . . . endearing, the way a grumpy cat is endearing, especially when he curls up in your lap and begins to purr.

Don't be ridiculous, Belle! As if he could ever come to care for you! The princess he turned into his personal chatelaine!

Alice would have giggled wickedly and told her to go for it.

But she was not Alice. And she was afraid to risk her heart.

Until the day he caught her when she fell off the ladder pulling down the drapes.

He had done so easily, without a second thought, as if he spent the day rescuing her from her own foolishness.

And she . . . she had nestled into his arms without a qualm, it felt so . . . natural . . . as if she had been born to fit against him . . . and his arms had held her so securely that she was not afraid of falling, not ever again.

His touch had thrilled her like no other man's ever had. When Gaston had touched her it made her feel trapped, smothered, like a bird in a cage. But when Rumplestiltskin touched her . . . she felt a freedom she had never known, and her heart had thundered in her breast like a runaway warhorse. It was crazy. It was totally unacceptable. But it was there and she could not deny it, anymore than she could deny her own name.

His touch quickened her very soul and made her long to have him run his hands all over her . . . in places no man ever had.

Her face flaming, she had run from the room, hoping he hadn't guessed why she was blushing. Then again, had he been too?

Is he . . . falling in love with me? Am I falling in love with him? Can it be? The princess and the spinner? Or beauty and the beast? It's like some tale in a book! Then again, who said fairy tales can't come true?

She had no answer to her question and she knew she'd never be bold enough to ask him for one.

Now she hung the wash on the line in the garden. Her dress, his shirts. Her apron, his trousers. Then the sheets and towels. As she hung, she sang softly, an old tune Alice had taught her.
"Love has no reason, love has no rhyme,
Romance can blossom any old time . . ."

She reached for her last clothespin and gasped as her hand touched flesh.

"Allow me," he said, smirking at having startled her.

"You scared me!"

"Afraid the big bad wolf would gobble you up?" He hung the last handkerchief.

"Ha! If the wolf tried that I'd give him a good whack with my broom!" she shot back.

"I'd better watch out for the broom then," he snickered and danced away when she went to smack his arm. "That was a pretty sing you were singing. You have a beautiful voice."

"You're just . . . saying that. I . . . only sing when I'm alone."

"You should sing more often."

"Why don't you sing too?"

"Me?" He put a hand over his heart and laughed. "Dearie, when have you ever heard me sing?"

"You . . . when you're making a potion or something, I've heard you . . . sometimes . . ."

"Dancing around a cauldron, sure I can chant things, but the only songs I know are ones men sing after having one too many pints of ale. And surely you don't want to hear some of those."

"I might," she flung back. "If I was in the mood."

"Oh?"

"It all depends."

"On what?"

"If you can catch me!" she challenged, then she took off running.

She ran around the mulberry bush on the right side of the path.

He chased her, moving like a cat, faster and faster. "Here I come, dearie!" he cried, then began to sing, "All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel . . ."

"See, you're singing," she cried gleefully.

"I am not! It's a nursery rhyme!" he called.

She ran around the other side, giggling. "Quit chasing me, Rum!" she shouted. "Or else I'll shove you into the mulberry bush!"

"The only place I'll let you shove me, dearie, is on a bed! With satin sheets!" he called wickedly, then he doubled back and grabbed her to him.

Suddenly their mouths were very close, almost touching.
Without thinking, only feeling, she wrapped her arms around his neck and their lips met for the briefest of instants.

Kissing him was like kissing a bonfire, it made her hot and stole the air from her body. She gasped, molding herself to him, his touch making her ache in places she didn't know she could.

He looked startled, as if kissing him were shocking. Then he drew away, as if he had touched hot coals.

"Forgive me. I . . . forgot myself," he whispered hoarsely.

"No. I . . . I wanted you to," she said gently.

"You can't possibly . . . mean that," he shook his head, as if in denial.

"Why?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Because . . . look at what I am. And then look at you. Then ask yourself that question again. You'll see the answer."

"You think you're not able to be loved," she said, understanding dawning. "But you're wrong. You're not a monster, Rum. You only think so. But that's not what I see."

"Then you're blind."

"No. But you see as others see you, not as you are. You think you're irredeemable. But I believe that if you show true remorse and wish to change, you can."

"The things I've done . . . no woman could forgive . . ." he drew away, his face a mask.

But she saw beneath the façade, and to the pain behind his eyes. "She must have hurt you really badly," she found herself saying, for suddenly she could see that his distrust was founded upon rejection and suspected that the rejection had been another woman. He had spoken of a lost son, was it possible his wife had left him and taken the child with her?

Rumplestiltskin bit his lip. Belle's words recalled to him Milah's angry accusations and he winced. "It was my fault. I didn't try hard enough to make her see . . . I was a failure. She's gone now, along with my son."

"Did she leave you?"

"Yes," he replied heavily. She had been taken hostage by pirates at first, but in the end, when they had mocked and jeered at him for a cripple, laughed at his refusal to fight their captain, they had offered her a choice. She could stay with her crippled, cowardly husband, and be a pariah all her days, or come with them for adventure and riches on the high seas, and earn fame and fortune.

"What about Bae?" he cried, stunned. "What about your son?"

She had looked conflicted for a moment. "I'll return someday. With lots of gold and a reputation to match. One better than his father's, at least. I'll be back, and he can be proud of one of us, at least. You can tell him that, if he asks."

"You're abandoning us?" he had gasped.

"No, she's choosing a better life, cripple!" laughed one of the pirates.
Maybe it had been true. All he had known was that she had walked away, anxious to be rid of him, and had left him behind. She had never returned and he knew the reason why. It was because of him that Bae had been left without a mother. For she could not bear to be the wife of a coward, a crippled spinner whose one talent was to spin wool into the finest thread in seven kingdoms.

Now Belle looked at him, with her brilliant blue eyes, and he turned away, his face twisting. "I know well what I am. And you would do well not to mock me."

"Come back!" she yelled as he strode across the garden and back into the castle. "I'm not like her. I won't leave. I . . . I . . . love you," but her claim was made to empty air, as Rumplestiltskin fled back to the sanctuary of his rooms, never hearing her final words.

She stared at the laundry flapping in the breeze and thought sadly, *He didn't hear me. Poor man! He's so afraid of losing someone he's closed up his heart in a box. But I'll find a way to free it, and free him. Love always finds a way. And I have a heart full of love, and am just waiting to share it with him.*

She walked slowly back to the castle, her hands in her pockets, and thought that their next meeting would end much differently than this one. For against all odds, she had captured his heart, and she vowed then and there to never let it go.
Chapter Summary

Rumple tries to deny his feelings for Belle, but the heart always knows . . . even when trapped in a prison of its own making . . . and sometimes all it takes is a single look . . .

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rumplestiltskin slammed the door to his castle so hard the dishes rattled in the cabinet beside the hearth. Afterwards he just stood before the door, his arms wrapped about himself, shivering. How could he have been so stupid? To allow her to get close—to allow anyone to get close again—after losing Bae and Milah? He knew better. He knew that all that following your heart got you—all that loving someone with all of your heart—got you was nothing. An empty chair at an empty table. And tears and an empty bed.

He spread his hands and gazed down at them.

Those wonderful long fingered hands that could spin the most delicate thread without breaking it, spin straw into gold, conjure magic from the air . . . hold Belle with such passion . . . No! he scolded himself thoroughly. You will not think of her that way again! It's impossible, you fool! She's an innocent maiden and you're nothing but a dried up cowardly sorcerer that your wife left and your son ran away from. You'd never be worthy of her. Never! Not in a thousand years! How could she want you, Rumplestiltskin, when you are this—this monster?

He clenched his hands into fists. When would he ever learn? Must he have every lesson beaten into him until he bled, and his heart tore in two? Belle Beauchamp was not for him—not as he was, the poor cowardly spinner, and not now, as the most feared sorcerer in the land. She had kissed him out of a moment's lapse in judgment, not out of true desire. Yes, that was it. She didn't really love him. For who could love a beast? True love was not for him, he'd learned that long ago.

He took a deep breath, settling his racing heart, and walked over to his wheel. Sometimes, as he'd told Belle weeks ago, spinning helped him forget—helped him forget that once he'd been a man, and his life had been his own, and not a slave to power's price. But he hadn't been happy then either, known as a coward and trying to raise his son on his own, with food and money always a problem. Now he was a powerful sorcerer, the Dark One of legend, and he had more money than he could spend and anything he wanted and yet he had found that wealth and power brought him no solace. Because what he wanted—what he had always wanted—someone to love him and only him—was not to be bought, sold, or dealt over.

He had brought Belle here out of a simple need to assuage his loneliness. Yet she had become so much more. And now he felt trapped, terrified. He, the Dark One, afraid of a mere girl! It was laughable. He could destroy her with one snap of his finger, one bit of his power. But he never would. Because, despite all of the hard lessons learned, his foolish heart had gone and done the unforgivable.

He had fallen in love again.
He spun mechanically, barely needing to think about what his hands were doing after so many years of doing this work. *Stupid, stupid, stupid Rumplestiltskin!* The words in his head kept time to rhythm of his spinning. *You're a beast, a monster, you can't go falling in love with her. You're not worthy! Look at what happened last time!*

Maybe the gentle humming of the wheel would drown out the cries of his lonely heart.

Page~*~*~*~Break

When Belle came inside after finishing the laundry, she noticed that Rumplestiltskin was nowhere to be found. She quietly put away the laundry and then began to start on dinner, making a roast goose with potatoes, onions, and carrot and some bread. The baking eased the ache in her heart somewhat. She knew that Rum had left her not because he found kissing her repulsive, but out of fear, and she contented herself with taking it slower, giving him time to adjust and hopefully conquering the fear that resided there.

When dinner was ready, she rang the bell to call him to the table.

It was a few minutes before he responded, and when he did, he ate dinner in silence. Belle filled it with a rather funny story about nearly leaving the giblets inside the goose before roasting it, but luckily she remembered them before sliding the pan in the oven.

That coaxed a faint smile from his lips.

He retired to the couch in front of the fire while she washed the dishes, nursing a single cup of wine.

As was her wont, she settled down in the recliner next to him with a book and began to read. She often read or mended beside him before going to bed, and usually they had lively discussions. But not this night. This night he stared steadfastly into the fire and Belle kept halting in reading to stare at his hands curled in his lap and wish they were running through her hair.

Finally, after half an hour of such torture, she rose and went to bed.

This pattern continued for two more nights. On the third night she was fed up with both her and his behavior and she came to stand before him, faint traces of soapsuds on her hands as she said, "Is it something I've done?"

"Huh?" He jerked up from his contemplation, startled. "What did you do?"

"That's what I'm wondering. Because I must have done something to make you not want to talk to me anymore."

"I . . . No . . . I thought . . . after what happened . . . you wouldn't want to talk with me . . ." His eyes locked with hers, and there was such longing and sorrow in his gaze that she almost felt a physical pain.

"This is silly," she said softly. "We need to stop this. I want to talk to you, Rum. Not just because you're here, but because I enjoy it. I enjoy you."

He blinked. "You enjoy me? The company of the Dark One?" he inquired bitingly.

"Yes. When you aren't acting like an ass!" she snapped. "There's lots of things I enjoy about you. If I had a paper I'd write them down. But one of the things I enjoy most about you is that you don't say what you don't mean. Not to me. Except when you're scared out of your mind."
He lifted his chin a notch. "I'm not a coward!"

"I never said that. But everyone's afraid of something."

"And you think I'm afraid of you? Don't be ridiculous. That's like saying a wolf is afraid of a fawn!"

She came closer. "And yet I see the fear in your eyes. Don't. Whatever she did, is done and over with. Don't let her ruin what we have together."

He snorted. He wanted to jump off the couch and run out of the room. Yet she held him still with the mere power of her bewitching blue eyes. "It was just a kiss," he said, trying to be nonchalant.

"Was it? Then do it again," she urged.

"What? You want me to kiss you?"

"You heard me. You're not deaf, even if you are old enough to be my father," she teased.

"I don't age like normal people!" he huffed, insulted. "I'm not in my dotage. Everything still works!"

She raised an eyebrow, challenging him.

He could never resist a challenge. He pulled her into his arms, intending to give her an impersonal peck on the lips and let her go.

But as soon as their lips met, things changed. He felt a familiar fire in his blood, an awakening, and passion swept through him such as he'd not felt since he was a young idiot making eyes at Milah across the way, and maybe not even then. He drank her in like a draught of fine wine, she intoxicated him, sweet as sugar and wild as a mountain torrent.

He could smell the soap that still clung to her as she wound her hands in his hair, and kissed him back like there was no tomorrow.

And maybe there wasn't. For them there was only now.

And gods help him, but he wanted her. No, not just wanted, needed her. Her touch brought agony and ecstasy and he knew in that instant that his heart would never be free. Not ever again.

She drew back, gasping, and said, "If that was just a kiss, I would hate to see what you meant by a real one."

He said nothing, simply looked up at her.

Then she laughed and kissed him again, gentler this time.

"The fawn has captured the wolf," he admitted softly. "And you're not afraid?"

"No."

"Most everyone fears me and my magic."

"I don't. I have love's magic on my side."

He laughed. "Love. Do you even know what that is?"
"I know it's how I feel when I'm with you."

"That's desire, dearie."

"No, it's more than that. I'll . . . I'll prove it to you."

"Where?" he laughed huskily.

"On that bed you mentioned before. With those silk sheets."

He smirked. "This could be a long night, Belle."

"I don't care. We can sleep late in the morning," she returned saucily.

"Remember, this was your idea," he reminded her before he swept her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs to his solitary room. His heart was already singing a wedding march and for once he allowed himself to hope.

They tumbled down upon the bed in a heap, laughing like two drunkards. Belle wasn't sure if she wasn't drunk, his touch made her dizzy, when it wasn't making her burn like a pitch-dipped torch. He kissed her again and she cried out with the sudden pleasure. "Rum! Our clothes!"

"Are easily managed," he said, and then he banished them with a thought.

They stared at one another, unashamed.

"You are so beautiful. Like an angel in a painting," he murmured.

Gently her hand touched his leg, where a scar ran from his knee down to his ankle, his legacy of that fateful day. He quivered, amazed that she touched him there, when Milah had refused to even look at him once he came home.

"And you—are like a fine marble sculpture."

"With a crippled leg," he mocked softly.

"Does it hinder you?" she queried mischievously.

"Like hell," he growled, pretending to be insulted, while all the while his heart thrilled to her touch, like the delicate weave of silk caressing his ruined flesh. "Are you sure? This is what you want?"

"Yes! Now shut up and kiss me, Rum! Kiss me the way you do in your dreams, when you're free and unafraid."

Then he did as she commanded, for this night there was no master and servant, only lovers, and he wished to be free of the doubt and the fear. He made of his heart a gift, and she took it and tucked it safely away, like the precious treasure it was, giving him hers in return.

They were up all night, learning each other with new ways and eyes and when dawn broke they did not even notice, curled in one another's arms, reborn anew of passion, fire, and a love just beginning to blossom.

When Belle woke at last, the noon sun shone in her eyes, making her squint. Beside her, Rumplestiltskin was sleeping like the dead, clearly she'd exhausted him, she thought with a smirk! Well, he had done the same to her . . . blushing she crawled from their nest of blankets and stood shivering for a moment on the flagstones until she hopped onto the thick rug and started to dress.
Pieces of her wardrobe were scattered all over and she thought magical clothing removal wasn't all it was cracked up to be. She finally found her other shoe, it was under the bed, and stuffed her foot in it. Then she cast a loving glance at the sorcerer still snoozing, his hair tumbled lovingly about his face.

It brought a smile to her lips. Then she tiptoed downstairs, her mind still awhirl with the events of the night, and giddy as a schoolgirl, she waltzed into the kitchen. This time she would bring him breakfast in bed, and see what he would have to say to that. She began to heat up the stove, rubbing her eyes and stretching. Finally, his trapped heart had been freed, and she was going to make sure it stayed that way.

Chapter End Notes

but what will the morning bring? For once again . . . doubt shall rear it's ugly head
Chapter Summary

Rumplestilkin has regrets the morning after, worrying he's hurt Belle, but Belle proves feistier than he'd thought and quarrels with him. Leaving to go for a walk into the village, Rumple encounters an old woman who gives him a golden rose pendant . . . for his true love . . . and he gives it to Belle . . . and the two slowly begin to fall in love with each other . . . Then Belle leaves the castle to gather some straw . . .

Rumplestiltskin stirred and woke soon after Belle had gone into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. He yawned and sat up, blinking at the strong sunlight coming from the windows. Was it noon already? How had he slept so long? were his first thoughts. Hard on the heels of that came a sharp recollection of just what had gone on between these sheets last night, and even into the early morning. He found himself blushing scarlet and looking around, only to find Belle's side of the bed empty.

Dear gods, did we really . . . was I so mad with desire . . .? He had never been like that before, not with any woman, certainly not Milah and not even that tavern wench once, what was her name again? Barbara, Betty . . . anyhow, neither of them had ever made him feel the way Belle had . . . so adored, so loved . . . and heaven help him . . . he'd done it with an unmarried girl . . . and a virgin one at that. There was a reason certain spells of sacrifice called for a virgin, untouched by any man. It had to do with purity of spirit, body, and magic. Rumplestiltskin felt a pang of regret. He hadn't meant for this to happen. All he'd wanted to do was kiss her.

You did kiss her, you fool! About a dozen times last night! Among other things! The crimson flush deepened. You rode her like a damned rocking horse, you bloody lecher! He castigated himself. He could recall being gentle, but only the first time. After that . . . well, things had become very heated. She must hate you now, because otherwise she'd still be here, his conscience, a thing he thought dead long ago, whimpered. Instead she's probably hiding in a hole or fled from the castle! True, he remembered her initiating this whole thing, and he hadn't raped her, but still . . . she was an innocent and he was . . . well, a damn sight more experienced! Did I hurt her? Is that why she ran? Was it horrible for her? For me it was . . . indescribable . . . but was I really that bad? Maybe she's afraid of me now, I wouldn't be a bit surprised . . .

What had started out as a kind of joy upon first waking had now turned into a morass of recrimination and regret and dread. He had never hurt a woman before, despite his dark reputation, and he was praying he had not done so now. But doubt lingered like a festering sore and he slowly sat up, wondering if perhaps he should start looking for her on the grounds. Had she bolted as soon as it was light? Or perhaps she had left recently? He could imagine what grist this would provide for the rumor mill—hell, people already thought he murdered children and drank blood, what was raping a girl added to that?

Before he could even push the covers back, the door swung open . . . to reveal Belle, wearing the same blue dress she'd had on yesterday, carrying a breakfast tray. "Oh, good morning, Rum! I'd hoped you'd be awake."

Rumplestiltskin just gaped at her. "Then you don't . . . you aren't . . ." he fumbled for words, he was
so practiced in their use, he now sounded like a stammering idiot. What was wrong with him? "I . . .
umm . . ."

She placed the tray on the bed next to him and climbed on the other side. The bed was huge, big
enough for four people. "Are you all right? Because you look sort of . . . stunned? Is it because you
just woke up?"

"Err . . . no . . . What do you remember about . . . last night?" Steam was rising off the plate of
eggs, bacon, potatoes, and toast and the coffee smelled heavenly. His stomach was gurgling,
despite the butterflies in it.

To his eternal shock, she smiled at him. "It was . . . how shall I describe it?"

"Horrible? The worst mistake of your life?" he inserted.

"No! I . . . do you think I would come back if it was like that?" she cried, confused. "Was it like
that for you?"

"No . . . not at all . . . but I'm a man, dearie, and it's different for us . . ." Gods, did he really
say that out loud?

"Are you asking if I enjoyed it? Oh, Rum! The answer is yes. You made me feel so . . . wonderful,
so beautiful . . . there aren't words enough to tell you how I feel. I must sound like a . . . a babbling
idiot but . . ."

"No, that's me, dearie. Some thief came and stole all my wits this morning."

She smirked. "I've heard that sometimes happens . . . when you play too vigorously with it . . ."

"Belle! My gods!" he almost choked on a piece of toast. "I assure you . . . that is not true. It's just
when I found you gone, I thought . . . you ran away."

She smacked him on the back and then said, hurt by his assumption, "I would never leave you,
Rum. The bargain I made was forever. Unless you throw me out, I will be here, all day, all night,
no matter what." She gently cupped his chin in her hands. "Don't you see, Rum? I've never let any
man, not even Gaston, get close to me like that. Never! You're the first and the only." She picked
up a fork and fed him some eggs. "How does that taste?"

"Divine," he murmured and swallowed. Her admission should have made him feel better, instead it
made him feel saddened. "If I hurt you, I apologize," he said before taking some bacon and eating
it.

"You didn't . . . well, only a little . . ." she admitted, coloring. "But I'm told that's normal for a
woman's first time . . ."

He nodded, and quickly ate some potatoes. Maybe if he kept his mouth full he could avoid putting
his foot in it. Right then, eating was safer than talking. Especially because he wasn't quite sure he
believed her. Milah had never been this . . . effusive over their nights together. He set down his
fork, the plate was empty and picked up his cup of coffee. He glanced sidelong at her, recalling
how he had half-pinned her to the bed and couldn't resist asking again, "Are you sure I didn't hurt
you? You can tell me, I won't . . . curse you or anything."

Belle shook her head, getting a little irritated at his constant questioning. "Gods and hells,
Rumplestiltskin! Didn't you hear me? I . . . am . . . fine! Or don't you trust me to tell you the truth?
I've never lied to you before. Why would I start now?"
"Belle, I didn't mean that you were lying," he began awkwardly, groping for words that wouldn't come. Maybe he'd hit his head last night? He didn't remember banging his head anywhere, but what if he had and didn't know it?

"No? Well, it sure seems like that's what you're implying . . . sorcerer!" she snapped, sudden tears filling her eyes. "Can't you trust me? Even a little? Even after what we shared?" When he remained mute, she glared at him and scrambled off the bed. "You're impossible, Rumplestiltskin! And you can do your own dishes this morning . . . my lord!"

With that, she flounced out of the room and the door slammed behind her.

Rumplestiltskin sat there, thinking dazedly, She's got some temper. Who knew? I haven't been told off that good since I came home and Milah tore me to shreds. He sent the tray with the dirty dishes downstairs with a wave of his hand and finished his coffee, setting the chipped mug down on the dresser before rising to his feet and pulling on his clothes. By the time he'd finished getting his boots on, he found himself breathing hard and rather indignant that he'd allowed his own chatelaine to talk to him like that. Really, who did she think she was? He gave her a roof over her head and food to eat, the run of his castle. And this was how she repaid him?

Suddenly the room seemed too cramped and small and he needed some air. He decided to take a trip to town. The walk would do him good and he needed some time alone. Some time to think and not to feel. His boots tapped a staccato rhythm down the stairs as he limped out the doors.

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Belle heard the castle doors slam and she almost jumped out of her skin. Then she relaxed, realizing Rumplestiltskin had probably gone out somewhere. For a moment, she wondered if she had made him angry and he was going to throw her out of the castle. Then her temper flared and she thought about how stubborn the man could be. Sometimes he made her so mad she wanted to . . . to slap his face or . . . or . . . tie him to the bed, came a sudden naughty thought.

She froze. Where had that come from? But wicked as it was, she couldn't help but smile, imagining the look on his face if she told him that. Enough! If he was stupid enough to not believe her when she told him that last night had been the stuff dreams were made of, then she might as well give up. An instant later she shook her head. She would not do that. That was what his first wife had done, probably what every woman had done that he'd known. But not her. She would make him see she loved him. She would fight for this strange and wondrous feeling called love.

He might be the most powerful sorcerer ever, but he too was just a man. And she loved him. She would just have to keep pushing that fact in his face. But what if that made him run from her? No, she couldn't bear it if that happened. She nearly bit her nails in frustration. Then she decided to go on a cleaning spree, because anything was better than standing here in the kitchen thinking lustful lovelorn thoughts about her employer.

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Rumplestiltskin had reached the town square, and today was market day, where all the villagers from the outlying farms came into town to sell their produce. He was about to buy a piece of fruit from one of them when he felt a tug on his cloak and looked down.

He found an old woman, dressed in a faded gray cloak and a ragged brown dress sitting beside a wooden begging bowl and said, "Here now, Grandmother, what is it?" he used the term out of respect, for he could feel a touch of magic about this woman, and he wasn't sure if she was a sorceress in disguise. He didn't want to waste his power unmasking her if she was, and besides, he
knew what it was to go hungry.

"Please, have you a copper for an old blind woman?"

Rumplestiltskin shrugged. "I'd wager you see better than most, old one. But here." He placed two gold pieces into her bowl, knowing she would feel what they were. Money was no object to him, he could always spin more straw, and she didn't know who he was, so his reputation was safe.

She groped for the coins and bit gently to test one. "Oh! Thank you kindly, sir!" she nearly wept for joy. "I and my grandkids shall eat for three months on this." Her clawlike hand suddenly gripped his. "You seem tense, sir. Having some problems, sonny?"

He gave her a sharp look. "What do you know about it?"

"I can always sense trouble. It's a Gift I have. Just a small one. Maybe to make up for losing my sight. And I can feel you're troubled. About someone . . . a woman, most likely."

"Any two bit fortune teller could have told that," he snorted.

"Ah, they could, but could they tell you what to do about it? I think not!" the old woman laughed. "It's not her you don't trust, it's yourself. You're afraid—afraid of hurting her and afraid of your own heart getting hurt again."

Rumplestiltskin stiffened. "What manner of conjurer are you?"

"Relax, sonny. Mama Fortuna's my name, or was back when I was young and able to see. She troubles you, this girl. You love her but are afraid to say so." She groped in a small pouch at her waist and withdrew something wrapped in a dirty red cloth. "Here. Sometimes love doesn't need words, but actions. Sometimes the heart knows what's best before the mouth can speak. Take this. You helped me, now I shall help you."

"What is this? I don't need—"

"Oh, yes, you do, sonny! I know a desperate lover when I touch one. This is a very old thing, and it has a bit of magic of its own. Give this to her and she will know what you feel without saying a word."

He tried to give her whatever it was back, but she refused. "No. It's payment for services rendered."

"All I did was give you some coins," he sputtered.

"One kindness deserves another. Take it. And hurry home now. She's waiting for you. And you have what you were looking for."

Rumplestiltskin looked down at the dirty cloth in his hand.

When he looked up again, the old woman had vanished.

Closing his hand about the cloth, he turned away from the market. He was no longer hungry and he wanted some privacy to check this . . . object for any curses.

"Daft old thing! Thinking I needed her help!" he snorted to himself, striding into the trees and then casting a few charms. There was no curse upon it and he carefully unwrapped the object to reveal . . . a lovely tricolor gold necklace shaped like a rose. The craftsmanship was exquisite. He had never seen a finer piece. He gently stroked it with a finger. It was perfect for Belle. He could
imagine it around her neck. How it would sparkle, this little trinket, this . . . tangible reminder that she held his heart in her keeping, however he tried to deny it.

He smiled and gently tucked it back in the cloth and continued home.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Belle had fallen asleep waiting for the roast to get done, leaning her head on her hand on the kitchen table. When she awoke some fifteen minutes later to the smell of beef juices simmering, she found a small box next to her hand on the table. With it was a note. "What's this?" she asked herself, then she carefully undid the string about the note and read the following words penned in neat script.

_Belle,_

_I'm sorry. I don't trust easily._

_Rum_

She hugged the note to her. He had written her an apology. She opened the box, and gasped when she saw the beautiful charm. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever had, though it was not encrusted with diamonds or jewels. Its very simplicity made it ten times more lovely than any jewel she had ever received as a princess from her father or Gaston.

She gently undid the delicate gold chain and put it on. It lay against her neck and somehow it warmed her. _Oh! He does love me!_ For no man would give such a thing unless he loved her as she loved him.

She twirled and stroked the rose for a moment, her heart singing. Until her nose smelled something burning and she jumped up from the chair.

"Oh no! My roast!"

Page~*~*~*~Break

A hearty beef stew awaited Rumplestiltskin as he sat down for dinner that night. He sniffed appreciatively and picked up his spoon, waiting for Belle to seat herself. To his delight, he saw she was wearing the necklace. "I see you received my little . . . gift."

She blushed a becoming rose. "It's lovely. I've never gotten anything so beautiful in my life."

"Oh, come now. It's just a trifle." He went to drink his wine.

"No, it isn't. Not to me." She fingered the rose lovingly. "I just wish I had something to give you in return."

"You've already given me enough, dearie," he told her, and of its own volition, his hand reached out for hers.

At his touch she shivered all the way down to her toes. But she let her hand remain in his.

They ate their stew quietly, then he looked at her and said, "What did you make for dessert tonight, Belle?"

"Cookies. Peanut butter with chocolate chips," she replied, running her tongue over her lip.
"Mmm. I've never had them before. But they sound . . . delicious." He was almost drooling . . . at her licking her lip.

"And after . . . I have something even better," she purred.

His eyes widened. "You . . . aren't . . . you little vixen!" he laughed huskily.

She clasped his other hand in hers. "Believe me, Rumplestiltskin. I mean what I say."

He stared into her eyes. "I believe you," he whispered, then he kissed her fiercely. "Just a taste."

She laughed up at him. "I will treasure it . . . until later."

Rumplestiltskin ate those cookies faster than he had ever eaten anything in his life, even when he was starving.

Page~*~*~*~Break

The next few days were some of the happiest days the sorcerer and Belle had ever known together. They teased and played silly games with one another through the castle, and at night, Belle was more than willing to sleep together in his bed, which was fit for a king, she joked. Or a lovestruck spinner and a princess, he returned.

But one afternoon, he realized he was running low on straw and said lazily, "Belle, would you mind doing me a favor, dearie?"

"What, Rum?" she asked, quietly dusting the chipped cup in the cabinet.

"Would you mind running a little errand for me? I need more straw. Could you go to town and get some?"

"You're . . . letting me go out? Alone?" She hadn't been out of the castle in months.

"My leg's paining me a smidgen, dearie, so I can't go with you." He rubbed it. "I trust you. Surely you know the way back?"

"Of course. I'll be back very soon. And then I'll massage your leg for you," she grinned, moving her hand up to touch the rose pendant.

Rumplestiltskin smirked at her. "Is that a promise, Belle?"

"You know perfectly well it is, Rum."

"Very well. I'll await your return with baited breath."

She tossed her head like a spirited mare and headed for the doors. She would be back in two hours, more or less. And while she was walking she would plan what they'd have for supper that night. She nearly giggled aloud at how . . . domesticated she sounded. Like an old married couple. She pushed open the doors and tilted her head to hear the songbirds twittering. The outing was an unexpected pleasure, like so many things about her unexpected sorcerer. She hurried down the road on eager feet, anxious to get there and back again before dark.
Rumple's distrust and fear for Belle's safety from the Evil Queen drives him to a desperate act...altering both their lives forever, and yet bringing him one very unexpected gift...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

hope in her heart. If she could manage to break the dreadful curse on Rumplestiltskin, he'd be free, no longer seen as a monster, no longer a slave to dark magic. Then they could love each other without reservation.

Rumplestiltskin watched through the window, as he had been for the past hour. It was growing dark and he feared something had befallen Belle, who had not returned yet. He was almost inclined to go out and search for her, he never should have let her go alone, too many things could have happened to a lone woman, or, may all the gods forbid, she had run off at the first opportunity.

"I will never leave you," her voice echoed clear and true in his head.

He wanted to believe that, he wanted it so much it hurt.

But then, Milah had promised much the same thing, once upon a time.

And she had abandoned him and Bae, leaving him with a heart torn and shattered.

Despite her reassurances, despite the love he now bore her, he was still frightened that it wouldn't last. Anything good in his life never had, whether through his fault or another's. And given his track record, he was sure these halcyon days were coming to an end.

It was then he noticed that Belle was coming into the front courtyard. His heart did a sudden leap of joy and before he knew what he was doing, he had run from the bedroom window and down the stairs, taking the steps almost two at a time. He came to his wheel, set up in the front room, and sat down just as Belle came into the castle.

"Oh, you're back," he said, trying to sound nonchalant. At last.

Belle smiled at him, her basket was overflowing with straw. She set it down next to his wheel with a slight thump, her necklace glistening in the lamplight. "It took a little longer than I thought. Coming home I met a noblewoman traveling the same way and we got to talking."

Rumplestiltskin was immediately suspicious. "What was her name? There are no estates out this way. I own the land for miles around."

"She...she didn't say." Belle said uncertainly. "But why does it matter? I missed you, Rum." Maybe now was the time to put her plan into action. She pulled him into her arms and kissed him, letting all of her passion, all of the love of her innocent heart, to flow through her in that kiss.
He found he accepted her kiss greedily, like a dying plant starved for sunlight, passion shot through him like a jolt of lightning. He drew her closer, as if he would absorb her into his very being, as if they could become one—RumplestiltskinBelle—and no longer two separate people ever again. His love starved heart expanded and opened, feeling warmth and light, and suddenly he felt weak... as if he was losing his strength, his magic.

"It's working, love!" Belle exclaimed breathlessly. "Your curse... it's breaking! True love breaks all curses."

Her words struck terror into his heart. He drew back, staring at her in horrified fascination. "Who told you that?" he gasped, trembling slightly. "Who told you that?" he half howled. Betrayed! He had been betrayed again. Pain stabbed him in his midsection and he almost doubled over. Only pride kept him on his feet. It could not be... and yet it was... he could his power slipping away, like blood from a mortal wound.

Belle drew back, suddenly afraid of this stranger, who looked normal but acted like a crazy man. "She... she did. The lady on the road...

"I knew it!" he roared. "I knew this was too good to be true. You were sent by her... to trick me... to make me weak..." He wrapped his arms about his middle to hold the shattered pieces of his heart. He turned away to hide the inexpressible pain surging through him.

"Rum! I wasn't sent by anyone!" Belle objected. She went to touch his shoulder and he shrank from her like a leper. "I came back, damn you! I came back!"

"Yes, you came back! On her orders! Your friend... the Queen! Queen Regina of the Enchanted Forest. My old, old enemy. All this time... you were working for her!"

"No! No! Rumplestiltskin, you're not listening to me. I only just met her today, I never knew she was a Queen!" Again she clutched at his shoulder. "I would never hurt you like that. I'm not a spy. Dammit, I love you!"

He flinched like she had just struck a mortal blow. "No, you don't. Because no one could ever love me!"

She grabbed him by the shoulders, tears overflowing down her cheeks. "You're wrong, Rum! I love you. You were freeing yourself, I could feel it. The magic was changing you back. But then you became afraid..."

"Maybe I just love power more, dearie," he said, his voice biting and hard.

"No. I know you. You don't love power. You're just afraid of losing your heart again. To someone who cares—someone who loves you."

He shook his head. "My magic gave me a new life from the ashes of the old."

"Yes, but it also trapped you in a role you were never meant to play. That was what I was trying to save you from. But even love cannot free you if you push it aside."

"I need my magic, dearie." He said. Listening to her, he believed the Queen had played with her, as she played with everyone. He had to get her away from him. He was like poison, and she would wither and die if she remained here, she was vulnerable to attacks from the queen now. So he said, in an icy cruel tone, one that shredded him to pieces, "I don't need you anymore, Belle."

It was a lie. But he made his voice steady and certain, like the duke's noble friends, so she would
believe.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Go. Just go." He pointed towards the door.

"You're . . . you're telling me to leave?" She looked as if he had run her through.

"Get out! Now!" he shouted. Several things shattered and broke from the force of his rage as his magic responded to him. Glass shards winked at him from the floor, along with splintered wood.

"Fine!" she yelled back, gathering her courage. She felt as though she were falling . . . falling into a nightmare and she couldn't wake, no matter how hard she tried. "I'll go . . . and you'll be left with an empty heart and a chipped cup for your troubles." Her chin trembled, but she held her head high. His words had hurt her deeply, but the wound was bleeding out sluggishly. She turned and walked towards the doors, feeling as if her heart had been carved out and left upon the floor, one last sacrifice to true love.

Don't leave! She heard one voice call to her. He doesn't mean it! He's just lashing out at you from fear.

But I'm not a doormat! I'm a princess of the House of Beauchamp! And I'll not stay where I'm not wanted. Damn you, Rumplestiltskin!

Anger gave her feet wings and she almost flew across the floor. Suddenly she tripped, and one hand closed upon the rose necklace. She stopped. Turned. There was one more thing she had to say.

"I will always love you, Rumplestiltskin. But it's not enough, is it? Remember."

Then she walked away, seeing him sway like a chopped tree in a high wind, his face a mask of cold acceptance. All except his eyes. For one instant, she caught the torment within their depths. She almost stayed then. But some spark of anger drove her onward and she ran, ran as if possessed, until she was breathless and panting, down the road and into the wood near the town, to fling herself down on the cold hard ground and weep into her hands, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

Page~*~*~*~Break

The slamming of the doors was like a death knell. He felt it deep within his soul and it echoed in the empty spaces. Come back! Don't go! He silently called to her retreating form. But he was voiceless, like a drowning man, drowning in his own grief and sorrow, of lost chances, and a love that had almost healed his destroyed heart. Belle had been right. He had been afraid. But not of losing his heart, it had been lost weeks before to the dark-haired beauty. No, he had been afraid of her love for him, that it would destroy her, and he would not have it so, for he was not worth it. His enemies would hurt her if they could, if they suspected he loved her, she would be a pawn in their games of power. Especially Regina.

Run, my lovely fawn! Run and hide, and forget me. I cannot protect you, not all my magic can save you from your own foolish heart, which loves an unworthy beast. It's better so.

That might have been so, but oh gods, it hurt! He grasped the frame of the wheel, half doubled over, wheezing. The pain was smothering him, squeezing him in a vice, until spots danced before his eyes, which had begun leaking tears. It's the only way. The only way, he repeated. Remember, I love you always, Rumplestiltskin. He covered his face with his hands. Belle. I will always love you. Until the stars crumble from the sky, I will love you. He began to sob, like a lost child, for he had sent away his last hope and now his heart would remain broken forever. But at least she was safe.
Alice stared at the bedraggled figure that stumbled through the garden gate. The hem of her blue dress was stained with mud and her cloak was ragged and her hair snarled. Her shoes were worn to scraps and Alice almost didn't recognize her. Then the beggar raised her head and Alice gasped. "B-Belle?"

"Alice?" Belle's voice was hoarse.

Then she took two steps forward and fell into her friend's arms.

Alice clasped her to her floury apron, her blond hair mingling with the seal brown tresses, and there were tears in her brilliant green eyes. "You've come home, Belle. Gods, how I missed you."

Nine months later:

She lay gasping in the bed, weak from the loss of blood, though Tansy said it had been an easy birth for a first time. All Belle knew was that she was exhausted, and wanted to sleep. Her arms rocked her baby daughter, her beautiful miracle, with big brown eyes like her father's and a fuzz of dark hair. Her skin was slightly red, but Tansy assured it would clear up in a few days. "So beautiful. My lovely little Alina Rose."

"Alina? For your mother?" Alice said, smiling down on them.

"Yes. Mama would have liked that."

"And her middle name? Does it have to do with her father?" Alice asked. Belle had told her the whole story and Alice did not judge her. Especially not since she had married a mercenary and was big with his child.

"It does. He gave me the gift of a rose," Belle murmured and one finger stroked the rose pendant about her neck. "It's a symbol of our love."

"You seem to be doing fine, milady," Tansy said. "I shall go inform King Maurice of the birth of his first grandchild." She swept out of the room, leaving mother, child, and her soon to be godmother alone.

A hour later:

"Take the baby . . ." Belle ordered, struggling to sit up. She was so weak. But she couldn't let that stop her. She had to get the baby away from here before the guards came.

Alice stared at her. "Belle, I think he's not in his right mind . . . to issue an order like that . . . his own kin!" her gaze darted to the bassinet, where baby Alina Rose slept peacefully, unknowing of her peril.

"I can't wait for him to be in his right mind, Alice! He hates her because of her father, don't you see? Thinks she's an . . . abomination, a magical freak! My beautiful little girl! Take her! Bring her to Rum. He'll look after her until . . .until I can travel. Please, Alice! As my best friend, the only one I can trust, do this for me!"
"Are you sure? I could try and help you onto a cart. Then you could both come . . ."

"No. That would never work. Gods and hells, you're almost ready to deliver yourself! You can't be
dragging me down the hall. Take my daughter, bring her to the Dark Castle. I will follow as soon
as I get my strength back. It should only take you three days on foot." She wrenched a ring off her
finger. "Here. Give him this, to prove I sent you." It was her House ring, the Beauchamp crest of a
crown in the middle of a rose bush. A rose for the crown. She almost gave Alice the locket instead,
but at the last moment, her heart failed her. It was the only thing she had that he had given her, the
blue dress long ago consigned to the rag bin. She clutched the rose pendant, and it was almost as if
she felt his heart beating along with hers. Rum, protect our baby.

She fell back on the bed. "Hurry, Alice."

"You don't look so good, Belle. I . . hope you're not getting sick."

"Don't worry about me! We need to worry about those damn guards of my father's. You know
they're sworn to him. Gaston hates me now, he'll do whatever Papa wants. Whatever he wants, up
to and including killing my baby. Go, Alice! Before the guard at the gate changes and you can't
leave."

"All right. Lie down, no sense getting yourself worked up," Alice hissed. Then she opened a large
basket, removing several loaves of bread. She placed a downy blanket in the basket and then lifted
the sleeping baby and tucked her inside, carefully putting the blanket over her and the loaves of
bread around her. The she shut the basket. "There! Nothing here but bread for the villagers beyond
the gate." Alice grinned slyly and patted her bulging middle. "I doubt that idiot Rowan will dare
stop a pregnant woman on an errand. Not if he wants any of my pastries!"

"Goodbye, Alice! And . . . good luck."

"Don't worry, Belle. I'll be back before you know it. And I'll keep the baby safe." Then she was
gone, like mist over the moors.

A few minutes later, a heavy hand pounded on the door.

Belle pretended to sleep, and the door burst open to admit a red-faced Gaston and two other guards
in mail. "Princess! We've come to show the baby to her grandfather," Gaston bellowed. "Where is
she?"

Belle didn't answer, her hands clenched into fists beneath the sheet. If she were stronger, she would
have tried to strangle the arrogant knight for his lying, treacherous tongue.

"Belle?" Gaston peered down at her. "She's asleep. Find the damn baby!"

"She—it's not here, sir!" reported one guard, gesturing to the cradle.

"Gods and hells! Search everywhere! We need to find that creature! I want this palace searched
from tower to midden. The king wants it found and its miserable life ended so no taint of dark
magic infects us."

The sound of feet marching away echoed in Belle's dreams when she finally fell asleep. She was
terribly afraid and prayed that Alice and the baby were safe.

Page~*~*~*~Break

A pounding on the door woke Rumplestiltskin from his nap. He looked at the mantle clock and
swore. Who in seven hells was banging on his door at this time of night? Who would dare the wrath of the Dark One?

He yanked open the door and saw a woman, great with child, standing on the front steps with a basket clutched to her. "Who are you and what do you want?" he snapped, irritated. "If you're looking for a blessing for your brat in there, find a hedge witch, I don't do those. If you want a curse or a love potion, come back tomorrow! Now go away!" He made as if to slam the door in her face.

Just then the baby beneath the bread woke and began to cry.

"Huh? What's that? You've got another one? Gods and hells, woman! What are you—a rabbit?"

"No, but I know a white one who's always late. Let me in, Rumplestiltskin. For the love that Belle bore you, let me in out of the cold, before your baby perishes." Alice stuck her foot out so he couldn't close the door.

Rumplestiltskin half-dragged her into the hall. "What are you talking about, girl? I don't have a child. Not anymore." He glared at her.

She glared right back. "My name isn't girl. It's Alice. I'm Belle's best friend, she told me to give you this." She handed him the ring. "Recognize it? She said you would."

He took it and just stood there looking for a long moment. "Belle sent you?"

"Yes." Alice gently undid the lid on the basket, tossed the bread on the table, and gently removed the screaming baby from the basket. "Supper, my lord. And your daughter. Meet Alina Rose."

Rumplestiltskin took the howling infant in his arms. He looked down into the beet red little face and grinned. "You are so like your mother, sweetheart."

"Humph! She looks kind of like her father too, with her face all crinkled. I'll heat up a bottle if you'll change her. There are cloths in there. Do you have goat's milk?"

"Ask the pantry, it'll give you what you need." Rumplestiltskin said absently, still staring at the baby. "Shh, little one. I'm here. Right here." He moved to fetch a clean diaper and snapped his fingers and a bowl of warm water and a soft cloth appeared on the table. As he changed the baby, amazed that he hadn't forgotten how, he said, "Where's Belle?"

"Still at the castle. She couldn't come with me, the birth took a lot out of her. But I'm going back to get her. You should have been there, spinner!"

"How could I? I didn't know!"

"You didn't bother to find out, did you?" Alice moved into the kitchen area and located the pantry.

Rumplestiltskin finished diapering the baby and picked her up before saying, "You've got an insolent mouth on you, woman. I pity your poor husband, whoever he is."

"You're a fine one to talk," Alice snorted. She spoke to the pantry and soon had poured goat's milk from a pitcher into a small glass bottle. "Ah, hells! Forgot about the nipple."

"Here," the sorcerer whispered something and a nipple appeared on the bottle.

"You know how to do this, right?" Alice asked.
"Of course! I'm not ignorant, I've been a parent before," Rumplestiltskin snapped. "Have you?"

"Not yet. But soon."

"Gods help us all," he muttered and stuck the nipple in Alina's mouth. The howling ceased. "You can spend the night here."

"Thank you. I'll be on my way back in the morning. And soon Belle will join you here."

"Is that what she wants?"

"It's better than staying with a father who tried to kill his own granddaughter."

"What? Why? Is he mad?"

"I think so. But then, I don't think that baby is a monster either. But Maurice does. That's why he wanted her exposed. Said she was tainted with dark magic."

Rumplestiltskin looked as though he were about to explode. "And they call me a monster! That penny-pinching reject from an ogre's ass! I ought to change him into a snail and step on him!"

Alina made a soft cry of protest. He gently took the bottle away and held her on his shoulder. "I think you need to burp, lovely girl." He patted her back, murmuring, "Don't be afraid. Papa will protect you from your idiot grandfather."

Alice raised an eyebrow. "Would you really?"

"Absolutely. No one hurts my family. Not ever," Rumplestiltskin swore. "I've made a lot of mistakes in my time, Alice, but one thing I do know is that I love Belle and I love my child. Forever and always."

"Better late than never, magician," Alice said. "But you'd better not hurt her."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, it's a promise. Lots of things find their way into soup when you tick off the cook."

Rumplestiltskin laughed. "I'll keep it in mind."

Just then the baby burped loudly.

"Good job, sweetheart," praised her besotted father. "Looks like I'd better get the cradle down from the attic."

"I'll leave you two to get acquainted. I need some sleep."

"There's a bedroom upstairs. Can you make it that far?"

"I walked three days here on my own two feet with a baby, magician. I think I can manage the stairs." Alice said, somewhat crossly. Her back was beginning to hurt.

"All right then. One more thing, Alice. Don't have your baby on the floor."

"You're a riot, Rumplestiltskin. Good night."

Then she left father and daughter to bond and crawled upstairs to sleep.
It had been two weeks since Alice had left and still Rumplestiltskin had no word of what had happened to her or to Belle. He supposed Alice could have had her baby by now, and that was why they had been delayed. He wished desperately to see for himself, but he couldn't leave his daughter alone in the castle, the queen was abroad and he would never risk Alina's life. And magical travel with an infant was too dangerous, they had been known to smother accidentally when transporting from place to place because of the compressed space and air. So he had to cultivate patience, not something he had a lot of, and just wait.

He had just put his daughter down for a nap and covered her with a light blanket he'd spun of softest merino wool when he turned at a noise and saw the Queen standing there in his entryway. He checked himself sharply and muttered an Illusion Charm under his breath. Then he snarled, "How did you get past my wards? They're supposed to keep out vermin."

"Oh, Rumple! Sounds like someone's in a bad mood!" she chuckled sultrily. "What's wrong? Your latest potion blew up?"

"Hardly," he moved in front of the cradle, which was near the hearth. "Did you come through a mirror?"

"You forgot to cover one." She looked gleeful, like a naughty child pulling wings off butterflies.

"I'm breaking them all next time."

"That's not very nice, Rumple," she pouted. "You'd think you'd be glad to see me."

"I'm about as glad to see you as I am to see a roach in my cupboard."

She walked about the hall as if she owned it, surveying it critically. "What's with the cradle, Rumple? You expecting? Or are you just nostalgic?"

"I'm getting rid of it. You'd be amazed at the things you find cleaning out the attic."

The Queen snorted. "You know that little piece you had here for awhile? What was her name again?"

"Belle. What of her?"

"Well, far be it for me to be the bearer of bad news . . . but . . . I have something to tell you. I'd heard you let her go. Back to her father."

"I did."

"But you don't know what really happened, do you?" The Queen purred. "Let me tell you. After her . . . association with you, her father turned her back on her. Shunned her like a leper. Kicked her out of the castle, it's said."

"So she needs . . . a home?"

"Oh no. It's too late for that. He locked her in a tower, you see. It seems she refused to admit that she was held captive by a monster who did . . . unspeakable things to her. It upset the king very much, that his own daughter defended you to him. So he . . . tried to persuade her to his way of thinking. With clerics with hot irons and that sort of thing. Really depressing. But then, they say she was already depressed from losing her child. Did she tell you that she was carrying?"
Rumplestiltskin went still. She could not know of Alina. "No. Unless it wasn't mine."

"Could be. In any case, it's said the baby was born cursed and Maurice had it exposed. Then he locked Belle away. They said . . . she went mad. And threw herself off the top of the tower. Such a shame."

"You're lying."

The Queen gave him a pitying look. "Am I?"

"We're done," he snarled. He gestured and the doors opened.

"Goodbye, Rumple. Maybe you ought to hire a housekeeper. These rooms are getting . . . a bit dusty."

Rumplestiltskin collapsed on the floor as soon as the Queen had sailed out the door. His throat was tight. "She can't be dead. She can't."

He whispered to the sleeping Alina. He rocked the cradle and then sent his magic throughout the castle, breaking all the mirrors in it, even the ones he'd kept covered. He should have done that long ago, more fool him!

"She was lying. She has to be," he cried. But what if she hadn't been?

"Belle, where are you? Or Alice? Where are you both?"

Three days later he was almost desperate enough to do a Seeing in water, despite the fact that divining had never been his strong suit, when Alice arrived at his front door, looking like something a cat had dragged in.

"Alice! Where's Belle?" he cried, leading her into the hall.

"Gone," the young woman said dully. "Both of them. Gone, magician."

"Both of them? Gone where?"

"To heaven, Rumplestiltskin. Belle and my baby. Stillborn. I tried . . . forgive me . . . I tried . . ."

"No! She can't be dead!"

"Believe me, no one wishes that less than I do. But when I got home . . . she was gone. Died in the night of a fever. Maurice, the old fool, locked her up. She took sick and that was it. I couldn't . . . couldn't do anything! I . . . I fainted when I heard the news . . . and then my time came on me and . . ."

She began to cry wretchedly.

Rumplestiltskin put his arm around her. "Where in seven hells is your husband?"

"I don't know! He should have been back by now! But he isn't! And I can't stay there! They all look at me like I'm cursed. I'm so sorry. She was my only friend, and now she's gone, I can't . . .!"

She abruptly threw her arms about him, and her touch snapped something inside of him. Clinging to her, he wept, a storm of tears and sorrow that tossed his shattered heart about in his chest. Together they mourned the loss of the one woman they had both loved, until finally grief let them go, and they crumpled exhausted to the couch, spent.

Alice drew away from him, wiping her eyes. "Where's Alina?"
"Asleep upstairs. You want to see her?"

"Yes. It might help . . . to see one living . . ." she sniffled sharply. "I'm her godmother, you know. Belle wanted it."

"I figured as much, dearie," He handed her a handkerchief.

She blew her nose. "Look, I figured I could help you take care of the baby. Keep house for you, cook supper, that sort of thing. You don't have to pay me. Do we have a deal?"

"Is that what you want?"

"I have nowhere else to go. And I love Alina. If my husband returns, he can stay here too, all right?"

"Yes. I think . . . I think Belle would have wanted it that way." He shook her hand to seal the bargain.

And so the deal was struck, and the broken-hearted sorcerer managed to pick up the pieces and have a new life, with his small daughter and his unconventional housekeeper as companions to fill his days and nights with laughter and love. Only sometimes, when the night was still, and the moon soared high in the sky, did he pause and listen, for occasionally, in the sigh of the wind he heard her voice.

_I will love you always, Rumplestiltskin. Remember._

Chapter End Notes

Here ends the Prologue of Rumple and Belle's Dark Castle adventure, before the curse is cast. Next comes the whole of Season 1, but a different story from before. And if you've watched the show . . . you'll know that Belle is not dead.
Chapter Summary

Takes place right after "The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter" and shows how Gold, his daughter Alina, and Henry were affected by the Dark Curse. Henry's best friend is Alina Gold, and together they must find a way to help Emma believe she is the savior and break the curse. Note, the curse works slightly differently than it did on the show.

Mary Margaret's classroom

The day after Graham's funeral:

Henry nudged his friend Alina under the desk with his foot. Since she sat next to him, it wasn't that he couldn't reach her, but he had to do it without his teacher, Mary Margaret Blanchard, seeing. The ten-year-old was usually pretty good about doing sneaky things, especially after he had gone out of Storybrooke and gotten a hold of his birth mother, Emma Swan, who was, according to a book of fairy tales, supposed to break an old curse upon the town.

The trouble was, Emma didn't believe in curses or fairy tales, even though Henry had shown her The Book. The whole town had been under this curse for twenty-eight years, and the curse had been one of forgetting and lies, where every fairy tale character you'd ever known had been transported to a world without magic, and had forgotten who they were and everything that had happened in their past lives. Families were broken and so were hearts. Nothing was as it should be. And all of it was due to Regina Mills, the mayor of Storybrooke, who also happened to be the Evil Queen of the Snow White legend, and Henry's adopted mother!

But Henry was determined to break the curse, only he couldn't do it alone. He needed Emma, she was supposed to be the savior, the only one to be able to enter and leave Storybrooke any time she wished. Only she thought Henry was making everything up. The only one who believed him at all was his best friend, Alina Rose Gold, who happened to be the pawnbroker's daughter, child of the richest man in town.

Alina was herself from the fairy tale realm, though she couldn't remember all of her past either, and Henry had yet to figure out who her father, Mr. Gold, was in that realm. All Alina knew was that her mother had died when she was born and she lived with her widowed father and their cook/housekeeper Saylah. She was also under Storybrooke's curse, but unlike most residents, she had read Henry's book and knew it for the truth. Unlike Emma, she believed.

Now Henry nudged Alina's foot and whispered, "I'll bet the Wicked Monarch had something to do with Sheriff Graham's death." That was code for his adopted mother, Mayor Regina Mills.

Alina blinked and held up her hand in front of her face, then whispered, "Well, that's pretty obvious. She got jealous that Graham wasn't making googly eyes at her anymore, but at Emma. And then—bam—he's gone." She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

They had discovered that Sheriff Graham was actually the Huntsmen from Snow White, and when he disobeyed the Queen and let the princess live, the Queen had punished him by stealing away his
heart and keeping it in a box. Heartless in both realms, he had served the Queen, most recently as her lover, but he had hated it.

"I know. But we can't prove it," Henry hissed back. He had rather liked Graham, even though the idea of Graham and Emma together made him uneasy.

"Not unless we get some evidence," Alina whispered back, chewing on the end of her pencil.

"How are we gonna do that?" asked Henry.

"We need the Super Secret Detective kit," Alina replied.

"The what?"

"Children, what are you whispering about back there?" asked Mary Margaret.

Henry froze. *Uh oh. Caught.* He quickly pasted a smile on his face and answered, "I was just asking Alina a question, Miss Blanchard. About the classwork."

"He forgot which page we were on in our math book," Alina spoke up. Then she mouthed to Henry, "Nice save. Talk later."

"It's page 395, Henry," Mary Margaret said.

"Okay, Miss Blanchard," Henry quickly turned to the appropriate page in his book and then giggled as he realized something. "Like in *Harry Potter*. When Snape tells them to turn to page 395."

"It's 394," Alina corrected, for she had read the books too, at least a hundred times.

"Are you sure, Goldie?"

"Positive. I memorized that line. And don't call me Goldie," Alina ordered, rolling her eyes. "I'm not a dog."

"What are you two arguing about?" asked Mary Margaret, coming down the row.

"Harry Potter. He misquoted a line," Alina informed her. "You know the part in *Prisoner of Azkaban* when—"

"Alina, you know I've never read those books and right now—"

"You should. They're really good," Henry chimed in.

"Yes, and maybe I will someday, but right now we are doing math," Mary Margaret said firmly, and tapped the book on Henry's desk. "So let's get to it, before you two have extra homework tonight. You can talk about Harry Potter after class." Then she turned and swept up the aisle.

Henry thought she reminded him a little of a princess then, though she couldn't recall her alter ego was Snow White. He bent over his book and began doing the problems on the board.

"Ooh, Mills and Gold are in trouble!" singsonged one of their classmates, a tall boy with a rather prominent Adam's Apple called Tom.

Henry blushed and continued working. Tom was always spouting off whenever anyone else was in trouble.
Alina jerked her head up and snarled, "Be quiet, Tom. Like you can talk, you're in trouble every other day!"

"So? At least I'm not the teacher's pet, like you and Mills, Gold. And we all know why that is," the boy sneered. He had buck teeth and reddish hair. "Cause your dad's the landlord and his mom's the mayor, so you're both suck-ups."

"And you're the village idiot, Tommy Mason," Alina hissed back angrily. She hated it when kids reminded her who her father was, as if it made a difference in how she behaved. It didn't. She wasn't a snot, like Aria Tremaine. "Better do your work, before you fail another paper and get left back again." She turned back to her math assignment, longing to get up and punch Tom out, but her dad always told her ladies didn't hit boys. Unless they did something totally inappropriate. Whatever that meant.

Tom glared at her, red-faced. That was the school joke, that he'd been left back a year because he was lazy and refused to do his homework.

When the bell finally rang, Henry waited until Alina had put everything in her sparkly pink backpack and everyone else had left before he said, "What was that you said before about the Super Detective kit?"

Alina grinned at him. She had deep brown hair and beautiful brown eyes, and her navy and white uniform, which all Storybrooke students wore, looked cute on her, though she hated it. *It makes me feel like I'm in reform school, or trapped with nuns,* she told Henry once. "It's a kit my dad has in his shop. I'll ask him if I can borrow it tonight over supper. We need it to investigate."

"Investigate what?"

"Your house, silly! We need to see if she left any evidence lying around," Alina whispered.

"We can't! You know what would happen if we got caught?" Henry gasped.

"Yeah. I'd tell her 'sorry, Madam Mayor, we were playing in the basement.' And she'd believe us. We're only junior detectives to us, Henry, everyone else thinks we're kids playing."

"You think she keeps evidence in my basement?"

"Why not? My dad keeps a lot of old things in our shop basement."

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know, old things. A broken spinning wheel, some leather, you know stuff like that. We just have to look around a little. The Detective kit will help."

"I'd better not get grounded for this," Henry warned.

"You won't," she assured him.

"What if we do find something? Then what?"

"Then we show it to Emma and maybe convince her to help us," Alina answered.

Just then a long blast of a car horn blared.

Henry winced. "Gotta go. That's my mom—I mean the mayor—waiting for me to come out so I can go to my session with Dr. Hopper." Archie Hopper was the town psychiatrist, and Regina had
scheduled sessions with him for Henry because of his delusional imagination. Only Regina knew her son wasn't delusional, it just suited her to play that card and make everyone think Henry had problems. Since she had cast the curse, she was the only one, besides Emma and Henry, unaffected by it.

"Okay! Bye, Henry! I'll call you tonight after I talk with Papa!" Alina waved as Henry rushed out the door. You didn't keep the mayor waiting, not even if you were her son.

Alina made her way down the sidewalk towards her tall brick house with gold trim. It was a large house, Victorian in style, and it practically screamed a rich family lives here. Well, one did, even though Alina didn't really care that much for money.

She went around the back near the kitchen and entered the house, tossing her backpack on the floor and yelling, as usual, "Saylah, I'm home!"

"In here, darling!" called a cheery voice with a faint accent. "I've got your favorite peanut butter cookies and milk on the table."

Alina rushed into the kitchen to find a stout middle-aged woman wearing a blue print dress and a white apron standing over the stove stirring a pot. She hugged the housekeeper around the middle. "Mmm! Smells delicious!"

"I'm making your papa's favorite—Guinness beef stew tonight," Saylah chuckled, hugging the girl back. She was the only mother figure the child had ever had, since she was born, Saylah had watched over her, loving her fiercely. She had been in the Gold employ for years.

"Yum! But right now I'm hungry for cookies," Alina exclaimed, sitting down at the table, where there was a platter of freshly baked cookies and a glass of milk awaiting her.

"After your snack, Alina, remember to do your homework," Saylah reminded.

"I know. I know. Or else no TV and no comic books," Alina finished the familiar statement. She wondered how Henry was doing and couldn't wait for supper tonight.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Henry sighed with relief after his session with Archie was over. Dr. Hopper, who was a tall man with a shock of red hair, was nice, but it was hard to sit there on his couch and be told that everything he knew to be true was just a fantasy world created by his fertile imagination. Archie thought he was humoring Henry, but then he was an adult with no memories of his past life.

Instead of going back home, Henry decided to head to Granny's diner and get some ice cream, and perhaps see Emma. Emma usually hung out there, if nothing had her attention down at the station as deputy. And in Storybrooke, almost nothing ever happened. Unless you counted Leroy getting drunk and passing out in the street. Or Bambi crossing the street. Or the Queen killing Sheriff Graham.

Henry wished that someone else besides Alina believed him about his stepmother. It was hard to break a curse when your only ally was another ten-year-old, even if Alina was smart and could get the Super Secret Detective kit from Mr. Gold. Well, maybe after some evidence was found, Emma would believe him.

The bells on the diner door tinkled loudly as Henry entered. He waved hello to Ruby, who was the waitress as well as Granny's granddaughter, and sat down at a table next to Emma, who was nursing a hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon, her favorite drink. It was also Henry's.
"Hi," he said.

Emma looked up, her blue eyes red-rimmed and tired. But she mustered a smile for her son anyway. "Hi, Henry. How was school? Don't you have homework to do?"

Henry shrugged. "It's easy, I'll do it later." He waved Ruby over. "One hot chocolate, please. With cinnamon. And a chocolate donut."

"You eat all that sugar and your mother's going to have a fit," Ruby teased, scribbling down his order.

"Which one?" Henry teased. "I don't hear her saying anything," he indicated Emma.

"I mean your other one," Ruby corrected.

"What the mayor doesn't know won't hurt her," Emma said. She was Henry's biological mother, and Regina his adopted one, and she had only recently discovered him, but it still hurt to have to share him with that witch of a woman.

"Cool! Maybe I'll get two donuts," Henry grinned.

Ruby dashed off to fill his order, while he turned to Emma and said, "It's too bad about Graham, isn't it?"

Emma nodded wearily. Graham had died in her arms and she still was shaky and grieving. "Yes. He was a good friend."

Henry nodded. "I know. And his death wasn't an accident," he whispered.

Emma winced. This was all she needed. "Henry, please. None of your conspiracy theories."

"It's not a theory," Henry protested. "The Queen took his heart and crushed it . . ."

"Henry!" Emma hissed through her teeth. "That's not true! Graham died of a heart attack. Now stop, people are staring." That wasn't strictly true. Only a few were.

"Brought on by the Queen's magic," Henry insisted maddeningly. "It's right here in my book." He unzipped his backpack and brought out the old leatherbound copy of *Once Upon a Time*, the book that supposedly told about all the fairy tales and the truth about Storybrooke and the curse. "She keeps hearts in boxes somewhere in the basement."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Henry, I know she's not a nice person. Hell, I can barely stand her, but even so that doesn't give you the right to go around accusing her of murder. Especially without proof."

Henry bit his lip. Why couldn't Emma see? "Okay, but what if I found proof? Then would you believe me?"

"Henry . . ." Emma sighed. But his puppydog eyes were too hard to resist. "All right. If you find me proof that Regina was behind this, I'll arrest her."

"Good!" Henry said, smiling. Ruby placed his hot cocoa and donut on the table in front of him and he began to eat hungrily. He hoped that Alina was able to convince her father to give her the detective kit. He was sure they could find the evidence they needed . . . hopefully without being caught.

*~*~*~*~Break
That same night:

Mr. Gold, pawnbroker and maker of deals, and once upon a time a powerful sorcerer, quietly spooned up the stew and ate it. "Perfect, as usual, Saylah."

Saylah smiled from her place at the foot of the table. "Thank you, Mr. Gold." She was always pleased when he complemented her cooking. He was not an easy man to impress, in fact some would call him downright impossible. But though he was a hard-nosed businessman and opportunist, he also had hidden a softer side, one that he only showed to a few people, one of those being the mischievous imp sitting at his left, slurping her stew.

"Alina, don't slurp," he corrected softly. "Ladies don't make noises when they eat."

Alina paused, looking up at him with big eyes. "How come men can?"

"They shouldn't," Gold replied, somewhat exasperatedly. The girl had habit of asking questions that some would regard as impudent. Like her mother. "I don't." He carefully spooned up another mouthful, making sure none got on his expensive Saville Row gray suit. He'd set a good example if it killed him, which it might very well do someday.

"Unless you're choking," she pointed out.

Gold frowned at her. "I'm not, now hush and eat your stew, dearie, before it gets cold," he ordered. It had been a long day at the shop today and he was tired.

Alina obeyed, eating the rest of her portion and then some bread with butter quietly. Then she set down her spoon and looked at her father expectantly. "Papa, do you still have that Super Secret Detective kit in the shop?"

Gold almost choked. "The what?" He hastily blotted his mouth with a napkin.

"The Super Secret Detective kit," Alina repeated, looking at him like he was insane. "You know . . . the kit that teaches you how to become a great detective and find clues and break codes. It was on the shelf next to those puppets."

Gold raised an eyebrow, brushing aside a strand of his immaculately groomed brown hair. "If you know where it is, then why are you asking me where it is?"

"Because I'm not sure if it's still there. You might have sold it. Can I look?"

"Now? Alina, I just closed up for the day and it's almost seven o'clock."

"So? It's just down the street, Papa. Please? I need to see if it's still there," she pleaded.

"Alina, why must you have this now?" he demanded, a little sharply. "Can't it wait till tomorrow?"

"No. Please let's get it now. Before you forget and sell it."

"It's not like I'm in my dotage, girl. Not yet anyway," he huffed exasperatedly.

"You forgot to buy Oreos last time you went to the store."

"It wasn't on my list!" he cried.
"I reminded you," she said maddeningly.

"Forget that," he ordered hastily. Kid had a mind like a steel trap, he thought wearily. Like someone else he could name. He put on his let's make a deal face. "If I go back to the shop with you and find this . . . detective kit . . . what will you trade me for it?"

Alina looked thoughtful. This was an old game of theirs. Her papa was the best deal maker in Storybrooke and he had taught her to never give away something without getting something in return. "Umm . . . I'll give you my vintage Spider Man comics," she bargained.

"How much are those worth?"

"A lot. Just look it up in the Comic Price guide," she urged, her eyes sparkling.

"Deal, sweetheart," Gold smiled and shook her hand. She was learning fast, his little girl.

Further down the table, Saylah coughed in disapproval.

Gold looked up and said, "You have something to say?"

"She's too young to be making bargains that way, Mr. Gold," Saylah snorted. She knew it wasn't her place to go correcting the master on how to raise his child, but she had been with him long enough to freely express her opinion without worrying that he'd turn her out. Who would mind Alina when he worked if he did that, anyhow?

"Nonsense, Saylah!" Gold returned, amused. "She's old enough to learn how to make a deal and stick to it. That's what makes the world go round."

"I thought that was love," Alina interjected.

Gold coughed. He looked a little uncomfortable. "That too, dearie. Let me finish up here, then we'll get your detective kit. What are you going to do with it anyway?"

"Play detective with Henry, of course," Alina said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Right," Gold laughed.

Alina waited until he was eating before she rushed from the table to get the promised comics and in about ten minutes, she was walking beside her father on the way to his pawnshop, keeping her steps slow to match his as he limped along with his cane.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Henry heard the phone ring and quickly picked it up before Regina could. He already knew who it was. Only one person would dare call his house at seven thirty at night.

"Alina? Did you get it?"

"Yes. I have it right here on the bed."

Henry heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, good. Was it hard to find?"

"No. I traded some Spider Man comics for it. But that's okay, I'd already read them."

"Okay. Meet me at the diner tomorrow after school. My mom's in a meeting with Sydney Glass all day so she won't be home till after supper."
"Okay. That's perfect! We can look for clues and then if you want you can eat supper with us."

"You sure that's all right?" Sometimes Henry wasn't sure whether Mr. Gold liked him or not, being the mayor's son.

"Uh huh. Saylah always makes enough to feed an army. Wait till you see this kit. It's super cool!"

"Great!" Sudden footsteps were heard coming up the stairs. "Gotta go. She's coming to check on me," he whispered. "Operation Cobra out." He hung up the phone and scrambled back into his bed before Regina was halfway up the stairs.

"Henry? Are you asleep?" Regina's cold voice floated around him as she peered into his room.

Henry closed his eyes and waited until she was gone before sitting up. That had been close. But tomorrow maybe they could find some evidence, something that would make Emma sit up and take notice before it was too late.
Whispers

Chapter Summary

Henry and Alina try and explore with the detective kit and Emma has a talk with Mr. Gold

Henry poked his pancakes around on his plate, pretending to eat them. He was never really hungry whenever he ate at home with Regina anymore, he just did so to keep up appearances. Lately he'd taken to carrying a Cheerios cereal bar in his backpack to eat before school just so his stomach wouldn't be grumbling all day. He put a bite of pancake on his fork and chewed mechanically.

Regina ate her egg whites, toast, and drank her coffee quickly, before saying, "Well, come on, Henry, finish up! Today's not the time to dawdle, I'm going to be late for my meeting."

Henry looked at her from beneath his shock of brown hair and said, "Since you called the meeting, Mom, who cares if you're late to it?"

Regina gave a soft huff of annoyance, her cream blouse moving up and down as the air left her lungs. She wore a sleek gray skirt and matching jacket, the suit alone had cost her over eight hundred dollars, not that it mattered, she had money to burn and had always been a snappy dresser. The gray suit went well with her statuesque looks and dark hair cut short in a fancy bob. She tuck a heel across her ankle and fiddled with her ruby bracelet before saying impatiently, "It doesn't matter if I called the meeting or not, Henry. A good official is always punctual." She checked her gold Rolex.

Henry ate three more bites of pancake and wished he was eating at Granny's diner. At least the company was better and they had the best chocolate chip pancakes, which Regina never made for him. At this rate, he looked forward to going to school. "When will you be home?" he asked as he finished his orange juice and put the glass in the sink.

"Oh, probably around supper time, I should think. Maybe we'll go to the Enchanted Rose," Regina suggested, naming a very pricey restaurant that almost no one in town could afford except the mayor and Mr. Gold.

"I'm eating over Alina's," Henry said quickly. He hated the Enchanted Rose. The atmosphere was nice but the food tasted like cardboard and they had no hamburgers and no macaroni and cheese.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She called and invited me yesterday," Henry said. Though he was aware that Regina and Mr. Gold didn't really get along—then again who did with Regina—he knew she would never tell him to refuse an invitation. Image and all that stuff.

"I see. Well, make sure you wear something nice for dinner then," Regina said. She made a face, as if thinking about the Golds was unpleasant.

"I will," Henry assured her, thinking that a change of T-shirt and some jeans was pretty nice. He sure as hell wasn't going to wear a shirt and tie.
"Come on, get in the car. Sydney will be climbing the walls if I'm not in the office by eight," Regina urged, and Henry quickly ran out the door.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Alina was waiting impatiently for Henry at the entrance to Granny's diner, shifting from foot to foot in her black patent leather Mary Janes. She hated these shoes, they pinched her feet, and as a little girl used to throw tantrums about wearing them until her dad had yelled at her and said she was lucky to have shoes, much less such expensive ones. She hadn't understood then what her dad had been talking about—who did he know that didn't own shoes? Now she knew about the unfortunate homeless and others like them, in third world countries, but that still didn't mean she liked wearing her stiff Mary Janes.

Right now she was balancing on one foot while toeing the other half off, looking down the street for Henry, wondering where he was? Finally she saw him, and nearly did the happy dance. "Finally! What were you doing? Hitting up Miss Blanchard?"

Henry shook his head rapidly. "No! She's like, older than my mom!" He then dropped his voice a little and hissed, "Besides, the Book says she's my grandma, so that's just gross, Alina."

"Oh. Right. Well, at least you've got a sexy grandma," Alina sighed. "That's better than what I've got—none. I don't even know who they were. My dad never talks about them or my mom."

"A sexy grandma!" Henry gaped at her. "Alina, she's Snow White! Snow White's not sexy!"

"So? David Nolan sure thinks she is." Alina returned, smirking.

"He's married, remember?"

"I know, to the wrong woman. But I'll bet back when he was Prince Charming he thought Snow was sexy."

Henry grimaced. "Ugh! Please, Alina! You're talking about my grandparents."

"What's wrong with that? They had your mom."

"Alina! How'd you like it if I said your dad found your mom sexy?"

"I hope so, Henry. I'd like to think he fell in love with her 'cause she was smart and sexy too," the girl said, a wistful note in her voice for the mother she never knew and was forbidden to talk about. At least to her father.

Henry quickly decided to change the subject. "Okay, so where's the detective kit?"

"In my room. I couldn't bring it to school. Tom might have gotten a hold of it and broken it, the big clumsy ox," his friend replied. "We can get it soon. First let's go into Granny's and have a snack. I'm hungry and it smells so good in there."

"Okay," Henry agreed. The smells coming from the diner were making his mouth water, especially the sweet scent of chocolate and cinnamon.

In short order the two kids were sitting in a booth, waiting for Ruby to bring them large hot cocoa's with whipped cream, one with cinnamon for Henry, and one with chocolate sprinkles for Alina. They had also ordered a cinnamon bun and an apple turnover.
Ruby brought their order and said teasingly, "You sure you can afford this? Don't break your piggy banks now."

Henry started to say something, but Alina beat him to it. "Just put it on my father's tab, Ruby. Okay?"

"Alina, no. I can pay for it—" Henry began.

"I know, but I want to. That's half the fun of having a rich dad, being able to treat your friends," Alina told him.

"Okay." Henry agreed. Regina was so tightfisted she'd probably ask for the money out of Henry's allowance.

"Sure thing, sweetie. You all enjoy now. And tell Saylah I said hi." Ruby grinned then swished away to wait on another table.

"Saylah knows you're here, right? So she doesn't worry?" Henry asked after sipping his cocoa. Last time Alina had forgotten to tell her she was going to be late, and Saylah had almost called the cops and Mr. Gold.

"Yup. Told her this morning. She knows you'll be over for dinner too." Alina took a large bite of her apple turnover and licked her fingers. "Granny makes the best apple turnovers," she said. "Just don't tell Saylah I said so."

"I won't. I wouldn't know the difference. You know I hate apples."

"Right," Alina knew why too. His adopted mother was the Evil Queen, and her track record with poisoned apples was legendary. She wouldn't have eaten an apple off that woman's tree if Tommy Mason had dared her to. Come to think of it, her dad had always warned her about eating anything at Regina's house.

"So, what's the kit like?"

"Uh, I didn't get a chance to look at it much since Papa made me take a bath after I did my homework and by then it was almost time for bed so I could only read two X-Men comics and take a peek before lights out, but what I did see was really cool!" She leaned across the table and whispered, "It has these cool super secret spy glasses, that can see in 3D, and this secret code book and a little suitcase to put important documents in and a magnifying glass to see tiny clues with and everything."

Henry was grinning. "Like they say in Harry Potter—wicked! I can't wait to see it." He crammed the rest of the cinnamon bun in his mouth. "Okay, I'm done. Let's go."

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While the two amateur detectives were racing back to the Gold house to uncover the mysteries in the Super Secret Detective kit, Emma Swan was pulling into a parking space beside Gold's Pawnshop. She rarely frequented this place, mostly because she had nothing she wanted to sell, and second because she didn't really trust the owner. But today she wanted to ask him something, and it was something only he might be able to answer.

She closed the door to her Bug and made sure it was locked and the keys were in her pocket before she went into the shop. How embarrassing would it be if she locked her own keys in her car? She didn't even have Graham to call for back up. She would have had to ask Gold to borrow his cane
—never mind, Emma, don't even go there, she ordered herself as she opened the door and went in.

As always, there was dim lighting in the shop, though always bright enough to illuminate the glass cases filled with other people's valuables. For once the shop was not dusty, and Emma wondered if Saylah had been in here with her feather duster. "Mr. Gold? It's Emma Swan."

"Be right there, dearie," came a soft voice from the back room.

Emma leaned on a counter filled with expensive earrings and necklaces while she waited.

Soon the pawnbroker limped into view, goldheaded cane and fancy gray suit and all. "Paperwork. It never ends," he offered by way of explanation, not that he owed her any. "What can I do for you, Deputy Swan? Found some heirlooms from granny you wanted to trade?"

"I never knew who my parents were, Gold. Much less my grandparents, so no," Emma said shortly.

"Ah, too bad. But at least you know your son. Some family is better than none, yes?" He eyed her keenly, his eyes searching her face.

Emma fought to keep from flinching. Gold's eyes were a deep brown and they seemed to be able to see right through you. "Yes. Henry tells me your daughter's his best friend."

"She is, dearie. Ever since they banged heads together playing baseball at the park when Regina was busy roasting some poor unfortunate soul on her cell. I think that was the former deputy." Gold smirked.

"How pleasant," Emma sniffed. "Seems like Regina's always roasting somebody. So . . . then there have been a lot of deputies but only one sheriff?" she queried casually.

"The deputies come and go," Gold answered elusively. "At Regina's whim, of course. There have been three or four of them, I lost count. Not really my area. Why are you so interested, Emma? Do you fear for your job? If you do, why not run for Sheriff? There's going to be an election in a few weeks. I've heard rumors that Sydney Glass was going to try for it."

"He's the one that runs the The Mirror, right?" Emma asked swiftly.

"Yes." Gold bared his teeth, which were oddly white, not crooked like Emma had expected. "Rumor also has it that Sydney is backed by the mayor."

"Ugh! Anyone that has her backing isn't somebody I'd trust. Do they have a history?"

Gold leaned an arm on the counter and whispered, "You didn't hear this from me, dearie, but it's said that they go way back. He has a thing for her, if you know what I mean. You're a big girl, Emma, I'm sure you do."

Emma almost gagged. Glass and Regina? The image almost made her vomit. "Ugh . . . that's nasty, Gold! But . . . then again, Graham was on her payroll too." She winced recalling that fact. Regina had her hooks into everything in this town. And everyone. She thought again of the handsome sheriff, who had seemed so desperate to leave the mayor there at the end. Could Regina have gotten mad enough to do murder, like Henry insisted? But he died in your arms, Emma! A small voice whispered. You were right there! True. And there was no such thing as magic. Was there?

"Emma?" Gold tapped the counter in front of her. "Where did you go? For a trip down memory lane?"
Emma flushed. "I . . . I was thinking about Graham. He was so young . . . to have died that way."

"Yes. A shame. Then again, you play with fire, you get burned," Gold said enigmatically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Emma was suddenly on alert. Was the pawnbroker implying something?

"Just that you need to be wary of the company you keep, dearie," Gold drawled. "Regina's not one to drop your guard around."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "You think there was something going on there?"

Gold snorted. "Regina is a master at luring in unexpected prey, dearie. She caught Graham on the first try. Hook, line, and sinker. And then there was no escape."

"You really don't like her, do you?"

"I like her as much as I ever did, Emma," he said shortly. "I taught Alina not to play in her backyard a long time ago. You can never trust a viper."

"Then you think she had something to do with Graham's death?" Emma probed.

"Death and her are old friends, dearie. And you cross her at your own peril."

"Then you do think so. But how? I was there, Gold! I saw him die."

"Things aren't always what they seem, dearie. Especially in this town." Gold's brown eyes gleamed like a tiger's.

"What? What do you mean?" Emma sputtered.

But Gold evidently had said enough. "Got to go, dearie. I have customers waiting."

"What customers?" Emma practically screeched. "There's no one here but me! Listen, Gold, you can't just say something like that and leave—"

"I have someone on the phone. Sorry, dearie." He began to leave, his cane thumping slightly on the floor as he headed to the back room.

"Gold! That's obstruction of justice!" Emma yelled.

"Only if a crime's been committed," he called back. "Has there been?"

"You damn . . . come back and tell me what you meant! I could have you arrested."

"That wouldn't be wise. Those cuffs couldn't hold me," laughed Gold. "I'm a wizard, you know. A financial one."

Emma ground her teeth together. "You're impossible! You and Henry and your magic!"

"Magic's real, dearie. All you have to do is believe." He knew that for a truth, though he didn't know how. But it was something bred in his bones, in his blood, and the very air he breathed.

Emma fought the urge to go and trip him up with his cane to get him to talk. She heard him pick up the phone and begin to talk. "Arghh! Infuriating damn pain in the ass!" she spat. "They probably owe him rent!"
Still fuming, she got back in her car. Maybe she was getting paranoid. Maybe he had meant nothing by his comments. She pulled away from the curb, still pondering, and went to get a coffee at Granny's. Next thing you know she'd be believing Henry's crazy story about hearts in boxes and curses.
some parental bonding here between Rumple and his daughter as well as the results of going exploring in the Mills basement.

"Let me look through the spyglass again, Alina," Henry whispered, holding his hand out. He still thought it was a mistake to go snooping around in the basement, especially when Regina had often told him never to play down here, that the house might fall in on him.

Alina handed over the spyglass, she'd been scanning the floor, searching for any sign of an aberration, like a trap door. But the interlocking stones seemed perfectly solid and even though they made lots of noise stamping about and listening for echoes, they never heard anything.

"Henry, there has to be something here," she cried. "I . . . I can feel it in my bones. There's something hidden . . . something dangerous."

"What do you mean? All I see are empty whitewashed walls and some old furniture and that's it," Henry said tiredly. "Maybe she hid the hearts somewhere else."

"Like where? It's not like you can just build something and shove a wallful of hearts in boxes in it and hope nobody finds it," said his friend irritably. She could feel the cold in the room and knew that something had gone on here. Something bad. But, like all the times when she got her "feelings", she couldn't tell exactly what made her feel that way or why. She just did. Her papa called her his "intuitive little girl" and said she reminded him of her mother, which made Alina happy to no end, because her father hardly ever mentioned her mother at all, much less praised Alina for being like her. Over the years, Alina had learned to keep silent about her deceased parent, because mention of her sent her father into a depression like none other. And Alina hated to see her papa unhappy. She was also afraid that her mother had died in childbirth, even though no one had ever said so, and she was afraid of finding out if that were true—that she had killed her own mom by being born. So she didn't say anything, but secretly she wished her father's heart would heal enough to one day marry again, so she could have a mother. Even a stepmother would be good—as long as she wasn't like the ones in the fairytales!

She continued feeling along the walls, in case there was a hidden door with a quick release catch like she'd seen in all the mystery movies she'd watched on TV.

But nothing came up.

Henry sighed and lowered the spyglass. "Alina, we've been down here for over an hour and found nothing. Maybe there isn't anything to find."

"Or maybe we're just not looking hard enough," the girl scowled.

"Well, we'd better get back to your house soon, because Saylah said dinner's at six and it's five thirty now." Henry reminded her. "If we're late, they'll start asking questions."

Alina bit her lip. She was reluctant to give up the search, but knew Henry was right. "Okay. Let's go home. Saylah will have a fit if I'm not there on time for dinner. And I've never been able to lie
to Papa. He always knows if I do."

"How? Does he have a lie detector or something?"

"I don't know. He just knows. And then his eyes get all sharp like rocks and he growls at me and calls me Alina Rose, and then I know I'm in big trouble," Alina replied. "Why don't we come back and look some more tomorrow?"

"Because Regina's home tomorrow. It's Saturday."

"Oh, right. You can come over if you want," Alina offered, knowing how much Henry hated being alone with Regina all day.

"Maybe. Or I can take Emma to my castle," Henry said, speaking about the wooden playground castle in the park.

"That'd be good too." Alina agreed. "Then I'll just spend time with my dad."

Henry cocked his head curiously. Having never had a father spend time with him before, he asked, "What do you two do together?"

"Lots of things. He likes to play games, like cards and boardgames. Sometimes we play Scrabble or Risk or Battleship. Or rummy, war, and poker."

"Your dad lets you gamble?"

"Well, not for money. For candy," Alina explained. "He taught me how to play poker this year. Sometimes he'll read to me from this huge book of stories he has. Sometimes we cook together."

"You mean Saylah actually lets you mess up her kitchen?" Henry gaped at her.

Alina laughed. "Only if Papa asks her to. We've baked cakes and pies together. Even a turkey once with stuffing. And soup."

"I didn't know your dad cooked."

Alina nodded. "He can, but he can't cook everything like Saylah. He said he learned how to cook when he was growing up, that back then he didn't have servants."

"You mean he wasn't always rich?"

"No. He made his money, he wasn't born to it like some people," Alina declared. "Or at least that's what he tells me. Come on, let's go back home."

"Yeah. Wouldn't want my mom to catch us down here." Henry mounted the stairs leading up to the main floor of the house.

Then the two made a beeline for the Gold residence, tired, disheartened and in need of some of Saylah's excellent roast beef with juicy gravy, onion, carrots, and parsleyed potatoes, along with homemade bread.

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Henry ate his supper quietly. It was delicious, he knew that Regina had often lamented the fact that Mr. Gold had hired Saylah first, for she was the best cook in Storybrooke. Mr. Gold and Alina carried the conversation, talking about customers in the pawnshop. It wasn't that they deliberately
excluded him, but Henry didn't feel much like talking. So he ate instead.

It was at times like this that he wished for a father like everyone else. Regina wasn't a good substitute for a mother, let alone a father. Usually she left him on his own, but when she did attempt to be more "motherly" the attempt usually fell flat. He watched Mr. Gold and the chattering Alina wistfully as he ate another slice of bread with butter.

"Are you enjoying your supper, Henry?" asked Saylah softly, touching him lightly on the arm.

"It's great, Saylah," Henry turned to the housekeeper, who unlike most help, ate with the family. He smiled at the elderly woman. "Where'd you learn to cook so good?"

"From my mama and granny," replied Saylah. She sensed the boy was lonely and sought to make him feel welcome. "I've even taught young miss Alina a few recipes. On Tuesday we're making cookies after school. Would you like to learn too, laddie?"

Henry nodded. "That would be cool. Thanks, Saylah."

He'd much rather be in Saylah's kitchen baking than at home.

Finally, Mr. Gold and Alina stopped talking and began to eat again. When they were finished, Saylah and Alina cleared the table. Henry would have helped, but Mr. Gold shook his head. "No, you're a guest. Guests don't work in my house, boy. Sit down and relax."

Henry obeyed. Then he was quiet, for the pawnbroker sometimes intimidated him.

"Do you like cherry crumb, Henry?" inquired Mr. Gold politely.

"With ice cream?" Henry said, nodding. "I love it!"

"Good, because I believe that's what Saylah made for dessert tonight," said Mr. Gold. "How are you liking school? Alina tells me Miss Blanchard is a much better teacher than the one she had last year."

"Yeah. Miss Smith nearly put us all to sleep," Henry said. "She was as boring as watching grass grow."

"That bad, huh?" chuckled the older man. "I had few like that myself, once upon a time. The trick to enduring them is to pretend they don't exist, dearie."

"That's what I tried to do. I just read the books in class and sucked on butterscotch candies to keep my eyes open." Henry said.

Then Saylah and Alina returned with the cherry crumble in a platter and a huge tub of vanilla ice cream and the rest of the time Henry spent eating the scrumptious sweet and even having seconds.

Page~*~*~*~Break

After playing a game of Scrabble with Alina, Mr. Gold, and Saylah, where Mr. Gold won, Henry reluctantly went back home. When he arrived there he found that Regina still wasn't home and it was almost eight o'clock. Henry did his homework, then spent some time reading the new batch of X-Men comics Alina had given him. Alina had new comics every month because Mr. Gold had gotten subscriptions for her and she always shared them with Henry. Henry supposed he could have asked Regina for some, but he hated asking her for anything, because she always hung it over your head like an anvil. Then you owed her, and owing Regina was not a good thing.
He was just getting into the new batch, reading about Wolverine, Magneto, and Professor X's pasts when he heard the tap tap of Regina's heels coming down the hallway. He looked up as the door opened and she came into the room.

"Still up reading, I see." Regina said. "Thought you'd be asleep."

"It's only nine." Henry said. "I'm not tired yet."

"Well, you can stay up till nine thirty. Then you need to go to sleep, otherwise you won't get up for school and I'll have to scream at you."

"Mom, tomorrow's Saturday. We don't have school."

"Oh. Right. I knew that." Regina looked uncomfortable.

"How was your meeting?"

"Fine. Sydney was accommodating, as always."

When isn't he? Henry snorted. He didn't really like the man, though he wasn't sure why.

"Well, I'm going to take a shower and then have some tea. Don't stay up too late," his adopted mother said before turning around and leaving.

Henry didn't mind, he wanted to get back to his comics, but a part of him wished, just once, that she would hug him before bed. She never hugged him unless it was in front of other people. He had seen Mr. Gold hug Alina tonight when he had come home, and it made Henry a little bit jealous, because he would never have a hug from his father. But then he recalled that at least he could hug Emma, and that would have to be enough.

In the Gold residence, Mr. Gold was sitting in the den in front of a cozy fire reading the paper. It was what he usually did before bed. His cane was leaning against the walnut coffee table, reflecting off the glass of a small curio cabinet. Inside the cabinet were some items of fine porcelain, a set of dishes with roses and thin gold rims, and a tea set with a scrolled silver tray. One of the cups in the set had a small chip out of it, but it was displayed proudly with the others.

Mr. Gold was reading an article about the upcoming Miner's Day in two months, the nuns were already asking for donations, which made him scowl, he hated beggars, when two small arms wound about his neck, followed by the scent of peaches and cream bubble bath.

He felt his daughter place a quick kiss on his cheek before covering his eyes and giggling. "Guess who?"

Mr. Gold set the paper down and wrapped his arms about his child, pulling her to him. "Oh, I think I've caught a squirmy, wriggly, little . . . worm!" he playfully poked the girl in the tummy.

Alina squealed and half fell on him. "Wrong!"

"How about a . . . caterpillar?" he teased. "You're soft and fuzzy!" She was wearing fluffy terry pajamas colored a dusky rose and fuzzy socks.

"No! Try again." She giggled hysterically as he tickled her.

"Third time's the charm, dearie. How about . . . a pretty little princess?"
Alina removed her hands from his eyes. "Got it, Papa!" she sang. "Only I'm just a girl."

"You're my little girl, and if I say you're a princess, then you are," he said simply, grinning at her. Then he winced as she bounced a little too hard on his injured leg. "Careful, love. I'm getting old, or you're almost too big for my lap."

Alina looked alarmed. "Did I hurt you, Papa? I didn't mean to."

"No, I'm fine. It's just this old wound . . . it flares up sometimes. Stay," he said when she would have gotten up.

Alina nestled carefully on his good side. "Papa, what happened to your leg?" she asked, it was something she always had longed to know, but had never dared to ask.

"I hurt it a long time ago. In an accident," he said softly.

"Like what kind of accident? A car crash?" she inquired, her eyes wide.

"Umm . . . something like that," he said evasively. There were times when he could barely recall things, and other times when his memories were clear as glass.

"How come they couldn't fix it? The doctors, I mean?"

"Well . . . they tried, but . . . it was too badly damaged to fix all the way. I'm lucky I can still walk, after a fashion." Mr. Gold said.

"Oh. You want me to get a hot pack for it? Saylah can heat one up in the microwave."

"No. It's not hurting me so much tonight."

Alina shifted. She loved this quiet time with her father before bed. Suddenly a button popped off her pajama top. "Oh, fiddlesticks!" she cried, since she was forbidden to ever swear in her dad's presence. That would only end with her mouth washed out with soap. "My button!" She hunted for it in the couch cushions.

"Here, let me see," her father said. He examined the button, then said, "Fetch me my sewing kit, princess. I can fix this in a few seconds."

"You can? You can sew?" she exclaimed.

Gold laughed. "And spin too, dearie. I told you once before, your father wasn't always a rich shopkeeper and a lawyer. Once I was the son of a tailor, and I could sew like nobody's business. Now hurry up!" He clapped his hands.

Alina scurried off into the small parlor where the sewing kit was kept. Her father rarely revealed much about his past, but she had recalled him mentioning that once or twice. It was hard though, remembering that her father, who wore beautifully tailored suits and ties, had ever been a poor tailor's son.

She returned lugging the sewing kit, and Gold took it and then said, "Now hold perfectly still, sweetheart." He took a needle and some pink thread, threaded it and began to sew the button on.

In a twinkling, the job was done. "There! Better than new!"

He placed the needle and thread back in the sewing basket.
"Thanks, Papa!" Alina said gratefully. "Can you teach me how to sew buttons?"

"You want to learn how to sew?" he repeated, astonished. "Why?"

"I just do. Can you show me?"

He felt oddly pleased by her request. Why, she wants to be like me! it reminded him of someone . . . his son, whom he hadn't seen in years. He felt a sharp pain in the vicinity of his heart when he thought about his son, grown now, and yet still not talking with him. Gold couldn't even remember where he was. "Yes. Look in the basket and find a piece of scrap material," he told his daughter. "There's also a tin of buttons. Take out four of them."

Alina did as she was told, and soon received an impromptu lesson from the master spinner of cloth, straw, and sorcery.

Gold patiently showed her how to thread the needle and sew a button firmly in place. It should have bored him, but he felt oddly happy teaching his daughter this simple thing, which he used to do every day as a child.

Alina managed to sew on two buttons before growing sleepy. "I'm tired, Papa."

"All right. Save the rest for tomorrow. Maybe I'll teach you how to hem a skirt too," he said, then he followed her upstairs and tucked her into bed. "Good night, sleep tight, and don't let—"

"—the bad fairies bite!" she finished. Some would have said "bedbugs" but in the Gold house it was always fairies. "Sweet dreams, Papa!"

"You too, dearie," he said, and kissed her forehead before returning to his own bed for the night.

He found himself pondering his missing son, and wishing if he would ever see him again. Then for some reason he thought of Henry Mills, and wondered if the boy had ever known a hug from the mayor. It was a thing he strongly doubted, for Regina Mills was a cold fish, and not given to gestures of affection. It made him wonder why she had ever bothered to adopt a child, or why he'd ever helped her in the first place. Money was all well and good, but nothing replaced affection or love, a fact which he knew well, and he sighed before turning out the light. Once he had been a lonely, desolate man, until Alina's mother had come into his life like a star gone nova, and changed everything.

My poor girl! I wish you could have known her. I'm a poor substitute for her and always will be, he thought sadly. He thought that might have been the reason his son had left him. But at least he had his daughter, and so he was never lonely again. It was something.
Emma gets closer to trying to solve the mystery of Graham's death and Alina and Henry embark on an even more dangerous mission.

Emma slowly sipped her coffee as she sat at her desk and flipped through the paperwork spread out over it. Not that there was much, Storybrooke didn't have a crime rate like LA or New York, and except for sometimes locking up Leroy when he stumbled drunkenly down Main Street, the jail cell remained empty.

The only recent thing to have happened, besides her coming to stay here, was Graham dying. She paused mid-sip in her coffee, thinking about the implications Henry and then Mr. Gold—of all people—had tossed at her. That Graham's death was not of natural causes. That Regina Mills, the mayor, had something to do with it. But both conversations had not a shred of evidence to back them up. And Emma dealt in cold hard facts, not—not hunches—even though she instinctively didn't trust Regina as far as she could throw her—and imaginary curses.

Of course, Henry was an impressionable boy, and according to Archie, lived in his own fantasy world. A world of fairy tale characters come to life. Emma could understand that. Living with Regina would have made her want to escape to some fantasy world too. Or see his birth mother as a savior. Emma felt guilty about that. Then again, she felt guilty about a lot of things. Such as giving up Henry for adoption.

But she had been eighteen, scared, and without a job or a home. How could she have raised a baby? It had seemed like the best thing to do at the time. But now . . . now she wasn't so sure. Look at where Henry had ended up. Here, in this backwater town in Maine, with a stepmother whom he hated. She felt plenty sorry for the boy, even though he lived in a huge house with everything money could buy. Money was no substitute for affection, as she well knew. Mr. Gold had even said so, and he was the richest man in town.

It felt odd to be in agreement with someone like that. Her time in the foster system had taught her to be wary of people like him—and she was. But he had a daughter whom he obviously loved, and somehow that one thing made him more . . . approachable. More human.

Alina is Henry's best friend, she thought. Then she thought about her son, and wondered why she didn't spend more time with him, get to know him better. Maybe it was because she was afraid. Afraid of getting close to someone again, only to get her heart broken.

She'd done that once. Allowed herself to love, to indulge in a fairy tale. With Henry's father, Neal. And look how that turned out, she snorted. But Henry's your son, a part of her mind argued. And he needs you. But did he really? Asked another part of her, the cynical part. Perhaps she'd been avoiding Henry because she was nervous, because she thought she wouldn't be a good mother to him. What did she know about being a mother anyway? She'd never had one growing up, so how could she be one?

She thought of Mary Margaret. Now there was someone who could be an excellent mother. Patient, kind, understanding. Everything Emma was not. But it was Emma who gave birth to
Henry. That poor kid! Stuck with me for a birth mother and Regina for a stepmother. No wonder he's in therapy.

Just then there was a crackle over the walkie-talkie on her desk. She picked it up. "Yes, Henry?"

"Uh, hi, Emma. I was wondering . . . are you busy today?"

"Not right now. Why?"

"Because I was wondering if you'd like to come over to the park and see my castle?"

"Your castle?"

"It's a wooden one, not a real one. But I hang out here a lot, sometimes with Alina or just by myself. Do you want to see it?" There was a wistful note in his voice.

Emma translated that to mean he was bored and wanted to see her. "Sure. I need to take a walk."

After getting directions, she closed up the sheriff's office and began to walk down the street.

Maybe spending some time with her son wouldn't be so bad, even if he did talk about curses and magic.

They spent an hour or two just sitting on the castle, Henry chattering away about various people in Storybrooke and their fairy tale counterparts.

"Have you figured out who Mr. Gold is yet?" Emma joked, wondering who he would have picked to represent the pawnbroker.

Henry shook his head. "No, but I'm sure I will. Like I'll find evidence that Regina killed Graham."

Emma's mouth tightened. "Henry . . . maybe you better quit that line of questioning. I told you before, I saw Graham die."

"Yeah, I know, he dropped dead. But he was perfectly healthy, why would that happen?"

"Henry, people die all the time who look perfectly healthy," Emma began. "Maybe he had a congenital heart defect . . ."

But her son shook his head stubbornly. "No. He was getting too close to you and Regina didn't like it."

"Henry, it's not like we were having an affair!" Emma laughed. "I mean, I liked him, but we weren't dating." Not that she would have minded dating him, but . . .

"You don't understand. Regina hates to share anything, and she hates when people she controls try to leave her or anything. I know she had something to do with his death, I just don't know how she did it. Except with magic."

Emma sighed. She didn't want to have the same conversation all over again. "All right. Let's talk about something else."

"Okay." Henry sensed he wasn't getting anywhere. Suddenly, he asked, "What happened to my real father? You never said."

Emma froze. Of course she should have been expecting that question sooner or later. It was one
every kid who had no parents asked. Even she had asked it, once upon a time. "Uh, well . . . he . . .
was a fireman." She blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. Anything was better than the
truth. "He . . . he saved a kid from a burning building. He was a hero," she continued spinning the
fabricated story, all the while thinking about how Neal had gotten disgusted and left her, before she
even told him she was pregnant.

She hadn't even known what he really did for a living, except that he rode a Harley and wore an
expensive leather jacket, boots, and a shirt. She had been working in a bar at the time, waiting
tables to make the rent on a crummy apartment in downtown Phoenix. And he had swept in like
some damned knight in shining armor off the street and blown her away.

For months they'd been deliriously happy, just the two of them, Emma could still remember the
way he had looked at her, as if she were a princess come to life, and she had thought he was the
most handsome man on earth as well as the nicest. Until she'd been laid off, and begun shoplifting
to keep the wolf from the door, as they say.

She hadn't wanted Neal to know . . . but somehow he'd found out . . . and then they had quarreled.
He'd told her to stop, that he could help her out, and she'd been too proud and stubborn to take his
offer. Twice. She didn't want to be beholden to anyone, not even the man she loved.

It had driven a wedge between them, and finally one day he had left, leaving her with a single rose
and a note, saying he was sorry and if she ever went straight and wanted to find him, here was his
address. She'd been depressed for months, found out she was pregnant, and began stealing even
higher priced items. Until she got caught stealing a car in her ninth month and ended up in jail.

Emma shook her head, sending the painful memories back to sleep. After she'd gotten out, she had
finally looked up Neal's address, only to find that he no longer lived there, he'd moved two months
ago and the people who were in the house now didn't know where he'd gone.

Thus the fairy tale had ended, with the lovely lady alone and broke, with a rap sheet, and the
handsome prince taken off for parts unknown, never to be heard from again. Some happy ending!

Emma looked down at Henry, the product of her love for Neal, and managed a smile. "You know,
kid, you're the one good thing in my life," she said sincerely, and hugged him.

"Then you're glad you came to Storybrooke?"

"Yes. And very glad to have known you," Emma whispered, and blinked away tears. Having her
son, whom she never thought she'd ever see again, was very precious to her.

"It's too bad I couldn't live with you," Henry said wistfully.

"There isn't room in Mary Margaret's apartment," Emma laughed regretfully. "Besides, I think
Regina would throw a hissy fit."

"She would. And you're not ready—yet—to take her on."

"Gee, thanks. I thought I was some super powerful person."

"You are. But you need to believe in yourself and the magic first. Only then can you break the
curse and defeat Regina," Henry said with all the confidence of a ten-year-old.

"Okay. Well, how about we have lunch at Granny's?"

"Sounds cool!" Henry grinned and stuffed the leatherbound Book into his backpack before jumping
down to the ground. He loved eating at Granny's and even more so with his mother. He would just
have to think about ways to convince her of Regina's guilt. There had to be one, because no one
could commit the perfect crime.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Alina carefully put a scoop of cookie batter on the cookie sheet next to the one Henry had put
there. They were making chocolate chip peanut butter cookies, as Saylah had promised. Henry had
come over after school to start helping, and Saylah had shown them how to measure out the dry
ingredients and the eggs, butter, and vanilla and put everything together.

Henry had mixed the dough with Saylah's mixer and now they were putting the cookies on the
sheet to bake in the preheated oven. Saylah was watching with her hands tucked into her floury
apron, looking pleased.

Henry carefully scooped up some more batter with his teaspoon and said, "Mmm! These cookies
sure smell good. I can't wait to eat some."

"Me neither. And they were easy to make, right?" Alina asked, licking her finger where a spot of
dough had gotten on it.

"Yeah." Henry handed the filled cookie sheet to Saylah.

As Saylah placed it in the oven for ten minutes, he turned to Alina and said, "Miss Blanchard has
Career Day coming up in a week. I'm going to ask Emma to come to it. Will your dad come too?"

Alina tapped her cheek thoughtfully. "I don't know. I haven't asked him yet. I forgot till now, with
the mystery and all."

"You could ask him tonight, Alina. I'm sure he would come." Saylah told her, sweeping the floor
with a broom.

"Come where?" asked Mr. Gold, as he entered the kitchen.

"Papa! You're home early!" Alina cried, scrambling down from her stool at the counter and
running over to hug her father.

"Easy, you almost knocked me down," he chuckled, catching her and hugging her.

"Sorry, but why are you home now?" she asked, looking up at him.

He planted his cane a little more firmly and said, "Things were slow at the shop today, so I decided
to close up early."

"You did?" Saylah stared at him. "Has there been a revolution?"

"No, and nobody died either," Gold quipped. "I know that's shocking but I felt like coming home
for once and eating an early supper." He sniffed the air. "It smells like peanut butter in here. What
are you three baking?"

"Peanut butter chocolate chips," answered Henry. "Saylah taught us how, Mr. Gold."

Gold inhaled the aroma of the cookies. "Ah! It's like ambrosia!" he sighed.

Saylah looked embarrassed. "I'm not that wonderful."
"Yes, you are!" Alina told her, spinning about. "You're the best baker in Storybrooke."

"Saylah, my daughter's right. There was only one other person I knew who could bake like you," Mr. Gold said staunchly.

"Who, Papa?" asked Alina curiously.

"Granny?" guessed Henry.

"No. Alina's mother," Mr. Gold answered. His expressive brown eyes turned suddenly dark with sorrow. "She loved to bake. Cookies, cakes, pies, scones. She always had something new on the table for me to try."

"What was her favorite dessert?" Alina asked, knowing how rare it was for her father to volunteer information like this.

"Peanut butter chocolate chip cookies. Like the ones you're making. Until I met her, I'd never had anything like them. Then she made them for me, and I never had anything so good in my life." Gold's eyes were far away, even as he caressed the top of Alina's head.

"But they're mine too!" Alina exclaimed.

"Well, of course," Gold chuckled. "You're our daughter, aren't you?" And so like your mother sometimes, child, that it hurts, he thought sadly. But in a way, that made him glad. For he had a piece of his wife in the child before him . . . when she wasn't getting into mischief as he had at that age.

"Always," Alina gave him another hug before running back to the counter.

"You can all have cookies and milk once these are done," Saylah said, giving her employer a sympathetic look.

The kids cheered.

"What would you like for dinner, sir?" the housekeeper asked.

Mr. Gold blinked. He had been far away, remembering a time long ago, when he and his wife had gone on a picnic. I miss you so, Isabelle, he winced, then straightened. His mind still overflowing with memories, he said, "Why don't we have something simple? Like . . . grilled cheese with bacon sandwiches and tomato soup?" Then he added, just to throw his cook, "And I'll make the sandwiches while you do the soup, Saylah."

Saylah's mouth hung open. "You'll what?"

The children were also goggling at him.

"You heard me." Gold said. "You know I can cook."

"Of course I do," Saylah snorted. "I was the one who taught you. But . . . you haven't made grilled cheese sandwiches since . . . since Alina's birthday!"

Gold shrugged. "That's because I didn't feel like it. But now I do." He looked over at Alina and Henry. "Here's another cooking lesson for you. Watch." He grabbed an apron dangling from a hook near the sink and put it on. Then he got out two pans and placed them on the stove.

"Alina, get me the bacon and the bread." He ordered. "Henry, the butter is in the dish on the door
of the refrigerator, and you'll find slices of Cheddar and Monteray Jack cheeses in the first bin."

The kids scrambled to get the ingredients, while Saylah pulled out a spatula and handed it to him.
"Here, sir. I'll get the soup from the pantry."

As she bustled over to the huge walk in closet, she wondered if he'd fallen and hit his head. He hadn't cooked anything for months, and why today of all days? Then she paused and glanced at the wall calendar. Ah, that was why. Smiling, Saylah grabbed a Mason jar of her homemade soup from the pantry. Now she knew. It explained a great deal.

You'll never forget, will you? Even after all this time, you still remember your anniversary, Saylah thought as she went to the cabinet to get a pot.

Gold, oblivious to the conclusion his housekeeper had drawn, began to fry the bacon on the stove.

Soon the smell of cured maple Vermont bacon warred with peanut butter cookies and Henry found himself drooling.

He watched closely as Mr. Gold finished frying the bacon, drained it, and buttered both sides of the slices of wheat bread. Then Gold assembled the sandwich, putting two slices of bacon inbetween two slices of Cheddar and one of Monteray Jack and laying it on the hot grill.

As the sandwich melted, Mr. Gold checked it, then flipped it neatly. Soon there was a perfectly grilled, deliciously gooey and crunchy grilled cheese and bacon sandwich sitting on a warmed plate.

As he turned to make another one, Saylah slid one sheet of cookies out of the oven and another into it. Then she gave the pot of soup on the stove a stir. "Looks mighty nice, Mr. Gold."

"Thank you. Nice to know I haven't lost my touch," Gold said, flipping another sandwich onto a plate. "See how easy this is?"

"Yeah. Maybe next time I'm home, I'll try and make one," Henry said.

"Just be careful it doesn't end up on the floor," Alina cautioned. "I did that once to a pancake I was making."

"That's because you were tossing it, not flipping it like I showed you," Saylah said.

Soon all the sandwiches were made—there were six, one for each of them and two extra in case anyone wanted seconds, and the soup was hot and bubbly. Alina set the table and Saylah and Mr. Gold handed out grilled cheese and bowls of soup. A platter of cookies cooled on the counter. There was iced tea and lemonade to drink.

"Papa, you make the best grilled cheese," Alina told him after a few bites.

"Mmm . . . yeah," Henry agreed, after swallowing a mouthful.

Mr. Gold looked faintly embarrassed. "It's not hard to make. My wife taught me a long time ago. This was one of her favorite meals." He picked up a sandwich and bit it. "It's also mine."

"I thought Saylah taught you how to cook," Henry reminded.

"I did, but I taught Isabelle too," Saylah said.

"You taught my mama?" Alina's eyes were wide.
"Yes. I was her best friend and I taught her everything I learned from my mother and grandmother."

"Then, when we were married, she showed me a few things," Gold said. "But she didn't have time to show me too much before she . . . was gone, so I learned the rest from Saylah." Then he busied himself eating soup so he wouldn't have to field anymore questions. The children seemed to sense this and were quiet then, allowing him to slip back into the memories he had nearly forgotten he had.

He recalled her standing over a stove, and himself sneaking up on her, stealing a kiss as she laughed. . . . he recalled a sunny meadow and crowning her with a wreath of roses, then half-running through the grass as she chased him with a daisy chain, her eyes—how they sparkled—with love.

Her long brown curls cascading onto his shoulder as she sat, leaning against him, as he read aloud from the classic Sense and Sensibility, or Swan Lake. The fire was warm and cozy and she snuggled beside him without fear, without hate, totally ignoring the fact that he was an ill-tempered beast who could snap his fingers and . . .

"Papa, I asked you if you were coming to Career Day?" Alina's voice broke into his thoughts and the memories scattered.

"Huh? Oh, yes. Career Day." For a moment he wasn't sure what in hell that meant.

"Are you?" his daughter demanded. "I need to tell Miss Blanchard yes or no."

"Right. I . . . yes, all right. But just this once," Gold said. He could never refuse those soulful brown eyes anything. A second later he wondered why in hell he'd agreed to come to school and make an idiot out of himself in front of a bunch of grammar school kids. Was he losing his mind?

Then Henry piped up with, "Emma will be there too, Mr. Gold."

"That's good, Henry," he said, at least I won't be the only one giving some ridiculous speech or whatever. Mary Margaret ought to just post different occupations on the board and let the kids find out about which ones they'd like by research. Most kids aren't interested in how to make money anyway, they want the glamorous careers, like actors, and models, and talk-show hosts.

But a promise was a promise, and he'd never broken one to Alina yet. He took another bite of his sandwich, which now tasted remarkably like sawdust, because the woman he had loved with all his heart was no longer across from him eating it, and not all the wishes in the world could bring her back.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Two days later:

"It sure is cold in here," Alina shivered, clutching her pink jacket to her as she stood beside Henry in the Mills crypt.

"You were the one who wanted to look in here," Henry reminded her. He didn't like being in here, the huge stone vault with the sarcophagus of Regina's father (also named Henry) gave him the creeps.

Alina spread her hands. "I didn't know where else to look, Henry. We'd already checked the basement, and where else could she hide something like that? It has to be here."

"Maybe she buried the evidence somewhere and we'll never find it," he said gloomily.
Alina shook her head. "No. This . . . it's creepy and scares me but . . . something's not right here." Her intuitive sense was tingling like mad and making her shiver.

"Sure it is, SpiderGirl," Henry laughed. "We're standing in a crypt and we're not dead." He poked her playfully, making her jump.

"Henry, quit it!" she yelped and tried to regain her balance.

She fell against the side of the sarcophagus.

"Hey, are you okay? Sorry."

Suddenly there came a soft grinding noise and the sarcophagus began to move.

"Look, a secret passage!" Henry cried. "Let's see where it goes." He jumped down the stairs.

"Wait, Henry! I don't like this . . ." Alina called. There was something terrifying about this place. But she followed Henry because she was afraid of being left alone.

The stairs led down to a huge room with filtered lights. As they flickered to life, the two children gasped and clung to each other.

Three sides of the room were blank white walls.

The other side was filled with small cubbyholes with wooden boxes with brass handles.

"I think we found it!" Henry cried excitedly. "Where she keeps the hearts."

"Or maybe it's coffins," moaned Alina. Her bad feelings were increasing.

Henry reached out to pull one of the brass handles. "Rats! It's stuck!" He pulled harder.

Suddenly the lights went out and they heard something moving.

Then all was silent.

Suddenly Alina spoke in a very small, very scared voice. "Henry . . . I think the door just shut. And now we're trapped here."

Henry tried to make his way back up the stairs. To his horror, he realized Alina was right. The door had shut. And now they were trapped, miles underground, in a lightless and possibly soon to be airless tomb.
Lost and Found

Chapter Summary

Emma and Gold go looking for their missing children. Can they find them in time?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For several moments, Henry had trouble breathing. He pounded on the entrance to the tunnel but it wasn't opening. "Damn it! It's stuck!"

"Henry!" Alina's voice called from below.

He turned and made his way down the stairs by feel. It was pitch black and the expression "I couldn't see my hand in front of my face" echoed in his head. Now he knew exactly where that saying had come from. He groped in the darkness. "Alina? Where are you?"

"Here," she whimpered and suddenly he felt her hand grasp his. It was trembling.

It was then that he recalled that Alina, who was brave about most other things girls feared—like snakes and spiders—was scared of the dark. No, not just scared, petrified.

"It's going to be okay," he murmured, trying to sound like he knew what he was talking about. "My mom or Emma or your dad will find us soon and there's nothing in here to hurt us." At least he didn't think so.

Alina clung to him. "Yes, there is," she trembled. "I can feel it. Feel them. Beating."

"What are you talking about?"

"The hearts. In the boxes."

"Shh. They can't get out."

"But they're here. Surrounding us."

"Don't. Don't think about it. You're scaring yourself."

She laughed softly, the sound bitter and hopeless. "I'm scared to death, Henry. No one knows we're here. They won't even think to look for hours and hours yet. What if . . . what if they never find us? Or our air runs out? We could . . . die here!"

"No!" he hissed, wrapping his arms about her. It felt good to hug something. She was warm and alive and even though he could feel her heart racing, it didn't make him fearful. Well, not much. It made him determined. "You have to believe we'll get out of here."

"I hate the dark. It's smothering me."

"No, it's just your imagination. Now imagine us getting out of here. Or . . . or anyplace where you're safe."
"Like where?"

"Like your room, or . . . or my castle . . . or Saylah's kitchen . . ."

"Baking cookies?"

"Yeah. Lots of them. Peanut butter, chocolate chips, sugar cookies . . ."

"Almond crescents, rum balls . . ."

They began naming all the kinds of cookies they could think of, anything to stave off the fear and the dark. All the while they were praying for someone to find them soon.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The phone in the sheriff's office rang abruptly. Emma was just about to bite into her banana for her afternoon snack when it shrilled. Lowering the piece of fruit, she picked it up, wondering who could be calling. "Hello? Deputy Swan, Sheriff's Department. How can I help you?"

She gasped when she heard the voice on the other end. "Mr. Gold?"

"Yes, I want to report a . . . missing child . . ." the phone crackled, or maybe it was his voice. Emma could almost see the panic in it as he said, "I just received a call from Saylah, my housekeeper. She says that Alina didn't . . . didn't come home from school this afternoon. She . . . she called the school and Granny's diner and they haven't seen her. And it's 4:30 so . . . she called me . . . I . . . usually Alina is good about telling me where she's going . . . this is very . . . unlike her . . ."

"Have you checked Regina's house?" Emma asked kindly. "Maybe she went to play with Henry and forgot to tell you?"

"I . . . already called there. Regina says . . . she hasn't seen either of them. Saylah's turned my house upside down looking . . . but nothing. You don't know where they are, do you?"

Emma shook her head, her heart speeding up. Both children missing . . ."No. I haven't seen Henry since yesterday. Please, Mr. Gold, don't panic. I'm sure we'll find them . . ." She wanted to laugh at her own words. It hadn't been five minutes since she learned Henry was missing and she was panicking already. "Look, meet me at the station and we'll look together. We'll take my car."

"No. We'll take mine."

"Fine. See you in a bit. And don't worry. This is a small town. I'm sure they're out in the woods or something, playing."

"I don't know, Sheriff. Strange things happen in this town," Mr. Gold said gloomily, then he hung up.

No sooner had she put down the phone and went to gather up her keys to the office, then the door burst open and Regina strode in.

The tapping of her Gucci heels nearly set Emma's teeth on edge, as did the way her Versacci black dress flowed about her. "Regina. I was just going to—"
"Yes, his brat is missing along with Henry. I want you to organize a search party," Regina said.

"That's what I was doing with Mr. Gold," Emma said, angry with the tone the other woman was taking. Did the mayor think she was incompetent? "We were going to start asking everyone we saw in town if they saw them."

"You do that. I'm going to search uptown and ask the nuns if they've seen anything. Henry's always been fascinated with that stupid convent."

Emma raised an eyebrow. Regina sounded like she was concerned. "All right. Call me if you find anything."

Regina snorted and sailed out of the room, as if she were queen and Emma her lowly subject.

Emma clenched her fists. Grr! If only she could prove Regina wasn't the wonderful person she pretended to be. She carefully locked up the office and watched as Regina's fancy car pulled away from the curb.

It was soon replaced by a vintage Cadillac, black with gold trim, in perfect condition. Behind the wheel was Mr. Gold.

Before he could get out, Emma got in. "Nice car," she said as she slammed the door. "Where shall we start?"

Mr. Gold looked rather frazzled, the first time she had ever seen him lose his composure. His eyes darted here and there, as if he were searching for Alina out of thin air. Their brown depths were filled with endless worry. "I . . . . was that Regina I saw pulling out of here just now?"

"Yes. She came down and demanded I start a search party for Henry. I told her you and I were already doing so and she insisted on doing her own search uptown."

Mr. Gold's mouth tightened. "Let her. We'll see how lucky she is." Then he carefully pulled away from the curb. "Let's go to the park. I know there's that wooden castle there Henry likes to play on. Maybe they're there. I didn't think about that earlier, when Saylah called. I just . . . felt my heart come up out of my throat. You know?"

Emma nodded. "Mine too." They shared a glance, two parents terrified that their children had been kidnapped, or worse. Because you never could tell, even here in Storybrooke, where supposedly everything stayed the same forever due to a curse.

"Could you imagine if we found them just . . . playing in the castle?" Emma asked, trying to sound hopeful. "It would be great. But then I'd want to . . . to strangle my son for making me crazy."

Gold quirked a half-smile at her. "Yes, I know. If they're there . . . my heart will go back to normal once I see it. Right now I'm imagining all kinds of . . . horrible things. It's like a nightmare. Even though this has never happened before. Storybrooke is a relatively safe town. But it doesn't help when your only daughter's gone missing. If . . . if we find them there I . . . first I'll hug her till she can't breathe and then I'll ground her till she's twenty-one or something." He drove slowly down the street, looking at all the people, of which there weren't many. "I . . . went through this once before, when she was small, just beginning to walk. We were in the supermarket, and she wanted to get down from the cart and hold my hand. So I said fine, just stay by me. Well, you know toddlers. I was looking at some string beans and next thing you know, Alina had wandered off somewhere. I almost died. I had every manager and employee in produce helping me search. We finally found her beneath a display of pears. I was so relieved . . . and so angry too. I doubt she remembers it, but
I gave her a spanking that day. God, and now here I am again!"

"Don't stress," Emma said. "I'm sure they're around somewhere." She was looking on the opposite side of the street, trying not to think about milk cartons and missing children posters. If they weren't found within 24 hours . . .

"But you're afraid they're not too," he said knowingly. "Never kid a kidder, dearie."

"Well, yes, but . . . I keep telling myself not to panic, that they're old enough to . . . get help or something if someone tried anything. And given that Henry's adopted by Regina and Alina's your daughter, no one would dare hurt them."

"In Storybrooke. But what if there was a stranger?" Mr. Gold turned left at the light and soon they came to the park.

They both got out and began calling. But the park only had one or two kids playing on the swings and the castle was empty. Emma stared at the wooden structure in dismay, as if hoping to find answers there. "Umm . . . okay. So, no kids here. Where shall we look next?"

Mr. Gold looked as lost as she did. "I . . . maybe we should check the hospital? Just in case?"

"That's a good idea." Emma said. She turned to go back in the car.

Just then Mr. Gold gave a sort of muffled cry.

Emma spun around. "Are you okay? Did you fall?"

He was holding his head as if it pained him. "No, no . . . I just have a headache all of a sudden and . . ." he halted, a look of astonishment coming over his face.

"What? What's the matter?" Emma asked, hoping he wasn't having a seizure or something. That would be all she needed.

Gold straightened, an odd look coming into his eyes.

Emma stared. There were times when she thought the man, for all his deal-making, was fey or something. The way he knew things . . .

"I . . . I have an idea where they might be." Gold said excitedly. "Let's go to the cemetery."

"Why would they be there?" Emma asked, half-running over to the car.

"I don't know. Call it a hunch, whatever, I just . . . feel like we should go there."

"Is . . . Alina's mother buried there?"

"No. She . . . died before we came here," Gold said, his voice rough with sudden sorrow.

"Would you mind if I asked how?"

Gold was silent, concentrating on navigating the narrow streets. Finally, he said, "I . . . don't talk about her much, Miss Swan. It makes forgetting her loss easier." It also made it easier to cover up the fact that he couldn't really remember how she had died. But he wasn't about to tell Emma that. And he didn't want to discuss his dead wife. It hurt far too much.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to pry."
"Don't worry about it, dearie," Gold waved off her apology. "It was a long time ago."

He pulled into the parking lot of the cemetery and they began to search the rows of graves and crypts. Dominating the whole landscape was a huge marble house that read MILLS.

Emma kept pace with Gold's limping steps, looking and calling.

Soon the air echoed to their frantic cries of "Henry!" and "Alina!"

But they saw no little girls or curious boys anywhere. The cemetery was . . . to use an old cliché, as silent as the grave.

Gold winced as another pain stabbed him in the head. These damn migraines! He didn't know why he'd been having them lately . . . though this one could be caused by stress. He paused beside the mausoleum housing Regina's Mills deceased father, panting slightly. This hilly terrain wasn't good for his leg at all and he rubbed it gently.

"Maybe we should look in the crypts," Emma suggested.

No sooner were the words out of her mouth, than Gold nodded. "Yes. Children play in the oddest of places."

Emma went and pulled on the door and it gave way easily.

They entered the room and called for the children.

Suddenly they heard a muffled pounding and screaming from somewhere.

"Here! Here! We're down here!" Henry's voice was coming up from the floor.

"In the dark! Get us out!" Alina howled.

"Emma! They're here!" Mr. Gold cried, feeling a relief so vast he nearly got tears in his eyes. He'd found his baby girl. "But where?"

"Henry? Can you hear me? Where are you?" Emma called.

"Emma! We're trapped in this secret room. There's a passage below the coffin and it shut."

Gold tapped the floor with his cane. "Dear God, where? Where is it?" He banged harder on the marble surface. "Alina's scared to death of the dark, always has been. I always have to leave a night light on . . . Alina, it's all right, love. Papa's coming to get you out."

In the darkness, Alina sagged against Henry in relief at hearing that familiar voice.

Emma was feeling about along the edges of the sarcophagus and suddenly something clicked.

The floor moved and then there was a hole gaping up.

Henry raced up the stairs, half-dragging Alina.

Alina felt her knees turn to Jello as she was caught in her father's embrace.

Mr. Gold held her close and whispered, "There now, dearie. You're okay, I'm here. Right here."

"Emma! You found us!" Henry crowed and went over to hug her.
Emma wrapped her arms about him. "Henry! Are you okay? How long were you down there? What in God's name were you doing down there anyway?"

"My question exactly," said Regina coldly, stepping into the crypt.

"Uh oh," Henry whimpered and clung to Emma. Now they were all in trouble, and there was no time to tell about the hearts in the boxes and let Emma and Mr. Gold see for themselves.

"What were you two doing playing in my father's crypt?" Regina demanded.

"It . . . was an accident," Alina whimpered, she was being held by her father, her face pressed securely against his chest.

Mr. Gold glared at Regina with all the fury of a mountain lion defending his cub. His leg was killing him from leaning most of his weight and Alina's on it but he would have died before he let go of her now. "Back off, Regina. You ought to be thanking your lucky stars we found them, not trying to interrogate them." He stroked Alina's hair. "It doesn't matter what they were doing. At least they're safe now."

Regina stiffened. "Don't talk to me like that, Gold. You forget what you owe me."

"I owe you far less than you think," Gold snarled, locking eyes with her. "And I'll talk to you any way I damn well please . . . Mayor Mills. Don't forget what you owe me." His eyes glinted dangerously. He knew the mayor owed him something, some favor, even if he couldn't recall the exact thing right then. But he knew it existed. There were gaps in his memory, but things were coming back to him every day. One day, he'd remember.

Regina backed down, going pale. "I . . . don't owe you anything, pawnbroker! Henry, let's go home. I've wasted an entire afternoon looking for you. What were you thinking, playing in the crypt?"

"It was a game, Mom," Henry whined, not wanting to leave Emma, but knowing he'd be in worse trouble if he didn't go with Regina.

Emma glared at her. "Regina, he's had a shock. Maybe you ought to wait a few minutes, let him calm down . . ."

"I'll do what I think is best for my son," Regina spat viciously. "I'm his mother, you're just the receptacle." She grabbed Henry from Emma. "Let's go, Henry. I can't believe all the trouble you caused me . . . " Then she spun about and cried, "Get out of my father's crypt, all of you! Let him rest in peace." Then she was gone, pulling Henry along with her.

"He can't . . . not after what you did," Alina whispered, knowing she spoke the truth without knowing how.

"What did you say, dearie?" asked Mr. Gold tenderly.

"Nothing . . . I'm just cold, Papa." She shivered, recalling the terrible smothering dark, and clung to her father. She hated that she was acting like a baby, but she'd been so scared. "It was so dark . . . and I could hear the hearts beating . . ."

"Shh, you're overwrought," Gold said soothingly, starting to limp out of the crypt.

"Here, let me help," Emma offered.
But Gold shook his head stubbornly. "No, thank you. I can do it."

Alina squirmed. "Papa, put me down. You'll hurt your leg."

"I will not. The day I can't carry my own daughter is the day they'll put me in the ground," Gold said and continued walking to the car with his child held close. "After I drop off Miss Swan, I'll call Saylah and she'll have a nice hot bath waiting for you and some supper, and then we're going to have a long talk, Alina Rose, about telling people where you're going at all times . . ."

"Yes, Papa," she murmured sleepily as he placed her in the back seat.

Emma got in the car. "Thanks for helping me search. I just wish that Henry wasn't . . . with Regina."

Mr. Gold sighed. "The woman's irrational."

"She acts like Henry's a . . . chess piece sometimes."

"That's how she treats everybody, dearie. Like pawns. Unless you fight back."

"But how can I? The law—"

"Would be on your side, if you chose to fight for custody, Emma."

"You think?"

"I don't think, dearie. I know. I was a lawyer once upon a time."

"Seems like you were a lot of things, Gold."

He laughed. "Yes, dearie. I'll help you if you want. But the choice is yours."

"For a price, right?"

"Everything has a price. But that's up to you." Gold said enigmatically. "Call me if you decide you want to go down that road. In the meantime, have a cup of tea and relax with a good book. That was my wife's prescription for everything."

"She was a wise woman, your wife," Emma laughed.

"The best, dearie. And far better than I deserved," Gold murmured. "All's well that ends well. For now."

Emma waved as she got out and unlocked her Bug. She had much to think about . . . and much to be grateful about. She had found her son . . . and perhaps a new ally. Things were looking up . . . at least on her end of it. She prayed Henry would be all right. Because if Regina hurt him . . . she would tear the woman to pieces. As she climbed into her car, one nagging thought kept circling. What was down in that crypt anyway that Regina had been so anxious to keep them from seeing?

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Gold's memories are both true and false-meaning some are true in one sense and false in another, and only I can sort them out for now! He'll regain his memories soon.
Next: Henry finds out some startling information about Mr. Gold!
Alina and Henry discover who Mr. Gold really is . . .

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alina grabbed the cordless phone off the base in the hallway and hid it beneath her covers before her father tucked her into bed that night. She had to call Henry and see if he was all right. She hadn't liked the way Regina had sounded at all, the woman had always scared her a little. Only she hadn't been afraid that night, because her father had been there and she knew Papa would kill anything—or anyone—that tried to hurt her.

She snuggled beneath her covers and waited until Papa had left the room after giving her the usual kiss goodnight before pulling the phone out from under the covers and hastily calling Henry's number. She prayed he would pick up the phone and not Regina. She suddenly wished she had a walkie talkie, like the kind Henry used to talk with Emma, but she'd never bought a set for herself, only for Henry for his birthday last year.

The phone rang and rang until finally a voice picked up. "Hello?"

"Henry!" she exclaimed, her breath wooshing out of her in relief. "You're alive!"

"Of course I'm alive, Alina. Don't be so dramatic."

"Well, I was kinda worried there. For about five minutes." She had her head buried beneath her covers so she could talk without sound carrying, though she was sure Papa was downstairs by now.

Henry chuckled slightly. "She didn't kill me, as you can tell. But . . . she did ground me for the weekend."

"Oh, no! That sucks!" Alina groaned. "We were supposed to go bowling this weekend, remember? I was going to ask Papa if you could come."

"I wish. But Regina isn't letting me out of the house." Henry sighed. "Did you get in trouble too?"

"Um . . . not really. Saylah yelled at me for scaring her out of the rest of her life and said I was lucky I didn't have to scrub the floor. Because you know how I hate that. Papa yelled at me too, and said I was lucky I'd gotten scared out of my mind, because he'd almost went insane and next time he'd make me do fifty chemistry problems and ground me for a whole week. Ugh!" Alina made a face. She was good at math, but found it horrendously boring and often made up excuses not to do her math homework till the last minute. One of the worst punishments her father had ever invented, as bad as Saylah's double chores, was to give her advanced algebra and chemistry problems to solve. It was as boring as writing lines and kept her sitting for hours and she disliked being still unless she was reading.

"Then he didn't give you any math problems for scaring him?"
"No. He just made me go to bed right after I had my bath and it's only eight thirty." She rolled her eyes. Fathers! It wasn't like she'd been kidnapped, after all.

"How are you talking to me?"

"Snuck the phone into my bedroom when he wasn't looking," she informed him gleefully. "How about you?"

"Regina went out somewhere with Sidney, I think. At least, that's what I heard from her conversation upstairs. I'm supposed to be sleeping," he said.

"Was she really mad? I'm sorry I got you in trouble."

"Mad enough to ground me, but otherwise I'm okay. And you don't have to apologize. It was my idea too to look in the crypt."

"Somehow we have to get Emma and my dad there. But how?"

"I don't know. I gotta stay away from there now . . . otherwise she'll suspect us."

"Yeah, I know. I wish we could see each other on the weekend."

"Me too. I'm going to be bored out of my mind."

Alina tapped a finger against her front tooth. "Hmm. Henry, maybe there's a way I can get you out of this."

"What way? When Regina decides something it's like . . . set in stone."

"Tell you later. Bye." Alina quickly clicked the off button, returned the phone to its base, then pattered down the stairs.

Mr. Gold looked up from where he was curled on the couch, reading an old classic, *Paradise Lost*. "Alina, sweetheart, I thought you were asleep. What's the matter? Did you have a bad dream?" He set down his book and held out his arms.

Alina came and curled up into them. She always felt so safe when her dad held her. "No, Papa. It's not me, it's Henry."

"What about Henry, dearie?" Mr. Gold looked down on her fondly.

"I want him to come bowling with us on Saturday. But what if . . . what if Regina grounds him for playing in the crypt? Can you help him?"

"Me? Alina, I have no say over what Regina does to her son," Gold protested. "I know you think otherwise—"

"You can do anything, Papa." Alina said, her eyes shining with love.

"Almost anything," he returned, smiling. If only she knew! But despite the things in his past, and there were many things, things that he didn't even remember, Alina considered him a hero. And she was the only one ever to do so. He couldn't bear to disappoint her. "And you're a little conniver, dearie." He tweaked her nose playfully. "By all rights you ought to be doing ten chemistry problems for me for scaring me half to death, Alina Rose. *Not* trying to make another deal with me."
"Well . . . I figured if anyone could convince Regina to let Henry go, it was you," Alina said loyally.

"Dearie, Regina and I don't get along at all."

"I know. But she listens to you. And she doesn't to anyone else."

"Hmm. We'll see, Alina. I can't promise you anything. Because there's no telling with her. But I will try my best."

"That's good enough for me," Alina hugged him. "What do I have to do in return?"

"Stay out of trouble," he said, hugging her back. "Now go back up to bed. We'll talk more in the morning."

"Okay, Papa. Good night!" then she scurried from the room, leaving him shaking his head and wondering how on earth he got talked into these things.

"Only you, Alina. Only for you." He picked up his book again. What a night this was turning out to be!

---

A few days later:

Mr. Gold couldn't convince Regina to abandon her sentence entirely, but had managed, God only knew how, to get her to allow Henry to come to the bowling alley for two hours that morning. While they were waiting to get in, since they were slow opening up that morning, Henry nudged Alina and whispered, "Psst! I got something to show you in my book."

"The Once Upon a Time book?"

"Yeah. I think . . . I think I found out who your dad is."

Alina looked excited. "You mean who he was. In that other world."

"The fairy tale world," Henry clarified. "But I'll let you read it later. If you want to know."

"Sure I want to know," Alina said. "But first, let's have fun bowling."

So that was what they did, and afterwards, Henry thanked Mr. Gold, who looked rather embarrassed.

In the backseat, Henry whispered to Alina, "You asked him, right?"

"Yes, but . . . he did the rest himself," she replied.

Henry looked at the older man and said, somewhat wistfully, "He'll do anything for you, won't he?"

"Except let me wear makeup to school and go to a bar," she joked.

"You know what I mean," Henry said. "He really loves you."

"He's my dad, Henry. Of course he loves me."
"Yeah, but . . . mine didn't. Or at least not enough to stay."

She put a hand on his arm. "Maybe he didn't stay because . . . he didn't have a reason. Maybe he didn't know about you. You don't know why he left."

He was silent for a moment. Perhaps Alina was right. Then again, maybe he was just a loser who didn't care about his son. Not even the Book knew the truth about his past. He bit his lip. If there was one thing he envied Alina, it was her father. Gold, for all of his wheeling and dealing, truly loved his daughter, and it showed. "Maybe," was all he said, then he closed his eyes and thought, if wishes do really come true, I wish I had my father back. But even as he thought it, he mocked himself for a fool.

Before dropping him off, they headed back to the Gold residence for lunch, which was some of Saylah's delicious homemade pea soup with ham and crusty French bread.

They all ate till they were full, then Henry handed Alina the Book before they left for the mayor's house. "Here. Go to page 394."

"394? Are you kidding?" she frowned at him.

"No. It's where the story is. Read it. Then call me and tell me if you think I'm right."

"Okay."

"Come on, you two. I promised I'd have Henry back before three and it's almost two," Gold called from the foyer.

"Coming, sir!" Henry called, running down the stairs.

Alina took the short way and slid down the banister. She landed on the floor with a thump.

"Alina Rose, ladies don't—" Saylah began as she caught sight of her.

"—slide down banisters," Alina finished. "I know. But I'm not a lady yet, Saylah!" the girl called, then skipped outside to the car, followed by Henry.

"Imp! Ah, your poor father!" Saylah said, shaking her head and winking at Mr. Gold.

"She'll grow out of it," he said ruefully, then turned to go.

"You hope," added the housekeeper.

---*---*---*---*---Break

Once they had dropped her friend off, Alina ran upstairs and got out the fairy tale book. She jumped on her bed, which had a frilly pink spread with roses on it (like her name) and put the book there and then flopped down on her stomach. Propping her head on her hand, she flipped the pages until she came to page 394. In bright gold script, the title of the next tale was written.

Rumplestiltskin and Beauty and the Beast.

"Rumplestiltskin," she whispered to herself. "Is that who you are, Papa?" She knew that he signed documents R. Gold. She had always thought the "R" stood for a name like Robert or Richard, but oddly enough could never remember knowing about it. Until now.

Slowly, she began to read.
As she did so, she became caught up in the tale before her, and her emotions ran the gamut between love, anger, despair, sorrow, and horror. Several times she had to pause in her reading, especially when she came to the part with Rumplestilskin and Belle kissing, to wipe her streaming eyes.

*Oh my God, Papa. How could you?* she thought once.

Now she understood the significance of the chipped cup in the curio cabinet and also the sorrow in her father's eyes when he spoke of a love lost forever.

"You blame yourself, Papa. Even though you didn't know what you did, you were afraid, and because of that you lost it all. Except for . . . me."

She sniffled into her handkerchief, for though she couldn't recall anything about her former life, she knew one thing very clearly. She was the daughter of Rumplestiltskin and Belle, the product of a love as old as time. She was also the daughter of a once powerful and wicked sorcerer.

*That* made her tremble.

*My papa isn't wicked! Not now he isn't! But maybe he once was. Because of the dagger's curse.* She thought of the father she knew, the man who hugged her and teased her, who tucked her into bed and kissed her goodnight, who loved her best of anyone in the world. She couldn't quite equate that with the wicked sorcerer the Book described.

But Henry said the book never lied.

She buried her head in her hands and cried. She was so confused!

"I wish I never read this!" she hiccupped. After a few minutes, she started to read again, wondering how, in all of that turmoil, she had come to be.

She read the next tale, called *Rumplestiltskin's Loss*, about a previous time in the sorcerer known as the Dark One's life and her jaw dropped.

*Holy hopping horned toads! I have a brother! No way! Or I did, before he got lost.*

She read to the end and thought, *I wonder if Papa remembers Bae? Or any of this? Somehow . . . I don't think so.*

The last tale was called *The Spinner and the Rose*, and it too was about Rumplestiltskin, alone in his tower, until the former pastry chef and cook of the small kingdom Belle had come from came knocking on the door one night, asking sanctuary for herself . . . and the baby she carried . . . the baby who was the daughter of her mistress and the sorcerer she now asked help from.

Alina gasped.

Saylah. *Saylah brought me to Papa.* She searched for a name for her housekeeper, but the tale didn't mention one. But it *did* mention the fact that Belle had took sick soon after the birth and it was presumed she had died. It also mentioned the fact that the king, her grandfather, had refused to acknowledge the baby girl as his kin, and had demanded she be exposed on a hillside.

*Child of a monster. Abomination.*

But Saylah had disobeyed that order, instead stealing away with the baby wrapped in a basket before the guards could carry out their task, the former cook had slipped through the gates and to the Dark Castle, there to give Rumplestiltskin a gift beyond price.
Alina swallowed a lump in her throat. Saylah had saved her. Because of that, the Beast was no longer alone, no longer bitter and unhappy. And thus the story had changed.

She shut the book and hid it under her pillow.

Now she knew the truth.

And she didn't know what to do.

Full of conflicting emotions, she lay down on her bed and fell asleep, exhausted.

Chapter End Notes

So, I just finished watching the episode Skin Deep again and it inspired me to write this. You'll note that some time passes between the part where he lets Belle go and Regina comes to lie to him that Belle is dead. Here, in my version, she comes and lies too, but it's actually just after the baby's born and King Maurice has condemned the baby to die. She takes Belle away and keeps her, but of course Rum and Saylah (we'll keep calling her that for now, but eventually you'll find out who she is-more than a pastry chef) don't know what happened to her and they both think Belle's dead. You'll find out why later.
Remember, Remember

Chapter Summary

Rumple remembers a few things about his past while he sits with Alina waiting for her to wake up

Henry drowned his waffles in syrup and sprinkled cinnamon all over them until it looked like brown snow had drifted over them. Regina looked at him in disgust and said, "Honestly, Henry, must you drown everything in cinnamon?"

Henry looked at her innocently over the rim of his glass of milk. "But I like cinnamon, Mom." And he knew Regina hated it. Then he put a huge bite of in his mouth. "It makes everything taste better."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Regina scolded, drinking her raspberry power protein shake down along with a small piece of whole grain toast.

Henry fought to keep from rolling his eyes. Did she always have to be so critical of everything he did now? Ever since the crypt incident, which was last week, she had been on his ass for every little thing. It made him so jumpy and sick of it that he wanted to run away and hide in Emma's Bug. Or in Alina's tree house in her backyard. Only problem was, Regina knew those hiding places and would be sure to find him. *Maybe I could hide out with Leroy. Or in the back room of Gold's pawnshop, where he keeps that old suit of armor.*

"Mom, are you coming to Career Day again this Wednesday?" he asked, hoping the answer was no. Whenever Regina showed up at school things got... tense. No one wanted to have Mayor Mills breathing down their neck.

"I'll have to see, Henry. I have a lot of meetings coming up," Regina replied, examining her Red Vamp nail polish critically. "How does this color look on me?" She extended a hand towards her son.

Henry raised an eyebrow. "The truth? It looks like you're dripping blood."

"Good," for some reason that seemed to please her. "I want to keep people on their toes."

Henry ate another few bites of his waffle, thinking that if people were any more scared and wary around his adopted mother they'd be petrified with fear. He hoped Alina was all right, she hadn't called him back last night. He wondered if she had read the Book and hoped the stories hadn't changed her opinion of her father too much.

When Henry had first discovered Gold was actually Rumplestiltskin, the Dark One, he'd been awed and a little scared. But then he recalled that the Dark One's dagger was cursed, and it was that which made Rumple into a beast. And here, in the land without magic, or not much magic at all anymore, as Henry saw it, Gold was only ordinary. And he was not cruel, at least not to Alina or Henry or his housekeeper Saylah.

True, he could and did threaten people over rent being due, but wasn't that what a businessman
did? As far as Henry knew, he'd never evicted anyone. So maybe that was proof that he'd changed from what he used to be.

Regina rinsed her glass and put it in the sink. "Hurry up, Henry! Don't dawdle or else you'll be late for school." She clapped her hands.

Henry finished his breakfast and wiped his mouth on his sleeve just to tick off his mother. As he went to pick up his glass and put it in the sink, he wondered if Emma was up yet and what she was doing this morning. He wished he were with her now, eating chocolate chip pancakes at Granny's diner.

He slung his back pack over his shoulder and went to get in the front seat of Regina's Mercedes.

Page~*~*~*~Break

As Regina pulled out of her driveway and headed to Storybrooke Elementary, Emma was parking her Bug at the cemetery. She had a strange feeling that there was something hidden in the crypt. Something that Regina didn't want them to know about.

She walked across the grass to the Mills crypt, an odd feeling running down her spine. It was not like fear... but almost the same. Emma rubbed her arms, which were prickly with goosebumps.

She reached the Mills crypt after about five minutes of walking and tugged on the door handle.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Alina thrashed and moaned softly into her pillow as she watched her mother, Belle, storm out of the castle and leave her father alone.

No! Don't you see? He does love you, Mama! He does! He just can't say it. He let you go!

She opened her mouth and cried aloud, "Come back! He let you go! He let you go! That means everything!"

But she was voiceless and mute, watching her mother walk away, leaving the man she loved alone once more, brooding and hurt and easy prey for loneliness and anger... She woke gasping, her hair straggling over her face, her eyes wide. "Don't go, Mama! He let you go!"

It took a moment for her to realize she had been dreaming, it was so vivid. She could almost see it in her mind. Her heart ached so bad she feared she would start sobbing any moment. She missed her mother so much... even though she had never known her. She didn't know how she could miss someone she had never known, yet she did, with a throbbing ache that made her want to hide under the covers and skip school.

Then she heard Saylah calling her from downstairs, "Alina, it's time to get up for school!"

Alina groaned and thought about pretending she was sick. Only that never seemed to work with Saylah. The woman always knew when she was shamming. Much like her papa. She threw back the covers and stood up. Hopefully school would be short today. She was so tired she just wanted to go back to bed. Her dreams had made her toss and turn all night.

At breakfast, Mr. Gold read the financial section of The Mirror while eating his French toast and bacon and drinking his second cup of coffee, which he liked with a dash of cream and a single teaspoon of sugar. His first cup was always black, "as a witch's heart" as he liked to say.
Next to him, Alina yawned and picked at her plate of French toast and nibbled on her bacon. The only thing she finished was her orange juice.

"Aren't you hungry today, dearie?" asked her father when he noticed her breakfast was mostly untouched.

"No!" Alina snapped, suddenly in a bad mood, and not wishing to be coddled. She half pushed her plate away. "I'm not. I'm just tired."

Gold stared at her in astonishment. "Well, someone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Alina scowled and looked at the French toast drowning in its bed of syrup. "I did not. I wish I could go back to sleep."

"You have school, so sorry, that's out. And mind that tone when you talk to me, young lady," Gold scolded, not minded to put up with any disrespect.

"Yes, Papa," Alina said, but sullenly, knowing she was behaving like a brat, but not caring. She thought again about her dreams and how she knew that her father had been the Dark One, and she just wanted to howl, or ask him why, or run out of the house and instead she sat there glaring at her breakfast, her soul in turmoil.

"Is something bothering you, Alina?" Gold inquired a bit more mildly. "Is that why you're so cranky? Or are you just tired?"

His daughter stubbornly didn't reply, which made Saylah click her tongue when she came round to remove the dishes.

Alina ignored the housekeeper. For once she would give Saylah the silent treatment. She thought about the book in her backpack and hoped she'd have time to talk to Henry today about what she'd read. She wondered what he thought about her papa.

Gold returned to his paper for a few brief moments while Saylah packed Alina's lunch in her pink lunch tote and Alina struggled to keep from bursting into tears or screaming every time she looked at her father, who looked like his usual self in his Armani suit and red tie, his hair neatly combed.

_He doesn't remember. He doesn't remember_, she chanted over and over. And she wished suddenly that she didn't know anything about the past either. She had thought she wanted to know, that she needed to know, but now that she did . . . she was miserable.

Finally, she could stand it no longer, and she said abruptly, "I'm gonna go get in the car." She picked up her lunch box, said goodbye to Saylah, and hurried out of the kitchen towards the garage.

Mr. Gold set down the paper and said to Saylah, "Dear God, don't tell me it's starting already."

"What is, sir?"

"Teenage hormones. She's not even thirteen yet!"

Saylah shook her head. "She's a girl, Mr. G. So some days are like this."

Gold groaned. "Wonderful!" Then he drained his coffee cup and said, "Make her take a nap when she comes home, Saylah. Maybe that'll sweeten her disposition."
"Will do, sir," Saylah answered, thinking the same thing.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

At school Henry noticed Alina drooping over her math book. Then again, that wasn't unusual for her to do. Alina was bored to pieces by math. Miss Blanchard kept writing on the board, not noticing the little girl half-dozing at her desk.

Henry nudged her awake. "Alina! Wake up!"

Alina blinked sleepily. "Is it lunch time yet?"

"Nope. But you'd better quit falling asleep before Miss Blanchard calls on you," Henry said.

"I didn't sleep well last night," Alina said grumpily. "I kept dreaming."

Henry gave her a sympathetic look. He could guess what had kept her awake and he was sorry for it.

"Oooh, Gold girl had dream!" Tom hooted from two seats over. "What about, Mills taking someone else to prom?"

Alina glared over at him. "Quit calling me Gold girl, Tommy! What do you think I am—Barbie?"

"Yeah, and he's Ken!" Tom pointed to Henry.

"And you're the Dope of the Year!" Henry shot back. "We're not even in high school yet, duh!"

"But she dreams of you, Mills!" Tom smirked. He clutched his heart dramatically. "Some day my prince will come . . ." he sang in a high falsetto.

"Shove it, Tommy!" Alina growled, in no mood to put up with his teasing today.

"Tom! Stop yodeling and do your math problems," ordered Mary Margaret, turning around. "And if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Or else you can have extra math homework tonight."

Tom immediately quit teasing. Mary Margaret, for all her sweetness, was death on insults. "Yes, Miss Blanchard," he said, but he stuck his tongue out at Alina when his teacher turned back to the board.

The morning seemed to drag on endlessly, but finally Miss Blanchard said it was lunch time and all the students moved their desks to sit beside their friends and got their lunches from the cubbies beside the coats along the wall.

Henry opened his Batman lunch box and moaned at what he saw in it.

Alina looked up from unwrapping her sandwich and put her Thermos of lemonade on her desk. "What's wrong, Henry?"

"She gave me liverwurst."

"Yuck! Is that like some kind of punishment?"

"I hope not. Maybe she got our sandwiches mixed up." Henry looked glum. Besides the sandwich there were carrot sticks, a carton of chocolate milk, and two strawberry tart cookies.
Alina broke her sandwich in half. "Here. Eat half of my peanut butter and jelly. Saylah always gives me too much."

"No, I can't take your lunch."

Alina laid the sandwich on his desk. "Yes, you can. I'm not very hungry today anyway." She also had a banana, Sun Chips, and a cupcake.

"Thanks," Henry said, and stuffed the disgusting liverwurst back in his lunch box and took half of Alina's sandwich. "This is really good. I wish Saylah made my lunch. She never gives you anything you don't like."

Alina ate her sandwich slowly. She didn't have much of an appetite, she was still upset about what the Book had written in it. But she didn't dare discuss that here. "I've got your book in my backpack."

"Uh huh. We'll look at it over recess," Henry said, devouring the rest of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Aww! How cute! Mills and Gold are sharing!" Tom snickered, peering at them as he went to throw his paper bag in the trash.

Henry scowled. "Go jump off a bridge, Tom!"

"With trolls under it," Alina added.

"Ooo, now I'm scared!" Tom mocked. "The two of you are such geeks! You get straight A's, you're suck ups, and you read too much!" He sauntered back to his seat, singing under his breath so only the children nearby could hear, "Mills and Goldie sitting in a tree—K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage . . ."

The others listening snickered behind their hands.

Alina went red and so did Henry. "I'm killing him!" she muttered.

Henry shook his head. "He's not worth jail time. Just ignore him. Stupid is as stupid does."

"Right. We'll be in high school before he's ever out of fifth grade," Alina snorted.

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Henry and Alina sat under a huge oak tree at recess, looking at the *Once Upon a Time* book.

Alina bit her lip. "So . . . you don't think he's bad?"

Henry knew who he referred to. "No. Maybe once with the curse, but not now. Not after being such a good dad and all."

"Then it doesn't frighten you, that he used to be . . . the Dark One?" she whispered, her head almost touching Henry's ear.

"Fairy tale geeks! Fairy tale geeks!" Tom chanted, and threw grass on them as he ran by.

Several other children laughed at his wit and daring.

Alina longed to go and punch the obnoxious boy out. Henry rolled his eyes.
Then he whispered back, "He was the Dark One. He's not now, Alina. Remember that."

Before Alina could respond, there came a loud cry from the other end of the playground.

"Give that back, Tom!" yelled Paige, a girl in their class. She had pretty blond hair and blue eyes. "My mom baked that brownie for me."

Alina and Henry looked up to see Tom standing in front of Paige with a brownie in his hand that he stuffed in his mouth. Three other boys who hung around him whistled and hooted and watched as Tom terrorized the gentle girl, who rarely said anything to anyone.

"No! My brownie!"

"Oh, why don't you cry about it?" sneered one of the other boys.

Tom laughed, spraying Paige with spit and brownie crumbs.

Henry felt his blood boil. He stood up and so did Alina.

Alina ran up to Tom and cried, "You're disgusting, Tom! Eating somebody else's food! What are you, a barbarian?"

"Mind your own business, Gold! Before I give you a fat lip, you busybody," Tom snapped.

Poor Paige looked like she was about to cry.

Alina was furious. "I'll give you one first, you big bully!" she growled, her temper sparking. She had all she could take of the big oaf today. Without thinking, she hauled off and tried to punch Tom in the teeth.

Tried because she wasn't tall enough to reach his mouth, and neither was she good at hitting people. Papa had taught her how to throw a punch, but Tom wasn't facing her and so her blow glanced away, striking him on the cheek.

Tom spun around like a cat and grabbed Alina by the jacket. "That's it, Goldie! You're dog meat!" he howled.

He shoved Alina hard and she fell down and hit her head on the blacktop.

For a moment she was dazed and saw stars.

"Stop it!" Paige yelled. "Leave her alone!"

"Make me, crybaby!" Tom brayed, then he began to bang Alina's head into the ground.

Paige stared, horrified. Then she ran to get Miss Blanchard.

Alina couldn't get up, she was almost choked by Tom's stranglehold on her.

She felt the world go dim.

The next thing she saw was a blur of blue and white as Henry launched himself at Tom, screaming, "Get off her, you stupid troll! Get off her!"

Henry clung like a barnacle to Tom's broad back, pulling at his tie and almost choking him. He was terrified Alina would get her brains bashed out by the big lug and furious that Tom would dare hit a
girl half his size.

Of course, Henry wasn't much bigger than Alina, but that didn't matter. He drummed his fists as hard as he could and yelled, "Don't you hit her, you damn coward!"

Tom was half-strangled and yelping from Henry's abuse.

The next thing Henry knew was Mary Margaret was yelling, "Henry, enough!"

Hands separated the two boys and Henry struggled against someone.

"Easy, boy. Looks like he's had enough," David said softly, restraining the furious boy.

"He hurt Alina!" Henry half-sobbed as he saw his friend lying there. "I think she needs a doctor."

"Yes, I'm calling 9-1-1," Mary Margaret said, dialing her cell. She couldn't believe this had happened. Nothing this bad had ever happened in her class before. Mr. Gold was going to have a conniption. So was Regina. And Emma. Mary Margaret shook her head. Poor Alina! She hoped she wasn't seriously injured. How had she missed this? It was a good thing Paige had called to her when she had. She looked over at David. "David, would you mind bringing Henry and Tom to the principal's office?"

"Sure, Mary Margaret," David said and then he marched both Henry and Tom, who was all redfaced, inside.

Henry's last sight of Alina was of her lying still on the ground and the sirens blaring as the ambulance came and took her away. He looked up at David, not caring if he got in trouble. "How'd you get here?"

"I was meeting Mary Margaret for lunch and I happened to see what was going on," David answered. He frowned. "You shouldn't be getting into fights, Henry."

"But I—" Henry began.

Then David looked at Tom. "And you, mister, shouldn't be beating up girls!"

"Aww, Mr. Nolan—"

David ignored Tom's whining and took them directly to the principal's office.

Henry just hoped Alina would be all right. And right then he wished Tom shoved off the toll bridge.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Gold limped as fast as he could down the hallway to the children's ward. His leg protested the vigorous exercise, but he blocked out the pain. Nothing mattered except that his baby girl was hurt. His dearest love, besides his dead wife, was lying comatose in a hospital bed. He had gotten a call directly from Mary Margaret and then again from Dr. Whale on his way out the door of his shop.

He damn near got a speeding ticket on his way to the hospital, but didn't care. Let Emma or whatever cop was on duty try and stop him from getting to the hospital and he would bury them. His heart was beating like an express train as he limped through the green doors on the fourth floor.

His cane thunked against the shiny floor tiles as he limped grimly along, counting the numbers on
the walls, which were painted with jungle animals and music notes.

Soon he arrived at Room 415, where his beloved daughter was.

"How is she?" were the first words to pass his lips as he saw the pediatric nurse bending over Alina's slight form, adjusting the IV drip.

"Hello, Mr. Gold," greeted the nurse, straightening. "My name's Claire. I'm head RN of pediatrics."

"How is she?" he repeated, ignoring Claire's outstretched hand and limping over to the bed.

"Well, as I'm sure Dr. Whale told you, she hasn't woken up yet. She has a slight concussion and a cut on her head which needed seven stitches. We did an MRI and a CAT scan and there was no bleeding inside, thank God. But she's also bruised on her back from being slammed into the ground by that—that boy."

"He's not a boy, he's a damned animal!" Gold spat. "Will she recover?" He prayed it would be so. If he lost his daughter . . .

"Oh, yes. Dr. Whale says in a week she should be good as new," Claire said confidently. "I'm giving her an antibiotic right now through her IV and I've also given her something for pain, as I'm sure she'll have a headache when she wakes up."

Gold dragged a chair from the side and plunked it down near his daughter's bed. "You're sure? She's not . . . not brain damaged?"

He looked so lost and fearful that Claire could hardly believe this was the same hardnosed man who demanded rent each month. "No, Mr. Gold. She's going to be fine. But she'll sleep for a few more hours because of the medicine." She almost patted his shoulder before she remembered who he was.

Gold sat down in the chair. "I need to call Saylah," he mumbled, recalling that his housekeeper had no idea Alina was hurt.

"Of course, Mr. Gold. Would you like something to drink or eat while you wait?"

"Just . . . a cup of coffee if you have it." That was all his stomach could tolerate right then.

"Coming right up," Claire said cheerily. "Cream and sugar?"

"Please," Gold replied, his eyes fixing on his daughter's still form with terrible intensity. He reached out and took her small hand in his own and clung like a drowning man.

Claire made her way out of the room to get the coffee, thinking that Gold looked about ready to snap. Maybe the man really was human after all.

"Alina. Alina, dearie. Come back to me," Gold murmured, his plea barely whispered in the still room. "Don't go away like your mother."

Despite Claire's words, he was still scared to death she was going to die.

He barely noticed when Claire returned with the coffee and set it down on the rolling tray table and then left.

"You're going to be all right," he hissed, hoping if he said the words enough times it would be so. A flash of anger rode his features as he growled, "And when I get a hold of that little brat who did
"This, I'll—I'll beat him within an inch of his life with my cane!"

"While I don't blame you for that, Gold, you'll make me arrest you for assault if you go through with it," Emma said, leaning against the door frame.

"Do you think I care, Swan?" Gold snapped, turning slightly to see her. "Look at what the little beast did to my daughter."

Alina had a white bandage wrapped around the top of her head. It made her look like a wax effigy.

"I know. Calm down. Beating that kid won't bring her around any sooner," Emma soothed, coming and laying a hand on his shoulder. "What did the doctor say?" She felt for him, she truly did. It was her worst nightmare, to have Henry hurt and lying in a hospital and she unable to do anything. And seeing the little girl so helpless made her want to beat on Tom too, just like her son had.

"It'll make me feel better," Gold said testily, but he left Emma's hand where it was. Then he told her what Whale had said.

"Well, that's good news," Emma said. "If you want to press charges, let me know and I'll have you fill out a report."

Gold snorted. "I'd like to run that kid and his whole family out of this town on a rail. How dare he do such a thing to my daughter?"

"Henry told me that Tom's always been a bully. He started with Paige first and when Alina went to help her, that was when the fight started. Apparently, Alina tried to take a swing at him first."

"Pity she didn't break his nose," Gold growled. This Tom kid reminded him of some boys he'd had to deal with when he was growing up. The reminder was not pleasant. "I'm going to call Saylah."

Emma remained as Gold called his housekeeper and told her what was going on. I'll get her a balloon and a stuffed bear from the gift shop from me and Henry, she thought as she watched the little girl sleep. She could recall a few scraps at this age as well, but nothing that had put her in the hospital.

She wondered if this Tom kid had a record and decided to check up on it. Anybody who was violent enough to bash another kid's head into the ground probably had a past. Or something. She couldn't blame Henry for interfering, even if it did get him suspended for two days. Tom was suspended for two weeks, though Emma suspected Gold would make that sentence look like a slap on the wrist if he had his way.

"You know, I tried to check out that crypt again today," Emma began, trying to distract the distraught Gold. Besides, she needed to tell someone about her suspicions.

Gold closed his cell and took up his coffee and sipped it. "And? Find anything?"

"No. I couldn't get in. The doors were locked."

"How very . . . odd. Now why would Regina do that?" Gold mused. "What is she hiding?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to find out. With a warrant if necessary."

"Oh, don't do that, dearie," Gold said. "You'll tip her off. A crowbar works better."

"Hmm. Maybe you're right." Emma drew away. "I'm going to the gift shop to buy Alina a get well
"You don't have to do that," Gold protested.

"I know. I want to. And so does Henry." Emma said. "I'll be back. You can come down to the station later to fill out a form if you want."

Gold muttered something noncommittal. The most important thing right now was for Alina to wake up. He'd settle with the boy later. As Emma left the room, he fixed on his daughter again and squeezed her hand gently. "Wake up, my lovely girl. Please."

The heart monitor made a soft noise and he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes wearily. He recalled the events of this morning and regretted his sharpness. It was too bad he couldn't go back in time.

Abruptly, he felt a prickle in the back of his head and suddenly, he was no longer in the sterile hospital room, but back in a small one room hut in the village where he'd grown up . . .

His very pregnant wife, Milah, stood by the door of his home, watching as he hoisted his travel sack on his back. "Well, I'm off to the front, dearie. Wish me luck." His lot had been called and now he had to go fight in the Ogre Wars for the duke. It was the last thing he wanted, to go away and leave his wife alone to fight in another man's war. Or any war. He didn't believe in fighting. They had been fighting the ogres up and down the Wall of the duke's lands for years, ever since he'd been a child. It had never gained them anything except widows and orphans.

Milah stood there, then she hugged him perfunctorily. "You just be careful, Rumple. Don't go getting yourself killed before the little one even knows his papa, you hear?"

"Yes, dearie," he gave her a smile. "You know, maybe we can end all the fighting if we just negotiate a bit? That's never been tried, you know."

"Negotiate!" she laughed. "With ogres! Oh, Rumple! You and your silly ideas of talking instead of fighting. You talk like that around your commander and he'll have you digging latrines or flogged before you can say Jack Sprat. Now go on with you, you daft bugger! Negotiating! What do you think this is, market day?"

He flushed as he always did when she criticized his ideas, which she had been doing of late. "I'm not daft. All war is blood and death and I don't want to die. I'm a better spinner than I am a fighter. What's the harm in talking peace?"

"Ha! Talking gets you nothing but a broken head, in my opinion, husband," Milah snorted. "Especially around ogres. You can't reason with them! They're monsters."

"Are they, wife? Or do we just think so because we don't speak their language?" he asked softly. It seemed so clear to him. In order for the war to end, there had to be a treaty, like the one drawn up in the square for selling goods between customers and merchants. He had heard stories of the ogres cunning as well as brutality. But no one had even tried to negotiate with them before. Not even in the beginning, when the duke's men had invaded the ogres' territory by mistake. Were they monsters, or was it just that people saw them that way because of how they looked?

He wasn't sure. All he knew was that now he had to join the army, and he'd rather be home, spinning first grade wool into fine thread and helping Milah with the chores now that her time was near. But the duke hadn't given a fig about the fact that he provided the sole income for his family and he had a pregnant wife. The poor never mattered to the rich . . .
Gold sighed and clutched Alina's hand tighter as the memories poured through him.

He had been stuck in this hellhole of churned earth, flies, and mildewed supplies for weeks now. The advance guard had slowed and been picked apart by the ogre archers, which argued for intelligence, he thought, but no one else agreed. His suggestion that they negotiate was met with jeers and laughter and even accusations of being yellow.

But he wasn't a coward, he told himself. He just wasn't a fighter. He was a spinner, and a damn good one. His comrades called him the Negotiator and made fun of his accent and his beliefs behind his back. But he ignored them. All he wanted was to serve his three months and go home to Milah. This was such a waste of time.

What was he doing here anyway? He was no warrior, no strategist. He was just another body for the duke to fling into his war machine. The one thing he was able to do, he could not because he had no wheel and no wool. Half the men here were shivering and freezing in the mud because they had holes in their clothes or had worn them thin. More than half were starving.

The conditions here were worse than any he could recall, even in the winter when he was penniless child. How could the duke expect his forces to fight like this? He was lucky they hadn't all come down with some disease, some flux and died right there from the dirt and starvation.

He felt like a fool. He didn't even know how to swing a sword. None of his company did. They were just like him, poor farmers and crafters. They didn't even have armor. Some of them didn't even wear shoes!

And they were supposed to fight ogres.

The stupidity made him want to hurl. But was he any better, because here he was still?

Gold groaned softly, but did not wake, even though his mind shied away from what came next.

He had been up all night, tending to the injured and dying in the medical tent. There were many mangled and torn bodies, some by the ogres' hands, some by those they called doctors. All he'd been doing for hours was bringing them cups of water and cooling fevered brows with wet cloths.

The groans of those in pain filled his ears and the stench of the dying filled his nostrils.

It was something he'd remember to his dying day.

As he stumbled out of the tent and over to get something to eat—if they had any gruel left—he heard his commander bellowing, "Com'pany 425, line up! We're about to engage, hurry up! Get yore staves and spears ready!"

For a moment he considered not going. He could barely hold the damn staff, much less wield it hard enough to do damage. He'd get himself killed in two seconds. But then he was grabbed by burly Carl, the blacksmith's nephew, and dragged over to the line of trembling would-be soldiers.

"Get in line, Negotiator!" Carl shoved him. "Maybe you can talk an ogre to death, eh?"

That made the rest of the fellows bellow, but he didn't find it funny at all. "You idiots!" he shouted. "We're all going to die here. We don't even know how to fight."

"Sure we do, spinner. You take the pointy bit and shove it up an ogre's behind!" cried someone.

The others cheered.
He spat on the ground in disgust. "Yeah, and what about when the ogre's mate comes and crushes your skull in? Who's going to be laughing then? This is suicide!"

"Oh, shut up, spinner! We're all gonna go someday, better like this than cowering in a corner, you yellow-bellied blabbermouth."

"Better alive then dead!" Rumple growled. Were they really going to do this? Charge the center and hope for the best? It was ridiculous! Trained knights had fallen doing that, how could they expect to do any better?

He looked at his staff, six feet tall with a pointed piece of metal on the end. His arms trembled. He had a life, damn it. A wife and a child, probably by now. How could he abandon them to play soldier like some stupid little boy? He didn't feel the same hatred the others did towards the ogres. Nor did he feel the same loyalty towards the duke, a man who'd never, as long as he could remember, been concerned about the villagers who tilled his fields and harvested his crops and put bread in the mouths of his children. What had the duke ever done that he should die for the man?

Nothing.

The line of men began to march forward. He remained where he was.

"Come on, Negotiator!" bellowed Carl. "I want to see you make an ogre's head spin around by talking at him!"

"Go to hell!" he called. Let them die if they wanted. What a waste.

Suddenly a knight in bloodstained armor rode up and cuffed him in the back of the head. "Move, soldier! Get up there with the rest of them!"

He spun around to argue and the horse, battle trained, reared and lashed out with his hooves.

He stumbled backwards in the mud and fell. He couldn't catch his breath.

"Trying to run, were you, coward?" snarled the horseman. "We'll see about that!"

Before he could regain his feet, he felt a searing pain in his leg as the horse stamped on it . . . breaking it in two while the knight laughed and laughed . . .

They said he was lucky it hadn't been cut off, that he could still use it somewhat . . . He wanted to die . . . now he was a cripple . . . the only thing keeping him going was Milah and his son . . . She had written him while he was passed out and now he was a father . . . he had to go home . . .

"Go home," Gold muttered, tossing his head. "Home . . ."

Only his homecoming, which took extra long because of his leg, was not the domestic reunion he'd imagined.

Milah had sneered at him and shut the door in his face and when he'd protested, saying it was his house, she'd yelled through the keyhole, "Yes! The house of a coward! I'm sick of the sight of you!"

He pounded on the door. "I'm not a coward! Why should I fight and die for some idiot in a castle who doesn't even know the real reason he's fighting anymore? Let me in, Milah!"

"You and your ideas! They don't amount to crap, and neither do you."

"Let me in to see my son!"
Milah yanked open the door. "Come in them, but don't expect to make me welcome you! Because of your actions, I'm known as the wife of a coward! You ran away!"

"You don't understand . . ." He cried, horrified that she would reject him, after all he had been through.

"I understand all I care to. Now go see your son. His name is Baelfire. He needs a strong name to erase his father's cowardice."

He stiffened. "That's not fair, Milah. You weren't there. You didn't see, didn't hear . . .I'm not my father . . ."

"No, you're worse than him. Because at least he had the decency to die rather than taint his family with the shame . . ."

"You'd rather I died? That you raised your son alone? What's wrong with you?"

"Ask yourself that question!" she snarled viciously. "We're done!"

"No! Give me a chance to explain!"

"Spare me your excuses. Or better yet, tell them to someone who cares." The slamming of the back door echoed like a death knell in his head.

He knew then he could never make her understand. All she heard was the whispers of coward. She didn't want to hear him. He realized then that she didn't love him anymore. Maybe she never had to throw him over so quickly, favoring rumors and gossip over his own account.

He bent down and picked up his sleeping son from the cradle. "My son. My little boy. Bae." He kissed the little face. "Maybe you'll love me, huh?"

He held his son and rocked him. Maybe he was a coward, but at least he was alive. Didn't that count for something? And maybe he wasn't worthy of Milah's love, but perhaps that wouldn't matter to the little scrap in front of him, the miracle he had created? Perhaps . . .

He woke wide-eyed and his leg was aching like seven hells. He glanced around in confusion. Where was he? This wasn't his home.

"Where?" he muttered.

Then he remembered what had happened. He rubbed his head. What a strange dream! Or . . . had it been a dream? He frowned. Of course it had been. It was like some crazy fairy tale. He must have been out of his head.

Several hours had passed. There was a stuffed pink cat on the nightstand with a balloon that said Get Well Soon on it and a small card attached. He suspected it was from Emma and Henry for Alina.

He drank the now cold coffee in the paper cup, hoping to wake himself up.

The caffeine hit his stomach like a jolt of pure lightning.

He blinked, then looked automatically towards the bed.

To his astonishment and delight, he saw Alina was awake. Her brown eyes studied him blearily.
"Papa?"

He moved then, without quite realizing it, and gathered her close. "Oh, Alina! You're going to be all right now." He breathed in the familiar scent of peanut butter and fruit shampoo. She was awake! He buried his face in her hair and tears dampened the brown tresses in relief. It was what he had hoped for, wished for. And now it had come true.
Emma knew that somehow she had to get into the crypt in order to see what Regina had hidden there. She cursed herself for not taking a good look around when she'd been there last time, but Regina had shown up so unexpectedly, so soon after they had found the kids . . . it made Emma wonder if the crypt had been bugged with video cameras or something similar. Given Regina's current position and her distrust of everyone save a few, it would make sense.

And now she was locked out, and whatever secret the crypt held locked away. Unless . . . no, she shouldn't even think of that. Not now. She had always done her own investigating. She had no right to involve him. But when she thought about it, he really was the best choice . . .

Biting her lip in turmoil, she went to use the restroom, and when she got done washing her hands, the phone was ringing.

She picked it up and heard Henry's voice on the other end. "Hi, Emma! Are you busy?"

"Not right now, Henry. How are you?"

"Well, I'm suspended for two days for fighting and Regina's not too happy with me, but otherwise I'm okay."

"Good. I had wondered how you were. Is . . . is Regina home?"

"Nope. She's in meetings all day. Emma, can we go to the hospital to visit Alina? She's going to be okay, right? Tom didn't . . . didn't hurt her bad, did he?"

"No, she's going to be fine. Didn't Regina tell you?"

"No. All she did when she found out was yell at me for causing trouble. But I couldn't just watch that big idiot pound on her, Emma. He was banging her head into the ground! And everyone was just . . . watching. I had to do something."

"I understand, Henry. And if that was my friend, I'd have done the same thing." Emma said. She recalled all the fights she'd gotten into as a youngster for defending other kids who couldn't defend themselves. It seemed to be a family trait. "And I'll pick you up and we can visit Alina together. I got her a stuffed dog and a balloon yesterday as a get well present from you and me."

"I'll bet she likes that," Henry said. "She has lots of stuffed animals. How long is she going to be in the hospital?"

"I don't know, Henry. I'd have to ask Mr. Gold. He'd know. One thing I do recall is that Alina has a slight concussion."

"What's that?"
"A head injury where there's some swelling on the brain and you can get headaches until it heals," Emma told him. "I had a concussion once. Smacked my head into a brick wall going after someone who had jumped bail."

"Ouch! Bet that must have hurt."

"Yep. Be out front in five minutes, kid."

"I will. And thanks! I was going nuts here," Henry laughed, then he hung up.

Emma got her jacket and hurried out to her car after locking up. She hoped Alina was feeling up to visitors.

"I'm bored, Papa," Alina said after the nurse had come in to check her vitals and take away her breakfast tray. Her father had brought her waffles and sausage from Granny's diner as a treat, and had eaten his egg and sausage muffin and coffee with her.

She had woken up yesterday afternoon with an awful headache, which was better now, and her dad had stayed all night with her, sleeping on a pullout bed the nurses gave him. Saylah had visited too and brought Alina flowers and peanut butter cookies, which she had shared with her father and the nurses on duty.

Dr. Whale had come once to examine her and was supposed to be here this morning, but he was late. Until he came, Alina didn't know if she could go home, or had to stay another day for observation, as Nurse Claire had said.

"Does your head hurt?"

"No, not right now," she replied honestly.

Gold shifted in the chair he had pulled next to the bed. It was a recliner, Claire had brought it for him so he was more comfortable sitting next to Alina's bed. "Why don't you watch TV? I'm sure there are some cartoons on."

"No. All the good ones are on Saturday and today's Friday," Alina said fretfully. She shifted in the bed, which could be raised and lowered, but she still felt a bit uncomfortable. She was not used to staying away from home and she missed her room and her stuffed animals and the antiseptic smell of the hospital was making her a little ill. She wanted to go home.

"All right. Then how about I give you a little get well gift?" Gold suggested, holding out a flat package wrapped in pink and green paper.

"For me? Thanks!" Alina tore open the paper to reveal . . . "A book! One I've never read before. A Children's Treasury of Myths and Legends of the Northern American Indians. Wow! This so cool! It has pictures and everything!"

"I thought you might like it. I saw it yesterday in the gift shop," Gold chuckled. "Would you like me to read some to you?"

She nodded, then winced. "Okay, Papa. But you gotta do the voices."

"I do?"
"Yes! Because you always do the best ones," Alina said, recalling that when she was a little girl, he had always read her bedtime stories and did different voices for each character.

"Very well. Your wish is my command, princess," Gold acquiesced, then he took the illustrated book and opened it to the first tale. "And now we'll read the tale of How Raven Stole the Sun," he began. "Once upon a time, when the world was new, Raven flew across it . . ."

As he read, Gold shifted voices whenever he came across a new character, like Coyote, or Grandfather Sun, making them high and squeaky or deep and echoing depending on who was talking.

Alina remained entranced by the tale, and she wasn't the only one.

Some of the nurses making rounds on the floor paused to listen to the odd voices coming from the room and soon three or four had gathered, gaping at the sight of the reclusive billionaire sitting and reading to his daughter, sounding like a first class mimic.

No one had ever imagined anything like that before and so stood spellbound until Dr. Whale came with his clipboard and pushed past them, saying, "What is going on here, people? A party?"

The nurses scattered, red-faced, and Dr. Whale smirked and interrupted, "Looks like you had quite the audience, Gold."

"Excuse me?" Gold lowered the book and looked up at the doctor.

"You ought to be on stage with that voice," Whale said. "How are you feeling today, Alina?"

"Better. When can I go home?"

Dr. Whale chuckled. "Well, let me see now." He felt her head and listened to her heart and said, "You have a mild concussion, no real trauma, but because of that I'd like you to stay here another day, just to be on the safe side. You can go home tomorrow, but you'll need to rest for a few days and in a week have a follow-up appointment, okay? In two weeks the stitches can come out."

"Okay," Alina agreed, not very happy about it but she knew there was nothing to be gained by whining.

"Your little girl is extremely lucky, Mr. Gold," Whale told him then. "It could have been much worse."

"I know that, doctor," Gold said. "I'm extremely grateful it wasn't."

"Yes, well, if you need anything, like Tylenol, just ring the red button," Whale said. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Just as he was departing, Emma and Henry came in.

"Hi, Alina!" Henry greeted, smiling.

"Henry! Emma!" Alina smiled at them.

"How are you feeling, kiddo?" asked Emma, hugging the little girl gently.

"I'm better, but Dr. Whale says I need to stay here overnight again."

"Just for observation," Gold added. "I think he's being extra cautious."
"Yeah," Alina made a face. "I was bored, so Papa was reading to me."

"I brought checkers, so we can play a game or two," Henry said, and opened his backpack to get out the checkers box.

As Henry helped Alina set up the board on her wheeled tray table, Emma said to Mr. Gold, "Were you here all night?"

"Of course. I would never leave Alina when she was hurt."

"I'd be the same with Henry. Thank God she's going to be all right."

Alina's ears perked up and she said quietly, "Thanks, Henry, for saving me. Did you get in trouble?"

"Uh, I got suspended for two days for fighting, and Regina yelled at me, but I'd do it again if I had to. He was hitting your head on the ground, Alina. I was afraid he'd kill you or something."

"Bastard!" Mr. Gold hissed, then he looked slightly ashamed. "Sorry. I . . . I shouldn't talk like that in front of you."

The children giggled and Emma just rolled her eyes. "Can't blame you there, Gold. If it were my kid . . ." Then she asked Alina softly, "When you saw that Tom was teasing Paige, why didn't you get a teacher?"

"Umm . . . well, I just . . . got mad, I guess. He'd been making fun of Henry and me all morning so I just . . . wanted to get him back. And instead he knocked me out."

"Next time, dearie, get a teacher. You're not big enough to defend yourself against bullies like him," Gold said. Then he asked, "He was teasing you? What did he say?"

"That we were suck ups and something about us . . . kissing in a tree," Henry told him, blushing.

"I see," Gold said tightly. "How long has this been going on?"

Henry shrugged. "Tom's always been a troublemaker. Always saying stuff like that. But he's never hurt either of us like that before."

"Well, it's going to stop. Now," Gold declared angrily.

"What are you going to do, sir?" asked Henry, wide eyed. He had visions of Tom becoming a smear on the pavement.

"I'm going to . . . talk with him," Gold answered through gritted teeth. He checked his watch. "Right now he's probably home, since he was suspended too."

"Gold . . ." Emma said warningly.

"Don't try and stop me, Emma," Gold warned, his eyes glinting dangerously. "He brutalized my child."

"That's why I'm going with you," Emma said decisively. "So I can see that justice is done."

Gold glared at her. "You don't need—"

"Oh yes, I do. Henry, stay here and play checkers with Alina. Mr. Gold and I will be back in two
"Are you going to arrest him, Emma?" asked Alina.

"And lock him up?" Henry wanted to know.

"No, Henry. He's too young to go to jail," Emma said. "We're just going to talk to him, like Mr. Gold said." She looked at Gold pointedly.

"You can go, Papa," Alina said when he hesitated. "I'll be fine. Henry and I'll play checkers. Just don't kill Tom, okay?"

"All right, dearie. I'll behave," Gold sighed, then he limped out of the room and down to the parking garage.

To his vast annoyance, Emma tagged along after him.

When she got in the passenger side of his Cadillac, he said sharply, "You don't have to accompany me, Miss Swan."

"Yes, I do. Believe me, Gold, I know how mad you are now. If someone put Henry in the hospital, I'd be frothing," Emma said, shutting the door. "But I don't want to have to slap cuffs on you for assaulting a minor. I'm just doing my job as sheriff, Gold."

Gold scowled. "Acting sheriff, Swan. And I won't do him permanent harm. Just scare the blazes out of him."

"I still want to be there. Just in case."

"You're impossible!" he growled. Then he pulled out of the parking garage.

Emma concealed a smile. "Look who's talking. Do you know where Tom lives?"

"Yes, of course. They rent the property from me. I know where everyone is in this town that owes me money." He pulled out onto Main Street and drove down four blocks and made a right at a traffic light.

"What are you planning on doing to him?"

"Nothing like what I want to do to him, believe me," Gold growled. "I want to beat the little brat senseless . . . but I won't. Because that won't make what happened to Alina go away. So . . . I have another plan."

"Such as?"

"You'll see, Emma."

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

When they reached Tom's house, a rather ordinary one floor house with blue trim and a scraggly looking yard, they saw a boy sitting on the porch steps. Gold parked the car and got out, leaning slightly on his cane. Emma quickly came around the other side as Tom rose, staring at Gold in terror.

Before Tom could run, Gold snapped, "You! Boy! Stay where you are!"
Tom turned the color of a sheet and whimpered, "Please, Mr. Gold! Don't evict us! Please!"

Gold limped up to the steps, his eyes glittering, his face a cold mask. "You have the nerve to make demands of me after what you've done, you impudent whelp?"

"Gold!" Emma warned.

Tom trembled. "N-no, sir. Only . . . we don't got nowhere else to go . . ."

"You should have thought of that before you hit my daughter," said Gold, reducing the boy to jelly with one well-placed glare.

"I'm s-sorry, sir!"

"Sure you are. Now." Gold clenched his fist on his cane. He waved Emma away when she would have approached. "Do you realize I could bankrupt your entire family for what you did, boy? One word and the bank will foreclose on this hovel you call a home and you'll be living in a cardboard box and begging on the street corner. I could have you up on charges for assault with a snap of my finger."

Tom's eyes were bugging out. "I . . . I . . . didn't mean it . . ."

"No? Then what did you think you were doing, boy? You smashed a girl half your size into the ground! What sort of boy does that? I'll tell you what sort! A big nasty bully! Only a bully would hit a girl like that. And do you know what I do to bullies?"

"You . . . you . . . eat them?"

Gold looked disgusted. "You'd give me indigestion. Don't be ridiculous. I'm tempted to knock you on the ground the way you did Alina. However . . . as Sheriff Swan pointed out . . . it wouldn't teach you anything. So . . . I'm here to make you a deal, Thomas. You come and work for me for two months in my shop. I need someone to throw out the trash and sweep and run errands for me. It will teach you the value of hard work and sacrifice and maybe next time you'll think twice about raising your hand to a girl. Or I can slap you with a lawsuit it'll take your parents the rest of their lives to pay off. What's it going to be?"

"Uh . . . I'll come to work for you, Mr. Gold," Tom said, lickety-split.

"Then the deal is struck. Be at my shop early Sunday morning. Around eight. You'll work till one or two on the weekends and after school on the weekdays. And if you're late, you'll work an hour extra the next day. And if you ever touch my daughter again, I'll make you wish your mother never kissed your father."

"Y-Yes, sir, Mr. Gold!" Tom babbled shrinking away from him.

Gold turned and made his way back down the stairs. "Satisfied, Sheriff?" he grunted as he got in the car.

Emma nodded. "Couldn't have done it better myself, Gold."

He eyed her and rolled his eyes. "Please, Swan. Don't patronize me."

"What? I'm serious. You were brilliant. I think you may actually get through to the kid."

"If this doesn't work, there's always my cane," Gold said lightly.
"Don't make me lock you up, Gold," Emma returned.

"You never know, Swan. Using those cuffs on me might give you a thrill," he quipped, smirking.

"You've got a sick sense of humor, you know that?" Emma cried, looking shocked.

"But at least I have one, dearie."

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't?"

"Let's just say . . . you need a bit of tweak now and then."

Emma glared at him the whole way back to the hospital.

When they returned to Alina's room, they found both kids watching TV.

Emma would have left then, but Alina begged them to stay and eat supper. Gold ordered from Granny's diner and they all had supper together.

As Emma drove Henry home, she brought up something that had been dwelling on her mind since this morning. "Henry . . . do you know if Regina keeps a . . . key somewhere? One that . . . locks the crypt?"

"Why? Do you want to search in there?" he asked eagerly.

"I need to, but I can't without a key. Do you think . . . you could look around for one tonight?"

"Sure, Emma! It'll be my secret mission!"

"Henry, be careful. Don't get caught." She felt guilty putting him at risk like this.

"I won't. I'll check her study at home. She keeps some stuff there. Or in her bedroom drawer. In the night table."

Emma almost told him to forget it. What sort of a mother was she, to risk her son like that? A desperate one, she thought sadly. "Henry . . . maybe you shouldn't . . ."

"Of course I should! I can do it, Emma! She'll never suspect me, and who else have you got to get close to her?" Henry interrupted.

"If you find anything . . . let me know," Emma said.

"I will." Henry said, he was eager to begin his search. If he found the key to the crypt, Emma would have the evidence she needed to see he was right, and Regina really did kill Graham. Then she would believe she was the savior and break the curse. He hopped out of the car and ran up the stairs, waving goodbye as he did so.

Regina wasn't home yet, so he had time to search a little.
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Henry discovers where the key is and Emma investigates and finds out her worst fears have come true. Then she talks with Gold and he gives her a book to help her understand things further.

Henry quickly scampered upstairs and dropped his backpack on the floor in his room. He looked at his watch and saw that it was almost seven. Regina usually returned from her meetings around seven thirty or eight, but on the off chance she got back early, Henry wanted to search her study and maybe even her bedroom for the key.

He went down into the office first, reasoning that she might keep it there because it was a logical place to look. He looked on her desk, which was crammed with papers, most of it having to do with projects and such. Henry ignored them. He pulled open all the drawers in the desk, but they were either files or had envelopes and ordinary desk items, like staples, pens, and paper clips inside. He carefully shut the drawers and went to look in the supply closet.

But there was nothing in there either except more printer paper, ink cartridges, and more envelopes, tape, and pencils. Boring!

Sighing, he went upstairs. It had taken him fifteen minutes to thoroughly search the office, and he wanted to look in the bedroom dresser drawer. He had an odd feeling that what he was looking for was there.

Regina's bedroom was dark until he opened the lights. They were recessed and cast a soft glow over the huge queen sized bed with dark sheets, the color of crimson, like drying blood, Henry had always thought. She had thick velvet drapes of black at the window and the carpet was a thick plush, a charcoal gray color that muffled your footsteps. There was a master bath that had whirlpool that could seat four people, and a walk in closet bigger than most people's single bedrooms. To either side of the massive bed, which required steps to get on, were mahogany night tables. A dresser with a large mirror was across from it, complete with a little bench so Regina could sit to do her nails and makeup.

Henry was rarely ever invited in here, and being in here now made him feel odd. He knew that Graham had occasionally spent the night here, and thinking about the former sheriff like that made him slightly ill. He knew Graham had been trapped by Regina, but still . . . how could he have slept with her like that? Henry decided he'd have thrown himself off a bridge first.

His sneakers made no sound on the carpet as he padded over to the first nightstand and opened the drawer. Nothing except some old paperback romances about some duke and some merchant's daughter. He shut the drawer, disappointed.

Then he went and opened the bottom drawer. Only some rolled up stockings and trouser socks met his eyes.

_Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the key's in her purse_, he thought dejectedly. Wasn't that where most people kept their keys?
He went around the bed to the last nightstand and pulled open the top drawer.

He nearly fell on the floor, he was so embarrassed. The drawer was full of underthings . . . lacy silk underwear in different colors, bras, slips, camisoles. Henry felt like he'd been dragged into a Victoria's Secret catalog without knowing.

"I don't believe this!" he groaned aloud. He stuffed his hands inside the drawer, feeling for the bottom.

He felt like a peeping Tom. He didn't even know she wore this stuff, and wondered if she'd ever worn some of it when Graham was around. Don't go there! Just don't! I don't wanna know the answer to that!

Suddenly, his hand touched something . . . not frilly and silky.

He froze. Then he threw out some of the bras and underwear.

They landed at his feet, but he didn't care. There was something hidden among them.

Then he saw it, a small skinny box made of green leather. He carefully lifted it out and opened it. Inside was a wrought iron key painted white. Henry almost whooped aloud for joy. The key! He'd found it!

He carefully slipped the key into his pocket and then put the box back under the under garments. He had just finished picking up the rest of the items and shoving them in the box when he heard sudden footsteps coming towards the bedroom.

"Oh no! I don't have time to hide!" he gasped in horror. But his facile little mind was already coming up with a story.

He went over to the big dresser and pretended to be looking at a small rosewood case with some pretty necklaces of rubies, sapphires, and citrines. Actually there were dangling earrings, rings, and a bracelet too.

He could feel the key burning a hole in the pocket of his jeans, but he looked up as Regina entered, kicking off her heels as she did so. "Oh, hi, Mom!" He gave her an innocent little boy grin, one he'd perfected for occasions such as this.

"Henry! What are you doing in here? You know I don't like you coming in my room when I'm not there," she frowned at him, her pretty mouth turning down in disapproval.

"I know and I'm sorry, but I needed a reference."

"What reference?"

"I needed to look at your jewelry. I wanted to get Alina something nice for her birthday. It's coming up in a month and I thought she'd like something pretty to wear, you know all about that girl stuff." Henry shrugged, swallowing down the lump in his throat. He hoped he sounded convincing. "So I thought I'd just peek at what you've got and it'd give me an idea."

Regina rolled her eyes. Boys! They came up with the stupidest ideas sometimes. Maybe it was like a disease. "Why didn't you wait until I came home, Henry? I could have told you that that necklace set is far too sophisticated for a young girl."

"It is?"
"God! You look like you just fell off the back of a turnip cart!" Regina snorted, sounding a lot like her mother. In fact, that was one of her mother's favorite expressions. "Listen to me, Henry. Alina is what, ten? No ten-year-old wears jewelry like mine. That's to impress a man when she's grown." Privately, Regina wondered if Alina would ever be good looking enough to get a man. Maybe because of her father's money, but she was a skinny, coltish girl, with brown hair and impudent brown eyes and far too smart and insolent for her own good. She had to take after her father. At least in Regina's opinion, which, in her mind, was the only one that mattered. "I can take you to a very exclusive boutique I know of near here and get you something very nice, but appropriate for a child. With no mother to help her, no wonder she's dressed like a ragamuffin sometimes."

"No, she's not," Henry protested. "She dresses like a normal kid."

"Exactly." Regina waved a hand at him. "All right, now scoot! I'm tired, all those meetings made me feel exhausted. I need a hot bath and some wine to relax."

Henry didn't need to be told twice. He walked as quickly as he could without arousing her suspicion back to his room. He immediately removed the key and tucked it inside The Book in his backpack. Then he got into pajamas. His heart was still pounding from his near miss. "Somebody up there must sure like me," he said as he jumped on his bed.

He reached for the walkie talkie under his pillow and said into it, "Emma, this is Agent Bond from Operation Cobra. The target's been acquired. Repeat: target acquired. Can you read me? Over."

There was static for a few moments, then Emma's voice, "Agent Bond, you have it?"

"Yup? Where should I meet you?"

"I'll pick you up after school and we can have an ice cream or something at Granny's."

"Great! Can we get one for Alina and Mr. Gold too? She should be home by then."

"If you know what kind they like, okay."

"I do. Alina's favorite is peanut butter with chocolate sprinkles, and Mr. Gold likes cherry vanilla with walnuts and chocolate sauce."

"I won't ask how you know that."

"I'm Alina's best friend and she told me her dad eats that for dessert most nights," Henry informed her.

"Okay, Henry. Meet you right after school tomorrow."

"Got it. Agent Bond out." He carefully shut the walkie talkie off and put it back under his pillow. It was the best birthday present he'd ever gotten from Alina. He was so excited that he could barely sleep, and it took seven comic books before he dozed off.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"Will you tell me if you find anything?" Henry asked as he ate his double chocolate chocolate chip sundae with whipped cream and cinnamon.

"We'll see," Emma said, not wanting to involve the kid anymore than he already was. God only knew what he'd come up with next. It was a good thing Alina was still on bed rest, because the two of them were like monkeys on crack, into everything all at once. "Let's get Alina and Mr. Gold
Henry finished his sundae and waited until Emma finished her apple pie with vanilla ice cream. He had given Emma the crypt key in the car on the way here. He hoped she wouldn't flip out when she found the hearts.

He waited while Emma ordered the ice cream, standing impatiently before the doors.

Emma remembered that Saylah was there was well, and ordered her a basic vanilla sundae with whipped cream and hot fudge sauce with a cherry, because she wasn't sure what ice cream she ate, but everyone liked vanilla, right? Once Ruby had given her the ice cream, they left the diner and headed over to Emma's Bug.

Henry was quiet on the way over to the Golds' brick house with salmon trim. He couldn't wait to tell Alina about finding the key and also about the rumor that Tom and his parents were going to find themselves out on the street because Gold was suing them for everything they had. Henry wasn't sure if that were true or not, but if it was, he couldn't blame Gold for doing it. After all, it was his daughter who'd been put in the hospital.

When they arrived, Saylah answered the door. "Hello, Henry! You're just in time for hot cocoa. I just brought some in for Alina and Mr. G in the den. That imp's driving him crazy, because Dr. Whale said she needed to rest when she got home and she wants to be outside."

"I can't blame her. It's a beautiful day out," Emma said.

"Hello, Sheriff Swan! How are things down at the station?"

"Good enough. I've got some ice cream here for you, Alina, and Mr. Gold."

"For me? Goodness, how nice of you!" Saylah exclaimed, taking the bag from her. "You didn't need to do that. But I haven't given myself a treat since Alina's been in the hospital. I was so worried I wore myself to a shadow," she laughed and patted her ample middle.

They followed her into the kitchen, where she put Mr. Gold's and Alina's ice cream on a tray and started to pour Emma and Henry some hot cocoa.

"Oh, Saylah, don't. We're still full from eating our ice cream over at Granny's." Emma said. "Why don't you sit here and eat yours and I'll take this in to them?"

"Thanks, Emma. Henry, you know where the den is, right?"

"Uh huh." Henry beckoned to Emma. "Follow me." He practically lived here sometimes.

They walked down a long hall and heard Mr. Gold and Alina's voices before they entered the den.

"King me," Alina was saying.

"Drat! You caught me!" Gold replied. "I should have seen that coming."

"When opportunity knocks, open the door."

"Now you're quoting me, little miss?"

"You say that all the time, Papa. Your move."

Henry entered and saw Mr. Gold and Alina bent over a checker board. Both had one king, but
Henry could see that Alina was positioned to outmaneuver her father if she played the game right. "Hi, Alina! Hi, Mr. Gold. We brought you ice cream."

Gold looked up from putting a black checker down. "You got Regina to bring us ice cream? Has the world turned upside down?"

"Not that I know of," Emma laughed, coming in with the tray. "I hope you're hungry."

"For ice cream? Always," Gold smirked and then said, "I should have known it was you, Emma. Regina would roast in hell before she ever set foot in my house. Thank you." He helped Emma set the tray down.

"Henry, I'm so glad you came over!" Alina said. She was wearing a pretty lavender lounge outfit and fuzzy pink slippers. Her head was still bandaged and she had on her hospital ID bracelet. She was propped up by thick pillows and had a pink and white crocheted afghan beside her on the couch. "I was dying of boredom!" She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her father. "Papa won't let me do anything except lie here and I feel fine."

"That's doctor's orders, Alina Rose, now quit pouting and eat your ice cream. Before I'm committed to the crazy ward," Gold said. He was sitting in a brocade chair, probably a Chippendale, next to the table. "Have a seat, Emma."

Emma pulled up another chair, thinking that Mary Margaret's apartment could fit into one corner of Gold's den. It was huge, but very tastefully appointed. "Rough morning?" she asked Gold sympathetically.

"She was released around ten this morning and since we walked in the door she's been pestering me to go outside. Kids! They don't know what's good for them." Gold picked up his dish of cherry vanilla and said, "Now who told you this is my favorite?"

"Henry," Emma admitted.

"Smart boy," Gold chuckled, and began to eat it.

"Thanks, Emma!" Alina half-sang as she began to eat her sundae. "So, what's been going on at school while I was away?"

"Miss Blanchard gave us some crazy math project to do. We have to build a pyramid out of toothpicks using this formula." Henry said.

"Yuck! Do I have to make it up?" Alina asked.

"No. Least I don't think so." Henry said.

"Thank God!"

"Paige said to tell you hello from her. We ate lunch together today since you weren't there," Henry said. "Oh, and wait till you hear about Tom."

"What about him? Is Emma gonna arrest his sorry ass and send him down to juvie?"

"I wish," Emma said.

"Alina Rose, you mind that mouth of yours!" Gold scolded. "Before I get out the bar of Ivory."

Alina cast an apologetic glance at him. "Oops. Sorry. It just slipped out. Anyway, what happened?"
Just as Henry started to explain, Gold picked up his mug of cocoa. On it, Emma couldn't help but notice, was written *Life doesn't come with instructions. That's what fathers are for.*

"That's real cute," she nodded at the mug when Gold looked at her.

"You talking to me, dearie?" he smirked, then said, "Blame that on Saylah. She helped Alina pick it out for my birthday last year."

"I wish I could have said that about mine," Emma said, a trifle wistfully.

"Mine didn't teach me much except how to sew a straight seam," Gold replied. "That and duck when he came home from having one too many."

"He was an alcoholic?"

"Until the day he packed up and left," Gold said. "I damn near had a party that day." He couldn't recall much about the man, but what he did recall was not pleasant.

"Papa, did you sue Tom and kick his family out on the street?" Alina asked.

"Did I what? Who told you that?" Gold frowned.

"I did. I heard that you were gonna make the Masons live on the street in a cardboard box," Henry informed him.

"Oh, good God! I never said that. I said I might do that, not that I would."

"What did you do to him, sir?" asked Henry.

"I decided to settle it between him and me," Gold replied. "So, he comes to work for me in my shop for awhile and I can teach him a better lesson than a lawsuit. Hopefully."

"Oh. That's a lot better than what some people said you did," Henry remarked.

"You shouldn't repeat rumors, Henry," Emma reproved.

"Yeah, people are stupid," Alina said. "Like that gigglehead Marian Preston. She always laughs at everything Miss Blanchard says, even when it's not funny."

"She's got problems," Henry rolled his eyes. "And so does Tom's friend, Davey. He's always trying to steal everybody's homework."

"Is he the one who goes around high-fiving everybody and then grabs your paper?"

"Yeah. I'd like to give him a high five all right. With a chair. Right in his dumb face," Henry said heatedly.

"Henry!" Emma exclaimed.

"What? He tried to get my answers to our history quiz today." Henry protested.

"If you have Tom come work for you, Papa, you'd better not let any of his school friends in your shop. They'll rob you blind."

"I'll make sure I watch him, like I watch everyone who come in," Gold assured her. "Customers . . . they're either a potential money maker or a potential disaster waiting to happen."
"Does Miss Blanchard know?" asked Emma.

"She does now," Henry said. "Want me to finish your game, sir?"

"Go ahead, Henry. She was beating me anyway." He turned to Emma. "Find anything else out about Regina?"

She lowered her voice. "Not yet, but I'm checking out the crypt again."

"Ah. With that crowbar?"

"No. I found a skeleton key," Emma said, winking.


"Spoken like a true lawyer," Emma grinned.

Gold just gave her a slight smile and continued eating his ice cream.

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Mills family crypt:

Emma went back to the crypt that same night and tried the key in the lock. It creaked like a door in a B-rated horror film, but it opened. She slipped inside, a flashlight lighting the way. When she reached the stone slab, she quickly pulled on a plastic glove and pushed on the side of the coffin.

As before, the slab slid aside and Emma went down into the hole created. It was pitch dark, but then lights came on.

Emma continued down the stairs and saw the room where the kids had been trapped.

It was featureless . . . except for the rows of wooden receptacles along the walls, like little drawers.

At first Emma though they were niches where family members ashes rested. But then she tugged on a brass handle and the drawer slid out . . . to reveal something unspeakable inside.

"Hearts!" she gasped, feeling the air leave her body in a rush.

She propped herself up against the drawers and hissed, "Holy God, Henry was right! There really are hearts in here. Dozens. What is she—a serial killer? The Heartless Lover? Oh, Graham! I'm sorry I couldn't save you. But I never thought . . ."

She reeled with the knowledge, gasping for air as she pulled out one drawer and then another.

Now what?

Remembering Gold's instructions, she pulled out a disposable camera and began taking pictures as fast as she could. Documentation. Proof was the key.

Then she crept back up the steps, making sure the room was sealed shut before she left the crypt locked. All the way home, she bit her nails and wished Regina were not the mayor.

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Emma wished Graham were still alive so she could share her find with him. But he wasn't and the
only other person who knew of her nocturnal activity was Mr. Gold. Did he suspect Regina was up to no good? Because she had noticed the two of them didn't seem to like each other. Funny that Henry and Alina did.

She had dropped off the camera early this morning and was going to pick up the pictures this afternoon. She tried to find something that would finger Regina, but her file came up with nothing. Emma even tried surfing the Net but again, came up with nothing. Emma knew there was something poisonous about Regina, and her squeaky-clean image was hiding something. She had the pictures, now she needed an ally willing to stand up to the mayor. And that left but one person.

Gold.

After picking up the pictures, Emma headed over to Gold's pawnshop.

"Can I talk to you privately?" she asked the pawnbroker as soon as he looked over at her.

"Certainly. Come into my office," he indicated she could come around the counter. "Keep sweeping, Thomas. The floor won't clean itself," he called to the boy, who was pushing a broom at the other end of the shop.

As the two disappeared into Gold's back room, Tom looked up and glared at their backs. Then he lowered his head and kept sweeping. Who knew if Gold had the place bugged?

Emma looked around before she removed the pictures from her purse. "I wanted you to see these. Just so you can confirm what I think they are."

Gold took them and examined them. "They're hearts, dearie. Human hearts, to be exact."

"How do you know that? They could be from . . . animals."

"No. Any anatomy book will tell you otherwise. Look." He went to a shelf and pulled down a large illustrated guide of parts of the body. He opened the page to a picture of a human heart. "Now compare them, Emma."

Emma looked. "Oh, God. Then they're real. I was hoping it was some kind of sick joke."

"From Regina? Emma, she plays pranks till someone dies and the only one laughing is her."

"What is she? A serial killer? She's deranged."

"She's the Evil Queen, dearie. A necromancer of terrible power."

"Now you sound like Henry. There is no such thing as magic."

"Isn't there?"

"Gold, come off it! Magic doesn't exist. What would you know about it anyway? You going to tell me you're a magician, a lawyer, a tailor, and a pawnbroker?"

"I've been many things, Swan." Gold said enigmatically. "Things I can't even recall, but I will. One thing I do know, however, is that magic was real here. At one time."

He limped over to his bookshelf again and took down a well-thumbed through book called The Universal Spiral. "This will explain things a little more concisely."

She eyed the book and him as if they were about to start dancing and jig and singing in Swahili.
"You expect me to believe that old beat up book? I thought you were a logical businessman, Gold."

"Even cold businessmen learn to face facts, dearie." He set the book down and leaned over towards her. "The fact is, Emma, that once magic was as common as grains of sand here in this world. Your own Native American culture has a long proud history of Dreamers, shamans, and heroes who used Power—magical power—for the good of all. There is a rich history of magic in this land, but over time, people have forgotten it was here at all."

"They didn't forget, Gold. They learned better."

"Learned not to speak of it, for it was forbidden. Learned not to use it, or else be burned at the stake for witchcraft. But that doesn't mean it didn't exist here. If this really were a land without magic, the curse wouldn't function here, Emma. Everyone in Storybrooke would be as they were before."

"Henry's gotten to you too, hasn't he? You think all that nonsense he spouts is true. That I'm... some kind of savior and you're all fairy tale characters from another world. What is this, Star Trek?"

Gold frowned. "Listen to yourself, Emma! Who are you trying to convince? Because there are gaps in my memory, dearie, that I can't figure out. Not just forgetting little things either, I'm talking about real gaps—stretches of time—years—where I can't remember anything. And I'm not prone to getting head injuries or insanity. Nor do I drink or do drugs, dearie."

"You can't be serious! Saying magic is real!"

"I'm saying magic was once real. And it can be again. You simply have to believe."

"Believe?"

"Yes. Think about it. There are things in this world, Emma, that cannot be seen, touched, or felt. How do you know they exist? You take it on faith. Do you remember the stories of King Arthur and his great wizard, Merlin? There have been archaeological finds proving that Arthur was a real person. I believe Merlin was also. And that he had magic... like many did during that time. Magic flourished then. Because people believed. But now it doesn't. Because people stopped believing. They started relying on science. You ask me why Regina keeps hearts in her father's crypt?"

"Because she's sick in the head."

"Yes. And because she's a necromancer of the old order." He flipped through the book. "Read this, Emma. It will explain magic better than I can."

Emma glared at him. "I thought I could depend on you to help me! Instead you're behaving like a-a crackpot, Gold!"

"Read it, Emma. And forget what you think you know. Magic is the hidden power and once it ruled this world. It's all there. Magic is a spiral, it goes up and down as the universe turns. But it always returns, dearie. For a price."

"What do you know, Gold? Were you... in on this with her?"

"Don't be stupid! I hate her as much as you do. I know she makes a dangerous enemy, Swan. Watch your back. Watch your son. He knows more than I do at the moment."

"Have you read his book then?"
"No. Not yet. Maybe I should. It could trigger my missing memories."

"Maybe you ought to make an appointment with Archie," Emma shot back.

"Read that before you condemn me to a madhouse," Gold said. "It was written by a real person, and not related to any of us here. It presents magic in a new light. It isn't just smoke and mirrors and illusion, Emma. That much I do know. Like I know the sky is blue."

Emma sighed and shoved the pictures in her purse. Then she took the book and put it there too. "All right, Gold. I'll humor you. Who in hell ever heard of a lawyer who believes in magic?"

"I'm not your average lawyer, Emma. I believe in true love too. I'm an aberration."

"You're nuttier than a fucking fruitcake, Gold. But you're what I've got to work with. Maybe I'm crazy too."

"You never know, dearie. Sometimes those we think are crazy actually are the sanest ones of all."

"Regina is crazy."

"No argument there, dearie. Get some sleep. And think about what I told you."

"Yes, Master Yoda," Emma bowed mockingly to him before she walked out of the shop. Great, now she had a headache. Maybe it was sign.
Emma reads the book Gold has given her and learns some unexpected things about the way magic works here, and Gold recalls some other things he's forgotten and loses a cherished item and takes revenge upon the person responsible.

Emma spent the weekend hanging about Mary Margaret's apartment, eating Cup-O-Noodles and considering her next move on Regina, as well as staring at the book Gold had lent her. *The Universal Spiral* by Hunter "White Wing" Flynn. It sounded like one of those New Age books promising peace, love, and happiness if only you believed. It stared up at her from the coffee table with accusing eyes, like a dog begging for treats. *Read me, Emma. Read me,* it seemed to whisper through her soul.

She glared daggers at it. *I don't want to read you. I don't want anything to DO with you, or Gold's crazy ideas about magic. Magic doesn't exist.* Gold's assumption that magic had once existed here bothered her more than a little.

She turned away from the book's siren call, not wanting to admit the possibility attracted her . . . just a little. As a child, she'd loved fairy tales, but as she grew up and the world became a harsh and lonely place, the magic of those simple tales had died a swift death. Giving up her baby for adoption had pretty much clinched things.

It was far easier to focus on the melodrama between Mary Margaret and David Nolan, who though still claiming amnesia, was also still married to his wife, Kathryn. Except he didn't even remember their life together, or even shared an attraction with her. Instead, he was drawn to the schoolteacher, Mary Margaret Blanchard. Single, unattached, and . . . also in love with forbidden fruit.

It had gotten so bad that everyone around town was talking about it. Emma supposed it was the hottest gossip to hit Storybrooke since Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie shacking up together. Not that Mary Margaret was doing anything but casting longing glances David's way when she happened to see him on the street, or in Granny's diner.

At least that's all Emma *thought* she was doing.

And while a bit immoral, they were two adults and what they were doing wasn't a crime. Seriously, Emma wondered why the hell David didn't just get a divorce if he wasn't happy in his marriage any longer? It would be easier on all of them and then maybe Mary Margaret wouldn't have TRAMP spray painted in red paint on her car.

*Or does it just not bother you because those two are supposed to be together? In Henry's book, they're Snow White and Prince Charming, or James, as he was once known. And they were married and had you. Is that why you don't mind if David's making eyes at Mary Margaret in front of you? Because they're your parents?*

Emma shook her head. Even if Henry's little fantasy realm was real, and that was a big if, she was no one to judge others' relationships. Not when she'd made such a mess of her own with Neal Cassidy. And seemed to be making an even bigger one with Henry.
She munched on a handful of Ruffles Sour Cream n' Onion chips as she lounged back on the couch, flicking through the channels. Nothing caught her eye.

Except the book on the coffee table.

"Maybe I'll take a nap." She said aloud. "God knows I didn't get much sleep last night dreaming about those bloody hearts."

But though she tried, her body refused to fall asleep. It kept replaying the scene in the crypt. She knew that if she could pin the hearts on Regina, it would make a substantial case against her. Another big if. Mayor Mills ran this town, and Emma was a newcomer.

"I need a warrant. And then I'm going to have to talk fast. I wonder if Gold will come and be my prosecuting attorney? But first I need to make a case against her."

_read me, Emma._

She tossed down the remote and swore. "Fine, you inanimate creepy object! I'll read you!"

She picked up the book and opened it to the first chapter.

This was probably going to be a waste of time, but what the hell? She had time to kill.

_page~*~*~*~Break

Two and half hours later, Emma's stomach was growling, reminding her it needed more than a handful of Ruffles to keep going. Emma ignored it. Somewhere along page thirty she'd stopped sneering at the content, and gotten caught up in the author's message and way with words. Now she could hardly put the book down.

She paused at the section titled "The Price of Magic".

That seemed important, so she took a highlighter and highlighted the book before she could think twice. It was what she always did when she had to remember important information written down. Then she stopped and groaned.

_Hope you don't kill me, Gold, for ruining your book. I'll buy you a new one._

She began to read the section.

... magic, like everything else in the world, has a price in order to use it. Now some may say that if you're honest, altruistic, and self-sacrificing, it doesn't, but that's complete bull. Power ALWAYS has a price required, because nothing worth doing is ever free. It always involves either a price paid by the practitioner, their family, or someone else, usually if someone demands a favor, it means he'll do something for you in return. Given the way the universe works, it makes sense.

To get, you must give. That's a law as old as the Beginning of Everything.

It applies to everything, as does the fact that magic is a form of energy, like light, heat, wind, ect. People tend to divide magic into Dark and Light, but that's like trying to divide the sun into little bits and pieces. Magic is. It's who does what with it that causes us to label it Light and Dark. Is lightning evil because it strikes a golfer in the middle of a storm? Is a river evil when it washes away a bridge with a car on it? Magic doesn't feel. It has no emotions save what may be lent to it by the caster.
When people say that they feel magic is evil, they mean that they can feel the intent of the caster in the aura of magic left behind. People can be evil, can do unspeakable things. But magic is a force, like wind and water. It is there in the earth, the sky, in all things living and non-living, like stone and glass, and it waits for those attuned to it to use it.

A gun is not evil until somebody picks it up, points it, and pulls the trigger at someone else. It is the same with magic.

Emma paused then to make herself a sandwich and have a cup of coffee. What this White Wing said made sense. Too much sense. It had explained that children were more receptive and open to magic than adults, because a child does not bother to analyze things to death, but accepts them at face value. Emma recalled clapping her hands three times and saying "I believe in fairies" when reading Peter Pan. She'd believed then that if she said the words, Tink wouldn't die. It had worked . . . then.

But now . . .?

She thought of the hearts in the small little caskets and shivered. Sacrificial magic. She had read about that in the book. Usually it was involuntary and practiced by those who wished to gain power. Like Regina.

All magic comes with a price. It can be paid right away, later, or even years from now, but it will be paid.

Emma shivered. Were those hearts the price Regina had paid? Because if Henry were right, and she was the Evil Queen of storybook fame, then her bid for power had worked. She had everything she ever wanted in this world. Money, power, prestige, fame. Emma couldn't see that Regina had paid anything for what she had done. Her curse had worked and now she ruled all. Other people were unhappy, their lives destroyed, but not Regina.

Unless . . . magic hadn't called in the debt. Unless the price had not been paid yet.

Maybe that's why Emma was here. To get Regina to pay magic's price. To make her responsible for her crimes.

Power uses anyone it can to achieve balance, Emma read. Then she thought irritably, But I'm nobody's puppet and I hope that Power realizes I can't do this myself and sends me some help.

She bit her fingernail, gnawing it down to the quick. Unless it already had, by giving her Mr. Gold.

Mr. Gold sat at his desk, going through his rent checks for the month. Those that were on time, he marked with a "P" and a star next to it. He did his accounting both the old-fashioned way and with an online program. He kept his computer at home, so if the shop were broken into, he still had it and its many security parameters to keep track of things. He also kept hard copies of everyone's rent at home in a filing cabinet. That way, if something happened to the computer or the shop burnt down, he had records.

He was currently finishing up with this month's rent, and had already made copies and put them in his briefcase to file at home when he noticed that Maurice French, the local florist, known to everyone as "Moe", hadn't paid his rent for the third month in a row. Or rather, he'd paid nothing this month, paid half last month and, was late and paid a minimum the month before. End result, he owed Gold quite a large sum of money.
Gold put a post-it note on his ledger, reminding him to either speak with Moe or send out one of his famous reminder notices in the mail. Once he might forgive a late payment, if given a good enough explanation, or a deferred one, but this! This was not going to be tolerated.

He shut the ledger with a thump and replaced it in his drawer, locking it with a small key on his key ring.

Then he rose and went to grab some lunch at Granny’s diner. They were having a reuben on rye special today and he hadn’t had decent corned beef since last St. Patrick’s Day when Saylah had made it.

Gold came home to find Alina and Henry rollerblading down the sidewalk by his house. It was a lovely day, not too cold, and the sun was out. Because it was Saturday, Gold only worked half a day, and he returned the children's wave as he went inside the house.

He quickly put the copies into his file cabinet in his study, then went and sat down on the recliner and put his leg up. It was aching a little, as it sometimes did, and he asked Saylah to bring him some Tylenol as well as a glass of iced tea.

As he sipped his iced tea slowly and paged through the latest Financial Manager periodical, Alina came in with Henry.

"Take those skates off in the house, you two!" he heard Saylah order as the kids clomped inside.

"Saylah, can we have some iced tea?" Henry called as he removed his skates.

"Of course, and some cookies too. Come in here and get some!" Saylah called.

"You go get the cookies," Gold heard his daughter tell Henry. "I'll ask him about it."

The next thing he heard was the padding of Alina's stocking feet as she came into the den.

He looked up. "Ask me what, dearie?"

She was wearing jeans and a purple sweatshirt that had Girls Just Wanna Have Fun written across it in bright pink puff paint. Her hair was pulled back into a tail with a pink ribbon. "Hello, Papa!" she kissed his cheek gently, what he used to call a "butterfly kiss" when she was younger. "I wanted to know something."

"About what?" He set the magazine down so he could focus on his daughter.

"Henry and I saw Miss Blanchard driving past here today and I saw something painted on her car. It was the word "tramp". Why would she have something like that on her car, Papa? It was right over the window on the driver's side, so it'd be hard to see through it. Henry says someone put it there. What does it mean, Papa? And don't tell me that it's the name of the dog in Lady and the Tramp like Saylah did."

Gold coughed and wished that Alina’s mother was here to field this one. It was always easier for a girl to talk about things like this with her mother. But she was dead, and that left only him. "All right. I'll tell you what it means, but let me make one thing clear. You're never to use that word to refer to any woman that way as long as you live in my house, Alina Rose."

Alina's eyes widened at his tone, which was hard and uncompromising. "Okay! I promise. Why are
you yelling at me?"

Gold hadn't thought he was yelling. But maybe he had been without realizing it. "Sorry. I don't mean to snap, I'm just not in a very good mood right now."

"Someone didn't pay their rent on time," Alina said knowingly.

Gold shook his head. She knew him too well. "Never mind that. Umm . . . back to your question." He cleared his throat. "Miss Blanchard has that word written on her car by some very . . . judgmental people, dearie. Calling her a tramp means . . . well . . . it means that she . . . goes out with a lot of guys."

"Like on dates?"

"Uh . . . yes and . . . she . . . uh . . . kisses them too . . ." Gold felt himself start to blush. Please, don't let her ask what else she does with them. Please, God! I'm not prepared for this talk yet, I thought I had a few more years!

"In other words, she's like a scarlet woman," Henry interjected, coming into the den with a tray of cookies and two glasses of iced tea.

Gold almost spit out the mouthful of tea he'd sipped. "Henry, where did you hear that old expression?"

"Regina. She said it served Miss Blanchard right for acting like one."

Alina frowned. "But Miss Blanchard doesn't go out with lots of guys. Only David."

"And David is married, dearie, and that's why some people are angry about it. They think he's being unfair to his wife."

"Uh huh. That she's wrecking their marriage," Henry said.

Gold eyed him. "How do you know so much about it?"

Henry shrugged. "People talk around me. They think I'm deaf because I'm a kid. And Regina thinks Mary Margaret's leading David down the garden path, whatever that means. She said that Mary Margaret's lucky to not be run out of town with the way she behaves. But I told her that they were meant to be together, that it's true love, and he should divorce Kathryn since he can't remember ever loving her anyway, and I'm sure he didn't. Then she told me to go to bed, that I didn't know anything. But the Book said that Charming and Snow are supposed to be together, and true love always finds its match."

Gold opened his mouth and changed the subject. "Henry, where is that book of yours? I think . . . I might want to take a look at it."

Henry gaped at him. So did Alina.

"You want to . . . read it, sir?"

"Yes. That is what you do with a book, isn't it?"

"Okay. Let me get it." Henry turned and ran up the stairs, where he'd left his backpack. The Book was inside it.

Alina just looked at him. She wondered if he would believe what was in the Book as the truth, or
would he dismiss it the way most adults did? Would the curse break if he read it? She made herself sit down and drink some iced tea.

Henry returned and held out the *Once Upon a Time* chronicles. "Here you go, Mr. Gold. You don't have to read it all at once, I've already read it about two dozen times."

"Thank you, Henry." He gently traced the cover with his finger. It felt . . . oddly warm, as if the book were alive. "Now why don't you have a snack with Alina and then go play? I'd like to . . . read some of this now."

As the children took their tea and cookies and raced upstairs, Gold opened up the book to the first page, marveling at how the paper felt like aged parchment beneath his fingers. He turned a page and began to read.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Gold read until the words blurred on the page and he fell asleep. The Book remained open on his lap and where his fingers touched the page, a blue light flickered over them for a few moments. Then it was gone, but that small flicker had been enough to cause the man who called himself Mr. Gold to recall the past the curse had removed, working with his innate will and strong magical Talent to break past the blocks Regina had implanted within his mind.

Gold slept, dreamed, and remembered.

When he woke, he felt tired and disorientated, and images of a world long ago danced through his brain. He rubbed his eyes, needing time to sort out these memories, but before he could do so, Saylah called him for dinner.

He ate, but he barely tasted what he put in his mouth. His mind was full to bursting about what he had read, what he had learned, and what he was now remembering.

He went up to bed soon afterwards, saying he was tired, and took the Book with him. There he read for hours until he fell into another exhausted sleep where the ghost of his beloved Belle haunted his dreams and he woke with tears upon his pillow and regret a bitter taste in the back of his throat.

Page~*~*~*~Break

On Monday morning, Emma issued a search warrant to Regina Mills, authorizing her to search the family crypt because she suspected there was evidence there of Graham's death.

"What do you mean?" Regina demanded. "Graham's death was from natural causes."

"Was it? I have my doubts." Emma said coldly. "So, I expect it to be accessible to me tomorrow." Thank goodness Henry had put the key back where he'd found it over the weekend.

Regina glared at the warrant. "Fine. Look around. Disturb the dead at your own peril. You won't find anything."

"Maybe. And maybe not," Emma said, then she turned on her heel. For once she had gotten the better of Regina.

As Emma hurried over to the sheriff's office, Mr. Gold confronted Moe French about his missing rent money.

"Look, I don't have the money right now, Gold!" Moe said. "I need to deliver all these roses,
tomorrow's Valentine's Day. I'll give it to you then."

"So you're refusing to pay me what you owe me?" Gold asked dangerously. His mind was spinning over the truth of who Moe French really was. And knowing what he did, he wasn't minded to give the pudgy florist a break at all. Not after what he had done to Belle . . . to him.

"Give me more time!"

"No," Gold said softly. "Your time's up." He indicated the florist's truck, painted gaudily with the words *Game of Thrones*. "Give me what you owe me or your truck is forfeit. I'm not the bank, French."

"You can't do that!" Moe cried, nearly spitting on the other man. "There's a grand plus in flowers in the back. Why don't you give me a grace period, Gold? Or is that too much to ask, you skinflint bastard?"

Gold's eyes narrowed. "You've already had a grace period, French. Three months where you didn't pay me half of what you owe. Come by my shop with the money and we'll talk. In the meantime, this is mine."

"We'll see about this, Gold! Just you wait!" Moe cried, feeling an irrational hatred towards the man then, that bloodsucking vampire who was out to fleece honest workers of whatever they made. If he lost his truck he was out of a job. Damn Gold to hell, that filthy miser! There was no way he could pay what he owed today. He watched, seething, as Gold paid a big brawny fellow to come and drive the truck away.

Gold turned, the smug bastard, and limped off down the street, leaving Moe cursing him and his family.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

As Gold walked away, his head pounding from the sudden acquisition of more memories, he ran into Regina. She was the last person he wanted to see right then.

"I need to talk to you," she began haughtily, as if she owned him.

He bristled slightly, then recalled he needed to pretend he didn't recall the past. "Well, dearie, right now I don't need to talk to you," he said. "If I have time later, we'll see."

Then he turned and walked past her. His head was pounding as more memories cascaded through his head. The Queen and Maurice. Both his old enemies. Both unaware of what he knew.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

He finished the Book that night. That morning he recalled more things as he woke up and headed into his shop. About himself, the cursed dagger, Milah, and Baelfire. He recalled what had really happened with her and with his son. His heart ached fiercely.

Luckily, there weren't many customers today, since today was Valentine's Day and people were shopping for that special someone. He wished suddenly that Belle were alive, he recalled much about their past, but how she had died eluded him. For now. He was sure he'd remember though. The Book had done its work well.

He got the call from Saylah, whom he suspected was actually someone else he'd known very well back then, though he wasn't entirely sure he was right, at two o'clock PM.
"Mr. Gold, you have to come home right away!"

"What? Why? Has something happened to Alina?" he cried, startled.

"No, Alina's still at school, but you really don't want her to come home to this. It's a mess, sir. I'm not touching it because Emma will probably want to see it."

"Saylah, what is going on?"

"We've been robbed, sir! In broad daylight, no less. I was getting groceries at the supermarket and I came home and found it gone."

"What did they take?" Gold demanded sharply.

"Come home, sir. It's best if you see for yourself."

"On my way." Gold hung up, adrenaline making him able to half run home.

When he saw the curio cabinet door shattered, and glass scattered all over the floor, he winced. That cabinet cost him a pretty penny, it was an original Chippendale piece. But that wasn't the worse thing. The worse thing was the fact that there was a space in front of the tea set where the chipped cup had been.

Belle's cup. The last thing he had of her, save for his beloved daughter.

"Was . . . anything else taken? The TV, my computer?" he named several other expensive things, but Saylah shook her head.

"Mr. G, I'm so sorry. You'd think with all this other stuff lying around, they'd have gone for something else, but . . ." she looked at him sadly, for she knew what the cup meant to him.

"Do me a favor, check the rest of the house. I'm calling Sheriff Swan." He went to grab his cell from his study.

Saylah hesitated. "Would . . . would you mind coming with me? Just in case . . ."

"Yes. Wait a minute, let me talk to the sheriff and then I'll get my gun." He hoped the thief was still here, so he could give the scummy bastard what he deserved.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Emma walked into Gold's house only to be met by Gold himself, holding a pistol. "Whoa! Watch where you're pointing that," she said. "I came as soon as I got your call. What happened?" He had left a message on her machine, only specifying that it was urgent she come over.

"I've been robbed," he said shortly. He lowered the gun. "This was just in case someone was still here."

Emma looked around. The place didn't seem ransacked . . . except for the curio cabinet. "What was taken, Gold?"

"It was . . . an extremely sentimental piece, I have no idea of it's real value. My wife . . . gave it to me before she . . ." he trailed off, the loss of the cup making him speechless.

"Was that all that was taken? Nothing else?"
"No. Saylah and I checked. You can see the thief broke my cabinet."

"Was that expensive? I don't know too much about furniture but it looks like it."

"Chippendale. Yes, but it can be replaced. What the thief stole cannot. It was one of a kind. Like Belle."

"Was that your wife's name?"

"Yes." The headache behind his eyes was turning into a red hot wave of fury.

"All right. Do you know who might have done this? Anyone with a grudge or something?"

"I'm a landlord, Emma. Half this town bears me a grudge," he said sarcastically. "But . . . recently, do you know a man by the name of Maurice French? He goes by Moe."

"The florist?" Emma stared. "What's he got against you?"

"We had a . . . little disagreement about the rent he owed me yesterday. I took his truck as collateral against what he owes me."

"Oh. Well, that gives him probable cause. I'll see what I can do. Give me . . . a few hours."

Gold's mouth tightened.

Emma smiled at him. "Don't go off half-cocked, Gold. I'll find him."

"Not if I find him first," growled the former sorcerer.

Emma nearly flinched at the anger in the other's voice. "You let me handle him, all right? Just . . . have a drink and relax."

Gold nodded, but the last thing he wanted to do was relax. As Emma left, Saylah came to clean up the glass before Alina got home.

"Saylah, just wait here for Alina. I'll be right back, I just need to get something from the store," Gold said.

"Should I tell her what happened?"

"Yes, you might as well. I'll be back soon."

Once he'd gotten a few things at the convenience store down the street, he'd be ready to do some hunting. Once Alina was in bed, he'd be free to track down French and make him pay for his audacity. Not just for the cup he'd stolen, but for other things as well. It was too bad he didn't have his magic back. Then Maurice would really be sorry.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

It took Emma until seven o'clock to dig up enough dirt on Moe French to get him put away for larceny. Clearly he had a grudge against Gold and a witness had said he'd threatened to make Gold sorry for demanding his money.

Now it was time to make the arrest. Emma checked her computer again for the right address before locking up and getting in her car. It was too bad this had to happen now, when Emma was close to nabbing Regina. And she had yet to thank Gold for his loan of that book, which she had finished
yesterday.

It had really opened her eyes, and what's more, her mind, to the possibility of magic.

__Gold's cabin in the woods:__

"Why did you take it?" Gold demanded, his voice cold with the ice of an Arctic gale.

Moe French was tied to the chair before him, his mouth shut with duct tape. Gold had done that before getting the man into the back of an unremarkable gray sedan and bringing him here, to his cabin. The cabin was where he sometimes came over the summer with Alina and Saylah, for small vacations. He would fish with Alina and go on nature walks with her. It was a way for him to unwind and spend some quality time with his daughter.

He'd never thought of it as a hideout. But it was perfect for what he needed. He had the pistol in his pocket, but he didn't use it. He found that he'd rather make Moe squirm than shoot him. So he put his cane right up against the other's throat and hissed, "I'm going to take the tape off and you're going to say something to me. You're going to tell me where it is. Or else I'm going to crush your windpipe." He pressed the tip of his cane against the vulnerable larynx, his eyes glittering.

When he'd been the Dark One, intimidation had come easily to him. As Mr. Gold, things were a bit different, but now he remembered who he was, he could put the fear of God into this piece of trash before him.

Moe nodded frantically, and Gold ripped off the tape. "Talk."

Moe moved his mouth and nothing came out.

Then he looked up at Gold, hatred in his eyes, and he said, "Go to hell, you bastard!"

"Wrong answer!" Gold spat. Suddenly he recalled what had really happened to Belle.

Belle, the love of his life. He'd driven her away, but she would have come back to him after Alina was born. She was going to come back . . . until Maurice had locked her up and tortured her for the crime of loving Rumplestiltskin, sorcerer. She had died of a fever . . . before he could come for her.

His temples throbbing, he raised his cane and brought it down on Moe's shoulder.

"Where is it? Tell me!"

Moe cried out, and spat at him.

That was enough to push Gold over the edge. He slammed the cane down again and again.

Moe cringed and begged for mercy, but Gold's eyes were dark with the need to revenge himself on the man who had cost him his love, his heart, and nearly his daughter.

"It's your fault!" he screamed. "You hurt her! You hurt her, you bastard! She was sick and you killed her! You were supposed to help her!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Gold!" Moe whimpered. "Please, stop! Please!"

"Don't lie to me! Damn you, don't lie!" Gold raged, furious that Maurice didn't even recall Belle, his beautiful princess, that she should be forgotten by the one who had caused her so much misery.
infuriated him past bearing. "You hurt her! And you'd have done worse to the baby! You sick son-of-a-bitch, how dare you hurt your own flesh and blood?"

Gold brought the cane down several more times. He wanted Maurice to hurt the way he did, and he beat the other until someone grabbed his arm.

"Enough! Gold, stop!"

Emma. Gold halted, his rage evaporating. He shivered, in the grip of memories that were too painful to recall, but that he was helpless to ignore. He felt like his head was going to split in two. Like his heart had, so long ago.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Emma had followed a hunch, and she was glad it had paid off before Gold had damaged French permanently. As the paramedics hauled French off to the hospital, Emma turned to the now quiet Gold and said, "Well, the good news is that you didn't damage him permanently. The bad news is that he just charged you with assault. Why did you do it, Gold? I told you I'd handle it."

"He stole from me," Gold said, knowing the real explanation was far more than he was willing to discuss right now.

Emma scowled. "That seems a rather . . . extreme reaction for just someone stealing something. What else did he say? Do you two have a history? You were shouting something as I came in. Something about . . . he hurt her. Who was she? Who did he hurt?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Gold, dammit! Tell me! You might as well, since now I have to lock you up." Emma shouted. "My God, what the hell possessed you?"

He looked at her sadly. "Memories."

"Memories?" she repeated. "You're not making any sense."

"Yes, I am."

Emma ground her teeth together. "If you have probable cause, I won't have to arrest you." She didn't want to do this. Gold was her ally against Regina, sort of like her friend. But what choice did she have?

Gold remained stonily silent.

"Stubborn jackass," she snarled, and reached for her cuffs.

He made no protest when she put them on, and she had a funny feeling that she was lucky for that. "Come on, get in the car."

She opened the door and Gold got in. He said softly, "I'll be out of there by tomorrow afternoon."

"Uh huh. But in the meantime, what are you going to tell Alina?" Emma asked bluntly as she got into the front seat.

Gold winced. That was the one thing he didn't have an answer for. And he desperately needed one. How would Alina react when she found out her papa was in jail for almost killing a man? And how was he ever going to explain that he was a sorcerer named Rumplestiltskin to her? Or that the man
he had beaten to within an inch of his life was her maternal grandfather, who hated her and had almost killed her as a baby? *I wish you were here, Belle. I need your strength, may all the gods listen.*
Truth Revealed

Chapter Summary

Several truths are revealed and certain people's gifts awaken

Truth Revealed

Mr. Gold, who now knew himself to be Rumplestiltskin, spent the rest of the night tossing and turning in the jail cell where Emma had put him. He had been locked up once before, in a filthy hole by James, Snow White's Prince Charming, but had managed to talk his way out of that cell within a month. But that former incarceration had given him a loathing of small spaces and being shut anywhere.

So it was that he spent a rather uncomfortable night, even though the bed might have been considered comfortable by some. His mind kept spinning around and around, gnawing on the memories that had returned to him, and also the fear that Alina would reject and condemn him the way Bae had. The girl practically worshipped him, what would she think if she found out that once he had been a dark sorcerer? He had made a bargain with her mother and kept her locked in his castle until he fell in love with her. Could he trust Alina to understand all the myriad fears that had driven him? Or would she, too, hate magic and fear him once she realized what he had done? Would she think of him as a coward, the way Bae had?

His beautiful little princess, the best thing to come of his love for Belle, whom he had adored since the day she had been placed in his arms. He could not bear it if she turned on him. The fear ate at him, making him a nervous wreck even before the sun crested the horizon and shone into the cell in all its harsh glory.

Gold sat upon the bed, his head throbbing as if he'd had a hangover, and waited for Emma to come. He knew he could make one phone call and would have Saylah call his financial advisor, who handled his investments. The advisor, a Mr. Bloom, would give Saylah access to his account so he could post bail, and then he would be out of here, probably by noon.

Of course, that still left him trying to explain to Alina everything that was going on. Just thinking about it made his guts clench. He leaned his head back against the side of the cell and fell into a half-doze.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Emma ate breakfast as usual with Mary Margaret at Granny's, wondering as she did so how to get Gold to tell her what had really happened between him and Moe. The man was infuriating, stubborn as a jackass and as closemouthed as a clam. Perhaps she could go and talk to Moe, if he was up to seeing visitors.

So after she had finished her scrambled eggs, potatoes, and sausage, she drove over to the hospital. She found that Moe was in a private room, wearing a soft foam collar because his collarbone had been fractured. He also had two cracked ribs, bruises on his upper torso and his right arm. He was on pain meds and Valium and when Emma came in, he just looked at her blankly.
"Mr. French? Moe? It's Sheriff Swan. I just wanted to know if you're able to answer some questions for me?"

Moe didn't respond except to blink his eyes a few times. Emma tried again. "I just want to ask you a few questions about what happened last night. I know you're in pain so I'll keep it short."

Moe didn't answer.

Then the nurse came in and said quietly, "You won't get anything out of him for hours, sheriff. That's some pretty strong pain meds he's on. He's out of it."

"Oh. Okay," Emma sighed. It looked like she was back to square one. She had to talk to Gold. She left Moe's hospital room and started back towards the sheriff's office. On the way there she stopped at Granny's. It was ten forty-five.

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Emma came into the office and saw Gold slumped against the wall. She paused, the brown paper bag she held in one hand. He seemed to be sleeping. But why in hell was he sleeping like that? The bed was right there.

Shrugging, she hung up her jacket and placed the bag on her desk. A Styrofoam cup of coffee accompanied it. She sat at her desk and just stared at the rest of the paperwork she had to do. Slowly, she placed The Universal Spiral on the desk. She knew she had to return it to Gold, but strangely, the book had grown on her. She almost hated to give it up.

When she turned back towards the cell, she saw that Gold had his eyes open.

"Is that coffee I smell?"

"Hungry?" Emma asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think you should talk to me."

Gold just looked at her. His stomach growled loudly, a pointed reminder he hadn't eaten since last night. "I need to make a phone call, Emma."

Emma sighed. "You're not making this easy on either of us. Why can't you just tell me what happened?"

"Because I need to talk to Saylah first. May I?"

Emma ground her teeth. "Fine, Gold. Use my cell." She handed it to him through the bars.

After the phone call, she gave him the cup of coffee. "Here. Now don't say I never gave you anything."

He took the coffee and sipped it. "How did you know how I like my coffee?"

"Alina's Henry's best friend. She tells him everything. Including your favorite food."

"And he remembers that?"

"Henry seems to remember everything." She waved the paper bag at him. "Want a breakfast
sandwich? Then give me a hint of what the hell went down last night."

"You want me to confess over a breakfast sandwich?" he inquired. "You forget, I know my rights. I am a lawyer. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law," he quoted.

"Dammit, Gold! I'm not asking for a confession. This is off the record. Don't you trust me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not in the habit of trusting a lot of people, dearie."

Emma grabbed the paper bag and thrust it into the cell. "My phone, please. And there! Eat it. I won't starve you. I'm not inhumane. Though some people would say you were, after what you did to Moe."

Gold handed her the cell back, but made no move towards the bag. "Is that what you think, Emma?"

Emma shoved the phone back in her pocket. "I think you had reason to do what you did. You don't strike me as a crazy bastard, Gold. Just a pain-in-the-ass. You gave me this book." She picked it up and showed it to him.

"Did you read it?"

"Yes."

"And what did you think?"

"It was . . . enlightening."

"Do you believe now?"

"I . . . I think so. I think I understand now."

"Good. Keep it. You might need it." Then he picked up the bag and took out the sandwich. "If you knew what I do about Moe French, you might think what I did as more vigilante style justice than anything else."

"Why?"

He did not answer right away, instead eating his sandwich.

Emma waited calmly.

Once he had finished he said, "What would you say if I told you that someone once threatened my daughter?"

"Moe threatened Alina? Why?"

"Wouldn't it enrage you if someone threatened to harm Henry?"

"Yes, of course. Is that what happened?"

"Perhaps. I don't give away information for free."

"Gold! I fed you!"

"Yes, yes. But you were just doing your job."
Emma glared at him. "Why are you being so damn stubborn?"

"It's my nature, dearie. Why do you want to know the truth so badly?"

"It's my nature. Won't you tell me?"

"Not yet. Right now I have to think of something to tell Alina."

"You're not going to lie to her, are you?"

"No. I have never done that. But telling her the truth... will be hard on her."

"Well, I'm sure she'll be upset, but... once you explain everything, instead of speaking in riddles like you are to me, I'm sure she'll forgive you."

"I don't know," Gold murmured sadly. He finished the cup of coffee, stuffed the empty cup into the bag and shoved it back through the bars. Then he sat there, staring at the floor.

Emma wanted to scream at him. But she didn't. Instead she took the bag and threw it out. Then she spun her chair around and started going through the paperwork. Two could play at this game.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Around two o'clock, Emma left to get some lunch. Gold still hadn't spoken with her about Moe French or their disagreement. She still didn't know what Moe had taken or why Gold had flipped out on him. But she was determined to have some answers.

Gold was alone in his cell, contemplating if he should tell Emma the reason why he detested French so much when Alina walked in. It was plain she'd come straight from school, because she was in her uniform with her backpack slung over one shoulder. She rushed over to stand beside the bars, her eyes huge in her pale face.

"Papa! Are you all right?"

"Hello, princess. I'm fine," he said, managing a small smile. God help him, the last thing he wanted was for Alina to see him like this. But there was no help for it.

"When are they gonna let you out?"

"Soon. I should be out of here by this afternoon."

She looked at him, her eyes a mixture of curiosity, sadness, and puzzlement. "I heard... people are saying you're here because you beat up Moe French. Why would you do that, Papa? He's just a florist."

Rumplestiltskin winced. "It's... complicated, sweetheart. I'll explain everything when I get home. I promise."

She looked as if she were about to protest. Then she nodded. "But it's true?"

"Yes," he sighed. "I lost my temper. I shouldn't have."

"Was it because he owed you money?"

"That was only part of it."
"Was it because he took Mama's cup?" she asked, sensing instinctively that had something to do with it.

"That's another part. Alina, I'll tell you everything at home. We'll have a long talk. There are things I need to tell you, things that might . . . surprise you, but you need to listen to me. Okay?"

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"It's not the right time. We need privacy."

"There's no one here."

"Emma could come back any minute."

Alina sighed. "I miss you, Papa. Saylah ate breakfast with me this morning before she told me where you were. It wasn't the same."

"I know. I'm sorry. Did you walk to school?"

"Henry offered to drive me, but I don't trust Regina," Alina answered. "So I called Paige and her mom drove us."

"That was smart," Gold said approvingly. He'd always told Alina to be wary of Regina and it seemed that she'd taken his advice to heart.

She reached a hand through the bars and he took it.

She was confused and she hated that she couldn't even hug her own father. She had tried to ignore the rumors, but it seemed all the kids could whisper about was the fact that her father was a jailbird and almost killed Mr. French. She didn't believe half of what they said, except for the fact that he was in jail. She squeezed his fingers in her right hand, and gripped one of the bars with her left.

"I wish you could come home now, Papa," she said. Suddenly she feared he would never be let out and she would return home without him. She couldn't bear that and she felt an odd quivering in the pit of her stomach, a sensation that radiated up through her arm.

"I will, Alina. You just have to be patient," he began, his heart aching for his innocent child.

"I wish you could . . . bust me out of here," she said, two tears trickling down her cheeks.

"This isn't the movies, Alina," he started to say when he noticed her crying. It damn near broke his heart. "Don't cry, Alina, please." He hated when she cried, he couldn't stand to see her in pain, especially not when he was the cause of it.

Suddenly, she felt an odd tingling sensation in her left hand. It prickled and danced across her skin and for a few moments, her hand seemed to glow, as if lit from within by a purple light.

The light sizzled over the bars and Alina jumped back, releasing both the bars and her father's hand.

She gasped as she saw that the bar she'd been holding had . . . black marks on it . . . almost like handprints. There was the faintest glow of purple and then it was gone.

She stared in disbelief at her hand. It looked normal. "Papa, what happened? The bar . . . did I do that? My . . . my hand . . . how did that happen?"
The terror in her voice roused him from his shock. "Alina, calm down. It's all right, dearie."

She shook her head. She stared at the bar where her hand had been. The marks were still there. Like her hand. She shivered. What had she done? Had she really left a handprint there?

Gold almost couldn't believe what had occurred. Dear God, she has magic. Like me. He had long considered the possibility that his daughter might have inherited magic's Gift, because when used properly, the magic was a gift, and not a curse—but he'd never expected it to show up like this! Usually those possessing some sort of magic had bouts of it as teenagers, hormones seemed to bring it on. Or sometimes tragic or emotional hardships.

"Alina, listen to me. What just happened was an accident . . ."

"I didn't mean to!" she half-sobbed, terrified she would be locked up too for trying to help her father escape, though she hadn't really done so. Did intent matter?

"Alina, please, calm down, sweetheart," he ordered, knowing that getting control over her emotions was paramount.

Then he felt something . . . a presence . . . and it wasn't Emma.

He stiffened. Regina. He'd know her aura anywhere, even if he didn't have access to his magic right now. Oh hells! He couldn't let Regina find out about Alina. And she would if she walked in right now. He could feel Alina's latent magical energy, and if he could do so, Regina would have no trouble. If she ever discovered there was a neophyte magic user here . . .

"Sweetheart, take a deep breath. Now, I need you to leave. Right now."

"Why? I want to stay with you."

"I know, but you have to go. Just do as I say. Leave and . . . and wait outside for Henry."

"How . . . how did you know he was going to come visit Emma?"

"He usually does, right? Now, please, go, Alina! Hurry!"

"But I want to know what happened . . ."

"I'll tell you later. Go!"

Now he could hear Regina's heels tapping down the hall.

Alina finally obeyed, leaving by the side door.

Just as the door snicked shut, Regina came in with Henry from the front entrance. "Where's Emma?"

"I think she stepped out to get some lunch. I'm sure she'll be back soon," Gold replied, forcing himself to sound normal. That had been too close!

"Oh. Henry, you go and wait outside for her. Go and get some ice cream or something. You have half-an-hour." Regina waved at him.

Henry just nodded and scampered away.

Gold was sure Alina would find him. He glared at Regina.
"Well, well. How the mighty have fallen," she purred, and there was satisfaction in her tone that burned like acid.

"Want to exchange places with me?" he hissed, trying to keep his temper in check.

She laughed, a brittle sound devoid of mirth. "I'm the mayor, Gold. No one, not even savior Emma, would dare lock me up."

He bared his teeth. "Pity. Might be an improvement."

"Such delicious gossip!" Regina said, pointing a long nail at him. "The eminent Mr. Gold, losing his cool and almost beating to death a poor florist. What will people say?"

"I didn't beat him to death, and he was no innocent. However, I'd say you put him up to this, Regina. Didn't you?"

She shrugged. "I may have . . . given him a few suggestions. The man really doesn't like you. Not after you took away his truck."

"The feeling's mutual." Gold said shortly, not wanting to fence with Regina right now. "You told him exactly what to take. Now where is it?"

She smirked like a child teasing a playmate. Then she unzipped a black bag she had hanging at her side and pulled out the cup. "Looking for this?" She held it up just before the bars. "My, what a fuss over such an . . . ordinary object."

Rumplestiltkin's eyes fixed on the chipped cup. Oh, how he wanted to reach out and grab it, to clasp it to him, this last piece of his love for Belle, the affirmation of their imperfect yet beautiful love. But he forced himself to remain still, to not react. That was what Regina wanted. If she saw how much the cup meant to him, she would move heaven and earth to make him pay for it. By whatever means necessary.

Regina stroked the side of the white and blue rimmed porcelain cup. She eyed Gold consideringly. "Do you want it?"

Gold remained calm, inscrutable. They could have been discussing the weather. "It's a keepsake."

"A keepsake you were willing to maim Moe French over."

"You don't give a damn about French. This isn't about him. This is about you and me, Regina. Like it's always been."

"But of course!" she chuckled. "You're the only worthy player in the game. But . . . everything comes with a price."

He ground his teeth silently. She was right. He couldn't let her keep the cup. It was almost like a piece of his heart was embedded in that porcelain. Too dangerous for a sorcerer of his caliber to let go. Of course, Regina didn't know that. Yet. And Rumplestilskin had no intention of letting her find out. But he also couldn't indebt himself further to her by asking for the cup back.

_You're between a rock and a hard place, Rum. Just do the best you can_, he counseled himself silently. He'd made worse deals than this. _All right, my old enemy. Round one to you. But that's not the end._ "What do you want?"

"Oh, a very trifling thing. I want to know your name."
"You already do," he said, feigning misunderstanding.

"Tell me your name," she demanded, her eyes glittering with the force of command.

"Mr. Gold has been my name since I came to this world," he said, answering yet not answering. He knew it was aggravating, but he loved to get Regina's goat.

Regina glared at him, her composure shredded. "Tell me your true name . . . or else this is mine."

Ah, trying to use the power of three against me, are you, dearie? That was a powerful enchantment, but Regina's power was diminished in this world. So he felt only a cursory impulse to obey, rather than the force that would have compelled him if they were in their old world. He lifted his head, met her eyes. I know who I am now. And knowledge is power.

Then he said, very softly, "Rumplestiltskin."

There! The die had been cast, the gauntlet thrown down.

She handed him the cup, which he held as if it were the most precious thing in the world. Right then it was. He leaned forward, using his voice as a prod, and said, "I am awake now, and no longer dreaming. Puts a bit of a crimp in your plans, doesn't it, dearie? But no curse lasts forever."

She stepped back slightly and said, "We'll see about that." Then she spun away, the haughty queen deigning to visit the lowly spinner in jail.

Behind her, Rumplestiltskin smiled. Battle had been joined. And he played to win.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Regina had just left the premises when Emma and the two children came back. Alina held a brown paper bag beside her and Henry carried a plastic cup probably filled with soda. Emma set her purse down on her desk and seemed rather flustered.

"Papa, we brought you lunch," Alina announced. "It's a pastrami sandwich with coleslaw on rye." She handed him the back, avoiding the place where the bars were slightly singed like the plague.

Gold saw her dart a half-fearful look at them before backing away. "Thanks, Alina," he said, unwrapping the sandwich.

Before he could take the first bite, Henry said, "Here's your Coke, Mr. Gold."

As he walked over to give Gold the soda, it zoomed out of his hand and slipped through the bars, landing neatly on the floor.

Gold blinked. "My God! You too!"

"Him too what?" Emma cried. "Gold, did you see what he did? Something like that happened at the diner too. He made the salt shaker move right across the table. Don't ask me how. Is it like telekinesis or something?"

"Am I like . . . a mutant? Like the X-Men?" asked Henry, not all frightened of his new "superpower."

"I have it too," Alina whispered.

At the same time Gold said, "No, you're not a mutant. You're a magician, born to magic's Gift. And
"Cool!" Henry was grinning.

Emma looked like she was about to faint. "My . . . my son has magic?"

"Yes, and so does Alina."

"How do you know that? How can you possibly know that?"

"Sit down, Emma. All of you, please sit down. This is going to take awhile. Emma, take your phone off the hook, once I start talking I don't want there to be any interruptions."

Emma did so, still feeling like someone had sucker punched her.

"I think it's best to start at the beginning. To answer your question, Emma, I know that Henry and Alina have magic because I also am a magician. Or I was until coming here lost me my powers. Once I was a powerful and feared sorcerer called Rumplestiltskin . . ."

Alina gasped. "Papa, you remember!"

"Well, he did read the Book," Henry reminded her.

Gold's eyes narrowed. "You know about my past, Alina? About what I was?"

She nodded. "I read the Book too. A few weeks ago. So I know everything the Book knows."

He let out a soft sigh of relief. "Then you . . . aren't . . . you don't hate me for what I was?"

"Why would I? You've changed, you're not who you were and I never even knew that person. Even if you are a powerful sorcerer, you're still my papa. My mom loved you always. So why shouldn't I?"

He felt as if a ton of bricks had been picked up off his chest. She didn't hate him! "Thank you, sweetheart," he said sincerely. He would have liked to hug her then, but the bars still separated them. "I changed after you came and I lost your mother, but that's a story for another time. Listen to me closely. . ."

He told them as much as he could about the war between him and Regina, about how he used a lot of his magic to counteract things she had destroyed and lives she had ruined.

"Now, don't make the mistake of thinking I was always like that. I wasn't. Once I allowed power to dictate my heart, and the curse I bore took me over. Until Belle came and broke most of its hold on me. Before her I was selfish, angry, filled with bitterness and hate. And I used magic for myself alone. It was because of that I lost my son, Baelfire."

"You had a son?" Emma whispered.

"Yes, long ago. But he hated the magic, and blamed it for my change in personality. He claimed it corrupted me. What he was too young to realize was that power and my own hatred corrupted me, not the magic. Do you remember the book I gave you to read, Emma? And how it talks of magic as a force, neither good or evil?"

"Yes. It said it was the actions of the caster that determined if magic was good or bad."

"Excellent! And that is the truth, as I'm sure you can tell," Rumplestiltskin said. Then he looked at
Alina. "You needn't be afraid of your Gift, Alina. I can teach you how to control it."

"But . . . I almost melted the bar."

"That's because you're an enchantress. You can enchant any object, transmute anything to something else, and use your own energy and that of the earth's for defense or attack."

Alina stared down at her hands. It didn't seem possible she could do all that. She was just a girl. But her papa never lied. Not to her.

"What about me?" Henry wanted to know.

"Your primary ability is as a conjurer. You can summon things or people, creatures not of this world even. Call a thing three times and it is bound to obey you. You can summon light and heat as well. You can also send things away from you, small things usually. But be warned, sometimes what you summon can turn on you, unless you take the proper precautions."

"Wow! It's like Harry Potter!"

"This is real, not a storybook, Henry," Rumplestiltskin said sternly. "Magic always has a price."

"That's what the book said," Emma interrupted. "The one you gave me."

"Yes. And that is the most important lesson you will ever learn. All magic comes with a price, and if you are not willing to pay it, don't cast it." He looked at Emma, who looked rather as if she'd been blown away by a hand grenade. "Emma, just so you know, you have magic too."

"What? How?"

"Magic is inherited through generations. Yours was probably inherited through your mother. Such things usually are, especially to a child born out of true love. True love is the most powerful magic of all, so it spawns magically Talented children. Some of the time. About fifty percent."

"True love breaks all curses," Henry recited.

"Exactly, boy. It's why evil sorceresses hate it. Because the heart is more powerful than any magic."

"Why is that?" asked Alina.

"Because the heart sees past all deceptions, all illusions, magical and non-magical. It sees past even the lies we tell ourselves to the true core of a person. And once you see a person for what he or she is, you know that person, and true knowing is true power, dearie."

"Then what you love you can also . . . control?" Henry asked.

"You can, for to know a thing truly is to gain power over it. But love does not seek domination. It frees, it gives, and only rarely does it take and never for harm. To have that power . . . and to give it away . . . do you understand now why love breaks all curses?"

Alina nodded. "Because love sacrifices."

Emma interrupted, her mind whirling. "How can you know I have magic?"

"Because all practitioners of the Art can sense their own kind," Rumplestiltskin answered. "Once your magic awakens, others who bear it will know you for what you are. Even if you don't
yourself. Your magic emits an aura, like radar, and those attuned to it always know."

"Then you knew before?"

"Not exactly. I wasn't awake before, so I didn't know what I was sensing. Now I do. One of your Gifts, Emma, is as a Truth Sayer. The bards back in the Dark Ages had that Gift, it was said. As for what else you have, I'd need to concentrate more fully before I determined that."

"This is . . . crazy!"

Gold laughed. "We're magicians, dearie! All of us have been called that. They thought DaVinci was crazy too, and he was a genius with a Gift of Sight. Merlin too. Don't worry about crazy. That's what other people call you when they can't figure out how to categorize you."

"I feel like I'm going crazy," Emma elaborated.

"You're not," Henry assured her.

"He's right. It's normal to feel like that when you first find out," Gold soothed. "Magic can be a frightening thing. But only at first. Once you learn how to bring it to heel, then you'll see wonders beyond your wildest imagination."

"Really?"

Gold nodded. "Oh, yes."

"But what are you, Papa?"

"Hmm. Oh, my Gift is as an Elementalist and Keeper of Knowledge. As such I know about many things and my powers over the Five Elements—Water, Earth, Fire, Air, and Spirit—help me when I need it. Or they did once. Right now they're blocked because of the curse, but eventually I'll have them back."

"Why aren't we? Or Regina?" Emma queried.

"Because, dearie, as the curse's caster, Regina remains almost unaffected by it. She didn't lose her memory and much of her magic is intact. You and Henry, however, are outside the curse because you weren't here when it was cast."

"But I was," Alina said.

"I know, dearie. But your magic was dormant then. So there was nothing for the curse to affect. Now it's awake, and free from the curse's rules. It's why I wanted you to leave here when Regina was coming. Because if she saw you then, she'd sense your magic and that's the last thing we need."

Henry looked troubled. "But what about me? If I go home, she'll know."

"True. Let me think about this. If I had my powers back, it would be a simple matter of disguising your aura. I could teach you, but it would take a few days. So . . . I need something else."

Suddenly, Emma cell began to vibrate. "Excuse me," she said, getting up to answer it and moving to the other side of the room. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end crackled a bit, but was easily understood.
"Oh, I see. Yes, I'll talk to him. Thank you."

She headed back towards Gold's cell. "That was your attorney. Your fine's been paid, you're free to go. He also said that he made a deal with French's public defender and agreed to pay off the man's hospital costs and expenses and also give him money for the damages you caused."

"Good. Then he can pay me what he owes and I'll give him his truck back. And possibly an apology."

She grabbed the keys and unlocked the cell door.

Gold stepped out of it, limping slightly, the cup held in his other hand.

"You got the cup back!" Alina exclaimed.

"Regina had it," he said shortly.

"Then she took it?" asked Emma.

"No, French did, with some encouragement," Gold said, a sneer twisting his face.

"Why do you hate him so much?" Emma queried softly.

Gold put his arm around Alina and hugged her to him. "Because nobody hurts my family, Emma. Nobody. And he hurt them more than once."

"I don't understand."

"I'll give you Henry's Book. Read it and you will," Rumplestiltskin replied. "For now, the debt between French and me is settled. But if he follows Regina again and takes what doesn't belong to him or tries to harm one of mine, all bets are off."

"I don't think he'd be that dumb," Emma said, resolving to read the Book in order to figure out the rest of Gold's mysterious past. Then she said, "If all the people in Storybrooke are fairy tale characters, who's Moe French?"

"He was a king. King Maurice," Rumplestiltskin answered.

Emma frowned. "But wasn't he . . .?"

"My grandfather," Alina said, the realization dawning. "And he . . . doesn't like me."

"No, dearie. Which is why I'm glad he doesn't know you. And why you must stay away from him," Gold said gently.

"I will. If he doesn't like me I don't like him either!"

"I don't blame you," Henry said feelingly.

"Come. We'll all go to my shop. I believe I have an amulet there that might help you, Henry. For a little while. You and Alina both."

"And me?" asked Emma.

"She already knows about you. And she's dismissed you as . . . insignificant. Otherwise she'd have killed you by now."
"I'll show her!" Emma snapped.

"Indeed, dearie. I have several surprises in store for Her Majesty the Queen," Rumplestiltskin chuckled wickedly. "What she doesn't know might come back to bite her. Hopefully fatally."
Magic lessons begin and Henry wishes upon a star . . and a new player enters the game. Who is it?

Mr. Gold took them all to his shop, then made them wait while he went into the back room and unlocked a plain wooden chest with a simple silver key. It was where he kept his most magical objects, though one would never know that by looking at the chest they were in. He preferred it that way. After searching through the chest for a few minutes, he found what he was looking for and brought out two amulets wrapped in soft cloths. He put them in a pocket of his jacket, then locked up the chest again, hanging the key about his neck. Then he limped out of room, leaning a little more heavily than was his wont on his cane.

He met the expectant eyes of his daughter, her friend, and Emma as he walked over to them. He extracted the two amulets from his pocket and laid the cloth on the counter before them. Gently, he unwrapped them. "There. Two Eyes of Horus, enchanted millennia ago in Ancient Egypt."

They were gold, showing a stylized Egyptian eye strung on black velvet cords. Even though he couldn't access his powers, he could feel the powerful aura coming off the amulets.

"Where did you get them?" asked Emma softly.

"From a salesman selling various charms. He stayed only long enough to make a deal with me. I doubt he realized what he had, only another sorcerer would realize they were amulets of protection. In ancient times, the Eye of Horus symbol was one given to people for protection against evil magic. It was also the symbol of medicine and physicians. These amulets have magic woven into them to both protect the wearer and disguise their true aura. With these on, Regina will never sense your magic, not even a little."

He handed one to each child. "Put them on and never remove them if you want to remain hidden."

"What about when we take a shower?" queried Alina, slipping the cord over her head.

"Not even then. The amulets and cords are waterproof."

Henry looked down at himself. "But . . . won't people wonder why we're wearing them?"

"No, because they won't see them. They are invisible to everyone except another practitioner of magic."

"Then people won't see them on us?" Henry asked.

"No, but it's best if you keep them on under your clothes, in case Regina spies them. If she does, just say they're . . ."

"Costume jewelry," Emma supplied.

"Yes. Exactly," Gold nodded. "Now, though we've disguised you, the next step is to help you
control your talent. I think if you meet with me on Saturdays at my house, we can begin doing so."

"Sounds like a plan," Emma said. "I've got to be going. I need to check out the crypt again now that I've got a warrant."

"Be careful you don't run into ghosts," Henry teased.

"Very funny, mister," Emma tousled his hair in a rare gesture of affection. "Watch out for him, okay?" she directed that last at Gold.

"Not a problem, Emma," Gold assured her. He glanced at the two children. "Well, it's too late to open up my shop, so let's go home and see Saylah. I'm sure she's dusting every fixture we have in an attempt to avoid going crazy."

"Wait, sir. I'd better call Regina."

"Are you staying for dinner, Henry?" asked Alina.

"Uh . . . yeah, if Regina says I can." Henry said. "Can I use your phone?"

"Yes, in my office."

Both Golds waited until Henry came back. "Talked to Regina. She said she was busy with a new project so I can eat dinner with you. If that's all right?"

"You may." Gold said. "You have a standing invitation. Let me get my keys, then we can go."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Saylah was delighted to see Mr. Gold back at home where he was supposed to be. To celebrate, she was making roast barbequed pork with sweet potatoes, red peppers, and pineapple in a savory sweet and spicy sauce. There were also yeasty dinner rolls and a cranberry mandarin orange salad. Dessert was surprise, which Alina whispered to Henry meant she hadn't made it yet.

Gold left them to change and take a shower while Saylah prepared the meal and contemplated dessert.

"Have you decided what you're going to write for Miss Blanchard's poetry assignment?" Alina asked, plunking her bookbag down on the kitchen table with a thump.

"Not yet. I'll think of something." Henry said.

"Maybe we ought to plan it now."

"You want me to do homework?" Henry asked, dismayed.

"Well, I thought it'd be easier to bounce ideas off each other."

"All right. What do we have to do again?"

"Write a poem of more than three lines in length, rhyming or unrhyming, about something you like or someone you admire," Alina answered.

"That ought to be easy for you," Henry said. "All you have to do is write about your dad."

Alina looked over at him sharply. There was a faint note of wistfullness in his voice. She knew how
much he wished he could have a father, so she said sympathetically, "You could write about Emma."

But Henry shook his head irritably. "I can't. If Regina ever found out . . . she'd make my life hell. Maybe even forbid me to see her."

"Um . . . maybe you could write about books?"

"I don't know. I can't write about fairy tales because the other kids would just make fun of me." Henry sighed. "I wish I could write about magic, but I know better."

"Maybe you could write about an actor? Like Alan Rickman or Daniel Radcliff?" she suggested, naming two of their favorite actors in the Harry Potter movies. One played Severus Snape and the other Harry Potter.

Henry brightened. "That might work."

"Well, write it down before you forget."

"What do you think I am, senile?" he asked, a little crossly.

"No, but I know you'll forget later on tonight and then you'll be calling me."

"Okay, Miss Bossypants." He pulled out a sheet of looseleaf and began to write.

"I am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Enough, you two!" Saylah ordered from the counter. "Are you friends or bickering siblings?"

"Sometimes we're both," Alina admitted candidly.

"Yeah, I can see that. Give it a rest. Before I separate you so my poor ears can get some peace."

"Yes, Saylah," Alina said contritely. "Let's go upstairs and watch cartoons."

"I thought you wanted to work on our poems."

"I changed my mind."

"A woman's prerogative," Saylah added at Henry's eye roll.

He followed Alina upstairs. Like him, she had a TV in her bedroom. And they could be alone and talk about magic. He fingered his amulet and thought, slightly resentfully, about how lucky Alina was to have a father. Something he'd never had, but always wanted.

While Alina flipped through the channels with her remote, Henry leaned on the bean bag chair in front of the TV and said, "I can't wait till your dad starts giving us magic lessons. It'll be wickedly awesome!"

"Then . . . it doesn't . . . scare you a little?" she asked softly.
"No. Why? Does it scare you?"

"Umm . . . a little. When I . . . made fingerprints on the bars of the jail cell . . . it felt . . . all weird and kind of, I don't know, creepy. I didn't know what was happening to me. Papa said not to worry, that I didn't need to be afraid, but . . . a part of me still is. Just a little."

"I sort of feel weird too. But in a good way. Then again, I didn't melt any bars, Stormy."

"I didn't melt them. They were still there. I just . . . sent like a shock through them or something."

"You're lucky that your dad understands these things. That you can talk to him and stuff. I wish . . ."

"You can talk to me, Henry. Anytime you want. Or Emma."

"Emma's almost as clueless as we are. And God forbid Regina ever found out. She'd probably try to convert me to the Dark Side or something."

Alina found Cartoon Network and left it on. "But she'll never find out. Unless you take off the amulet."

"I know . . . it's just . . . I wish I had a normal family. Like you."

"Me? I'm missing a mom. I just have a housekeeper and Papa. Why don't you go and live with Emma?"

"I thought about that, but . . . I can only do that if she has custody of me legally. Otherwise Regina could get me back. It's funny, but when I was small I . . . sort of looked up to her. Regina, I mean. Before I knew who she really was. She gave me lots of things, anything I wanted. But then . . . about a year before I found out, something changed. It was like . . . something in me realized that she didn't care . . . that she gave me things, but not . . ."

"Love?"

"Yeah. Sure, she acted like she cared, like most moms do, but it was just an act. Her heart, if she even has one, wasn't in it. And that's when I started to wonder. Then I found the papers in her desk. And Miss Blanchard gave me the book. That's when I started to look for my real mom. Because I hoped she'd give me something Regina couldn't."

"You have to give her time, Henry. I think she loves you but . . . she's afraid too."

"But . . . don't mothers just love their kids? How long did it take your dad to love you?"

"I was a baby, Henry. I think it's different with babies. I don't know. I never had a mom. If I did, maybe I'd know. I think Regina gave her heart away. That's why she can't love you, can't love anyone. Except herself." She wished she knew something else to say, but she didn't. She felt bad for Henry, but didn't know what to do to make him feel better.

"Yeah. She loves herself a lot," Henry said bitterly. Maybe if he had a father, he would love him right away. The way Mr. Gold loved Alina. If only . . . he sighed and focused upon the TV. Bugs Bunny was on. Henry watched the Road Runner trying to outwit Wile Coyote and smiled. He'd just watch TV until it was time for dinner. He'd worry about his missing father later.
For dessert, Saylah made peanut butter and jelly bars. They were so good, Henry asked if he could take some home. Saylah wrapped up two for him then he played Monopoly with Alina until seven, when Gold said he'd better take him home.

Henry wondered if Regina would be home yet, but as usual, she wasn't and he arrived home to an empty house. Once again, he felt a sharp pang of loneliness. After he'd taken a shower, he tried to work on his poem, but nothing was coming to his mind. He threw down his pen in frustration and gazed out the window.

The night sky was clear, a deep velvet blackness, except for the stars shining. One star seemed to be brighter than the rest. As Henry watched, it soared from the heavens.

A falling star! He thought excitedly. I'm a conjurer. Maybe if I wish hard enough . . . I wish . . . I wish my father would come home to me. And he'd love me the way other kids' dads do.

He felt something quiver through him, but he didn't know if his magic or his wish had worked.

It probably hadn't. He didn't know what he was doing yet. He stared out the window until he felt himself growing sleepy.

Then he curled up in bed and fell asleep. That night he dreamed of an indistinct figure who looked similar to him hugging him and saying he was proud of him. My dad, he thought in his dreams, and he smiled.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The next day:

Emma stopped by Regina's office at town hall to get the key to the crypt. She would have gone there sooner, but then there had been Gold's episode with Mr. French to deal with. She had heard through the grapevine, meaning Ruby, that Moe was released from the hospital today.

Emma hoped he wouldn't do something stupid, and confront Gold again. Right now she had a crypt to investigate.

She drove the Bug over to the cemetery and parked it. Using the key, she opened the crypt. It looked the same as it had when she and Gold had come here looking for their kids. She pressed on a dozen spots on the side of the stone effigy before one finally triggered the hidden staircase.

Now that she had the warrant, she could do a legal search and take photos of the hearts.

Except that when she got down to the hidden room, it was empty. There were no boxes along the wall, and no hearts. The wall was a smooth blank space.

Emma gaped at the sight. Had she imagined everything? But no, she had the pictures. They were locked in her desk drawer. But the hearts were gone!

She ran her fingers along the wall, hoping to find a seam or a crack. Something to indicate the wall was false. But nothing met her fingers.

"Damn! Now what?" she swore. "Without the boxes here, my pictures could be dismissed and probably will be, by Regina and any lawyer she hires."

She probed the wall again.
Then she banged her fist on it. Solid.

At a loss, she stood there for a moment, then climbed back up the stairs. How could a wall of hearts disappear?

She knew of only one man who could answer that question.

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Gold looked up from polishing the glass case when the bell tinkled over the door. "Emma, what can I do for you?"

Emma looked around. The only other person in the shop besides Gold was Tom. He was sweeping the floor, which always seemed to get dusty. "I need to talk to you, Mr. Gold. Privately."

Sensing there was something wrong, Gold nodded and said, "In there. Have a seat." He turned to where Tom was sweeping. "You're done for today, Thomas. Go home."

Tom looked as if Gold was senile. "But . . . it's only three fifteen. I have an hour left."

"I'm letting you off early. Now go. Before I change my mind."

Tom didn't need to be told again. He tossed his apron on top of a pile of books and shot out the door as if someone had set his pants on fire.

Gold locked up the entrance and put out a CLOSED sign before meeting Emma in the back room. "What's this about, Emma?"

"Can anyone hear us?" she asked warily.

"No. I sent Tom home and locked up the shop." He leaned on the desk.

"It's about the crypt. And how Regina made a wall disappear."

"Disappear?"

"Yes. Can . . . can magic do that?"

"Of course, dearie. That's a magician's stock in trade. Making things disappear. What wall are you talking about?"

"The one with the hearts. Look, I went there again, with the warrant, and I didn't find them. They were gone. Vanished. Like they never were there. But I saw them, Gold. I took pictures. Now how'd she do that? Is she that powerful?"

Gold frowned. "Possibly. Or she could have moved them. No, then she'd need a place to hide them and that's too risky. Those hearts give her her power."

"So where are they?"

"Right there."

"I looked there, Gold! Do you think I'm blind?"

"No, I think you're confused. I think your eyes and hands see something that's not there. Illusion, dearie. The oldest trick in the book. The hearts are still there, but she's used her magic to prevent
you from seeing them."

"My God! What do I do? How do I break the spell?"

"You need to learn a countercharm."

"Can you teach me?" Emma asked. "I can't believe I just asked you that."

"Magic is real, Emma. Believe in it, or anything you try, anything I try and teach you, will be useless. Know yourself, Swan. Accept what you are and what you can do. Otherwise you'll never see more than an illusionary wall."

"I'm trying!"

"Try harder."

"That's it? That's all you're going to tell me? Why can't you break the spell?"

"One, I don't have access to my powers. And two, that's the best advice I can give you right now."

"That's brilliant!" she snapped.

"I try, dearie," he smirked at her. "Now, why don't you go home, get into something comfy and read Henry's book? If that doesn't convince you, nothing will. Believe, Emma. And all things are possible."

"You ought to be on a talk show, Gold."

"I wouldn't waste my breath," he snorted. "Read the book. And remember, meet me on Saturday, eleven o'clock AM, at my house."

"You going to teach me how to cut up frog legs?"

"You'll see," he said enigmatically.

"Do you always have to be so . . . mysterious?"

"Mysterious is my middle name, dearie."

"So is pain-in-the-ass," she muttered as she left the office.

Gold shook his head. This was going to be a difficult apprentice. Luckily, he'd dealt with difficult apprentices before.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Having nothing better to do, Emma followed Rumplestiltskin's advice and went home and got into a pair of comfy sweatpants and an old T-shirt with the Road Runner on it. Then she took Henry's book from beside her bed and after making a cup of cocoa began to read it.

At first she was skeptical, but gradually the Book began to win her over.

At the same time, halfway across the country, a tall man wearing a black T-shirt with the logo Fire Mountain Dojo—Where Legends Are Made gassed up his Harley at a rest stop in Kansas. He'd come from Phoenix and had been traveling for hours.
Ask him where he was going, and he'd tell you he'd know when he got there. The truth was, he had no idea why he'd suddenly closed up his martial arts shop, where he was a sensei, and decided to hit the road. Just that he was filled with a strong compulsion to travel east. East and north. To God only knew where. It was crazy. He wondered if he was bewitched. But that was impossible. This was a land without magic, unlike the one he'd come from long ago. But something was driving him. Something was beckoning him, and had ever since two nights ago.

Something had woken him from a sound sleep. A feeling, a longing, a need he couldn't ignore. He couldn't even remember what he had dreamed now. It was all fuzzy. But he knew one thing. He had to leave Phoenix and travel east and north. Far away, so he could find something important. He didn't know what in hell it was, but he knew that when he saw it, he'd find out what he was searching for. He was needed. That was all he knew. But soon he would find out more.

He finished putting gas in the tank and bought a water bottle and paid for everything. Then he was off, sending the Harley flying down the highway, destination unknown.
Return to Me

Chapter Summary

She's baaack!

A/N: This chapter's title was inspired by the hit song by Dean Martin and also the movie Return to Me, a favorite of my late mother's. Enjoy!

On Saturday, Emma and Henry came by the Gold mansion, as planned at eleven o'clock. Emma parked the Bug around the back, so no one walking by from the street could see her car. She had finished reading the Once Upon a Time book and it had almost totally broken down much of her initial disbelief and resistance about magic and the truth about Storybrooke. There was too much in the tales that made sense and matched certain things to not be true. What she still had trouble with was her immediate family. There was still a part of her that resisted the fact that she had a mother and father who were very close to her own age, at least in this world, and they weren't together either. But she could work that out later. What was important now was defeating this curse and Regina, who had placed it on everyone. And in order to do that she had to learn how to control her own magic.

A part of her still doubted she had much talent at all, but it no longer doubted that magic was real. She would try—try being the operative word—to learn what Gold had to teach her.

Saylah greeted them at the door and invited them to make themselves at home. There was a plate of freshly baked oatmeal cookies on the table and also a pot of tea. "Come in and have some. Mr. G and Alina will be right down. He's talking to a client on the phone and Alina was getting changed, they were puttering around in the garden this morning."

Emma and Henry sat down in the warm honey kitchen and helped themselves to cookies and tea. "These are so delicious, I could eat the plate," Emma said. "But then I'd gain fifty pounds. Where did you learn how to bake, Saylah? A culinary school?"

"Nothing so fancy, Miss Swan!" the housekeeper laughed. "I learned everything from my mama and grandma. How to cook, how to clean, and how to listen when somebody's got a problem they won't tell no one else."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Gold . . . comes to you with problems?"

"Sometimes. But mostly Alina. Since she has no mama, I do my best to help answer her questions," Saylah said warmly. She bustled about the kitchen, stirring a pot on the stove and checking the oven timer.

Henry was on his third cookie when Alina came down the stairs. "Hello! I didn't hear you come in," she greeted them. Then she took two cookies and poured herself a cup of tea. She was holding a pink hair tie in one hand and a small brush in the other.

"We came in the back," Henry told her.

Before Alina could say anything more, Rumplestiltskin limped into the room, wearing the most
casual set of clothes Emma or Henry had ever seen on him—gray slacks and a soft collared blue golf shirt and neat black loafers. Today his leg was barely hurting, so he hardly needed his cane.

"Hello, Henry, Emma! I see Saylah's given you some of her famous oatmeal squares. They're so good I could eat a whole batch." He came over and took three cookies and sat down next to Alina.

"Then it's a good thing I made two batches," Saylah said with a wink.

"Papa, can you braid my hair?" asked Alina. "I keep messing it up."

"Come here, dearie, and let me see what I can do," Gold said, beckoning her over.

Alina came over and handed him the brush and the hair tie.

"Two or one?" he asked.

"One French braid, please."

To Emma's shock, she watched as Rumplestiltskin deftly combed and began to braid Alina's long brown hair. "You know how to braid hair?"

"You'd be surprised what you pick up when you're the only parent in the house," Gold replied, twining the sections expertly into a neat braid. Then he placed the pink hair tie on the end and said, "There you go, dearie!"

"Thanks!" Alina said, giving him a brief hug before going to sit down and finish her tea and cookies.

Once everyone had finished their snack, Gold led them downstairs to his workroom. He had converted the room, which he used to store some of his goods for the shop, into a sort of combination of exercise and meditation room, with blue mats on the floor and brick and wood walls.

"Have a seat," he gestured to the floor, where he carefully lowered himself. Once Emma, Henry, and Alina were seated in front of him, he said, "One of the first things I want you to learn about magic is how to concentrate before you use it. In order to concentrate fully, we're going to use a few easy techniques that teach you how to calm your emotions and clear your mind. Such as guided meditation."

Emma frowned. "I thought this was magic class, Gold, not yoga."

"Meditation, especially for beginners, Emma, teaches you control over your magic," Gold replied. "In order for you to cast properly, you need to have control over your emotions, because casting in anger will result in unexpected consequences. Magic is not just power alone, but will and focus, therefore learning how to be calm is essential."

"You sound like a Buddhist monk," Emma remarked.

"Those monks had the right idea, dearie," Gold answered. "First, I'm going to teach you how to breathe."

He spent forty-five minutes showing his pupils how to regulate their breathing, slowing their resperation and heartbeat. Once he was sure they could do so, he added ten minutes worth of visualization to that.
"I want you to think of something that relaxes you, something that makes you feel calm and peaceful. Once you have this image in your mind, focus on it. Feel it, hear it, see it, touch it. And remember—breathe."

He demonstrated, using as his visual guide a memory of Belle as he'd last seen her. Picturing her in his mind always relaxed him and filled him with a sense of peace, though for a long time she had also filled him with loss, until he'd learned to put the loss aside.

As his students groped and struggled to find meaningful images, he calmly put himself into a trance-like state so he could see all three's magical auras. Henry's was a deep blue, Emma's a scintillating green and yellow, while Alina's was a royal purple. The colors indicated the type of magical Talents they possessed. Henry was a conjurer—blue for the summoner, Alina an enchantress—purple for binding and change—and Emma was an enhancer—yellow and green for growth.

"Remember, your image doesn't have to be of a person, it could be a place or even an animal, whatever makes you calm and peaceful."

He gave them another five minutes before asking that they focus on that image and start breathing and concentrating.

As they did so, he could see who had better concentration, because their auras grew smaller as they pulled the magic inside of them. Henry seemed to have the best control, with Alina second, and Emma last.

"All right. Rest," he said, clapping his hands lightly. "You'll notice you feel slightly tired, even though you haven't been doing much except breathing and focusing."

"Why is that?" asked Alina.

"Because breathing and focusing is hard at first," he answered. "But the more you practice, the better you'll be. One other thing you need to know about magic—words are power. What you say, or write, is what determines how effective a spell or binding will be, and among mages, your word is what binds you and your power. So never ever say what you don't mean. You'll notice, when I make a deal with someone, I always keep to the letter of my agreement. For all magic comes with a price."

"How do you know what that price will be?" Emma asked.

"Sometimes it's indicated beforehand in the spell itself . . . other times, you pay it at the end of the spell, so before you cast anything with magic, make sure you know the price you'll pay . . . or that someone else will. Usually you pay a price of energy, which is why you can feel exhausted after using your Power. But other times . . . the price can be much steeper. The harder the task you wish to do, the greater the price required."

"Then Regina's curse . . . must have demanded a high price," Emma mused.

"Oh, yes. It did. It demanded the sacrifice of someone she held dear," Rumplestiltskin replied.

"And she paid it?"

"Most assuredly, dearie. Else the curse wouldn't have worked."

"Do you know what it might have been?"
"Possibly. And if I'm right, it shows her to be a most ruthless enemy."

"What is it?" asked Henry.

"Are you sure you wish to know?"

They all nodded.

"There was only one person Regina cared about after her mother killed her beloved Daniel. Her father."

"She . . . sacrificed her own father!" Alina was horrified. "But that's . . . disgusting!" She could never conceive of doing something so terrible, not for any reason. She would die before letting her father sacrifice himself for her.

"Are you sure, Gold?"

"Reasonably," he replied softly. "He died just before the curse struck. And the funeral was quick and hasty. It was said it was . . . heart trouble."

Emma felt a shiver go down her spine. What sort of psychopath killed her own father?

"I told you she was evil," Henry murmured.

"Watch your back," Gold warned. "She is not to be trusted. Not ever."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

A week later, they had their second lesson, and this time Rumplestiltskin showed them how to see magical auras, their own and others.

A certain man on a motorcycle drew ever closer to Storybrooke, having to stop over in Virginia to fix a flat tire and tune up his engine, minor things, but they delayed him a day or two.

And deep in a basement room of the psychiatric ward of the hospital, a patient planned to escape her endless prison, finally managing to wean herself off the anti-depressants and sedatives the staff had been pumping into her body for years. Now at last she was free of the mental fog and clear-headed, she knew exactly who she was, that she had been kept for years against her will in this room, that she was no more crazy than the one who had imprisoned her here.

Unlike the others in Storybrooke, she was not affected by the curse, though she did not know why this was. She knew of the curse because Regina had bragged to her about it before casting it, saying it would trap everyone she held dear in a prison from which there was no return.

She had been here, in this same room, for years, struggling to be free of the drugs they gave her, drugs that were supposed to help, but only made her dizzy, sick, and disorientated. But at last she was free of their dependence, and now it was time to leave this place.

She was not, and would never be, a pawn of sorcery.

By listening carefully to the aides when they came in to administer drugs to her, pills which she pretended to take, she knew enough about the layout of the town . . . Storybrooke . . . to know where to go when she escaped. She was relieved to know he was here still. Did he remember her? Or had the curse affected him too? But even if he did not, she would still go to him. She had been going to him that night . . . the night she'd been captured . . . she shook her head. She could not
afford to think of the past now. What mattered was the escape.

She slowed her breathing as she lay upon the hard bed they had provided her, appearing as if she were sleeping . . . or drugged, which happened frequently in this madhouse. As she lay there, she planned over again how she would do this. Timing was everything.

Soon now, an aide would come to give her a sedative, something to keep her tractable, to keep her dazed and confused.

Only she'd not be taking it, not ever again.

Five minutes later, right on schedule, the door unlocked and she heard it shut behind the nurse who was on duty this afternoon. It was four o'clock.

"Time for your medicine, Lacey," the aide said cheerily, calling her by the false name she'd been registered under here.

She didn't blink. Or stir. Just lay there like a wooden doll.

The nurse came and bent over her, prepped her arm with an alcohol swab, and went to inject the needle.

Suddenly she surged from the bed, grabbed the startled nurse and shoved her down on the bed.

"What? Hey!" the nurse yelped.

She stuck the syringe into the nurse's arm, pressed the plunger down.

Once she was certain all the medication had been delivered, she tossed the syringe into the plastic waste bag the nurse had brought with her.

The medication started to take effect after a few moments, and she stretched the nurse out on the bed. The woman's eyes were closed, she obviously had no resistance to the sedative, which was pretty strong.

Quickly, the former patient stripped the nurse of her scrubs and shoes, luckily they were nearly the same size. After dressing in the stolen clothing, she put her gown on the nurse and drew the blanket over her.

She quickly left the room, using the key card she found clipped to a pocket to lock the door. She shouldn't be discovered for hours. Plenty of time to escape, if she were clever.

As she walked up the stairs, she tossed the plastic bag with the syringe in a wastebasket. One hand caressed a gold rose pendant, that she had had for years and never taken off. For some reason, the one who had captured her never could see it even when looking straight at it. Otherwise it would have been taken from her, as she had tried to take her identity.

She walked casually out the doors of the hospital and turned right, heading across the parking lot.

It was hard not to break into a run, hard not to scream for joy as the wind kissed her face. I am free! Free at last! And now, at long last, I can go home.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Rumplestiltskin had just locked a rare pair of magical red dancing shoes into a case and was getting ready to go home for the day. He had already dismissed Tom and was about to get his cane
and lock up when the bell tinkled over the door.

"Are you . . . Mr. Gold?"

He half turned, wondering who had come in at this hour. "Yes, I am, dearie, but I'm closed." He turned around, prepared to see some desperate young woman with an old heirloom or a man down on his luck willing to pawn his gold watch. Instead he saw . . . a dead person.

"Dearest God!" He rubbed his eyes. Was he seeing things? Going insane?

"It is you!" she exclaimed, smiling that old familiar smile. "Do you remember me, Rum?"

The sound of her voice made him shiver all over. It was a sound he thought never to hear again. He gripped his cane tightly and stared at her suspiciously. This could be a trap. A trick. Someone sent by Regina to see if he was vulnerable. He wouldn't put it past the bitch.

"You look like . . . someone I knew a long time ago. But . . . how can I be sure?"

"Then you remember me?" she probed, coming closer.

"If you are who I think you are. The woman I . . . would have married."

"Say my name."

"Not yet, dearie." He still looked her up and down, trying to see through the veil of illusion. This could not be. Or could it? "Where have you been all this time?"

"I was . . . locked up. In an asylum. Regina . . . did this to me. The queen . . . she swore that if she could not have her happy ending, than no one else shall. So she took me . . . and kept me her prisoner all these years."

He quivered with rage. "She lied! She told me you were dead. And so did Alice . . . do you remember Alice?"

"Of course! My best friend."

"Was she?"

"You don't believe me," she sounded hurt.

"Force of habit, dearie. How can you prove you are who you say, and not her pawn?" he asked, his voice sharp and hard.

"By this," she suddenly held out the rose pendant. "Remember this, Rum? The gift of a rose. You told me you were sorry for not trusting me."

He paled. Then he came forward to see the pendant. It was the same one. The very same one.

"What about the baby?" he asked suddenly.

"I sent her to you. With Alice. Did she . . . is she all right?"

Gold took her by the shoulders. Regina never knew about Alina. Not until much later, after the curse was set in motion. "One more question. What did you say to me the last time we spoke?"

"I said . . . I will love you always, Rumplestiltskin. Remember."
His heart skipped several beats. Then he crushed her to him, whispering in a hoarse voice, "Belle. Belle. It's you. You've returned to me." There were tears on his cheeks that he didn't remember crying.

She hugged him back, saying softly, "I remember everything, Rum. It's what kept me sane in that dark place. You . . . and our child. I knew she would be safe with you. She is, isn't she?"

"Always, my love." He couldn't believe she was really here, that he was holding her, touching her. For so long he had believed her dead, had torn out a part of his heart, and now he knew the truth, it was standing right before him. **Belle was alive.**

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her the way he had long ago, when she was his chatelaine and he was her supposedly beastly master. When she fell in love with him and he with her.

The kiss started out gentle and quickly grew into a passionate affirmation of the love they shared. It seared him like a bonfire, sweeping through him with unrestrained passion, awakening that part of him that he'd declared dead and buried with her long ago.

"I love you, Belle. And **nothing** will ever separate us again."

"I love you too," she whispered back, his kiss setting her on fire. It was everything she had dreamed . . . and more. "Let's go home, Rum. Wherever that is."

"Yes. Don't worry, dearie. I'll protect you," he assured her, putting an arm around her as he ushered her from the shop. No one was around. Inside he was singing, a song he had forgotten, a song of hope and joy, for his heart had returned to him, and he was whole once more . . . except for his magic. He couldn't wait to see the expression on Alina's face when he introduced her to her mother.
Chapter Summary

Rumple introduces Alina to her long lost mother and Emma also. Plus more of the mysterious stranger

Alina sat at the kitchen table, doing her English homework. She usually liked this subject, but that afternoon she found herself distracted and had barely finished her essay using all her vocabulary word for the week in it when she got up and went to wash her hands. As she was coming out of the bathroom down the hall, she heard the door open and her father call softly, "Alina, I'm home! And I have a surprise for you!"

He sounded unusually cheery, she thought and wondered what surprise he'd found for her. Sometimes people traded things at his shop and on occasion he would bring something home that he thought she'd like. Once it had been the old game Twister, and she and Henry had played it until they laughed themselves sick trying to bend their bodies like pretzels. "We have to play this with Emma!" Henry had said a few days ago. But they hadn't yet.

Emma had been too busy getting elected as sheriff, running against Regina's choice, Sydney Glass. She had just managed to win the election, backed by her silent partner, Mr. Gold. Now Regina was swamping her with paperwork, hoping she'd take the hint and quit. "Not my mom!" Henry had declared afterwards, and it made Alina wish she could have a mom to say that of.

She dried her hands on the golden towel hanging in the bathroom and came out into the kitchen. She found her father sitting at the kitchen table with a strange woman. Alina stared. Gold never brought home guests without telling Saylah, yet here he was with one now . . . and a lady to boot! And he was laughing with her like they were old friends. Alina knew her father was normally reserved around women, polite, but shy or businesslike. She'd only ever seen him act amused around Emma.


"Papa, who is she?" Alina couldn't believe her normally talkative father was floundering for words.

The woman in the chair wearing scrubs and sneakers looked at Alina as though she were a lost treasure now found. "Alina. Alina Rose," she whispered the little girl's name as if it were a benediction.

"That's my name, but who—" Alina began, thinking how odd it was for anyone except Henry to know her middle name. Why had her father told this woman that? Suddenly their eyes met, and Alina felt something . . . some strange kind of connection flash through her. Had she known this woman long ago?

Belle stood, her heart overwhelmed with love for the child standing before her . . . who had been a newborn baby when she had been forced to hide her away with Alice in a basket because Maurice wanted the baby exposed. Her little baby . . . had grown up into a beautiful girl.
"Alina . . . this is Belle," Gold tried again, now regaining his power of speech. "It's your mother, she's returned to us."

"But . . . you told me Mama died!" Alina gasped. "How . . . is she here?"

"I didn't die, Alina. Your father . . . he was told a lie. By his great enemy, Regina. Regina wanted me dead, but she couldn't kill me. She used me instead, keeping me prisoner in an asylum as her bargaining chip. For years, she kept me locked up, but I finally escaped and now I've come home at last." She reached out her arms tentatively.

Alina took two steps forwards and hugged her. And everything fell into place then. Belle's arms about her, holding her, the strange smell of lemon antiseptic, but most of all the warmth was what triggered the feeling of utter rightness. Her mother . . . who wasn't dead but captured. Her mother . . . was here, now, hugging her like there was no tomorrow. Her mother . . . who had been but a name and not even a memory . . . was crying into her hair and whispering, "My baby . . . my sweet little girl . . . look how big you are . . ." Alina feared this was a dream and she'd wake up any minute to her father calling her to dinner.

There were so many feelings swirling through her. Shock, confusion, but most of all happiness. Now she could be like almost every kid in America, with two parents, a father and a mother. Now they were complete. She breathed deeply of her mother's scent, a mixture of lemons and rosewater, listened to her heart beating . . . the first sound she had ever heard, she thought . . . or at least that was what her anatomy book said. Alina closed her eyes and listened . . . letting her mother's heartbeat fill her . . . and drive away the empty spaces in her soul. She couldn't remember . . . and yet . . . a part of her knew beyond knowing.

She lifted her head, met her mother's blue eyes and whispered, "It's like a miracle. I've got you back."

"Yes. And nothing will ever part us again," Belle said quickly.

"No, it won't," Rumplestiltskin assured them, then he stood up and hugged both of them, both of his beloved girls, and counted himself, for the first time, blessed.

They remained that way for a long time, just holding each other, until Saylah came into the kitchen from folding the laundry and saw them.

"Heavens, what's all this?" she began, then when she caught sight of Belle, she froze. "Oh! Oh my God! But it can't be . . . you were dead . . .!"

Belle looked up, gently disengaging herself from her husband and daughter. "Why, Alice! You've gotten older!"

"The curse affects her that way, Belle," Rum whispered softly. "And she doesn't remember you or who she really is."

Belle reached out and hugged her old friend, and when she did so something happened. Saylah shuddered, as if blown by a strong wind. There came a flash of light, like moonlight on a winter evening, and then Saylah changed . . . from a rather frumpy middle-aged woman into a younger woman, no older than Belle herself, with blond hair wearing a blue dress and an apron.

She hugged Belle back, laughing and crying. "Oh my God! You're alive! They told me you were dead! You're alive . . . and I'm me again!"

Mr. Gold stood stunned at this reunion. Somehow, Alice's curse had been broken. He couldn't
understand it, yet it had happened before his eyes. Belle, he thought dazedly. It must have been Belle. But she was no magician, and he knew Emma had not yet broken the curse. Then he shook his head. For once he wasn't going to overanalyze a situation. He would simply accept it. Belle was here . . . the love of his life was standing in the kitchen, holding her best friend restored to herself, and what the hell did it matter why it had happened? He had his family back, reunited, he thought, then felt a pang of regret sweep through him. All but one. His son. Ah, Baelfire, where are you? You should be here too, but I can't seem to find you.

Alina clutched his hand, and said, "Oh, Papa! Isn't it awesome? It's like Christmas and all my birthdays rolled into one. Just wait until I tell Henry!"

"Alina, we need to wait until Henry and Emma are here before we tell them anything," Gold cautioned. "Because we can't risk Regina finding out."

Alina nodded. Then her eyes flashed. "How could she do that, Papa? All those years . . . locking her up like . . . like some animal . . . and we both thought she was gone forever . . . what kind of twisted monster could do that?"

"A very dangerous one, dearie. Never forget that. For now, we must be careful, Alina. Very careful. Until I get my magic back."

"When will you? Is the curse broken?"

"No. I don't know why Alice remembers . . . unless it has something to do with Belle . . . she was never affected by the curse, but still . . . neither was Emma and she can't make people remember by touching them. It's a mystery, Alina. Forget about it for now, dearie. Your mother is home at last and we should celebrate."

"Yes!" Alina agreed. "So . . . can I invite Henry for dinner?"

Gold smiled down at her, his little girl looked a lot like Belle, except for the eyes. "Yes, but then we have to swear him to secrecy."

"That won't be hard. Henry knows when to keep his mouth shut," Alina said calmly. She fingered her pendant and thought about the wonderful new feeling flowing through her, this feeling of completeness. Then she hoped Henry wouldn't feel too bad, because while her wish had come true, he was still missing his father. But maybe someday . . . Henry would find him. Or he would find Henry. Anything was possible . . . especially now.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

There was something different about the Gold residence tonight, Henry thought as he came up the walk. Something in the air . . . a sparkle, a shine . . . like magic. Then again, two magicians did live here, he reminded himself, even if one of them didn't have his magic back. He looked up at the brick facing, the windows lined with salmon pink, an odd color for a rich widower, but Alina said the color reminded her father of a rose, of her mother. He knocked on the door, expecting Saylah to answer it as usual.

Instead Mr. Gold opened it. "Come in, Henry," he said, and his eyes were lit with an unusual merriment.

Henry stepped inside, thinking that maybe the Mills mansion was bigger than Gold's, but the Gold house felt more like a home. Maybe it was because of their housekeeper. Or because a real family lived here. He handed Gold his jacket, which the older man hung neatly in the coat closet.
"You're just in time for supper. But first, I would like you to meet someone."

"Who?"

"You'll see in a moment, lad. Before you do though, I need you to promise me to never tell about her to Regina."

"I won't. I don't tell Regina anything. I promise," Henry said swiftly. He wondered who Gold was protecting.

Gold led the way into the kitchen, where the family normally took meals. Henry saw a strange blond woman cutting bread at the counter and wondered if this was who he was supposed to keep secret. But then he saw the lovely dark-haired woman sitting beside Alina.

She was wearing a simple pair of jeans and a pink blouse with sneakers, her hair falling down in curls over her shoulders, but when she looked up at them, Henry recognized her from his book. His mouth fell open.

"Aren't you dead?" he blurted. Then he blushed. "Umm . . . sorry, I mean hello. I'm Henry, Alina's best friend."

Belle laughed. "I seem to be getting that reaction a lot lately." She took the boy's hand gently in hers. "It's nice to meet you, Henry. I'm Belle . . . Belle French, in this world. For now. Until Rum marries me."

"He's doing that on Friday. And you're coming to the wedding, right?" Alina asked. "You and Emma and Alice."

"Alice?" Henry asked, his eyes darting to the blond girl. "Wait . . . what happened to Saylah?"

"I am Saylah. Or rather, Saylah is me, Alice," said the blond woman.

"You've remembered! But how? Emma didn't break the curse yet."

"We don't know how that happened," Gold said. "But it did. Have a seat, Henry. Before it all gets cold."

Henry slid into his familiar place on Alina's other side. It looked like they were having crab cakes and fillet mignon tonight with green beans and garlic mashed potatoes. Yum! It was one of his favorites. He noticed the adults all had wine glasses tonight. Because it wasn't every day your wife came back from the dead. Or your housekeeper had her memory restored. Alina and he had glasses of soda, knowing Gold it was ginger ale.

"How'd it happen?" he nudged Alina under the table.

Alina grinned at him. "Tell you later."

Gold filled his, Belle's, and Alice's glasses with champagne, then lifted his and said, "To my wife and to Alice, who have returned to us. Welcome back, for all of time." He fairly glowed with love as he gazed at Belle.

They clinked glasses together and drank. Henry wished Emma were there too. He gazed at Belle, so happy and alive, her eyes shining in the lamplight, and wished that he could be that happy. He was glad for Alina, and for Gold too. They deserved this. Regina had stolen their happiness and now they had it back, the way it was meant to be.
Dessert was three layer chocolate cake, and hot cocoa for everyone. Henry had his with cinnamon and Alina with sprinkles, as usual. Henry didn't even have to ask, Alice just handed him the cinnamon shaker. He couldn't get over how different she looked, younger, prettier, but he could still see shades of Saylah around her mouth and eyes. Wouldn't Emma be surprised at the changes going on here?

"Let's play Scrabble," Alina suggested after they had all eaten the cake, which was delicious. Henry and Belle had seconds.

"I haven't played a good game of Scrabble in a long time," Belle said.

"Papa always beats us," Alina said. "He's too good with all the long words."

"Well, maybe tonight will be different," Belle said, smirking. "I'm really good with long words too, Rum."

"I remember," Gold laughed. "Sometimes we would sit there on cold evenings in my castle and challenge each other to word games with my dictionary. Spelling and definitions."

"Or books and authors," Belle told them. "He was the only one I knew who'd read as much as I had. If anyone had known what we did, they'd have thought us hopelessly boring. Or crazy."

"I think it's neat," Henry put in.

"Come on, let's get the game," Alina said, and Henry followed her to get the game out of the closet.

As they did so, Alina told Henry about how Belle had been captured by Regina and kept prisoner.

"I thought she was going to come into it somehow," Henry said angrily. "She ruins everybody's lives!"

"Especially yours," Alina said sympathetically.

Henry sighed. "I wish I didn't have to live with her."

"Maybe you could ask Emma to get custody of you," Alina suggested.

"I don't know if she can."

"Maybe Papa can help. He was a lawyer once."

Henry shrugged. "I won't hold my breath."

"You can't lose hope, Henry. Hope is love," Alina said, gazing at him earnestly.

"Yeah, I know." But maybe it was easier to hope when you had some dreams come true. "Umm . . . why are your parents getting married again?"

"Because before . . . well, they weren't officially married, in Fairy Tale Land you didn't have to be, but now Papa wants to make it legal."

"Oh. That way Regina can't pull anything and send your mom back to the nuthouse." He pulled the Scrabble box from the game closet and tucked it under his arm.

"With all the nuts and the squirrels," Alina sang, quoting a line from Annie, one of her favorite
movies.

Gold looked up as they entered the kitchen again. "You're quoting Annie again, dearie? How many times have we seen that movie?"

"I don't know," Alina said.

"Probably fifty," Henry said.

"We should have movie night some night. We can invite Emma and make popcorn," Alina said.

"She's a planner, this one," Gold said, and ruffled her hair. "Like you, Belle."

Belle smiled at their easy camaraderie. She still felt awkward around her daughter. She had missed out on so much of Alina's life. But she would just have to start making new memories. There was no use mourning the past. Today was a new day. "Would you like to play too, Alice?"

"No, you'd all clobber me," Alice chuckled. "I'm going to put my feet up with a cup of coffee and read. Haven't done that for a while."

Henry set up the board and they all sat down to play in earnest.

Half-an-hour went by and Gold and Belle were tied. "Beat this. Onomatopoeia. Triple Word Score, double points on the M," Gold said, smirking.

"You used my tile. Sneaky, Rum!" Belle lamented, putting her tongue between her teeth and thinking hard. Then she pulled another tile from the bag and spelled, "Xenophobic. Double Word Score. Got you!"

Then Henry spelled, "Creature."

And Alina spelled, "Circumnavigation."

"My God! She's killing us!" Gold said in mock-horror. "I can't let a fourth-grader beat me. She'll ruin my reputation." Then he began laying down tiles rapidly. "Zelophobia. Quadruple Word Score and Double Letter on the Z."

"What's that mean?" asked Henry.

"Is that even a word, Papa?" Alina asked suspiciously.

"It certainly is. You think I'd cheat?" Gold half-growled.

"What's it mean?" Alina challenged.

"It's a fear of jealousy," Belle answered.

"Exactly," Gold said smugly.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" Alice called from the den, where she could hear everything. "It's like playing with twin dictionaries."

The children laughed.

"We're never gonna win," Alina said.
"Who cares? It's fun," Henry said. He had never had such fun playing games with Regina. If she couldn't win, she turned nasty.

He was having so much fun that he didn't want the night to end. But at eight o'clock, Belle finally won the game and Gold said, "Better put it away, Alina. I need to take Henry home."

As Alina began putting the tiles away in the bag, Henry turned to Belle and said, "That was great. We'll have to get Emma to play with us sometime. If you don't mind, that is."

"Of course not. I would like to meet your mom, Henry."

"Umm . . . okay. And . . . umm . . . I'm sorry about Regina . . ." he looked down at his sneakers awkwardly. He didn't know what else to say to a woman who'd had her whole life stolen from her.

Belle put her hands on his shoulders. "Henry, you have nothing to be sorry for. Regina does whatever she can get away with. You're not to blame for her actions, even if you are her adopted son. Understand?"

"Then you don't . . .?"

"Resent you? Never!" Belle said firmly. "Regina was evil as the day is long way before you came into the picture, kid. She hasn't changed, more's the pity. But you are always welcome here. Right, Rum?"

"Yes. I thought you knew that," Gold said, sounding surprised.

"I did, but I thought . . . never mind. We'd better get home."

"Before Regina puts out a search warrant," Gold said.

"I'll see you on Friday, Alina! Goodbye!" Henry waved to Belle and Alina, then got on his jacket and followed Gold to his car.

Henry was silent as they drove up to the Mills mansion. Gold seemed to sense the little boy was bothered by something, because as he parked in the driveway, he said, "If this were a different time and place, Henry, you wouldn't have to come back here. You'd live with me. Master and apprentice, you know."

"Emma too?"

"Yes, if she wished. Unfortunately . . . right now Regina has the upper hand. So we have to wait."

"Do you think the curse can be broken, Mr. Gold?"

"You're not losing faith now, are you? I know it can. Emma just has to come into her own magic. Don't lose hope, Henry. If Belle can return to me, then Regina can be beaten at her own game. Trust me."

Henry nodded. He was being foolish. He just wished everything could happen now. He wished he didn't have to get out of the car. He'd happily sleep on Gold's couch, or even in the garage, instead of having to deal with Regina. *Love is hope.* Alina's words echoed in his head. Yet his heart still ached for a father without a name.

On impulse, he did something he never had before. He hugged Gold goodbye.

Rumplestiltskin was startled. But only at first. Then he hugged Henry back. He hated sending the
boy off like this, back into the lion's den, with that cold-hearted bitch. But he had no choice. Not yet.

For a moment, Henry allowed himself to pretend he was being held by his long-lost father. The arms around him were strong and they would protect him. He could smell some type of spicy aftershave and it comforted him.

Then, in a blink, he recalled where he was, and it was over. "Good night, sir." He said, pulling away.

"Henry . . . you can call me Rum, if you'd like," Gold said quietly. "Good night."

He watched as the boy got out of the car and trudged up the walk to the stark white house. *Someday, Regina, there will be a reckoning for the lives you have ruined through your mad quest for power, your need to hurt. I will see to it. And that poor boy will finally be free of you.*

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It had taken longer than he thought it would for the shop to repair his bike, thought the tall man as he reclined on a bed in a Ramada Inn in New Jersey. Luckily this hotel had cable TV and a decent number of channels. He'd stopped here to get some gas and rest, knowing he was closer to his destination with every hour.

Wherever that was. He closed his eyes and wondered how in hell he could just pack up and leave. His job, his life was back in Phoenix, at the dojo. But he couldn't deny the terrible tug he felt. It gave him no rest, no peace. And he had to go on . . . until he reached wherever it was calling him from.

Then again, what did he really have back in Phoenix? Besides being the owner of his own martial arts studio, he didn't really have anyone to come home to. He'd been careful to maintain a professional relationship with his students, even those women who had candidly asked him out. And there had been more than a few, over the years. But he had only let his guard down with one. Her name was Emma Swan.

He smiled. Emma . . . he hadn't allowed himself to think about her in years. His wild swan . . . beautiful and free and somehow always in trouble. Was that who was calling him? He'd thought it over between them years ago. But maybe he'd been wrong. It had happened before. Maybe there was a second chance, a second chance to be happy, to fall in love again. He would wait and see.
Finally Mr. Gold and Belle tie the knot!

Emma was about to head over to Granny's diner for some coffee and some scrambled eggs, toast, and hash browns, when the walkie talkie she always carried in her purse beeped just as she was heading out the door. "What's up, Henry?"

"Emma, you gotta come over Mr. Gold's house after work today," her son said excitedly. "There's something I have to show you."

Emma unlocked her Bug and climbed in, shutting the door before she said, "Henry, does Mr. Gold know you're inviting people over his house?"

"He said to call you, well, Alina told me to, but he won't care, Emma. Just come over, around supper time."

"Henry! Now you're inviting me to supper at someone else's house?"

"It's okay, Emma! Trust me. Rum said I could come over anytime and I'm having supper there tonight and you have to come too," Henry insisted.

"Why? And did Mr. Gold say you could call him that?"

"Uh huh. Last night. And it's a surprise, so I can't tell you why."

Emma groaned. "All right. I'll be there. I just hope Gold knows about you two plotting behind his back."

"Emma, he like knows everything. And he's fine with it. Okay, gotta go, Regina's calling me for breakfast. Love you, bye!"

"Bye!" Emma said, then turned off the walkie talkie as it had begun to crackle with static. What on earth had Henry and Alina cooked up this time? Then she turned the car over and headed to Granny's, wondering if she ought to bring dessert tonight.

Alina woke to the smell of pancakes and jumped out of bed, shoving her feet into her fuzzy slippers and sliding down the banister. It was early, only six thirty, but she was wide awake and eager to start the day, now that her mother was home. Maybe she was in the kitchen, making breakfast with Alice?

As she walked across the foyer to the kitchen, she heard voices coming from it. One was her father's and the other she recognized as Belle's.

"Now you count three minutes and wait till there's bubbles and then you flip it," Gold was saying. "Like this."

Alina peered around the doorjam and saw her father and mother by the stove. Gold had his back to
her, he was wearing his usual pair of sweats and a T-shirt and black socks, and he had his arm around Belle and was showing her how to make pancakes.

Belle had on one of his sweatshirts, it was like a nightgown on her, and came down to past her knees and her feet were bare. She had her face turned towards him, smiling.

There was a bowl of pancake batter on the counter with a spoon in it, but neither of them was making anymore pancakes.

"You've become quite the chef since I've been gone," Belle said, giggling.

"I had to do something while you were gone, sweetheart," Gold answered, brushing some of her dark hair off her face.

"Inbetween running your pawnshop and raising our daughter," she teased. "You've always been a man of many talents, Rum."

He shrugged, embarrassed. "I try my best."

Suddenly he put down the spatula he'd been holding and pulled Belle to him and kissed her.

Her arms came around him and it was as though they melted into one another, kissing him back with all of the passion she had stored up since being trapped in the asylum.

Alina started giggling then as she walked into the kitchen.

Gold drew away, reluctantly, now that he had an audience, and looked over at his daughter. "What are you laughing at, miss?"

"Nothing. It's just . . . you know how many times I used to dream about this? That I'd wake up and Mama would be here with us? Every night when I was small, Papa. And now it's happened."

Belle smiled at her. "It's like a dream come true for us too, Alina."

"Is it a dream that I smell something burning?" asked Alice, coming into the kitchen from her small suite at the opposite end.

"Oh, damn! Rum, we forgot the pancake!" Belle cried in dismay, surveying the blackened disk.

He tossed the burnt pancake into the trash can. "I got a little distracted. Sorry."

Alice rolled her eyes. "Kissing in my kitchen! Honestly, you two! You act like you were seventeen."

"We're in love and we've been separated for God knows how many years," Belle protested. "So sue me."

"That's his job. He's the lawyer," Alice pointed out. "Now you two lovebirds move over and let me cook, before you burn down my kitchen."

Gold raised an eyebrow at his housekeeper. "Your kitchen, Alice?"

"Yes, Mr. G. Mine. You just live here," Alice returned. "Now scram!"

Gold shook his head, and muttered, "Now she's giving me orders? Who writes the paychecks here?"
"Same old Alice," Belle grinned. "Let's have some coffee, Rum." She slipped from his arms and went over to the counter and began to pour herself some from the Farberware percolator.

"Can I have some, Mama?" asked Alina.

"Half," her father said softly.

So Belle poured her half a cup and added plenty of half-and-half to it. "Here you go, dear."

Alina took it and stirred in two Splendas from the sugar dispenser, which contained that and regular sugar packets. Then she went to sit in her usual spot to the left of her father, cradling her mug in her hands. "Just wait till you meet Emma, Mama! She has magic lessons like Henry and I do with Papa. And I told Henry to call her tonight and invite her over for dinner."

Gold set down his own mug of coffee and stared at his daughter. "And when were you planning to tell me this? When she rang the doorbell?"

"Umm . . . I'm telling you now, Papa," Alina said innocently. "Besides, you don't care, right? Henry wants Emma to meet Mama."

Gold shook his head. "All of a sudden I feel like my world's been turned upside down. My housekeeper gives me orders and my daughter makes plans behind my back." Then he took Belle's hand and gave her a smile. "But what do I care, so long as you're here, dearie?"

"Hopeless, the two of you!" Alice snorted, and began pouring pancake batter onto the hot griddle again.

"Oh, quit pouting, Alice!" Belle ordered. "If we could find out where your husband is, you'd be singing a different tune."

"Humph! That's a big if, Belle. And once you did, who's to say I wouldn't brain him over the head with my skillet for never coming back to me?" Alice asked, stirring the batter.

"Maybe there's an explanation," Gold began.

"Oh, I'm sure there is, Mr. G. There always was. Thing is, will I fall for it?"

"Do you think he's under the curse too?" Alina asked.

"Probably, if he's here," Gold nodded.

"Maybe Henry and I could find him for you, Alice."

"Alina, you and Henry better quit playing detectives and worry about school," Gold said.

Alina groaned. "You're such a killjoy, Papa. I'll ask Henry if I can look at his book again . . . at recess today."

"Don't worry about him, Alina. I've lived half my life without him, a few more weeks won't make a difference," said Alice. "Do you want ham or bacon this morning?"

"Bacon!" the three chorused, making Alice roll her eyes.

Emma showed up at the Gold residence at five thirty, carrying a white bakery box in her hands.
She rang the doorbell.

Within five seconds the door was opened by Alina, dressed in a pair of blue pants and a blue T-shirt with a unicorn on it. "Papa, she's here!" Alina called. "Come in, Emma. We're having appetizers in the dining room."

"Appetizers?" Emma repeated. "Who else is here? Besides Henry?"

"You'll see. What's in the box?"

"A cherry pie from Granny's," Emma answered.

"I'll give it to Alice. Henry told you she's got her memory back, right? And her real name's Alice?"

"From Wonderland?" Emma said.

"Yup. She went there as a little girl and came back. And she really was my mom's best friend. Anyway, go on into the dining room," Alina said, and she took the box from Emma and ran into the kitchen with it.

Emma continued on into the dining room, a bit nervously, wondering who else could be here. The White Rabbit? Humpty Dumpty? She wouldn't put it past Gold, the sneaky conjurer.

She walked in to see Henry sitting across from a woman who looked to be around her age or a little older, with dark hair that fell past her shoulders and gorgeous blue eyes and a face that a model would envy. She was wearing jeans and a Def Leppard T-shirt with a man's red plaid shirt over it and white sneakers. Okay . . . there's a strange woman here wearing . . . Gold's clothes? Does he have a secret girlfriend or something?

Just then Gold himself walked into the room from the kitchen, a pleased smile lighting his face. "Ah, Emma! There you are. I'd like you to meet Belle French, my . . . betrothed."

"And my mom," Alina added.

"Your mom? But she's dead!" Emma blurted, looking totally flummoxed. "Gold, you told me she died."

"He thought I was dead," Belle said quickly. "But that was a lie, told to him by my kidnapper, Regina. You know her as Regina Mills."

"Regina . . . kidnapped you?" Emma repeated, shocked.

"She had me put in a psychiatric institute," Belle explained. "For . . . as long as there's been a curse and Storybrooke has been here, about, what is it, Rum—twenty-seven years?"

"Twenty-eight," Gold corrected.

"Oh my God. It's like Jaycee Dugard," Emma murmured. "You know, the little girl who was kidnapped when she was eight or so and was trapped with her creepy psycho kidnapper for like twenty years. How did you find her, Gold?"

"I didn't. She escaped and found me," Gold said softly. "No one else knows she's here except you and Henry, Alice, and Alina. If Regina ever knew . . ."

"I ought to arrest her ass!" Emma said fiercely. "She's committed a crime. Gold, you could prosecute her for it."
"Emma, right now I'm only concerned about keeping Belle safe. I'll deal with Regina later, when the curse is broken," Gold said. "Now why don't you sit down and have some potato and cheese puff and bagel dogs?" He gestured to the platters on the table filled with appetizers.

Emma sat down next to Henry, then said to Belle, "How did you ever manage to . . . not go crazy locked up like that?"

"It wasn't easy, believe me. They kept giving me drugs . . . Ativan and Zoloft and some other ones for depression. After awhile I was like in a fog most of the time and so sleepy I could hardly remember my name. But . . . this is going to sound nuts . . . well, maybe not after some of the things you've heard about us . . . but whenever I touched my rose pendant here," she paused to show Emma the beautiful golden rose pendant about her neck. "This was a gift from Rum before we were cursed, when we first fell in love . . . whenever I touched it, I remembered who I was and what had happened."

"Is it magic?" asked Henry.

"Yes, but not of my making," Rum said. "I received it from an old woman in the town below my castle. I think she may have been an enchantress."

"In any case, once I remembered, I started to try and wean myself off the drugs they were giving me. It took years to do that, since I couldn't always refuse them and some of them were very addictive after you've been taking them for so long," Belle explained.

"But didn't Regina try and take your necklace?" Henry asked.

"She would have . . . but she couldn't see it for some reason," Belle told him. "I think I was the only one who could in that place. In any case, after a long time I was finally free of the drugs and began to plan my escape from that . . . hellhole. I had listened to all the conversations I could between the nurses and orderlies and learned where I was and an approximate layout of the town. Then, when I had a chance, I drugged the nurse on duty who came to give me a sedative, stole her scrubs and shoes, and ran like hell over to Rum's shop. You should have seen his face when he first saw me . . . he almost passed out right there."

"I thought I was seeing a ghost," Gold said. "Until I started asking her a few questions. Ones that no one else would know the answers to. Then I knew she was real and I took her home."

"Where I've been ever since," Belle said.

"And they're getting married on Friday, in two days," Alina announced. "Mama, we need to shop for a dress. And you can't keep wearing Papa's clothes."

"Alina, I really don't have anything else to wear," Belle began.

"And she can't go out either. If Regina spots her . . ." Gold said.

"Wait a minute. She can go out . . . with me," Emma put in. "I'll get a wig or something for her to wear and we can go shop at the boutique in Apple Ridge, the next town over from here. You can leave Storybrooke, right, Belle?"

"I don't know, I've never tried."

"She can, Emma. Since she wasn't part of the original curse, she's like you and me," Henry stated confidently.
"And I've got an Ariel wig in my closet," Alina said.

"Good. We can go shopping tomorrow. Gold, where's your credit card?" Emma asked.

Gold reached into his pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. "Here, Belle. Use my Platinum Plus Master Card. Buy whatever you like, it has a limit of about a million five on it."

Emma nearly fell over. "Dollars?"

"No, dearie, pesos," Gold smirked. "Of course dollars, Swan. You know what I used to do for a living. Money is no object, not when it comes to my darling wife. Well, she will be my wife on Friday."

"You're invited to the wedding, of course. Along with Henry," said Belle happily.

"Thanks. That's really sweet of you. Now I have to get a dress," Emma said.

"So do I," Alina said.

"Just put it on my card," Gold said.

"I couldn't do that," Emma protested.

"Do it, Emma. It's only money," her teacher stated.

"Only someone as rich as you would say that," Emma murmured. "Thanks, Gold."

"Not a problem."

Emma supposed anyone who had over a million dollar limit on his credit line wouldn't care about the hundred dollars or so she planned on spending on a dress. "It's settled then. I'll pick you up around . . . nine o'clock in the morning?"

"That's fine. Thank you, Emma."

"I wish I could stay home from school and go with you," Alina said wistfully. "You could call and say I'm sick with tonsillitis, Papa."

"Absolutely not," Gold said firmly. "If you're absent from school and so is Emma, Regina might get suspicious."

"Aww . . . but how can I pick out a dress if I'm not with them?" Alina pouted.

"I can pick one for you, sweetie," Belle said. "It'll be a surprise then . . . sort of like a birthday present."

Alina smiled happily. "Okay, Mama. Can you try and pick something with lavender in it? Purple's one of my favorite colors."

"Along with pink and blue," Henry said, eating a bagel dog.

"How do you know that?" Emma asked curiously.

"She's my best friend. Why wouldn't I know that?" her son asked.

Why not indeed? Emma wondered, having never had a best friend growing up. The foster care
system had moved her around too much for to make one. She picked up a potato puff and ate it, thinking that tomorrow should be fun. She hadn't had the occasion to shop for clothes in a long time, especially with another woman. Especially not using a credit card with an unholy amount of money on it. She grinned at Belle. "We're going to have a blast tomorrow. Gold, I hope you don't keel over when you get the bill."

"Emma, buy whatever you want. If you max that one out, call me and I'll transfer more money to you."

Emma's jaw nearly hit the table. "Is he for real?"

Gold just rolled his eyes. "It's just money, Emma. And nothing matters more to me than Belle."

"Now do you see why I love him?" Belle asked, laughing.

"Oh yeah, and I think I love him too!" Emma said, laughing as well.

"Have fun, girls," Gold said, then he helped himself to a bagel dog.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

Belle was ready at nine o'clock sharp, wearing her stolen scrubs because they fit better than Rum's shirts, though she didn't mind wearing them to bed at all. Besides, she didn't have them on for very long, not once Rumple came to bed. She found that he was as ardent a lover as always, and she craved his touch like a dying plant craved water.

She had asked Alice if she wanted to go with them, but Alice shook her head. "No, I'm not sure if I can, with the curse still active. Besides, someone has to be here when Alina gets home. So you and Emma go and have a good time, Belle. Spend some of Mr. G's money, it'll make him happy."

"Usually that's when a husband gets upset," Belle remarked.

"Rum's not your average husband," Alice said.

"You can say that again!" her friend agreed.

Emma and Belle spent all the next day in a shopping frenzy. They bought almost everything they saw that Belle liked. Packages piled up in the Bug until Emma could barely see out the rear view window. Her trunk was full of clothes and shoes and cosmetics and her own dress, which Belle had to talk her into buying, it cost more than she made in a month. There was also a beautiful dress for Alina, of a sheer lavender with deep blue trim and shoes to match. Emma had shoes too and Belle bought her a beautiful silver swan pendant as well.

"You crazy?" Emma said. "I just spent almost seven hundred dollars here and that costs a hundred dollars, Belle."

Belle waved the Master Card in her face. "It's only money, Emma, as Rum says. Now put it on the counter. What are for friends for?"

"I'll be your friend," said the sales clerk, grinning, and swiping the Master Card.

They went out to lunch in a place called Cal's Seafood Place, and ate the lobster plate, with all the sides and an appetizer of hush puppies and stuffed shrimp. They even had the Chocolate Temptation Brownie Delight afterwards.
"Oh, God! I hope I can still fit in my dress!" Emma groaned.

"You're fine. You can stand to put on a pound or two," Belle said, licking the fork.

She took the bill without batting an eye and tucked the Master Card into the waitress's leather card holder, making sure to tip her generously.

"Do I want to know how much this cost?" asked Emma.

"No. Just ignore the dollar signs next to the food," Belle smirked. "We're not even halfway to his credit limit, Emma."

"I haven't had this much fun in I don't know how long."

"Me too. This sure beats being stuck in a tiny room being visited by men in white coats."

"I'll bet. You're going to knock Rum's socks off with that wedding dress," Emma predicted.

"And a few other things too, dearie," Belle chuckled wickedly.

Emma laughed so hard she almost had Coke up her nose. "Belle! You wicked wench!"

"What? I've have twenty-eight years of deprivation to make up for, Emma. And I'm going to make every day count, girlfriend."

"You really love him, don't you?"

"You need to ask? Emma, only the thought of him and Alina kept me sane in that place. I've always loved him, even when he was an impossible beast and threw me out of his castle. Oh I was angry at him, don't think I wasn't, but in a way I understood why he did it. He thought he was unlovable, unworthy of me. So he pushed me away. He was scared... scared of loving me like that. His first wife left him, you see, ran off with another man, and left him to raise his son alone. That really crushes your self-esteem."

"Whatever happened to his son?"

"I don't know. He doesn't really talk about it. Perhaps he died or something."

"And the fact that he has magic... that your daughter does... and I do... doesn't bother you?" Emma asked.

Belle shook her head. "No. You forget, magic isn't the impossible concept it is here. It's an everyday thing where I come from. Even if I don't have it, I understand it. And the magic... it's a part of him. I can't have one without the other. Seeing him like this... magicless... it hurts, Emma. It's as if he's only half there. I know he misses it too, even if he won't say it. It's kind of like a soldier with one leg. And the fact that Alina inherited his gift, I'm happy for her. She looks so much like me, physically, I'm glad that she has some of his talents in her too."

"You're amazing, Belle."

"No. I'm just a princess with an extraordinary capacity to love an extraordinary man. He was the first man I ever knew that loved me... just Belle Beauchamp... and not my title or my position. Do you know how rare that is for someone like I was? Rarer than a black diamond. And he was so hurt by Milah, she tore him into shreds, left him easy prey for that bloody dagger's curse."

"But you saw past all that," Emma said.
"Yes. I've always been what my father calls perceptive. He was a monster of his own making. And by loving him, I freed him from his prison. As he freed me from mine."

"Are you ever going to contact your father?"

"Someday, perhaps when the curse is broken. But that's difficult. I can forgive him for what he did to me . . . but forgiving him for trying to hurt Alina . . . that's much harder. And Rum hates him for that . . . I don't know if he'll ever get over that."

Emma sighed. "I'm a fine one to talk. I haven't seen Henry's father in years, since before he was born."

"Ah. A bad break up?"

"Something like that. I've thought about contacting him . . . if I can ever find him. Maybe I ought to do a search on the Web."

"The Web?"

"Computer internet," Emma said. "I'll have to show you what I mean. Technology is sort of like this world's version of magic."

"Did you love him then?" Belle queried softly.

"Once. A long time ago."

"What the heart loves once, it can love again," Belle said softly. "If anyone knows that, I do."

Emma smiled. "You're such a romantic, Belle."

"And proud of it. Come on, we have some more shopping to do."

They collected their purses and left.

"Are they movie stars or something?" wondered their waitress, gazing after them. "They tipped me thirty-five percent, I was going to say something, but then I figured what the hell?"

"I don't know. They sure don't dress rich. But who knows?" shrugged her boss.

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Gold arrived home to find Belle and Alina painting each other's nails, and Belle was wearing a lovely dress in a peach shade that set off her hair to perfection. Her hair was just the way he liked it, pulled up on the sides and left to tumble down her back in chestnut waves. Then he could plunge his fingers into it and run them through it, stroking the silken richness. He loved playing with her hair, it excited him to no end, then again he'd always liked playing with string and thread and hair was just living thread when it came right down to it.

"How's my two favorite girls? Did you have a good time shopping with Emma, Belle?"

"The best, Rum," Belle and rose to kiss him.

"Good. That's what I want to hear," he said, kissing her back, a gentle prelude for later, when they were alone. "You look gorgeous, sweetheart," he said, eyeing her dress appreciatively.

Belle spun around, laughing like a little girl. "I'm glad you like it. I picked it out knowing you
might."

"Dearie, I like you in anything you have on," Gold grinned. Then he whispered, "But especially when you have nothing on but your hair, love."

"Rumplestiltskin!" Belle mock-scolded. "You're a rogue."

"Guilty as charged," he smirked. "But I've heard a rumor that you like rogues, my sweet Belle."

"You know I do, you wicked man!" she smiled up at him. Then she gave him a playful swat on the behind. "Behave, Rum."

"I am behaving," he said, then he grabbed her hand before she could swat him again and turned it over, kissing her palm. "See, a perfect gentleman."

"Oh, you!" Belle snorted, then she started laughing and Rum joined her.

Alina watched their teasing and smiled. She rarely heard her father laugh, until her mother had returned. And it was a beautiful sound, especially when accompanied by her mother's, whom she'd never expected to hear ever.

"Papa, what do you think of this nail polish?" she asked, holding out a hand for him to see.

"It's beautiful, sweetie."

"It matches my new dress. I can't wait till Friday."

"Alina, neither can I," Gold said sincerely.

"Wait till you see the dress Emma picked out for Mama. She said it'll knock you out on the floor."

Gold chuckled. "I can't wait."

Alina's comment was an understatement, Rum thought as he watched Belle come down the aisle of the courthouse towards him. She wore an ivory gown with seed pearls and lace at the collar, one that flared out to a soft cotton skirt that showed tantalizing glimpses of her ankles, which were encased in matching satin pumps with glittering crushed diamond dust on them. The gown was not a traditional bridal gown, but it was an elegant creation that showed off Belle's curves and body to the fullest, without being cheap or trashy.

His breath caught . . . and he wasn't sure if he'd ever get it back. Or even if he wanted to. He was wearing a very expensive Armani suit and tie, white jacket over charcoal gray pants and spit polished black Gucci loafers. There was a red rose in his button hole and he was hardly leaning on his cane at all.

He held out a hand as she promenaded to him and when she took it, it was like he was touching her for the first time all over again . . . only this time he was not the beast of the dagger's curse, but just Rumplestiltskin, and this time he would have her forever.

Behind him were Alina, in her pretty lavender dress with matching nail polish, and Henry in a smart navy blue suit and tie, and Emma in an aqua dress that flattered her very nicely. Alice was there as well, in a pretty navy silk pantsuit with heels that made her look sweet and seductive at the same time.
God, Gold, you have a harem here . . . if you wanted it, a wicked part of his mind whispered. Then he shrugged and focused on the only woman that had ever mattered to him, in this world or any other. And everyone else faded away, as he clasped her hand in his and turned to face the justice of the peace.

The ceremony was short and sweet, just what Gold wanted, for he had spoken vows to Belle in the silence of his heart long before, and this was a mere legality. But at last it was done, and Alice, Emma, and Henry cheered and clapped and threw paper confetti and Jordan almonds over them as they came down the courthouse steps.

"Ow!" Gold hissed.

"What happened, love?" asked Belle, shaking her head to free it of some confetti.

"I just got hit in the head with an almond. I think Alice threw it on purpose," he said, half-grumbling.

"For luck," Belle chuckled.

"Braining your employer with a nut is good luck?" Rum repeated. "For what? Finding new employment?"

"Maybe it was an accident."

"Right," he snorted. But he was in too good of a mood to be bothered by the antics of his crazy housekeeper.

Luckily it was early in the morning, so no one was around but the happy couple and their friends. They all hopped in Gold's Cadillac and returned to the house for some brunch and champagne.

As they were eating the excellent buffet Alice had prepared earlier, Emma announced, "Alina, are you ready to come over to Mary Margaret's apartment with me and have a girls' weekend?"

Alina jumped up and down. "Yes, Emma! And we can watch all seven Harry Potter movies, like a marathon, and eat popcorn and drink Sprite and stay up till twelve."

"Okay," Emma said, blinking.

"She'll plan your life in sixty seconds if you don't watch her, Emma," Gold smiled.

"I wonder where she gets that from, Rum?" Belle asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Are you suggesting I plan everything out, dearie?"

"Most things."

"He's OCD," Alice said, snickering.

Gold shot her a mock-glare. "I think I liked you better before you got your memory back."

"Tough luck. You're stuck with me now," Alice said. Then she clinked a champagne glass to his and said, "Seriously, congratulations. I don't know of a couple who belongs together more than you."

"I'll drink to that," Emma said, then did.
"You really don't have to take Alina for the weekend," Gold said.

"Nonsense. You deserve a wedding present, and this was the best I could come up with. Since I don't have a Platinum Plus Master Card of my own," Emma grinned.

"Thank you," Gold said. "The best gifts are those money can't buy."

"Well, enjoy it," Emma said, winking.

"We will," Belle said, and the look she gave her husband was full of promises she meant to keep when they were finally alone.

"Henry, want to come to the Harry Potter marathon?" Alina invited. "It's not really just for girls."

"I wish I could. But Regina's been complaining I'm never home, and I don't really want to tick her off. Not now. So I'm going to have to stay there this weekend."

"Poor you!"

"It'll be okay. I have some new books to read and maybe I can tell Sydney to call her up and take her out for a bit," Henry said. He also, though he didn't say it, wanted to practice his magic when he was alone, and try the summoning spell for his father again, since the first one hadn't worked.

Then he went to get some more bacon-wrapped scallops and egg rolls and drink some more fruit punch, thankful that at least he got a day off from school, as Mary Margaret knew why he was absent and wouldn't ever tell Regina he wasn't there.

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Somewhere in a hotel in Vermont:

The former martial arts instructor sneezed into a tissue and lay back down on the bed of the Comfort Inn, and cursed the shifting cold weather as the reason he'd come down with this terrible cold. It was always warm in Phoenix, warmer than here anyway, and he hardly ever got sick there.

But now he was sneezing and sniffling and coughing so bad he could hardly ride his bike and the cold medicine he'd gulped down with his morning coffee made him drowsy as hell. He needed to rest for a few days, get rid of this blasted cold or whatever it was, then he'd follow the nagging urging that tugged him towards the north.

He hoped that whatever his destination was, it was warmer than here, and they had coffee laced with a shot of Irish whiskey if it wasn't. It was March, and the cold sent spikes through his bones, used to the southern heat of the desert. God, Emma, if it's you calling me, I'm going to have a few things to say to you, dragging me all this way and making me freeze my ass off! Then he sneezed again, and blew his nose on the tissue before closing his eyes and drifting in a Comtrex-induced haze to sleep.
Rumple and Belle celebrate their wedding night, Alina has fun with Emma and Snow, and the mysterious man on the black Harley comes at last to the end of his journey.

After Emma had gone home with Alina, and so had Henry, Alice helped Belle and Gold put away the food that was leftover, then said with a saucy wink, "I'm going to vegetate in front of my flat screen TV and watch sappy movies all night in my apartment. So you two just go and enjoy yourselves, lovebirds!"

Belle blushed rose. "Alice, really!"

"Belle, really! Do you think I don't know whose bed you're sleeping in after a few days in this house?" she chuckled wickedly. "Remember, I make the beds around here."

"Go watch TV, Alice," Gold ordered, laughing.

Alice smirked. "Sure thing, Mr. G. I'll just watch TV all by my little old lonesome self. Now, what should I watch? There's *Return to Me* and *Pretty Woman* and *Beauty and the Beast* . . ."

"Ah ha!" Gold cried. "I knew it! You're a closet romantic!"

Alice glanced back at him, looking a little sheepish. "I've always been. Or didn't Belle tell you that?"

"We were busy, dearie. Discussing . . . other things," Gold chuckled.

"I just bet you were, lover boy! Now go on, carry her up those stairs, Mr. G, like Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind!*" Alice urged, giggling.

"Don't mind if I do, sugah," Gold crooned in his best imitation of a Southern gentleman. Then he scooped Belle up in his arms.

"Rum! Don't, you'll hurt yourself!" she gasped.

Gold hesitated, until Alice shouted, "Ignore her, Mr. G. Just keep going! You're the groom, she's the bride, now go!"

"Alice, you're fired!" Belle cried, as Rumplestiltskin began to climb the stairs with her in his arms. But she was laughing, gazing into her beloved's eyes, her arms around his neck.

He smiled down at her, that special smile meant only for her, and whispered, "Don't worry, sweetheart. I won't drop you. You're featherlight, my beloved Belle."

"I'm not worried about that, I don't want you to injure yourself . . ."

"I won't. I'm really not that much of a cripple, you know."

"Oh, Rum! I know that. And I love you . . . more than I've ever dreamed possible. You are my
"heart and I will never ever let you go."

He continued on to the top of the stairs, and then he said, "As you are mine, Belle. You are my other half, the light in my darkness, and for you I will change the world and make myself anew."

She cupped his cheek in her hand as he walked down the hall to the bedroom. "Rumple . . . you don't need to change for me . . . I love you just the way you are. . ."

"Even with my magic?" he queried softly.

"Your magic is part of you . . . and if I asked you to give that up, Rum, you'd not be yourself. When I fell in love with you, you were cursed, and it was that I feared, never you. It was Regina who wanted you vulnerable and weak, never me. I wanted the curse broken because I loved you, not because I was afraid of your magic."

"You know that magic is a force, that it's the user who determines its good or evil?" Gold asked softly.

"I know," she smiled at him trustingly.

"I'll never use my magic for evil again, Belle. I know better now. The Beast is gone for good, my beauty. Now there's only me, Rumplestiltskin, sorcerer. Or I will be once the curse breaks."

"And I love you, Rumplestiltskin Gold, for everything you are and ever will be, whether in this world or any other." Their lips met, reaffirming what she had told him long ago, that she would love him always.

And as always, he felt reborn when she kissed him, for she brought out the best in him, and for that he loved her best of all.

He practically kicked down the door of their bedroom, carried her over the threshold, and gently placed her on the bed. Then he shut the door and turned back to her. *Take that, Rhett Butler!* "Let me help you take off that dress, sweetheart."

She rose and turned about. "Be my guest, darling."

His hands undid the buttons deftly and then he pulled it over her head and draped it over a chair. In just her underclothes, Belle came to him and said, half-purring, "My turn." Her hands tugged off his jacket, then undid his tie. Then her fingers were on his shirt buttons, which undid themselves like magic. As she slipped it off, she stroked his chest and sighed. "You are so beautiful, Rum. And every night I was stuck in that damn room, I dreamed of you this way."

"You were in my dreams too," he admitted. "Only you were always running away and I could never catch you."

"But now you have, love. And the only running I'll do from now on is right into your arms," she promised.

Then her hands were moving again, and as the last button was undone, he stepped out of his pants and the two of them fell on the bed, too impatient to even drag the comforter off, as they reaffirmed their love for each other over and over, a love that had been lost, then found, and redeemed for all of time.

Page~*~*~*~Break
Emma had never had such fun just sitting in front of the TV watching movies like she did that night with Alina and Mary Margaret. She had never made friends easily, always erecting a wall about herself, a shell that kept her innermost self safe. But being with Mary Margaret (her mother, according to the Book) made her feel safe, as she had never been before, and being with Alina was almost like being with a little sister, something she had always wanted growing up.

They made a humongous bowl of buttered popcorn, and drank cans of Sprite and Coke, and ate SnoCaps and Kit Kats and Reeses like they were in a real movie theater, and they laughed and screamed at all the crazy hijinks Harry Potter got up to and sighed over Severus Snape (God, but he was hot!) and threw balls of paper at the screen when Voldemort came on, and cried when Cedric Diggory died.

They made it through *Goblet of Fire* and part way through *Order of the Phoenix* before their eyes started closing and Mary Margaret said they had to turn off the TV before they fell asleep while the DVD was still playing. It was one-thirty in the morning.

As Mary Margaret shut off the TV, Alina yawned and said, "Wow! I've never stayed up this late before. Not on purpose, anyway. Once I got sick in the middle of the night when I was little, like six, and I woke up Papa crying and then I threw up all over him and it was like two in the morning . . ."

Emma started laughing. "Oh my God! Poor Gold!"

"And poor Alina too!" Mary Margaret said, also snickering.

"He was really good about it though," Alina recalled. "He didn't even yell, and his pajamas are really expensive, silk by somebody-or-other, and I totally wrecked them."

Emma nearly died. "Oh . . . Alina . . . you're priceless! Does . . . does your dad know you tell these things about him to . . . us?" She was laughing so hard she nearly cried.

"Well, I don't tell just anybody, Emma. Just people I know, like Henry and you and Mary Margaret. Well, I never told Henry about this, because it's kind of embarrassing, though I wonder if he ever threw up on Regina . . . she'd probably ground him or something, I'll bet . . ."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Emma snorted. "Okay, kid, let's fix up the sofa for you and then it's nighty-night."

Mary Margaret got some sheets out of the linen closet and helped Emma put them over the sofa, along with a blanket and an extra pillow. "There you go, Alina! Good night, sleep tight—"

"-and don't let the bad fairies bite!" Alina finished, crawling up on to the sofa and pulling the covers about her.

"The bad fairies?" Mary Margaret repeated.

"Uh huh. It's what Papa always says to me when he tucks me in."

"Oh. I see," the schoolteacher said, then she smothered a giggle.

"Damn! What is he, Daddy Warbucks?" Emma demanded.

Alina giggled too. "Sort of. Only he's not bald, thank God!"

Emma and Mary Margaret busted out laughing again.
"I'm going to bed!" Emma said, smothering giggles with her hand. "Before I pee my pants!"

"Me too!" Mary Margaret said, and they hurried to their respective bedrooms, giggles trailing behind them.

Alina put her head down on the pillow and closed her eyes. "Night, Papa and Mama. Hope you're having a good time!"

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Henry stared out the window at all the stars the same night, and clutched his Eye of Horus amulet tightly in his fist. He couldn't sleep, despite the fact that he was tired. He replayed the night he had wished upon the falling star repeatedly in his head, and wondered if he dared to use his magic again, especially now that Regina was home.

But if he didn't . . . would his father remain lost to him forever?

He sighed and leaned on the windowsill. It was odd but he almost . . . felt his father drawing near. Maybe he was imagining things.

Then again, maybe not.

Mr. Gold had told them that magic worked best if you believed.

Henry did. He always had.

He peered up at the North Star, Polaris. Bring him home to me, he thought.

He sat there for about half-an-hour, considering what he should do. At last he decided to follow his instincts and leave it alone for tonight.

Then he went and got into bed, making sure his walkie talkie was under his pillow. When he slept he dreamed of a man that looked like him walking up the sidewalk and holding out his arms for Henry to run into.

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Far away, the martial arts instructor tossed restlessly, coughing in spite of the cold medicine he'd dosed himself with just an hour previously. His dreams were strange things, of himself with a boy that resembled him, hugging him and laughing. For one instant he thought he might be dreaming of his childhood, but he knew in an odd way that was wrong, this was not him as a boy, he was the adult here and the boy was . . . his son.

He groaned, shaking his head, and then he called out, the feeling of urgency returning, "Okay, son. I'm coming!"

After he had said that he sank into a deeper sleep, his cough subsiding to a mere tickle, and dreamed no more dreams.

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Mr. Gold and Belle spent the rest of the weekend in a kind of sleepy rose-colored haze. They slept late on Saturday, but then so did Alice, and woke to the sun shining. When they went downstairs, they found Alice making oatmeal with bananas, brown sugar, and cinnamon, and also some sausage links, along with coffee and orange juice.
"Mmm!" Belle sniffed the air appreciatively. "I love your oatmeal, Alice!"

"I know. That's why I made some today. For your wedding breakfast."

"That's right! Back in our old world, we always had a wedding breakfast!" Belle recalled. "And the husband and wife would exchange morning gifts . . . oh, and I didn't get you anything, Rum!"

He squeezed her hand. "That's all right, Belle. Having you marry me is enough of a gift right there."

"Same here, Rum," she murmured.

"Ooh boy! It's like watching Love Connection!" Alice murmured, stirring the oatmeal.

Gold rolled his eyes. "What do you want to do today, Belle?"

"I can answer that," Alice said slyly. "She wants to go back to bed, like every newlywed woman on the planet."

"After I eat breakfast," Belle grinned.

"We can do that," her husband agreed, his brown eyes sparkling. Then he said, "And no comments from the peanut gallery."

"I didn't say anything," Alice said innocently. Then she began to dish up the oatmeal.

The newlyweds ate breakfast quietly, and if they happened to take forever because they were staring into each other's eyes with their spoons halfway to their mouths, Alice didn't comment. But she did take a picture on her cell phone. For posterity. And to blackmail Gold if she ever needed to.

Page~*~*~*~Break

On Saturday afternoon Emma dropped Alina off at the Gold residence, and Henry came over then too, because they all had magic lessons with Gold at two o'clock. This time he did more than meditate with them. This time he made them summon light by concentrating hard.

Henry was the first one to accomplish this feat, as he was a conjuror, summoning anything came easily to him.

Alina did so next, because calling light was one of the basic powers of enchantment.

Emma finally managed it as well, though her light was not constant like the other two, but flickered and danced on her palm. Still, it was light, and it was there. She gasped when she saw it and said, "Wow! I feel like that girl in Harry Potter, what's her face, the smart geek . . ."

"Hermione," said Henry, Alina, and Gold all at once.

Emma blinked. "You know her name, Gold?"

"I know everyone's name, Emma. I've seen those movies almost fifty times," he admitted. "Very good, all of you! Now banish them."

"How?" asked Emma.

"Just wish them out."
Henry and Alina's vanished.

Emma found it a little bit harder to vanish hers, but it too went out after she thought about it fiercely. "Okay, Gold, what's next? Levitation?"

"Nothing right now," he said calmly. "Calling light is harder than you think. You need to rest."

"Huh?" Henry said, then he yawned.

Alina rubbed her eyes. "How come I'm sleepy, Papa?"

"Yeah, why do I feel like I've run the Boston marathon?" Emma frowned.

"Because in a way you have. You're like a person just starting a tough exercise regimen, you need to adjust to using your magic. The first few times you cast a spell, you'll feel like this. Every apprentice magic user does." Gold said.

"Just by summoning light?" Henry said. "But I . . ." Then he halted, realizing that he almost told about using his powers to summon his father to Storybrooke. He didn't want Gold or Emma to lecture him.

"Trust me, Henry. You need to rest," Gold told him.

"Can I sleep here on the couch?" the boy bargained. "Regina will never know, she's out over at her office, doing some kind of paperwork for Miner's Day."

"All right," Gold said, not feeling right about sending the kid back to his empty house.

"Guess I'd better head home," Emma said. "My eyes feel like they're filled with sand. Who knew summoning some stupid ball of light was so exhausting? ObiWan had nothing on you, Gold."

They all left the workroom and trooped upstairs. Emma went and got her coat from the closet, then Henry, Gold, and Alina walked her out to her Bug.

Gold was frowning. "Are you sure you'll be all right to drive home?"

Emma nodded. "Yeah, I've driven with almost no sleep before, trust me."

She opened the door to her car and was just about to get in it when a sleek black Harley suddenly drove up with a man wearing a black leather jacket with the logo Fire Mountain Dojo on it and a black helmet with orange flames curling about the sides. He pulled off his helmet, revealing a handsome face with dark curling hair and deep brown eyes.

"Uh, hi, I was wondering if you could tell me where the hell I am?" he began, then he halted, his eyes widening in recognition as he saw Emma. "Oh my God. Emma!"

Emma almost passed out. "Jesus H. Christ!" she cried. "Neal?"

Just as Gold staggered backwards and leaned against the Bug, clutching his cane.

"Papa, what's the matter?" Alina cried. "Who is he?"

"Bae!" her father gasped. "It's really you. You've come home."

The man on the bike turned and saw Gold and went pale. "Papa?"
Before Gold could say anything, Henry stepped forward. He looked from Gold to the stranger and back again. "You're his missing son, aren't you?"

Dazedly, the man once known as Baelfire and also Neal slowly nodded. "Yeah, I guess I am. Who are you?" he asked, looking at Henry for the first time.

"My name's Henry."

Their eyes met. The older man's jaw dropped. Then he managed to say, in a shocked tone, "Holy God! You look . . . just like me. How is that possible?"

"Because he's your son," Alina said, lifting her eyebrow. "Obviously."

"Okay, what the hell were those Comtrex laced with?" Bae muttered to himself. "Because this has to be a dream, right?" Except for one thing. The strange urgency that had dragged him across the United States, from Phoenix to Maine, was now gone.

Abruptly, Gold regained his equilibrium and said, "Why don't we discuss this inside?"

Shaking his head, the man quickly killed the engine on his Harley and parked it. He hung his helmet on the handlebars and followed Emma, Henry, Alina, and his father inside, wondering if he would wake up soon.
If Bae was shocked to find himself suddenly face-to-face with his long lost love, Emma, his father, and his unknown son, and a strange girl as well, so was Gold. He had imagined finding his lost son for many years, but in his head, Baelfire was always the age he had lost him at, somewhere around fourteen. Of course, logically he knew that couldn't be so, for time ran differently here, and his son would have grown up, but seeing the grown man before him in place of child he'd known was very unnerving . . . as was the fact that his son had obviously had a relationship with Emma before she ever came to Storybrooke and they had produced Henry . . . his grandson.

Gold had never even considered he might be a grandfather, after all Alina wasn't even old enough for middle school yet, let alone high school and dating. And if she had to date someone, Gold would have almost hoped it was Henry. Except now that was impossible.

He led the way to the kitchen table, where Belle looked up from eating some watermelon in a bowl. "Thought you went home, Emma? Did you decide to stay after all?" Then she caught sight of the tall man behind Emma and her eyes widened. "Hello. I'm Belle Gold, Rum's wife. Nice to meet you." She held out her hand for him to shake.

A confused Bae took it and said, "Uh . . . nice to meet you too. I'm Neal Cassidy. Well, sometimes." He looked from Belle to Gold and then to Alina.

"Belle, this is also my son . . . his name was Baelfire in our old world. I called him Bae," Gold told her softly.

Belle gasped. "Then you're the one! His missing son! I thought perhaps you'd died."

"No, but . . . then you know about . . . you're from there too?"

"Bae, why don't you sit down?" Gold suggested, gesturing to a chair at the table.

His son sank into it, looking shell shocked. He looked at his father and said quietly, "I haven't been Bae in a long time, Papa. The family who adopted me suggested I change my name, they thought Baelfire sounded too much like a street handle . . . like the gang I used to run with before . . . so I changed it to Neal Cassidy, like my foster father." He looked over at Alina and Henry. "Uh, who are you?"

"Your sister, Alina Rose Gold," Gold supplied.

"Hi!" Alina said, smiling.

Bae gave her an awkward smile back. "Hey. Then she's . . . your kid, right?" He looked at Belle.

"Yes, Alina is my daughter," Belle confirmed. "She was born in our old world, but the curse doesn't affect her as much because Regina never knew about her."
"Huh? What curse? The only curse I know of is the one that affected you, Papa. The curse of the Dark One."

"That curse is . . . inactive now," Gold said. "Belle's speaking of the curse that's over Storybrooke and all of those who reside here, except for Henry, Emma, and Belle."

"The curse I'm supposedly supposed to break," Emma said, speaking for the first time.

"Uh, I'm really confused," Bae said, sounding lost.

"I'll explain everything," Gold said, and then he began to tell Bae about the curse, Regina, and what it meant for the citizens of Storybrooke if Emma could break it and return them all to their former selves.

While he was doing that, Alina and Henry were looking at each other curiously.

"So . . . if he's your brother and my dad . . ." Henry began. "Then that means we're . . ."


"Weird? Is that even possible?"

Alina shrugged. "Guess so, since we are what we are. But if you start calling me Aunt Alina, Henry, I'm slugging you one."

"No way! Even if you are," he shook his head. "I mean we're the same age and . . . you're my best friend."

"Always," she murmured. "That's never gonna change, even if we are related now." She squeezed his hand beneath the table. "Only now we're family too. So it's even cooler."

"You're right. It is," Henry agreed, and grinned at her.

But if the children seemed accepting of their new status, the adults were having a more difficult time. Bae kept looking back and forth from Emma to Gold as if trying to decide who he was more surprised to see sitting there. He listened to Gold explain about Regina and the curse, but he only half-absorbed everything. His mind was still spinning around like a whirlpool trying to process the fact that not only had he found Emma, but that he also had a son as well, and had also discovered his missing father in this world too, and his father had a family he'd never met until today. Oh my God. That's my kid sitting there across from me. Jesus Christ on the cross, that's my papa right here next to me. And then there's my little sister over there and Emma too.

He rubbed his eyes, but when he blinked, everyone was still there. It wasn't a dream. It was real. "I still can't believe . . . it's like one of those . . . uh . . ."

"Hallmark movies?" Emma suggested, also feeling quite shocked.

Bae gave a soft laugh. "Yeah, you could say that. Only I feel like I've opened up a Hallmark card and had a baseball bat just smash me in the head."

"I know exactly how you feel," Emma said.

"Me too. When you took off that helmet and I saw . . . that's why I almost fell down," Gold said softly. "It's like a miracle."

"I guess so," Bae said. "I still don't get something though. I felt like I was . . . summoned here. Like
something was driving me. I just . . . all of a sudden I closed up my shop and I had to come here, even though I didn't know where the hell "here" was or where I was going. I own a dojo, see, back in Phoenix, I'm a martial arts instructor." He pulled off his jacket and showed everyone the logo—a mountain on fire with the words _Fire Mountain Dojo—Where Legends Are Made_ beneath it. "I called it that 'cause it's sort of a play on my old name—Baelfire . . . Fire Mountain, even though nobody else would know that but me."

"Wait a minute. You said you felt a summoning?" Gold asked sharply.

"Uh, well, yeah . . . least that's the best I can describe it. It was like a . . . pull to go here. I couldn't rest, couldn't do anything but get on my bike and go . . . until I reached here, Storybrooke. Even the damn cold I caught on the way over here couldn't stop me. It was almost like . . . magic. Only there is no magic here."

"That's where you're wrong, son. Actually there is . . . it's just not something widely practiced now. If this were truly a land with no magic, Regina's curse would be null and void, as would her magic. But it isn't."

At Bae's wide-eyed look, Emma said, "You need to read _The Universal Spiral_, Neal. It explains a lot, trust me. About how magic exists here, about the price of magic, and why we—Henry, me, and Alina—all have it."

"What? You—_all three_ of you—have magic?" he sputtered. "How the hell . . . Emma, you never did before . . . do you have magic too, Belle?"

"No. But Alina inherited hers from Rum. And Emma got hers from Snow White, or Mary Margaret as she's known in this land. And I guess Henry got his from both of you, since magic's inherited," Belle explained.

"But you don't have magic anymore, Papa?" Bae asked, floundering.

"No. Because the curse stole it," Rumplestiltskin answered.

"Oh. Well, at least something worked the way I thought it would," he sighed.

Gold turned and eyed Henry sternly. "So . . . something summoned Bae . . . or Neal . . . all the way from Phoenix. Would I be right in assuming that was you, Henry Mills?"

Henry gulped and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Henry, _you_ called him?" Emma repeated. "Lord, how?"

"And why didn't you wait before attempting to use your powers like that?" Gold demanded. "You could have killed yourself, using too much of your power, drained yourself dry, like a . . . a corn husk!"

Henry looked ashamed. "I'm sorry. I just . . . well . . . I was thinking one night about my dad . . . and a star fell . . . so I wished on it . . . I didn't think it'd work . . . but it did, because he's here . . . I didn't know I could hurt myself."

Gold sighed. "Now you do, lad. I want you to promise me not to do something like that again. You're very . . . vulnerable right now, and you could harm yourself by casting a spell beyond your current power level. The last thing I need is for my . . . my grandson to die on my watch. Understand?" He said the word _grandson_ like it was a foreign language.
"Okay. I promise," Henry said, glad the lecture was over and Gold and Emma didn't seem too mad at him. Then again, they were still in shock over meeting his dad. He eyed the older man sitting across from him, marveling that he was truly here, and that he looked so much like an older version of himself. *It's like my dream. He looks just the way I saw him in my dream.*

"That goes for you too, Alina," Gold added, looking at his daughter.

"Yes, Papa," she replied.

Emma was gathering her courage, and then she came out with, "So, you've been in Phoenix all these years? But I tried to find you after . . . after Henry was born, but . . . the address you gave me . . . you were gone . . ."

"When was that?" Bae frowned.

"Uh, around 2002," Emma said. "I'd put Henry up for adoption . . . I had to . . . I was eighteen and without a job . . ."

"You couldn't find me because I'd gone to Japan," Bae said.

"Japan? How'd you ever afford that?" Emma asked, startled.

"I took out a loan," he answered. "I went there to study with the martial arts experts. I'd been taking karate since I was adopted by the Cassidys, but I wanted to be taught by the real experts, so I went to Japan for uh, about four years. While I was there I finished college, the master I apprenticed under gave me the money to do that. Got myself a degree in psychology and criminology."

"So you're like . . . a black belt in karate?" asked Henry.

Bae nodded. "Karate, ninjitsu, and some forms of kung fu too. When I came back to the States, I was almost broke, so I started doing tournaments for money. All over the West Coast. I got myself a manager and then I did that for two years, till I'd paid off my loan and could open my own dojo. I did some other stuff too, here and there, until I started getting enough students to make myself solvent, and now, well, I'm pretty successful at it. I've got a good reputation as an instructor, I teach adults and kids, or I did before I packed up to come here."

Now Henry felt guilty, ripping the man from the only life he'd ever known. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you, but . . ." he trailed off, looking at his father with big pleading brown eyes.

"Shoot, kid. I know why you did it. Your methods were definitely screwy, I'd have rather gotten a phone call, but . . . then again, this is my crazy family I'm talking about . . ." He eyed Emma again. "I'd like to talk with you sometime, Emma. In private, if you don't mind."

"Sure, Neal. Uh, or do you prefer Bae?"

He shrugged. "Whatever you feel comfortable calling me is fine, Emma." Then he darted a glance at his father. "And we need to discuss some things too, Papa."

"Yes, I know," Gold replied, looking slightly relieved that his son actually wanted to have a conversation with him.

"And then we should probably have a little chat too, Henry," Bae said, then he shook his head. "Damn! Maybe I should have brought my appointment calendar. Then I could book you all at once."

"What book's that?"

"The Once Upon a Time Chronicles," she clarified. "It tells all about how the curse was cast and about everybody's lives before they got transported here. It'll help you get to know everyone better."

"Are you in it?"

"Uh, only as a baby. I was really little, like one or two, I think, when Regina cast the curse, right Papa? I grew up here, I can't really remember much about the other world."

"Fairy Tale Land," Henry said.

Before they could say anything more, Alice returned from her trip to the supermarket. As she entered the kitchen, carrying her groceries, she gaped at the good-looking man sitting at the table. "Okay, did you call an escort service while I was out, Emma? You could have waited."

That broke the tension and the adults started laughing softly.

"I'm a martial arts instructor," Bae began, chuckling.

Alice sighed. "Dear God, you can instruct me anytime you want. Alice Carstairs. I'm Mr. Gold's housekeeper. That and Belle's best friend." She smiled as she shook Bae's hand.

"Alice, meet my son, Bae," said Gold quickly.

"Your son, Mr. G?" Alice gaped. "Boy oh boy, all your chickens are coming home to roost, aren't they?" She looked over Bae. "You know, there is a certain resemblance, around the mouth and the eyes." Then she happened to look over at Henry, Alina, and Emma. Her blue eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Jumping Jehosephat! Tell me I'm not seeing things. Because you . . . and Henry . . . oh my God!"

"You're not seeing anything except what's there, Alice," Emma confirmed. "He's also Henry's father."

"Holy hot damn! I think I need a drink," Alice gasped. "Scratch that, I think all of you need one. Like a double scotch on the rocks. Did you know, Emma, that he was . . ."

"Gold's missing son?" Emma clarified. "Hadn't the slightest idea until now."

"It's a long story, Alice," said Belle.

"I'll bet. Tell me about it later, Belle. I've got to start dinner. I assume you're all staying, right?"

She received nods all around the table, until Emma looked at Henry and said, "Shouldn't you check back with Regina and let her know where you'll be?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess. I can leave her a note, she's going to be in meetings tonight, so she won't even know I'm not there."

"Whoa. Is this the same Regina who cast the curse?" Bae asked. "And you live with her?"

"Yeah. She adopted me. I'd rather live in Alina's tree house, believe me."
"Hey, maybe you can live here, Henry," Alina exclaimed. "Since we're related now, I mean."

"Alina, that's going to be a bit tricky," Gold said. "Right now it's better if we don't open that can of worms just yet." He cleared his throat. "Bae, you're welcome to stay here if you want. Or you can go to Granny's, she has a bed and breakfast . . ." he trailed off awkwardly.

"Uh . . . well . . . maybe I'd better stay there . . . until we settle a few things," Bae said, also feeling awkward. There was so much past history between them, and yet . . . seeing his father again brought back so many good memories . . . ones that balanced out the bad ones . . . in a way, he felt rather like Henry, seeing Rumple after so long, he realized that he didn't really know the man before him . . . not the way he was now. In a way, he had lost and gained a father too.

Apparently, his father had managed to get his act together, and he had a new family now, one that Bae wasn't part of. Or was he? Did he even want to be? He had no living relatives now that the Cassidys were gone, they had died in a freak plane crash three years ago. He had mourned them, the only family he'd ever had in this world . . . until now.

_God, when I started this trip, I expected Emma to be at the end of it, and now I find, not just her, but my papa, my son, my sister, and my stepmother. Heaven help me!_ He rubbed his eyes again, they felt sticky and weary. "Sorry. I'm kind of beat, I don't think I stopped once since Vermont."

"There's a bedroom upstairs if you need it," Gold offered.

"If you don't mind . . ."

"Not at all, Bae," Rumple reassured him. "It's up the stairs, two doors to the right, just after the blue bathroom."

"Across from mine," Alina added helpfully. Then she yawned as well. "I feel like taking a nap too, Papa."

"Me too," said Henry.

"Me three," Emma agreed.

"Why don't all of you do that?" Belle suggested. "Henry, you can sleep on the sofa in the den, and Emma, we have another guest room down the hall from that one, it's green."

"When you all wake up, dinner will be ready," Alice said brightly.

They all split up then, going to their respective rooms to sleep . . . as well as ponder the new circumstances they found themselves in.

Rumple and Belle went upstairs to their bedroom also, because the former sorcerer knew he had to discuss Bae with Belle now that he was here, and he wanted her to hear the truth from him, so she would understand things between him and his son . . . and what had driven him to create the Dark Curse. He also wanted to discuss the fact that they were now grandparents, of all things, and how it made her feel . . . and himself as well.

He only hoped she would understand what a desperate soul he had been back then, lonely and lost and hurting, trying to find the only other person that was his family besides Alina, the only other person he had ever loved besides her and Alina.

He shut the door and turned around, saying quietly, "Belle, I think we need to discuss a few things . . ."
"Okay, Rum. Whenever you're ready," she said, and then listened as he began to speak.
His Wild Swan

Chapter Summary

Emma and Bae have a long overdue heart-to-heart talk

Belle remained silent for quite some time after Rumplestiltskin finished telling her about Bae, Milah, the Ogre Wars, how desperate he'd been to protect his child from being killed in a war no child should ever have to fight, his deal with the soldiers to get the dagger of the Dark One, and how he had absorbed the power of the Dark One in order to save his son, because without magic he was just another powerless cripple. He had told her how the curse had changed him, making the once even-tempered spinner that believed in negotiating into a monster that used dark magic to revenge himself on people who offered him or his son the slightest insult. He told her how he had made a deal with Bae to go with him to the land without magic using a magic beanstalk and then broken it, fearing that without magic, he'd become helpless again and unable to protect his son. Then he explained that he'd done his best to find Bae again, and made the Dark Curse as result of struggling to find the only other member of his family after he'd lost Belle.

"But, you see, I'd never intended the curse to be used as Regina used it," he explained quietly. "I'd intended to use it on myself, so I could go to wherever he was in the realms and bring him home. But I was . . . half out of my mind with grief after Alice came with Alina and told me you were dead. I wasn't thinking straight at all, and when Regina came again, wanting something to gain revenge on those she hated, I made a deal with her for the curse. At that point I hated a lot of things, most notably myself, and also your father, for doing what he did, and I didn't even think that the curse could be cast the way Regina did. I was a fool. So, you see, I am partly to blame for Storybrooke . . . and responsible for Bae running off from me. It's not something I'm proud of at all. But since regaining my memories, I've resolved to do my best to atone for my mistakes, if that's even possible."

Belle came to him then, and put her arm about him and hugged him to her. "It's always possible, Rum. I forgave you a long time ago for what happened between us. What you've just told me . . . doesn't make me love you any less. It makes me love you more."

"It . . . does? But why?"

"Because it shows me quite clearly that you're no coward, Rumplestiltskin. You were misled, misguided, and what you did was wrong, but for the right motivation. Everything you did was motivated by love—for your son, for me—and who am I to judge you, having never been the desperate soul you were then? I love Alina more than my life. If need be I would sacrifice my own in a heartbeat for her and never think twice. What parent would not move heaven, hell, and earth for their child? I would. You made the devil's own bargain, Rum, and it cost you, but despite the curse, you still retained the spark of the good person you were before it. Alina can see it. So can Henry. And so can I. You are now who you were always meant to be. Father, grandfather, lover, and friend. I saw the man behind the mask of the beast long ago in the Dark Castle. I married that man on Friday, and I am still sitting here beside him. The past is prologue, beloved. What matters is now."

Gold stared at her, blinking, his eyes filling with tears. "Belle . . . I don't . . . damn it, I don't deserve
you—"

She put a finger to his lips. "Shut up, Rum. You do. You dared to love a lonely princess, not for her position or her beauty, but for herself. You dared to risk a heart that had been broken and battered. That is true courage. And that, my sorcerer, is worth more than gold, more than all the jewels in the world. You put yourself in hell for the love of a child. That is not the act of an evil man, only a desperate one. I love you, Rum, all of you, imperfect, desperate fool that you are. I believe in you, Rumplestiltskin Gold. Now you must believe as well."

"I . . . I will try," he stammered.

She kissed him then, one fiery kiss that showed him more than words her love for him, as constant as the North Star, as deep as the ocean, that burned as brightly now as it had all the years before, steadfast and true.

Her kiss was like magic, revitalizing him, and giving him hope that he could still mend things between himself and Bae. That he could have what he had always dreamed of—his family whole again. If Baelfire were willing to listen to him. It was a very big if. But perhaps it was not as impossible as it once had seemed.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Hours passed, but Emma woke up feeling refreshed and not drained of energy as she had been. She made her way down the stairs and into the kitchen, hoping to grab something to eat before dinner. She wondered what sort of snacks Gold kept in his home? Was he a health nut? Or a closet junk food junkie?

Insatiably curious about the reclusive billionaire, she entered the kitchen, and inhaled the delicious aroma of something cooking. "Oh God, what is that?" she cried, feeling herself start to salivate.

Alice turned from shoving something in the oven. "That's my Hawaiian roast pork with pineapple you're smelling. I have it in my slow cooker over there, and I just put in a pan of golden sweet bread and some potatoes au gratin. Oh, and there's a pecan pie for dessert too."

"Good God, Alice! You're like Martha Stewart!" Emma exclaimed.

"Better. I cook with ordinary ingredients, not those fancy schmancy things nobody's ever heard of," Alice smirked. "Dinner should be ready in . . . about an hour and a half. If you want a snack, just look in the pantry. The door over there." She pointed to a door beside a cabinet that Emma had assumed was a closet.

Emma went and opened it.

Then she just stood there.

"Holy hells, Alice! This could fit Mary Margaret's whole kitchen and den in it! This is a pantry? It looks like half a grocery store!"

"Mr. G has a thing about running out of food," Alice chuckled.

"Yeah, well this could feed half of Storybrooke," Emma said, and walked in, looking around.

"I've organized it by shelves, in alphabetical order," Alice called.

"Gee, I wonder why," Emma muttered.
There was a shelf that seemed devoted to snack foods, everything from potato chips to Tostidos, Triscuits, and popcorn. Emma found a bag of some kind of popcorn she'd never heard of, a mixture of Vermont cheddar and caramel corn. Deciding to be daring, she grabbed it and a package of Oreos off the cookie shelf.

Then she came back out and shut the door. "I'm surprised you don't get lost in there," she quipped.

"Sometimes I hide in there," Alice confided. "You wouldn't believe the phone conversations I've heard while munching Doritoes," she giggled. "Once I was trying to prepare something for lunch and couldn't decide on some pasta and there was this solicitor calling constantly, and usually I just ignored it, but that day Mr. G was home and he picked it up . . . next thing I know he's half-growling into the phone—listen you imbecile, if I wanted to patronize your organization I'd have sent you a check, but you're not worth my time, now hang up the phone and erase my number from your list before I haul your ass into court and slam you with a lawsuit for harassment that'll bankrupt you and your entire family. And that's if I'm in a good mood. I swear, Emma, the phone cringed away from him and whoever was on the other end probably fainted dead away!"

Emma grinned. Then she opened the bag of popcorn and began to eat some. "Hey, this is really good!"

Alice looked over to see what she was eating. "That's Alina's favorite popcorn. Mr. G's too. They eat bags of it, especially when they're having movie night."

Emma ate another handful. "I can see why. This stuff's addicting."

"Want some milk with your Oreos?" asked Alice.

"Sure."

Alice went over to the industrial-sized refrigerator. "1% or coconut?"

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Coconut milk?"

"Mr. G loves it. It's surprisingly good, not too sweet and creamy, almost like regular milk, but with half the calories and twice the calcium and potassium. He's got Belle hooked on it too. Why don't you try some?"

Emma shrugged. "All right."

Alice poured her a small glass of it and another of 1% milk. "Here. I gave you both kinds, just in case. You can go and eat it out on the veranda." She gestured to a large stone-flagged area just outside of a pair of glass doors, with an iron-wrought table and chairs. Plants in wooden boxes and pots were scattered around the veranda.

Emma took her popcorn, cookies, and milk outside and sat there, looking at the huge lawn spread out before her, with a big oak tree with a treehouse nestled in it and further away there was a child's swingset and a jungle gym.

It was the kind of place she used to fantasize about as a child. No wonder Henry loved coming here.

She sipped her glass of coconut milk tentatively. To her surprise it actually was good. "Mmm!" she murmured. "Coconut milk and Oreos. It's like being in paradise."

"Mind if I join you?" came Bae's soft voice. He carried his own package of Oreos, a jar of Jiff, a
spoon, and his own glass of milk on a tray.

Emma looked up. She felt her heart skip a beat. Even after ten years, she still felt it . . . the old attraction. "Uh, sure."

Bae set the tray down and sat in the chair opposite her. "I see you still like Oreos."

"Breakfast of champions, Neal," she answered, eating another one. "And you do too."

"You kidding, Swan? This is like the ultimate comfort food. When I was in Japan, they didn't have these there. I was craving them like an addict. So when I came back, the first thing I bought at the store, even before real food, was six packages of Oreos and a jar of Jiff. Then I got home and I ate a whole package with some peanut butter, in about an hour."

"That's disgusting."

"Why? You like them too, Emma," he asked, taking one out of his package and putting a teaspoon of peanut butter on top of it.

"Not because of that. Because if anyone else did that, they'd be the size of a house. And I bet you didn't even gain a pound." She dunked her cookie in the coconut milk and ate it.

"You'd be surprised how many calories a martial arts workout burns," he admitted, grinning. Then he ate his own Oreo with peanut butter and drank some of his milk.

"What kind's that?"

"The coconut milk. Stuff's incredible. I had it first over in Japan." He began to make another Oreo peanut butter cookie.

"I never had it before, but . . . I actually like it," Emma said, and ate some more popcorn. She couldn't take her eyes off him. He looked just a bit older, but not much, and she said, "You know, Neal, you haven't changed a bit. Or . . . not much."

"I could say the same about you . . . except for one thing," he said, pausing in mid bite. "Why didn't you tell me, Em? About our son?"

She was astonished to hear more hurt than anger in his question. She gulped another swallow of coconut milk, wishing suddenly she had rum inside the glass. Then she gathered what courage she had and said, "It's . . . um . . . complicated. Well, at least it was."

He finished his Oreo and steepled his hands on the table. "Uncomplicate it for me, Swan. Did you know before I left you that night?"

"No. I didn't," she said honestly. "God, Neal, I was eighteen. I didn't know a damn thing. I thought you couldn't get pregnant the first time. Or even the second time. That didn't even occur to me. All I wanted . . . was to be with you."

He sighed. "Yeah, me too. I wasn't exactly responsible either. My dad—my foster father, I mean—taught me about protection, but that was the last thing on my mind when we . . . were together that first time. I was practically a kid myself. Only nineteen."

"How old are you, really?" she asked then.

"Well, I should be around fourteen years your senior," Bae replied. "Which would make me around
forty-two. But I'm only twenty-nine."

"How . . . is that possible?"

"Simple. I spent around fourteen years, as near as I can figure it, in a place where I only aged a year. You'd know it as Wonderland. That wasn't where I was intending to go when I climbed down the beanstalk. I was supposed to end up here, but I tripped and fell . . . and I fell through a portal into Wonderland. A land ruled by a psychotic bitch known as Cora Miller, or the Queen of Hearts. I was unlucky enough to end up as her page . . . which is like saying slave, because that's what she treated me as. Time doesn't run there like it does here."

"You were in Wonderland? Like Alice?"

"Yes, but unlike her, I was trapped there for a long time. Until the Queen fixed her eyes on someone different, an adventurer with a magic hat called Jefferson. While she was trying to . . . persuade him to give her his hat, I saw my chance and used it to escape . . . to this world. I was fifteen when I arrived here, lost, alone, and I ended up on the streets in Phoenix. You know about the eight months I spent as a member of the Red Dragons, I told you that when we first started going out. You know that I was a former street brat and a gang member. And that the Cassidys saved my sorry ass. Everything I am now, I owe to them, Emma."

"I remember you telling me that. But you never told me about Wonderland."

"How in hell could I? You'd have thought I was smoking something," he snorted. "Anyway, that's why I'm only twenty-nine. So . . . when did you find out? And why the hell didn't you come find me after you knew?"

"I was almost four months before I realized what was going on. I started to get sick then, and I thought I was dying of some crazy disease . . . until a friend suggested that I get one of those pregnancy tests. So I did . . . stole it from a drugstore. And I almost died when I saw the result. I was scared, Neal. I didn't know what the hell to do. I was living in some shelter for the homeless, and I stole whatever wasn't nailed down. I knew how you felt about that . . . and I couldn't bring myself to come back and ask for help . . . then I got caught boosting a car in my ninth month . . . and they threw the book at me and there I was in jail . . . with nothing and nobody . . ."

"Jesus, Emma," he shook his head. "I could have . . . if I'd known . . . I'd have done the right thing, you know."

"You'd have married me?" she queried sarcastically. "An eighteen-year-old jailbird with a rap sheet as long as your arm?"

"Who was carrying my child," he leaned forward and stared at her intently. "I'd have helped you, damn it! Only you wouldn't let me. You shut me out. I saw where you were headed, the same path I walked once, before the Cassidys adopted me and helped me straighten myself out. I tried to tell you that, but you wouldn't listen."

"I thought you were judging me, Neal. And I couldn't stand it, that you were looking down your nose at me."

"I was what? Is that how I seemed to you?" he asked, genuinely shocked.

"Sometimes. I don't know. I was crazy about you . . . and I didn't want you to think I wasn't good enough for you . . . even though I knew damn well I was," she admitted sadly.

"Don't," he said forcefully. "Don't ever think that, Emma Swan. I never have." He reached out
suddenly and captured her hand in his own. "I made a screwed up mess of my own life, I'm the last person to ever judge anybody."

"You? You're a successful businessman, Neal. You own your own dojo, have a good job. Hell, you even went to college. I'm lucky I finished high school, and I was a bail bondsman out of Boston until recently. Who gave her kid up for adoption because there was no way I could give him any kind of life as an ex-con."

His hand tightened on hers. "In a way, you made the right decision at the time. I'm just sorry I wasn't around so you could . . . make a different one. And now we've come full circle it seems."

"Yeah. Here, in a town called Storybrooke, under a curse by an evil queen, where my son is related to the richest man in town, a sorcerer named Rumplestiltskin, whose best friend is his daughter, and we all have magic and I'm supposed to be some kind of superhero and break a curse with magic I don't even know how to use. How screwed up is that, Neal?"

"About as screwed up as me being from another realm, the son of that same sorcerer, ending up here because of a magic hat, and meeting you," he answered. "But you know something? The day I met you was the best day of my life. Only I didn't know it then. I've kicked myself ever since for walking away that morning. I almost went to find you, about a week after we had that fight . . . only I talked myself out of it. I told myself you didn't need me. But I was wrong. We needed each other, wild swan. And I think . . . we always have."

"Wild swan," she murmured. "That was always your name for me." Her eyes were shining brightly. "Because you are. Wild and free, and beautiful to behold. I loved you for that, Em. I'd never met anyone like you. And I still haven't."

"What do we do now, Neal? About Henry? About us?"

"Well . . . that depends. On your definition of us. I'd like to get to know my son. And I'd like to get to know you again. If that's what you want. Do you?"

Slowly she nodded. "I . . . think so. If you want to, that is. I just . . . don't want it to seem like I'm trapping you or anything, because you're Henry's father."

He shook his head. "Hell, Emma. Nobody has ever done that. Not the Queen of Hearts, not my papa, not even you. If I stay, I'll do it because I want to. Not because you've forced me."

"Do you? Want to stay?"

In answer, he released her hand and brought his thumb up to gently stroke her cheek. "If I didn't, I wouldn't be here now, wild swan."

The next thing she knew, his mouth was on hers, and she was drowning in the desire his kiss sent spiraling through her. He tasted like dark chocolate and peanut butter, forbidden ecstasy, and she found herself responding to his kiss as if they had been separated just last night, instead of ten years ago.

It lasted but a few moments, but in that time, she felt she lived a lifetime over. A lifetime she had lost, but had now found again.

Then he drew back, panting slightly, and whispered, "Let's start over, Em. I think we deserve it. And so does Henry. How about it, wild swan?"
She quivered under his hand, suddenly afraid. Could she, did she dare risk her heart again?

"Don't be afraid. I'd never hurt you, don't you know that by now?"

It was his sincerity that decided her. Looking into his dark brown eyes, she knew that her love for him had never died. The wild swan had found her mate. If she dared to admit it.

"Okay. Let's try . . . Bae."

"Now you're calling me Bae?" he asked wryly.

"It's your name, isn't it? Your true name."

"Yes."

"And if there's one thing I've learned by having magic lessons with Gold, it's to call a thing by their real name," she said. "Baelfire Gold."

"Gold. Where'd he ever come up with that?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"Oh, I intend to. Among other things," Bae stated. "We have a lot to discuss, my papa and I."

"I'll bet," Emma snorted.

"But right now, all I want to do is this," Bae said, his eyes sparkling with mischief. Then he picked up an Oreo, dunked it in his milk, and shoved it in Emma's mouth.

She gasped, unable to talk, too busy trying to swallow. "Bmmfmaff!"

"Gotcha!" he grinned. "You always fell for that."

Emma glared at him, or tried to, but her heart wasn't in it. It was beating a mile a minute, racing like a runaway train, right out of her chest and into his arms.

She swallowed the rest of the Oreo. "You rotten jerk!"

He laughed. "Yup. Same old Emma."

And she knew she hadn't fooled him for a minute.

She rolled her eyes. But before she could say anything else, Alice poked her head out of the sliding glass door. "Dinner's almost ready. So come on in."

"Who the hell wants dinner after eating Oreos?" Emma muttered, but she gathered up her empty glass of milk and the cookies and popcorn and made her way inside, glancing back once to see if Bae was following.
Chapter Summary

Rumple and Bae also have a heart-to-heart and Bae's past after he fell through the portal is revealed

Emma nearly groaned in bliss as she put another bite of the most tender juiciest roast pork she'd ever eaten in her life in her mouth. "My God, Alice! I'd ask you for the recipe for this, but I'd probably burn it if I tried to cook it."

"Yeah, I remember you could barely boil water," Bae said, eating another bite off his own plate. "God, this is incredible! I've never tasted anything so good in my life, and I've eaten at some pretty fancy restaurants in Manhattan."

Alina nodded and said, "I told Alice she ought to go on Food Network and challenge Bobby Flay to the Iron Chef competition. She'd blow him away!"

"She'd make Rachel Ray look like some kid making macaroni and cheese out of a box in her mom's kitchen," Henry added.

"Rachel Ray's a snot," Alina stated. "She can't cook to save her life. All her recipes are rip offs of other people's."

"I never liked her either," Bae commented. "But I'd eat cardboard if you cooked it, Alice."

"She'd probably make cardboard taste good," Belle grinned.

"Oh, stop!" Alice blushed. "Before you embarrass me to death."

"That'd be a first," Gold smirked.

Alice made a face at him. "Watch it, Mr. G. Before I ask for a raise."

"How much?" he countered.

"I was kidding!"

"I'm not. Name it," Gold said.

"Umm . . . I'll have to think about it," Alice said.

"Tell me after dinner, then," her employer said calmly. Then he took another helping of the pork roast. He agreed wholeheartedly with Bae and Emma about Alice's cooking. The woman was a magician with food.

The dessert was even better, some kind of bread pudding with caramel sauce and pineapple bits, and Bae nearly licked the plate when he was done. He looked at Alice and said, "How much would you charge to come and cook for me?"

Alice chuckled, and said teasingly, "Well, sugar, that all depends . . ." then she shook her head.
"Sorry, but you couldn't afford me. And my contract's exclusive, Bae."

"Darn it," he said, looking rather disappointed.

"But you can come over anytime and eat here," Gold offered hopefully.

"Thanks. I'll . . . I'll think about it," Bae said quickly. *Later. When I've time to . . . reconsider the fact that the man I never expected to see again in this lifetime is right here before me . . . and with a family he obviously loves.* He glanced at his son, Henry. *That* was another thing he had to come to terms with. So many things to think about, to choose from. Emma. Mr. Gold, his father. Henry. Past, present, and now future. Possibilities swam before his eyes and he rubbed them.

He slowly sipped his coffee, staring at the brown liquid as if he could divine answers from it. His family. Right here before him. If he dared to hope, to dream, to take another chance.

But right then all he felt like doing was hopping on his bike and gunning the engine. He felt confused and out of sorts, or else he'd never contemplate running off. He'd learned his lesson long ago, by using a magic bean to escape to what he'd thought was a better world, only to find that one world was nearly the same as another, with both good and bad people in it, and the only real difference was what he became in it. In the world of his birth, he'd been the loving son, in Wonderland, the slave, and in this world he was what he had made of himself, the martial arts instructor, the street kid turned good . . . the father of a ten year old boy he'd never known.

And it was that last that scared him out of his wits.

But though scared, he would stay. He meant what he'd said to Emma. He wanted a fresh start, a chance to do things differently. A chance to reawaken the love he'd had with Emma, to chance to get to know Henry, a chance to reconnect with his father.

*You can do this, Bae. Just breathe. And take it one step at a time.*

He looked up to see Emma pushing back her chair and saying, "I really have to be going, Belle. Thanks for inviting me, I really enjoyed it . . . Rum. Do you mind if I call you that?"

"It's fine, Emma," Gold replied.

Bae saw an out and he took it. "Uh . . . I have to be going too. I'll walk you out, Emma." He turned to his father and Belle. "Thank you for supper. It was incredible." The words sounded odd in his mouth, as if he was a stranger. But in a way he was.

Emma was looking at Henry. "Kid, I have to take you back to Regina. Might as well be now."

Henry shook his head. "Not yet."

"Papa will take him," Alina said swiftly, giving Emma one of her pleading puppydog stares. "After we play Monopoly," she said, naming one game she knew that could take a few hours.

"Yeah, after that," Henry agreed enthusiastically. Anything to keep him here, where he was wanted, and out of that house.

Emma looked at Gold and Belle. "That okay with you?"

"Perfect," Belle said.

"I'll make sure he's home before Regina," Gold assured her.
"Why does he have to go back there at all?" Bae queried.

"Because Regina's his adopted mother. She has rights," Emma sighed.

*Rights I don't have. And neither does Emma,* Bae thought. But perhaps it wasn't too late to acquire some. He would have to look into it. "Oh. Well, I'll . . . uh see you all later," he said awkwardly.

He took Emma's arm in his own and they walked out the door.

He paused before he reached her car, saying, "Uh, I forgot to ask . . . how do I get to this Granny's bed and breakfast?"

"It's the only one in Storybrooke," Emma laughed. "Follow me, I'll take you to it. I used to stay there, until Regina made me move out. Now I stay with my friend, Mary Margaret." *Who's also my mother, Snow White,* she thought in slight amusement. She wondered what Bae would say to that. Maybe he wouldn't find it so shocking, considering whose son he was.

"Right. Lead the way, wild swan," Bae said, then stole another brief kiss and jumped on his bike, gunning the engine and putting on his helmet.

Emma backed slowly out of the Gold's driveway, waiting until Bae had come up behind her before driving slowly down the street towards Granny's. She kept glancing briefly in her rearview mirror, as if trying to reassure herself that Baelfire was actually there. Her mouth still tingled from his kiss.

It was still there. The fire, the passion, the magic.

He had come back. The one and only man she had ever loved.

And he would stay. For Henry. For her. Even for Mr. Gold. Emma just hoped he meant it. Because she couldn't bear to lose him a second time.

They reached Granny's and Emma honked her horn and waved at him before turning around and driving over to Mary Margaret's apartment. She couldn't wait to tell her what had happened. It would blow the sedate schoolteacher away.

**Page~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~Breath**

Henry played Monopoly with Alina on the dining room table while Mr. Gold and Belle sat nearby in the den, talking about some book they had both read. Just another quiet moment between family members. His grandparents. For a moment, he allowed himself to pretend this was normal, even though it wasn't, not for him. But it was okay if he pretended, just for now.

He rolled the dice, got a ten and a one. "Aww!" he groaned as he moved his dog down the block with Atlantic Avenue, where Alina owned half the property and had started putting houses on them. He landed on one of her properties and sighed. "Okay. How much?"

"Uh . . . let's see . . ." She consulted her cards, then said, "That'll be . . . two hundred bucks. Pay up."

Henry gave her the money. "I can't believe I let you get three properties like that. Now I'm doomed. I'm going to owe you the shirt off my back soon."

"But you have Park Place," she reminded him.

"Yeah, and you have the Boardwalk. And you're never gonna trade it to me. So you'll win . . .
eventually."

"Maybe. You're not gonna quit, are you?"

He shook his head. "No way! How'd you get so good anyway?"

She giggled. "I'm not that good, Henry. You've never played Papa. Now he's good! He can beat my butt in two seconds." She rolled the dice again, shaking them in her hands. "C'mon! Give me a twelve, baby! Mama needs a new pair of shoes."

*And I need a father*, Henry thought, smiling at Alina's wit. He wondered if that wish, made so long ago, would really come true, like he had hoped. His father was here now, but that didn't mean he'd stay.

Alina opened her hand and the dice fell onto the board. Eleven. She moved her piece past Go and collected two hundred dollars. Then she landed on Henry's small strip and paid him twenty-five.

They played until it was almost nine o'clock, and Henry was almost broke. But he would have cheerfully continued until he had no more money, when Gold said, "Henry. Time to go."

He sighed. "Okay. Bye, Alina. See you tomorrow." He picked up his backpack. He turned and hugged Belle. "Bye, Belle." He wished he could stay. He wished he could call her Grandma. He wished he had a normal family.

"Good night, Henry," she kissed his cheek. "Be careful driving, Rum."

"I will, sweetheart," he said, then gently ushered Henry out to the porch. He patted the boy on the shoulder before unlocking his Cadillac.

Henry slid into the front seat, looking wistfully at the Victorian. "I wish . . ." he trailed off.

"I wish the same thing," Gold said earnestly. "But for now . . . we have to wait. I know it's hard. But one day, Henry, we can just . . . be together, as a family."

"When?"

"I don't know. I wish I did." Gold sighed. Then he started the car and drove to Regina's house.

As he pulled into her driveway, he said, "If Regina lets you, come by my shop two days from now. I have something I think you'll like, okay?"

"Okay, Rum," Henry agreed, then he wrapped his arms around his grandfather and hugged him.

Rum returned the hug, wishing it was his son he was hugging. But he would settle for Henry. No, not settle, he corrected himself. He was happy his grandson wanted to be held by him. Now he understood better the odd connection he had felt with Henry. It was more than just the magic they shared. It was blood. It was Bae. And maybe, someday, it would be love too.

Reluctantly, Henry released Rumple and got out of the car and walked up to the door and let himself in with his key.

His grandfather watched as Henry opened the door and went inside, making sure he did so before Gold drove back home to where Belle and Alina waited.
The next morning, which was Sunday, Bae woke up and went downstairs and ordered breakfast, some scrambled eggs, ham, and toast with coffee. It was very good, but Bae didn't really enjoy it as much as he should have. He had spent a restless night, despite being tired, sleeping and waking up, his dreams formless things that impeded his ability to sleep soundly. Most of them were of himself as a boy and his father. Some of them were of Henry. All of them woke him and made him feel distinctly upset.

During his time in Japan, his mentor had told him that his dreams were ways his mind was trying to tell him that something was troubling him and he needed to resolve it, or face something he wanted to keep hidden.

Bae knew that his mind was trying to tell him that he needed to resolve two important matters. One was Henry. The other was his father.

Right then he decided that he should face his father first, and see what became of that. He sipped his coffee and considered his feelings towards the older man. They were a mixture of love and irritation and oddly enough, fear. Not fear of Gold's magic, which had been the case when he was a teenager. Gold here was no longer cursed. Gold here was more like the father he had known before the curse. Except Gold had something here he'd never had back when Bae was a kid.

Gold had a wife he truly loved and a little girl. A family again.

Seeing his father with Belle made Bae realize that what Rumple had with Milah had been a pale shadow of true love and devotion. His parents had never loved each other like that. But once his father had loved him. They had only each other, until that fateful day when Bae had used the bean.

Now Rumple had a new child to love, and Bae was suddenly afraid that there was no longer a place for him. It was ridiculous. He was a grown man, and had made his own way in the world for years alone. He thought he had outgrown his need for a father after losing Neal Cassidy. But he had been wrong. He still wanted . . . still needed . . . a parent. Losing Rumple had created a great hole in his life. Finding him again was like a dream come true.

Except . . . what if Rumple no longer needed him? No longer wanted the son who had rejected him, who had cursed him for using magic, and then used a different form of magic himself and proved himself a hypocrite? Whose last words to him had been you're a damn coward, Papa?

For years as a slave in Wonderland, those words had haunted him. For the first few months, he had told himself he hated his father, that it was all Rumple's fault he'd ended up in Wonderland, a slave to the Queen of Hearts. It had been easy to blame Rumplestiltskin at first. The man was a coward, had broken his word to him. But as his years of captivity wore on, and he had nothing else to look forward to but more years as her servant, he began to see that perhaps staying with his cursed father wasn't as bad as he'd once thought. Yes, his father had frightened him with his overzealousness and the way he had quickly used his magic to try and solve everything, he had been frightened of the way the magic had changed the gentle man he'd once known into a monster, but even that had been nothing compared to what the Queen of Hearts had done to him.

Gradually, I hate my father became something different, as he acknowledged that he had also been partially to blame for thinking a magic bean could solve all their problems, and using it had brought him to this sorry state. It became I wish I had made a different choice. I wish I had stayed beside him. And then it had become, I wish I had him back.

Being adopted by Neal Cassidy and his wife Sarah had filled some of the empty places in his soul, but after their deaths, Bae had come to realize that not all of them had been filled. He had loved his adopted parents, but a part of him had always longed for the father he had lost. And always would.
Now his father had been found. But questions still remained. And the only way he could answer them was by talking to the man he'd run from so long ago, the man who had been magic's slave but was now free, the man who had broken his word to his son, yet paradoxically had allowed himself to become a cursed monster for his son's safety.

Bae drained his coffee cup to the dregs and then pushed his chair back and stood up. After settling his bill, he went and got on his bike, and rode back to the salmon pink Victorian.

It was time to talk with his father. His gut clenched hard as he went up the walk and rang the bell. Alice answered the door. "Hello, handsome! Long time no see."

Bae smiled in spite of himself. "Hey, Alice. Is . . . my father home?"

She nodded. "Yup. He always is on Sundays. He spends his time with Belle and Alina. Come on in. I'll see where he is."

He followed her down the hall to the kitchen. Belle was there, sitting at the table munching on some trail mix and doing a crossword puzzle. He eyed her, wondering how and where she had met his father, and yet he couldn't bring himself to ask her something so personal.

Alice looked about, then said, "Belle, have you seen Mr. G anywhere around? Bae wants to see him."

Belle looked up then. "Oh! Hi! I was just doing some puzzles to pass the time. Uh . . . I think Rum is out in the backyard with Alina. Playing horseshoes or something."

"I'll go tell him you're here," Alice said, but Bae halted her.

"Wait. I . . . I can do that myself," Bae said. "You're not my servant, Alice. I'm sure you're busy. Don't worry, I can do that myself . . . in a little bit."

"Okay. I'm going to start dusting," Alice said, then left Belle and Baelfire alone.

Bae cleared his throat and said, "Uh . . . I don't mean to interrupt. I'll just . . . err . . . see what he's doing, okay?" Can I sound any more pathetic?

He moved towards the set of sliding glass doors, and as he did so, Belle called out, "Baelfire. Wait."

He paused. "Yeah?"

"There's something I . . . need to say to you. I know that . . . you've come to talk to him about . . . certain things that happened in the past. He told me about them yesterday." She looked awkwardly at him, biting her lip. "And well . . . I just want to remind you of something. You're a father now. What would you do if someone tried to hurt Henry? Really truly hurt him?"

"I'd kick his ass," Bae answered without even thinking. It was a gut reaction.

"Yes. And when those . . . men came to take you away to fight in the army . . . that was Rum's reaction too. He wanted to kick their ass. Only he couldn't, being just a spinner and unarmed and crippled. Not physically. So he did the only thing he could. He made a deal with the devil. And if you think he was wrong to do so, think about who he was . . . and who they were. And who he was protecting. Then think about what you would have done . . . if it were you and Henry. What would you do to protect the son you loved from harm? What would you give up, what would you
sacrifice, for your child? I know what my answer would be. Anything and everything. What's yours? Just think about it before you go out there. Okay?"

Bae nodded. "Okay." Then he said wryly, "Why do I get the feeling that if I said something else, you'd kick my ass right out the door?"

"Because you're right," she answered candidly. "If I thought you were going to hurt my husband, son or not, you'd be out that door so fast your head would be facing backwards."

"Uh huh. Lady, you're half my size and I could probably break you in half, but I don't doubt for a minute you'd try and kill me," Bae said, smirking. "So . . . I'll behave myself. I just came here to talk. And . . . I'll remember what you said."

"Good. They're out in the yard," Belle said, waving a hand towards the sliding glass doors.

Bae approached them, reaching for the handle. Then he halted, and just stood there, watching through them.

The yard was large, a great expanse of grass that was fenced, with some trees and a lawn that sloped down to an in-ground pool surrounded by gray flagstones and with some expensive patio furniture surrounding it. A white gazebo rested at one end. There was a tree house and a swing set on the lawn.

Nearby was a cleared space where a horseshoe pit had been dug. There stood Alina and his papa, playing horseshoes.

Alina was dressed in jeans and a blue shirt, her flyaway dark hair straggling loose from its pony tail. She was looking up at Rumple and saying something, grinning. She held a horseshoe in her right hand.

The stake in the pit had three around it and two more just outside it.

Rumple was peering down at her, one hand on his fine gold-headed cane, the other gesturing towards the horseshoe pit. He was wearing casual gray slacks, loafers, and a collared red golf shirt. His brown hair, flecked slightly with gray, fell in neat waves to his shoulders. His brown eyes sparkled with amusement.

Bae watched as Alina tossed her horseshoe at the stake in the ground.

It whipped about it and thumped to the ground.

The little girl was practically jumping up and down. She turned and said something to her father, who laughed and reached out and ruffled the dark hair affectionately.

Then Gold reached down and picked up his own horseshoe.

Bae watched, somewhat enviously, as he threw, scoring a bullseye as well, or whatever it was called.

Rumple said something to Alina, probably something like "Ha! Beat that!"

Alina went and retrieved the horseshoes from the pit and brought them back to her papa.

For long moments, Bae simply watched the two playing, mesmerized at the way the two seemed so perfect together. So happy. Father and daughter, each knowing they belonged with each other.
He bit back a sigh. Once he had nearly worshipped the man playing out there. Once . . . before a
dagger's curse . . . before a magic bean had swept them apart. Before he had called the man he
loved best in all the world a coward. Once upon a time they had been happy, like his sister was
now. Once . . .

Did he have a right to disturb their fragile peace? Their obvious happiness?

To intrude upon their family?

He was an outsider, belonging yet not. He thought about what Belle had said. He understood
where she was coming from. How could he not? He hesitated, then pushed open the door and
walked outside.

He stood for a moment beside the table where he had sat with Emma, eating Oreos and kissing her.
Then, gathering his courage, he walked across the lawn towards the pair.

"I'm gonna beat you this time, Papa!" Alina was saying to Rumple.

"Sure you are, dearie," her father smiled.

"I will. Just don't let me win," she ordered. "Because that's pathetic."

"Would I do that, Alina?"

"You would if you thought it'd make me happy," she answered. "So please don't, okay?"

"Okay, minx. Your turn."

Bae smiled wistfully at their exchange. They were so close. Just like he had been with Rumple
once. Don't let me win. And of course he would, and she knew it. You would if it made me happy.
Right there was what his papa had lived for . . . to make his child happy. Or he had before the
dagger's curse. Belle's words flashed again across his mind. And perhaps even after it as well.

He halted then, unable to make himself move forward.

Alina threw and the horseshoe almost hit the stake. "Rats! Missed!"

"Good try though," Rumple consoled her. Then he threw . . . and landed another dead center
around the stake.

"How do you do that?" Alina asked wonderingly.

"Practice, dearie," he answered.

Alina noticed her brother first, out of the corner of her eye. She turned around and waved, saying,
"Hey, Bae."

"Hey, yourself," he returned her greeting, his mouth suddenly dry as the Mojave.

"Hey," Rumple said, looking over at his son.

Okay. Now we've all said hello. I wonder if we can move past that now? Bae thought. He
swallowed, then said, "Could I . . . talk with you a few minutes, Papa? If you're finished, that is."
Rumple looked at him, startled reluctance painted across his lean face. "Yes, of course. Alina, sweetie, would you mind going inside by your mom for awhile?"

Alina looked from Rumple to Bae and back again, frissons of uneasiness going up and down her spine. Her intuition told her both men were nervous, and that was never a good sign. A sudden protectiveness rose in her, and she found herself glaring warningly at her brother and snapping, "You'd better not hurt him, Baelfire. Or else I'll rearrange you."

Bae gazed into his sister's brown eyes, at the little face, so serious. He fought to keep from smiling. There she was, this tiny waif, not even sixty pounds soaking wet, and she was threatening him! Protecting the sorcerer who was the most feared being in all the realms, like a lioness defending a cub! It spoke volumes to him about just how much she loved Rumplestiltskin.

"Alina!" Rumple reproved.

"What? I mean it," she said. Then she turned and hugged her father. "See you later, Papa." She trotted off towards the house, pausing once and glancing back, then heading over to the patio and the sliding glass doors.

Once she had gone inside, Rumple said, "Come with me, son. We can talk privately over here, in the gazebo."

Bae followed as his father limped across the lawn to a small white gazebo situated at the end of the pool area, it was painted white and had curling ivy and some kind of vine with purple flowers on it going up the trellis on one side. There was a wrought iron bench inside it and a small table, the bench had a thick cushion on it. Upon the table was a small stereo system.

Bae gasped when he saw it. "Is that a Bose?"

"It is. One of the latest models, a Wave III," answered Rumple. "I can sync it with my iPod and my smart phone and Belle's too. Alina's been begging me to get her an iPhone, but she's only ten and there's no way I'm getting my ten year old a smart phone. She doesn't need one, since the only places she goes to are school, Granny's, my shop, and Henry's house. And sometimes she visits Emma down at the station. But she can walk everywhere and she knows to call me on their phones if she's going to be late." He gestured to the bench. "Have a seat."

Bae sat down and Rumple did as well, leaning his cane in the corner. For long moments they just sat there, neither of them knowing where to begin or even how to begin. The silence stretched awkwardly.

Finally, Rumple cleared his throat and said, "You know, I never expected us to . . . meet like this, even though I've been looking for you since you used that beanstalk. I . . . know you must . . . hate me for what I did . . . but I can't . . ."

"Whoa! Wait, back up," Bae said suddenly. "I . . . damn, this is harder than I thought . . ." He moistened his lips. "Papa, I don't . . . hate you. I never have . . . well, maybe for a few months when I was trapped in Wonderland, but not after . . . yeah, sure I resented the hell out of you for breaking our deal that way, but I never . . . I could never hate you . . . I hated what the curse did to you . . . it took my father away from me and left a stranger in his place, sort of . . . I hated the fact that it was because of me you became the Dark One . . . that's what I hated, not you. Good Christ, you were all I had, ever since Mother left . . ."

"Bae, I never meant to break that deal with you . . . I'm so sorry . . . you'll never know how much . . . I know it's not enough, but I . . . just wanted you to hear me say it," Rumple began, his voice
gone hoarse and strained with emotion. He blinked rapidly. "You were right, I am a coward, I let the magic control me . . . but I know better now. I should have gone with you, but I was . . . afraid . . ." the words gushed from his lips like blood from a fatal wound, stained crimson with blood and tears. He swallowed again and again, but the lump in his throat was still there, and his eyes stung with tears. Finally he gritted out, " . . . that if I gave up the dark magic I couldn't protect you . . . I'd be nothing again . . . just a crippled spinner . . . useless . . . do you see? I was wrong . . ."

Bae flinched at the pain he saw in the other's gaze. "Yeah, but so was I. I was desperate . . . and so were you . . . I thought I had found the solution, that it was so easy . . . get a magic bean and go to a different world . . . but it wasn't, because nothing ever is . . . hell, what did I know, I was just a stupid kid . . . I didn't know then, like I do now . . . what it meant to be really powerless, to have someone else control you . . . make you feel like nothing . . . you'd always protected me, or tried to . . . but the Queen of Hearts taught me what a slave was worth, which was less than spit."

Rumple stared at his son in horror. "You . . . a slave? To Cora Miller?"

"Yeah. I slipped climbing down the beanstalk and I fell into a portal to Wonderland. Then she came, and made me her page . . . at first I thought it was great, but then . . . then I started to see her for what she was . . . worse than you when you were the Dark One, because there wasn't any curse on her . . . she was just wicked and cruel and sick . . . the things she did . . . and I was helpless to stop them, and then I understood why you chose the magic, because I would have done anything in order to stop being so helpless, to finally gain some control over my life . . ." He began to tremble then, as he told Rumplestiltskin things he had never told another soul before, because they wouldn't have understood, but he knew his father would, because his father had been where he was.

Rumplestiltskin listened and found himself horrified over what his son, his innocent child, had endured, black with rage at the Queen of Hearts, and filled with regret so deep it stabbed him to the heart. He had done this. It was his fault. He had driven Bae away by becoming a monster.

"My God! Oh, Bae!" he managed to stammer, and then he noticed the trembling, saw the dark terror in the brown eyes that had once been filled only with light and laughter and love. "Bae . . . my poor boy . . . Bae, look at me. You're all right now. She can't hurt you, it's okay . . ." Only it wasn't and maybe it would never be again.

The tremors worsened, and suddenly Bae was no longer sitting in his father's gazebo in the yard, but back wearing that stinking uniform as her page and being called "boy" and "it" and made to watch while she executed dozens of helpless people, one by one, and heard her maniacal laugh . . . suddenly he was fifteen, far from home, and he desperately wanted to go back, to tell his papa he was sorry, he wanted to feel his father's strong arms around him, holding him close, telling him it was just a nightmare . . .

. . . and then he felt arms about him, hugging him, and heard his father's voice saying, "Bae . . . it's okay now . . . you're safe . . . it's all right, son."

He put his head down on his father's shoulder, breathing in the scent of him. Safe. I'm all right now. Safe and sound. Right here. It's okay. He exhaled softly, and then because he knew he was safe, both then and now, he did something he had never allowed himself to do before, he released the stranglehold upon his emotions, and let the fifteen year old within him out, and tears fell on Rumple's shoulder, as he wept for what he had done and been and lost, and now had found anew.

"Shhh . . . it's okay . . . I'm here, right here . . . oh, Bae, I'm so sorry . . ." and the familiar arms hugged him tight and would have squeezed the breath from him if he hadn't been an adult now, and not the skinny fifteen year old of his memories.
"I'm sorry too . . ." he gasped, and turned his head to look at his father, and saw that he too was
crying. "God, I'm a screwed up mess . . . and so are you . . . I thought . . . I thought I'd dealt with
this years ago . . . only I didn't really . . . not like this . . ."

"You could go see Archie Hopper, son. He's a therapist," his father began.

"No. This is all the therapy I need. Just to talk . . ." Bae released a shivering breath then gently
disengaged himself from his father's arms. "Sorry. Like I said, I thought I was okay with what
happened . . . it was like a lifetime ago, but then I guess you never do forget fifteen years as
somebody's puppet, huh? That was why I became a martial arts instructor, you know. So I could
protect myself and never ever be a victim again."

Rumple wiped his eyes. "This . . . what happened to you is my fault. I drove you away . . . I was a
monster . . ."

"No! Papa, stop! I can't let you blame yourself for this. I made the choice to use the bean. I didn't
have to, nobody made me. It was my decision. And so was the price I paid for it. Hell, I know you
made a lot of mistakes. Well, so did I. And if there's one thing I learned from my mentor in Japan,
is that the past is written on sand, and you learn from your mistakes and then let it be washed
away. Because there' s no sense in carrying guilt around like a mountain for what's done and gone.
You're no coward either. You took that dagger's curse for me, and that's the bravest thing anyone
could ever do for me. You weren't a perfect father, though you tried your best, and I wasn't a
perfect son either. Not with you and not with Neal Cassidy."

"You were better than I deserved."

"Hey! Aren't you listening to me?" Bae asked sharply.

"Of course I am."

"Like hell you are. Quit being a stubborn ass, Papa. I didn't come here so I could tear you apart, so
I could rant and rave at you and blame you for everything that went wrong in my life. I came here
because my son summoned me . . . finding you again, finding Emma . . . it was like winning one of
those stupid scratch off games at a convenience store. One shot in ten million. I found my family
again, Papa. I thought I was alone after the Cassidys died in that accident, and then I come here
and suddenly there you all are. My head's still spinning around. But one thing I do know is that . . .
life's too short for me to wallow in past regrets and things I could've or should've done. And the
same goes for you."

"Are you saying . . . you forgive me? But you don't even know what else I've done . . ." Rumple
began, hope fluttering in his breast.

"You can tell me another time. But whatever the hell it is, I forgive you for it. If you'll forgive me
for being a stupid know-it-all kid, okay?"

"There's nothing for me to forgive you for, Bae . . ."

"Papa! Christ, I'm not a damn saint," his son growled. "Do you or don't you?"

"Yes. Always."

"Thanks. Now, there's one more question I have to ask you. You have a new family here, with
Belle and Alina. I don't want to intrude on it—"

"Bae! Now who's being a stubborn ass?" Rumple demanded. "This is your family too, son. It
always was and always will be. So . . . welcome home." Then he grabbed his son and hugged him hard. There were tears in his eyes as Bae hugged him back.
Beautiful Boy

Chapter Summary

Henry is hurt and Bae helps him and they begin to bond, as well as Bae learning more about Belle and Alina

While Bae and Rumple were talking outside, Alina went inside by her mother and Alice. Still uneasy about her brother and father together, she bit her lip and looked worriedly towards the backyard after coming indoors.

Belle looked up and noticed her daughter's expression and said, "Alina, honey, come and sit down and have a cup of tea with me and Alice."

"And some chocolate peanut butter cookies," Alice said, carrying a plate of them over to the table and setting them down. "I know they're your favorite, and Belle's too." She filled the white and blue porcelain teapot with hot water and tea bags and handed out the matching blue and white teacups. She set them down on the table and pushed over the container with the Splenda and sugar packets and the small milk pitcher shaped like a rooster as well.

As Belle poured out the tea and handed round the sugar and milk pitcher, she said to Alina, "You look kind of nervous, Alina. Anything wrong?"

Alina shook her head at first. There was nothing wrong with her. She was just concerned about her brother and what he was speaking about with her papa. Then she slowly nodded. "Mama, I was... worried about what Bae and Papa are talking about. They looked... I felt like they weren't happy with each other when Bae came and said he wanted to talk with Papa. I got a funny feeling here," she tapped her chest. "So I... I told Bae he'd better not hurt Papa or else I'd rearrange him."

Alice started snickering behind her napkin. "Kiddo, you're something else!"

Belle giggled softly as well, then said, "You'd rearrange him, Alina? Just what's that supposed to mean?"

"Uh, you know, Mama. Like when you threaten to rearrange somebody's face," her daughter explained.

"Oh, dear. And I... uh... wasn't very welcoming to him either, I'm afraid," Belle admitted. "I... told him that if he hurt your papa I'd kick his behind out of my house."

"Getting a bit overprotective there, aren't you, Belle?" Alice teased, sipping her tea.

Belle shrugged. "I suppose it's natural. Rum's my husband, and I just want to make sure nobody hurts him like they did before."

Alina nodded. "That's how I feel too, Mama. It's not like I don't like my brother, but there's something... I don't know... that made me nervous, and I know that they didn't... that he didn't leave Papa on good terms last time... and I was just afraid he'd... quarrel with him and... I know how much Papa wants his son back, so..."
Belle reached out and laid her hand on Alina's shoulder. "I know exactly how you feel, honey. Both of us love your papa so much, and we don't want to see him get hurt, even though he can probably protect himself just fine."

"From Regina, yeah," Alina agreed. "But from his family, Mama . . . I don't know."

"Well, Bae and I had a small discussion before he went out to talk to your papa, so hopefully it helped, and he's more understanding now and less willing to . . . open up old wounds," Belle said. "I truly hope he and your papa have a nice talk and agree to resolve whatever issues they have, so we can be a complete family again. I know how much Rum wants us all to be together, and I'd be willing to welcome Baelfire so long as he doesn't bring turmoil into our lives."

"Guess you'll just have to wait and see," Alice said philosophically, eating a cookie. "But just so you know, if that boy starts with Mr. G, he'll have to talk fast before I whack him upside the head with my skillet."

Belle and Alina started laughing, imagining diminutive Alice chasing the tall Baelfire around the kitchen table and trying to hit him with her skillet.

"Oh, boy!" Belle snickered. "Between all of us, Rum is pretty well defended, I'd say." She looked over at Alina. "Does it bother you, baby, that your brother is here?"

"Only if he happens to fight with Papa," Alina said, eating a cookie also. "I don't mind having a big brother otherwise, Mama. I mean, I'm not some jealous brat just 'cause I have to share Papa with him. I'm not five, y'know."

Belle smiled at her. "I know. And I think if you give him a chance, you'll really like having a brother around, Alina. I know when I was growing up, I always wanted a brother or sister, but my papa never remarried after my mama died. So I ended up rather lonely, though when I was eleven Alice came to work in the castle and we became best friends, almost like sisters."

"Ain't that the truth!" Alice grinned.

"Like Henry and me?" Alina asked.

Belle nodded. "Just like that." She carefully stirred milk into her tea and sipped it. Then she dunked a cookie in it and ate it.

"What did you two do growing up?" Alina asked curiously.

"Oh, lots of things. But since Alice was an apprentice chef in the kitchens, I spent a lot of time down there, learning how to cook," Belle said. "After I had lessons with my tutors, that is."

"She taught me how to read better," Alice said. "I only had a few years at my village school, see, before my mom and I moved to Avonlea city, and I couldn't read all that well. And I was an awful speller. Until Belle taught me better, and lent me her books to help me learn how to spell and the meanings of words."

"Later on, I lent her my novels and histories," Belle said. "And we used to discuss them when we were making bread or pie crust."

"Or chopping up vegetables for soup," Alice recalled.

While the two women and Alina discussed their long-ago childhoods, Bae and Rumple listened to the Bose and Bae asked Rumple about being called Mr. Gold in this world.
"Where did you get that name, Papa?" he asked while the radio played softly, cycling through Gold's playlist on his phone.

"That was the name the curse gave me," Rumple explained. "I couldn't recall anything about my past until this year, after Emma came here. I suppose calling me that makes sense, considering what I could do with my magic. And also because I happen to have a lot of money here in Storybrooke. Maybe it's Regina's idea of a joke."

Bae scowled. "If it is, it's not very funny. Emma told me she's Henry's adopted mother."

"Yes. And I'm afraid that's my fault," Rumple sighed heavily. "You see, I was the one who acquired him for her. Though of course I had no idea whose son he was until Emma arrived. The records of his birth mother were sealed and even then, I might not have made the connection."

"Am I . . . listed as his father on the birth certificate?"

"I believe so, though I can't be sure unless I pay to have the documents unsealed," Gold pointed out. "Emma would know, however."

"I'll ask her," Bae said. "It doesn't seem like Henry likes his stepmom very much."

"She's the Evil Queen, Bae. What heart she had, she destroyed long ago with hate and revenge. She can't love the boy, only pretend to. And Henry knows it."

"I don't like him being there," Bae said. "Is there any way we could . . . get him away from her?"

"It's a difficult thing, dearie," Rumple sighed. "In order to do so, we'd have to file a custody suit, and prove Regina an unfit mother. And that won't be easy, since she's covered her tracks well, and she's careful not to be openly abusive of Henry."

"But you can make a case against her?"

"Eventually, yes. If I can get enough evidence," Rumple allowed. "However, it would be easier to do so if you and Emma could . . . show you are a couple again. Most juries don't like separate birth parents suing for custody. They want to see a two parent household, to provide unity and responsibility and all of that."

"But they allowed Regina, a single parent, to adopt Henry," Bae objected.

"She pulled strings, Bae. Maybe even used her magic to influence people," Rumple said. "I know you want to protect your son. I do also. But we have to take it one step at a time."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," sighed his son. "I really need to spend time with the kid. He doesn't know me and I don't know him. But I want to change that. Emma and I both have decent jobs, and I can support a family. If she's willing to get back together with me—marry me—I can just move my dojo over here and start out with new students."

"Once the curse is broken," Rumple agreed.

"What do you think will happen when it is?" asked Bae curiously. "I mean, obviously, you'll all gain your memories back, but . . . will you also all return to . . . to the world we came from?"

"That's a good question," Rumple mused. "I . . . created that curse so I could find you, Bae, but even I don't know quite what will happen when it breaks. Magic like that is . . . unpredictable. Especially in this world."
"You created it?" Bae stammered.

"Yes, but I never intended it to the use Regina put it," Rumple sighed. "I was eventually going to use it on myself, to bring me to you."

"Then how did Regina get her hands on it?"

"That's a long story . . . and maybe it's best discussed another time."

Bae eyed him shrewdly. "You made another deal with the devil, didn't you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. There's much in my past that I'm not . . . proud of at all, Bae."

"Mmm . . . me too. I guess that's enough for us to go on with for now. I'm sort of hungry, now that I think about it."

"Then why don't we go inside and see what Alice has for a snack?" his father suggested. "I'm rather hungry too."

Rumple shut off the radio and then rose, using his cane, and Bae followed him as they walked back across the lawn to the patio and into the house.

As they entered the kitchen through the sliding glass doors, Rumple said, "What's this? You're having a tea party and didn't invite us? Or is this one of those girls' only things?"

"No, you can join us," Belle laughed. "But we were hungry and didn't feel like waiting for hours while you two got caught up."

"We've done that," said her husband. "Let me get some more cups," he said, and limped back out into the den where the curio cabinet was. It was not the original one, as that had been smashed to pieces by Moe, but Gold had managed to buy a replacement that was almost as nice as the original.

Bae came and sat down next to Alina and across from Belle at the table. He looked at his small sister and said, "Still want to rearrange me?"

The little girl shook her head slightly. "No. I only said that if you started fighting with Papa. You haven't been, right?"

"No. I didn't come here to fight with him, Alina," Bae told her calmly. "I came here to talk, that's all. And we did and now things are okay between us again."

"Then will you be moving here?" she asked.

"Uh . . . I don't know about that yet," Bae said. "I've gotten used to being on my own . . . but . . . we'll see."

"No, not living here in this house," she clarified. "I mean, moving here, to Storybrooke."

"Ah. Well, I've thought about it. But I need to take a look around . . . find a place to open up my dojo again and stuff. It might take me a few months to get everything settled. But I definitely don't want to be apart from my family again, if I can help it."

"That's good," Alina said. "Because I wouldn't like being apart from my brother. And Henry would probably die if you left, he's been wanting a dad for ages, ever since I've known him, and we've been friends since we were five."
"That's not going to happen," Bae reassured her. "If I have to go back to Phoenix, it'll only be long
enough to settle my affairs there and then I'll come right back."

"That's good to know," said Rumple as he entered the kitchen again, holding his chipped cup and a
second one from the teaset in his hand.

He gave the whole one to Bae and sat down at the table next to Belle, setting the chipped one
down in front of him.

Belle's eyes widened and she gasped upon seeing it. "You still have it! My chipped cup!"

Her husband looked at her, his eyes gone soft with love. "Of course I do. Out of everything I
possess, this cup is the one thing I cherish most."

Bae looked back and forth between them. "Why?"

"It's like a talisman," Alina explained before either of her parents could reply. "Back in the fairy
tale world, Mama lived with Papa in the Dark Castle, as his chatelaine, and one day she dropped
that cup on the floor when Papa made a joke and it chipped."

"And I was terrified he was going to do something terrible to me... because that's what most
nobles would have done to servants who broke things... at least most of the ones I'd known
growing up in my father's palace," Belle explained.

"And as the Dark One, I had a horrible reputation as a nasty beast," Rumple said.

"But Papa was falling in love with her," Alina continued. "And he's never been one to really value
things over people, so... all he said to her was, "It's just a cup," and let it go."

"But that was the beginning of our relationship as something besides master and servant," Belle
said. "It was then that I began to see the man beneath the beast, the lonely heart that wished for
someone to love... and someone to love him in return."

"And the cup became a symbol of our love for each other, and a way to remember Belle when I
thought she had died," Rumple told Bae.

"Because of the curse?" Bae asked.

"No, because of Regina," Alina replied. "She lied to Papa, and told her Mama was dead."

"And so did I, actually," Alice interjected.

"Huh? You just lost me," Bae said.

"It'll help if you read Henry's book," his sister told him. "The Once Upon a Time Chronicles. It'll
explain everything so much better."

"But just to sum up a few things," Rumple began, pouring some tea into his chipped cup, "I made a
deal with Belle's father, King Maurice, to rid his kingdom of ogres if Belle were to come and live
with me as my chatelaine." He told Bae the story of himself and Belle, and what had happened to
them so long ago in the Dark Castle, ending with Regina's unexpected visit to the castle while
Alice was gone, supposedly fetching Belle, and Alina was there as a baby, but hidden from her by
Rum's magic. "I wasn't convinced Regina was telling the truth, you see, but Alice confirmed her
story, so then I believed it," Rumple explained.
"She manipulated me too," Alice said. "Then again, that wasn't hard to do, considering the state I was in when I arrived back at the palace. By then I'd been in labor for almost half a day, and I was trying like hell to find out where Belle was before I had my baby. They'd moved her, you see, and no one seemed to know where she'd gone. I was frantic. I knew she was out of favor with Maurice, who'd ordered Gaston and his guardsmen to hunt down his own grandchild and kill her. When I couldn't find Belle, I almost fainted. I tried asking some of the kitchen staff, who all knew me and that I was her best friend, but they didn't seem to know anything. One girl told me she'd heard Belle had taken sick with childbed fever and was moved upstairs to a tower room. Someone else claimed her father had locked her in there until she recanted of her "unnatural love" for a dark beast and her abominable child. The king wanted her to tell where the child was, since they couldn't find it, and Belle refused, so he locked her up "for her own good".

"That part was true," Belle said softly. "He did lock me up because I refused to tell him where Alina was. And I was slightly sick from the birth, but I wasn't dying or anything. I was stuck in the tower, almost going crazy, because I couldn't be with Rumple and Alina. My father refused to listen to me, he claimed I was possessed and out of my mind, that Rum had enchanted me. He refused to believe that I knew the Dark One true's nature, knew the man and the sorcerer better than anyone ever had, and that the child born of our love was not a creature of darkness. Nothing I said could convince him. He flew into a rage, claimed I was disloyal and had betrayed him by falling for a dark sorcerer and I would remain shut up in the tower until I came to my senses. But I managed to bribe one of my jailers to search for Alice. She was the only one I could trust."

"Only when the man found me, I was having my baby, and they kicked him out of the room before he delivered his message," Alice said. "It must have been around that time that Regina showed up."

"It was. I don't know what she told him, or what kind of deal he struck with her," Belle said. "But the next thing I knew was she had me bound and gagged and thrown in the back of her coach like a basket of apples. The journey back to her kingdom was so rough that I passed out. When I woke up, I was her prisoner. First in her dungeon and later in Storybrooke, I was a patient at the insane asylum, under the false name Lacey Beauregard. She told me that if she could not have her happy ending, then no one should, and she would make sure of it."

"And during that time, I was delivering my baby, and I was so weak from walking all the way back from the Dark Castle that I fainted just as my baby was born," Alice said. "When I came to, Mistress Amelia was crying and she told me the baby was stillborn and Belle had died, according to Maurice, and the kingdom was in mourning. But that last was just a story put about by Maurice to cover up what he'd done—selling his own daughter to that filthy witch."

Rumple's eyes flashed almost molten at that, and he growled, "Just one more thing he has to answer for."

"He's here?" Bae asked.

"Yes. He's a florist called Moe French in Storybrooke," Rumple said shortly.

"He sounds like he's sick in the head," Bae remarked. "Just like Regina. Both of them sound like they're totally psycho."

"Regina definitely is," Belle asserted. "My father . . . well . . . he's totally screwed up."

Rumple drank some tea from his cup and ate two cookies, then said, "That's something I knew a long time ago, dearie. But let's discuss something else. Talking about him gives me indigestion."

"Can't say I blame you, Rum." Alice said. Then she began to talk about Miner's Day, and some of
the things she wanted to bake for it.

Bae turned to Alina, after eating a few cookies, and said, "Would you mind telling me a little bit about Henry? Belle told me you're his best friend."

"Okay," she said. "What do you want to know?"

"Just a few things. Like . . . his favorite food and uh . . . " Bae floundered.

"He loves hot cocoa with cinnamon. Actually, he loves cinnamon on almost anything, except for apples. He can't stand them, because of Regina. Because she's poisoned people with apples, you know . . ."
shoebox on the street and eating leftovers out of somebody's garbage, young man."

Henry stomped upstairs, thinking that at least if he lived on the street he'd be free of Regina. And that was probably worth it. He tossed his backpack on the floor and flung himself on his bed. He knew he should call Alina and tell her what went on, but he couldn't bring himself to do that. Not yet.

After twenty minutes, the house got quiet and he thought Regina had left for her meeting. He crept downstairs and saw her car was gone. Abruptly he decided to hell with her dictates and he went to open the front door and go out. He didn't care what happened if she came home and he was gone. He was going to spend the day with his father.

The door was locked.

Frantic, he tugged on it, thinking it was stuck. But no . . . it was locked.

Then he ran over to the back door off the kitchen and found that it too was locked. When he tried the button on the wall to open the garage, he found that it was also locked down.

"I can't believe she locked me up in my own house!" he yelled angrily.

This was going too far. Maybe Regina had gone crazy. Or maybe she was getting jealous and trying to keep Henry all to herself. Well, fat chance of that!

Henry raced upstairs. Luckily he had watched over a dozen James Bond movies and so he knew how to get out of a locked house. He dragged some sheets from the linen closet and an old jump rope and began to tie it all together.

Ten minutes later he had a serviceable rope which he knotted around his bedpost, after first moving the bed against the wall. Then he tossed the rope out the window.

It was a little short, like by three feet, but that was all right. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and climbed out the window. He felt almost like a captive in one of his adventure stories, or a convict escaping from Alcatraz. He just hoped nobody saw him doing this, or they might mistake him for a robber and call Regina or Emma over to investigate.

Luckily, his room didn't face the street. He climbed carefully down the side of the house, glad that he had learned how to climb up a rope and down one in gym class. Finally he reached the end of the sheet rope, and he let go and jumped to the ground.

Only for some reason he landed wrong on his left foot and he felt something twist beneath him. He fell to the ground, yelping at the sudden hot flash of pain in his left ankle. "Oww!"

He rubbed it before getting to his feet. His hurt ankle throbbed and he couldn't put a lot of his weight on it, but he could still walk. He walked down his driveway and out into the street casually, trying his best not to limp on his sore ankle. Then he headed towards Gold's Victorian.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Bae was talking a short walk down to the end of the block, he needed some exercise after eating four peanut butter chocolate chip cookies. Those cookies were more addicting than Oreos, he decided. He could understand why Belle, Alina, and his father loved them. He hadn't had homemade cookies in ages, and Alice was probably a better baker than Betty Crocker.

I need to start doing my workouts again if I'm going to be eating like this on a daily basis,
reminded himself. He increased his pace to a brisk walk and noted that most of the houses on this block were affluent ones, though none were as big as Gold's, or looked as tasteful.

This was a nice town, even if it was cursed, he thought. He could get used to it here, though he did miss the heat of Phoenix. He shivered and clutched his jacket closer. Maybe he should have asked his father to borrow a sweatshirt. If he even owned one. Then he supposed Gold must, since nobody could wear suits and golf shirts all the time. A slight wind blew across the street and rattled the tree branches of the flowering dogwoods and beeches in people's yards.

Bae walked faster, his hands in his pockets.

His thoughts now turned to Emma and Henry.

As if his thoughts had conjured him, Henry appeared at the end of the street.

Bae halted, wondering if this were just a figment of his imagination. But then he saw the boy come towards him, and realized it was no daydream. He waved at Bae. "Hello!"

"Hey, Henry," Bae called to him. Then he frowned. There was something off about the kid's gait. Almost like he was limping. No, he was limping, Bae corrected himself. He jogged over to the boy, concerned. "Did you hurt your leg?"

"Umm . . . yeah, a little," Henry said. "I had to climb out the window because Regina locked me in the house and I landed wrong on it and I think I sprained it a little."

"You just climbed out a window?" Bae repeated, shocked. "My God, kid, you could have been killed!"

"It wasn't that high and . . . there was no other way out of there. She locked all the doors," Henry protested, then winced as he put too much weight on his sore ankle.

Bae noticed and knelt, gently feeling the ankle. "That's starting to swell. You shouldn't be walking on it like that. Come on, I'll take you back to your . . . uh . . . grandfather's house and I can put some ice on it and wrap it up."

Before Henry could say anything, he found himself picked up gently and the next thing he knew he was being carried in Baelfire's arms down the street.

At first he felt kind of awkward being carried like that, but soon he just relaxed and enjoyed the feel of his father's arms about him, holding him securely against his well-muscled chest. Henry snuggled a little into Bae's shirt and jacket, inhaling the masculine smells of leather and some kind of spicy aftershave and a good clean solid manly smell, which had been something Henry had never had before, but with which he suddenly connected. It was rare for him to be held, Regina was not the hugging sort, and even as a small child, Henry didn't recall many times when she had held him. As soon as he could walk, she had let him, and she never seemed to have much time to sit with him and snuggle with him or other things he had seen Rumple do with Alina.

Maybe he was a bit old to be carried like this, but Henry found he didn't mind it at all. Instead he reveled in the closeness he felt to his father. He had always envied Alina a little for having what he'd always wished for, a father to love and protect and advise her. But now, with Baelfire, he had what he'd been longing for since he realized that he didn't have a father like most of the other kids in Storybrooke. He leaned his head on Bae's chest and listened to the rhythm of his father's heartbeat, releasing a soft sigh of contentment.

"You okay?" Bae asked, looking down at his son in concern. "Your ankle probably hurts like hell,
sprains always do, but it'll feel better once I get some ice on it and an Ace bandage."

His brown eyes met those of his boy, and Bae found an overwhelming tide of love and protectiveness rising in him, stronger than anything he'd ever felt before for anyone save perhaps for Emma. When he had first seen Henry last night, he'd been too overwhelmed by the fact that he existed to feel much except shock. But now, holding his child in his arms, he was filled with a sudden urge to make sure his son never suffered any more pain or hurt ever. He understood now what had driven Rumple to use the dagger, for he would have cheerfully taken a bullet or worse for this boy in his arms, this beautiful boy, the product of his and Emma's love for each other, this remarkable gift he'd never expected to be given.

"It doesn't hurt so bad now," Henry told him, and it was true. Once he was off the injured foot, the throbbing wasn't half as bad as it had been. And being held by his father eclipsed any twinges of pain he'd been feeling until then.

Bae smiled at the answer, which was something he'd said to his own father whenever he'd gotten scraped or beaten up by some of the bigger village boys for being the son of the local coward. He had seen the pain and anger in Rumple's eyes and he'd strove instinctively to make it less, for his father didn't deserve the sneers and criticism he'd received from his neighbors. For that, Bae blamed Milah, for not standing beside her husband and sticking up for him. Abandoning him and her son just proved, in the eyes of the villagers, that Rumplestiltskin was no good, a coward that not even his own wife could stand. Only Bae had known the truth, and he had fought for his father's self-respect, even when fighting only got him hurt, because to do any less had been unthinkable.

It took about five minutes for Bae and Henry to reach Rumple and Belle's house, Bae's long legs, encased in jeans and his sneakers, eating up the pavement in swift easy strides, despite carrying Henry in his arms.

He set Henry down briefly to open the front door, then picked him up again and went inside. "Let me put you down here in the den," Bae said to Henry, walking down the hall to it. "You just sit here and I'm going to get some ice and bandages, okay?"

He emerged into the hall to find Belle, Rumple, and Alina all staring at him.

"What's going on?" Belle asked.

At the same time Alina said, "What's happened to Henry, Bae?"

"Yes, why were you carrying him?" Rumple wanted to know. "Is he hurt?"

"I found him coming down the street while I was walking," Bae answered. "He's sprained his ankle climbing out his bedroom window, I think."

"He was climbing out the window?" Rumple frowned. "What for?"

"Was it cause of Regina?" demanded Alina suspiciously.

"I don't know the whole story yet," Bae told them. "Why don't you go and ask him while I go and get some stuff I need? Papa, do you have a bucket? I need to fill it with ice. And an Ace bandage or something like it?"

"In the bathroom down here I have some first aid supplies, you can ask Alice for an extra bucket and she can get you the ice too," Rumple said. He found he was feeling the same sort of worry and tightness in his chest that he had whenever Bae had been hurt as a child. Or when Alina had been hurt by that bully Tom.
As Bae hurried into the kitchen to talk with Alice, Alina bounded into the den to see her best friend, who was now her nephew as well. "Henry! What were you doing climbing out the window?"

"Hey, Alina. I had to, because Regina locked me up. She wouldn't let me come over, she . . . she was being a total jerk and she said . . . she said . . ." he looked up as Rumple and Belle entered the den. " . . . she said she didn't want me associating with people like you, Rum, and she wanted me to stay home and that was that."

"People like me?" Rumple raised an eyebrow.

"Excuse me?" Belle said, a scowl coming over her expressive face. "What's she implying? That my husband's no good, that scheming evil . . . witch? How dare she say that?"

"Yeah! Who does she think she is?" Alina snapped.

"The Evil Queen," Henry sighed. "Anyway, that's how I got hurt. I tied a bunch of sheets and a jump rope together to my bedpost and climbed out the window, but it wasn't long enough to reach the ground, and when I jumped down, I landed wrong on my ankle."

"Perhaps we'd better take you to the hospital," Belle suggested.

"No!" Henry objected. "Then she'll find out I tried to escape."

"But you could need X-rays," Belle said worriedly.

"He doesn't," Bae interjected, coming into the den with a bucket filled with ice, a towel, and a roll of Ace bandages. "I checked it out before I brought him home, Belle. I took a course in sports medicine and treatments, since given what I am and what I do for a living, I need to know that kind of thing, just in case a student of mine gets hurt during a class or a tournament. I know the difference between a sprain and a broken ankle, trust me. He's got a mildly strained tendon, but nothing more serious."

"You're sure?" Rumple asked.

"Oh, yeah. I've seen some pretty bad ones, Papa," Bae reassured him. Then he put the bucket down beside Henry and knelt in front of him. "Okay, tiger. I'm going to take off your sneaker now. I'll be as gentle as I can, but it might hurt." Suiting actions to words, Bae gently untied Henry's Converse and removed it.

The boy winced and hissed as the martial arts instructor removed his sock, revealing his ankle, which was swollen and turning a shade of bluish purple almost like a blueberry.

Bae carefully felt the ankle, saying, "Yeah, I know it hurts, kid, but it's not as bad as it looks. You've probably pulled the tendon along here and here," he indicated where by tapping the injured foot. "But it'll heal in about a week or two. Right now I'm going to do two things. First, I'm going to have you put your foot in this bucket of ice for about fifteen minutes. That's going to bring the swelling down and help with the pain. After that, I'm going to put a warm towel on it for about twenty minutes, and we'll alternate hot and cold compresses for about an hour before I wrap it, okay? Papa, do you have some children's Tylenol or Advil?"

"Yes. I'll get some," Rumple answered, and limped off towards the medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

"You can take some of that too," Bae said, and carefully lifted his son's foot and put it into the ice
bucket.

Henry shuddered. "Ahh! That’s cold!"

"Relax, kid," Bae soothed. "It's only cold till you get used to it. But doesn't it make you feel a little better? Soon it'll numb all that pain away." He rubbed along his son’s leg.

Henry had to admit that after about five minutes, the ice did feel really good, and he took the two Tylenol Rumple gave him without protest as well.

Bae sat back on his heels and shook his head reprovingly. "I can't believe you climbed out your window without bothering to call one of us."

Before Henry could defend his reasoning, Rumple broke in with a snort. "Like father like son, I'd say. Or don't you remember the time you climbed that maple tree when you were eight and the branch broke and so did your arm?"

"Uh . . . that was different. That snot Grady Marcus dared me to," Bae defended.

His father rolled his eyes. "And that excuse sounds as lame now as it did twenty-one years ago, Baelfire."

"Papa, I was eight, and they were teasing me," his son protested. "They said that I'd never do it because I was the son of the village coward so . . . I . . . well, I had to. How was I supposed to know the branch would break?"

"By using the brains you were born with," his father sighed.

Belle chuckled. "At eight, no boy does that, Rum."

"I might have thought about it, but I'd still have done it," Alina spoke up. "And then I'd have dropped a branch right down on that stupid kid's head too! Nobody calls my papa a coward!"

"Hopeless, the two of you!" groaned their father. "The both of you would risk your necks over some stupid names an idiot like that called me."

"It's because they love you, Rum," Belle said, putting an arm about him.

"And when you love somebody, you protect them," Henry put in. "Like I tried to do to Alina when Tom was pounding her head into the blacktop."

Bae stared at his son and his sister. "Wait a damn minute! You're telling me some kid beat you up, Alina?"

Alina nodded. "Uh huh. His name's Tom Mason, and he's nothing but a big bully and one day at recess he ate my friend Paige's brownie . . ." She told her brother all about the fight that had resulted in and how Tom had smashed her head into the ground and put her in the hospital with a concussion and seven stitches on her head.

Bae gaped at her. "You're telling me some bullying little snot put you in the hospital and he's not dead yet? Where is he? You want me to go and kick his ass?"

Before Alina could respond, Belle said sharply, "Rum, you never told me that! What were you waiting for, next Christmas?"

"I was going to, dearie, but we were sort of busy . . ." he began.
"Now I want to kick that kid's ass!" growled Belle, her blue eyes flashing.

"That won't be necessary," Rumple informed them. "I took care of it."

"What did you do to him?" Bae wanted to know.

Rumple told him. "Emma convinced me not to beat the boy into the ground, like I wanted to at first. And once I'd thought about it, I saw she was right. Having Tom come work for me in my shop was a far better solution. Not quite as satisfying, but better."

Bae grunted. "Humph! How's the ankle feel now, tiger?"

"Better. It doesn't hurt at all now," Henry said.

"That's because it's numbed," Bae said. "All right, let's see, it's been fifteen minutes. Time to get some heat on it." He looked over at Alina. "Would you put this towel in the microwave for about forty seconds or so, Alina?"

"Sure, Bae," she said, and hopped off the couch where she'd been sitting next to Henry and took the towel into the kitchen.

When she returned, Bae had removed Henry's ankle from the ice bucket and was examining it. "Some of the swelling's down," he said approvingly. He took the towel Alina brought him and shook it slightly. "Good, it's warm, but not too much." Then he wrapped Henry's whole foot in the towel and propped it up on a pillow on top of a small footstool. "Oh, and that's another thing. You should keep this elevated as much as possible for the next week and walk on it as little as possible."

"Do I need crutches or something?" Henry asked.

"Hmm . . . no, it's not that bad. Just don't overdo it." Bae patted Henry's leg.

"What are you going to tell Regina?" asked Alina.

"I'll tell her I tripped and fell down the stairs," Henry answered. "Accidents happen."

"Serves her right for locking you up," Alina said.

"How's the patient?" asked Alice, coming into the den with a tray with several mugs of cocoa on a tray and some chocolate fudge bars. "Feel up to some of these? They always made me feel better when I was sick as a girl."

Henry smiled and took a fudge bar and the cup of cocoa with cinnamon sprinkled atop the dollop of whipped cream. "Thanks, Alice!" He sipped his cocoa and sighed in bliss. This was almost like heaven. The only thing missing was Emma. Curious, he looked at Bae and said, "So what else did you do as a kid? Did you get into fights too?"

"Uh . . . well . . . sometimes . . ."

"Sometimes, Baelfire?" Rumple queried. "I'd say it was almost everyday you came home with a black eye or a cut lip when you were younger than Henry was now."

"That's because everyday those idiot kids started with me. They never could leave me alone, or shut their fat mouths about you, Papa. So I punched them out," Bae said. "Well, some of them. The ones that weren't bigger than me."

"And how many times did I tell you to just ignore them and walk away?" Rumple asked.
"Almost always," Bae admitted. "But somehow, I never could. So half the time I ended up with black eyes, a bloody nose, and a fat lip. The other half the time, they did, and I ended up getting scolded and standing in a corner for not listening to you, Papa, or carding wool for half the next day. God, that was the worst!"

"Why?" asked Henry.

"Because it takes so long to do it," Bae explained. "When you card raw wool, you make it so it's even and soft and free of any dirt or particles, you comb it with these big brushes until it's clean and straight, so you can spin it or weave it. And it is the most boring thing on earth! I used to fall asleep holding the brushes."

"Nothing's as bad as doing chemistry problems," Alina disagreed. "Math is so boring!"

Bae slanted her an amused glance. "That's how he punishing you? Math problems?"

"That and going to bed early without dessert," she replied. "And no reading bedtime stories once."

"When she was little it was a swat and time out," Rumple recalled. "The same as it was with you, Bae."

"Regina usually grounds me," Henry said. "Or she screams loud enough to make the house shake. When I was younger she used to lock me in a dark closet. Once she forgot about me and left me in there for hours. I fell asleep in there, I think."

"That's horrible!" Belle said. "Did she apologize when she let you out?"

"Sort of. I was five and she bought me a new Nintendo DS. That was after she told me it was my own fault for being bad enough to make her shut me in there."

"I'd have passed out," Alina said. "You know I hate the dark."

"Don't tell me Papa locked you up," Bae said.

"I would never!" protested Rumple.

"No. I don't know why I'm scared of the dark," Alina admitted.

"I was too," Belle said. "Because I let my imagination run away with me. But eventually I grew out of it."

"How, Mama?" Alina queried.

"I learned to think of nice things," her mother answered. "I can help you with that, sweetheart."

"Would you?" Alina asked, smiling at her mother. "I hate being afraid like that."

"We'll work on it tonight, okay?" Belle promised.

Alina nodded. She was glad that her mom had found the solution to her phobia.

Then Bae said it was time to ice Henry's foot again, and he unwrapped it and had Henry stick it back in the ice again. While it was getting numbed again, Alina went and got Battleship from the closet and Henry and Bae began to play each other.

"This used to be one of my favorite games," Bae told his son. "They'd just started making video
They played Battleship while Rumple, Alice, Alina, and Belle played blackjack for chocolate bars.

Once Bae had reapplied the warm towel for twenty minutes again, he then wrapped Henry's ankle in an Ace bandage, making it snug and supportive, but not too tight. He put Henry's sock back on and had the boy prop his foot on pillows, then said, "Now how's it feel?"

"A lot better. Thanks!" Henry grinned at him. He almost called the older man "dad", but then shied away from it because it seemed too soon. He didn't call Emma "mom" yet, even though a part of him wanted to. But doing that might tick off Regina, and she could forbid Emma to see him.

Things were different with Bae, however, and Henry decided that it would be okay to start calling him dad soon, like in another week or two.

"Good," Bae said in relief. "How long can you stay here, Henry?"

"Probably all day until after lunch," he answered. "Regina's meetings with the town council always take till supper at least."

So he had another couple of hours with his son, Bae mused, then began to play Battleship in earnest.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Henry ate lunch with the Golds, and enjoyed spending time with all of them, especially his father. He learned that Bae's favorite snack was Oreos with peanut butter on them, along with a big glass of coconut milk, and one of his favorite foods was fried chicken with a side of corn on the cob, dripping with butter and salt. He also liked sushi and steamed dumplings of all kinds. Bae enjoyed reading suspense and historical fiction and the occasional good horror story as well.

He also was addicted to playing Candy Crush, and in fact he was playing it on his cell when Emma came in the door. She smiled brightly when she saw Bae and said, "Hi, Bae! I was wondering . . . what on earth happened to you, Henry?" she gasped when she caught sight of his foot propped on pillows.

Henry told her, and Emma looked furious. "Somebody needs to lock Regina up!" she growled. "Can you believe the nerve, Bae?"

But Bae was too busy beating a level to pay attention.

"Bae! Hey, Baelfire! What the hell are you doing?" Emma demanded, shaking his shoulder.

He put the game on pause, then said, "Half a minute, Emma! Let me beat this level, okay?"

"You think playing a game is more important than Henry's welfare?"

"No, of course not! But we can discuss it after I beat this level."

"What in hell are you playing?"

"You've never played Candy Crush?" he asked incredulously. "Where've you been living—a cave?"

"I'm not much for games," Emma began.
"I can download it for you," Henry said, and took Emma's cell and downloaded it from the Google playstore.

Soon Emma found herself playing along with Bae on her phone and then Rumple gave Henry his cell so he could join them.

The three of them spent another hour happily playing and Henry felt it was one of the best afternoons he'd ever spent, even though he was injured and would have to return home to Regina eventually. He felt like he was finally part of a real family, and not the fake one he'd grown up in. Like he belonged here, with his mother, father, grandparents, and aunt.

When Emma said that it was time for him to go back home before Regina found out he was missing, he felt despair and suddenly wished his name weren't Henry Mills, but Henry Swan, or Henry Gold. Then he could stay here forever, where he was always welcome and loved.

Bae came with Henry and Emma in her Bug as they drove back to the Mills mansion. When they reached it, Bae got out and carried Henry to the front door and set him down.

"Now what?" his son said. "The door's locked."

"I know that, kid. But it's only locked because you don't know how to open it."

"And you do? How? With magic?"

"Nope. With a lockpick," Bae replied, and tugged a small metal instrument from his pocket. "Your old man used to be in a gang when he was fifteen," Bae admitted. "It's not something I'm proud of, but I know how to pick locks because of it. And a good thing too, since it'll save me a trip carrying you on my back up to your window." He carefully inserted the lockpick into the doorknob and wriggled it around.

In about five minutes the lock sprang open.

"You did it!" Henry exclaimed.

"Yeah. But I was slow as molasses. I used to be able to pick a lock in less than a minute," Bae said. "But I'm out of practice." He picked up Henry and said, "But don't get any ideas, tiger. That's one skill I'm never going to teach you."

He brought Henry upstairs and put him in bed, after moving the bed back to its original position. He also hid the sheet rope in the bottom of Henry's closet. Then he tucked Henry into bed and said, "Okay, I have to go now. It wouldn't be good if your wicked stepmother caught me here. Or Emma. You take care of yourself, Henry. And if you need me, here's my cell number. You can call me anytime, or your mom too." He scribbled his number on a sheet of notepaper and gave it to Henry. "Take a nap, why don't you? You're probably tired."

Then he hugged his son, wishing he could stay longer. It was only when Emma, who was lookout, honked the horn, that he made himself let go.

Then he made his way down the stairs, thinking that someday he'd get his beautiful boy away from that wicked witch, or his name wasn't Baelfire Gold.
Family Bonds

Chapter Summary

Henry bonds some more with Bae and his grandpa and Alina, Belle, and Bae go on a little shopping expedition

Regina seemed vastly annoyed when she came home and found Henry had sprained his ankle. "How did you do such a stupid thing?" she demanded, looking at the boy as if he had deliberately set out to annoy her by slipping and falling down the stairs.

"I don't know," Hanry said, somewhat impudently. "I was looking at my phone and I just . . . tripped."

Regina rolled her eyes. "I suppose I'll have to take you to Dr. Whale's office and let him check you out tomorrow."

"I'm okay now," Henry protested. "I took care of it."

"Henry, you're not a doctor, what do you know about such things?"

"I've read the first aid handbooks out of the library at school," Henry pointed out. And I trust my father to know what he's doing. "All I've got to do is keep it elevated and not take gym for the next two weeks and I should be fine, Mom. You can write me a note, then I don't have to miss school or anything. I know you're really busy."

"Hmm . . . okay, if you're sure? I'll pick you up one of those soft casts at the store tomorrow and you can wear it until your ankle heals," Regina said. What Henry said was true, she was extremely busy and it would really put a crimp in her schedule if she had to bring him to the doctor. It was why she was so annoyed at him for getting injured in the first place. She eyed the bandage around his foot and said, "You did a pretty good job. Where'd you learn how to wrap it like that?"

"They teach us a lot of things in school nowadays," Henry replied blithely. "We had a whole course on first aid and injuries in health this year, and we watched a lot of videos where they teach you all that stuff. We even did CPR on dolls." Henry knew that stuff was taught in school . . . when they were older, but what Regina didn't know wouldn't hurt her. And it wasn't like his welfare really concerned her anyway. He was just a means to an end to her—a way to make her look good in front of her constituents.

Henry had decided sometime before actually going to search for Emma that Regina's whole reason for adopting him had to do with image—her image as a mayor, that is. People respected and looked up to a woman who wore many hats, and as a single career woman, Regina looked good, but she looked even better as a single mom holding down a job and raising a child. That was what today's voter was looking for—a woman who believed not just in personal success, but family as well. And from the outside, Regina looked like the ultimate supermom.

Henry could have set them straight in two seconds, but nobody wanted to know the truth of his lonely existence. Except for the Golds and now Emma and Bae, his birth parents. Everyone else was content to think he lived a life of privilege and wanted for nothing, and in a way it was true.
Materially he had everything he could possibly want . . . but emotionally he was starved for affection and attention. Dr. Hopper would have said that was what caused Henry to make up the stories he did about everyone being from another world, cursed, and fairy tale characters.

And that might have made sense . . . except for the fact that a cursed Storybrooke and inhabitants who had forgotten their true selves gained Henry nothing in terms of affection and love. Until Emma had come to town he had only had Alina and Mr. Gold to provide him with affection and allow him glimpses into what a normal relationship between a parent and child was like.

But now he had both his parents here, and come hell or high water, he was determined not to lose them . . . for whatever reason.

Regina sniffed and said, somewhat condescendingly, "Well, at least you're learning something useful at school. I'll put the note in your backpack. You might as well just go to bed, since it's already past nine o'clock and you have to get up early tomorrow for school."

Then she gave him a perfunctory kiss on the cheek and left the room, shaking her head at her son's clumsiness. Really, he must get that from Emma Swan, and at least in this case, blood would tell, she thought disparingly.

Henry sighed and curled his hand around the slip of paper with Baelfire's number on it. Just holding the scrap of paper made him feel oddly close to his father, who had taken such loving care of him this afternoon.

He waited until he heard Regina go back downstairs before getting up and going into the bathroom to use the toilet and brush his teeth before going to sleep. He also took two more children's Tylenol, since the ones Rumple had given him had worn off and his ankle was throbbing somewhat.

Afterwards he went back to bed and carefully propped up his foot on a pillow and snuggled down into his covers. He fell asleep with Bae's cell number clutched in his hand, almost like a kid with a security toy, and just as he drifted off he whispered, "Night, Dad."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

On Monday, Bae and Rumple went around town, scouting out potential buildings for Bae's dojo. They found one that would be very good, it used to be a warehouse, but since business at the cannery was down, it had been abandoned.

Bae looked at it and said, "This looks like what I was looking for. It'll take a few weeks to get in the condition I want, but it's doable. Now I just need to talk to whoever is renting it."

"You already are," Rumple said.

Bae blinked. "You own this building?"

"I do. Fact is, I own almost everything here in Storybrooke," his father informed him.

Bae whistled. "Fancy that! You've become a landowner, Papa. Not bad for a village spinner."

Gold shrugged. "I am what the curse made me, Bae. However, that means I can let you have the building—"

"Whoa! No, you're not going to do that," Bae disagreed.
"Bae, you're family," Rumple began.

"I know, but that doesn't mean I should get a free ride. I'm not a mooch."

"Bae, I just want to—"

Again, his son cut him off in midsentence. "No, Papa. I'm not going to have this building rent free just because I'm your son or out of some sense of guilt you're still feeling for what happened all those years ago. I can afford to pay you what it's worth, trust me. I'm very solvent."

"It isn't worth much," Rumple sighed, seeing he wasn't going to get anywhere with his stubborn son. "I'll give you a discount though."

"Fine," Bae sighed. "If it'll make you happy."

"We'll negotiate back at my shop," Rumple said. He checked his gold Rolex. "It's almost lunchtime. Do you want to head back home and see what Alice can fix for us, or do you want to eat at Granny's?"

"Maybe it's better if we go back home. You know I love Alice's cooking, and right now I'd better keep a low profile. Just until I get all my permits and speak with Regina and the council about moving my business here," Bae said. "Once that's settled, I could give a damn who sees me."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Gold agreed. "All right, let's go home then."

As they drove back to the salmon pink Victorian, Rumple asked, "When do you think you want to go back to Phoenix?"

"Soon, I guess. I left one of my instructors there in charge until I call him and tell him otherwise. I really just have to go back and get some of my things, stuff from my apartment, my weapons, that sort of thing. I may just leave that dojo open, with Paul in charge of it, he's one of my instructors, and have a west and east coast branch."

Rumple nodded. "You let me know when you want to leave and I'll get you a plane ticket, okay?"

"Papa, you don't have to . . ."

"I know that. But I want to."

"Okay. And thanks. Sorry if I sound like I'm an ungrateful bastard, but I've just gotten used to doing things myself," his son said.

His father sighed. "And that's something I need to get used to. I'm too used to thinking of you as the boy I lost, and not a grown man."

They were quiet for the rest of the way home, until Bae said softly, "I might be an adult now, but I know I can come to you for advice, Papa. And I will, especially when it comes to Henry."

"He's a good kid, Bae. A little impulsive, a little mischievous on occasion, but a good kid. Like his father," Rumple said.

"He's also straightforward, like his mom," Bae acknowledged. "And I can see you in him too, Papa. He's got your intelligence, your way of examining all angles of a problem. Emma told me how he went and found her in Boston using the Internet and some computer search programs most kids his age wouldn't understand, let alone operate. You've always been intuitive like that, and also
determined to do what you set out to. Henry's a lot like that."

Rumple seemed astonished at Bae's deduction. "You . . . really think that?"

"Sure I do. And I'd wager Alina's more like you than you think too."

"Maybe a little. She's a lot like Belle."

"Don't sell yourself short, Papa. I've got your stubbornness and determination too . . . and your ability to endure hardships and keep on going. And your business sense. The curse might have given you an opportunity to be a rich man, but you were savvy about that stuff long before you were cursed. I was a little kid, but I remember that we never starved and I always had warm clothes and shoes to wear in the winter and even some money left over for little treats and stuff. Which was more than a lot of our neighbors had."

"But it was never enough," Rumple protested. "I wanted to give you so much more."

"Papa, you gave me plenty. You gave me a home and food and someone to come home to that I loved everyday. You ask Henry what he'd rather have—everything money can buy and a cold fish like his adopted mother, or just the essentials and somebody who loves him no matter what—and he'll tell you just what I did. Money helps, it helps a lot, but it's love that matters. And I learned that from you. And the Cassidys."

Rumple coughed slightly and kept his eyes on the road, blinking rapidly. His son's words caused an unusual tightness in his throat, since for years he'd seen himself as a failure where Bae was concerned, and though he'd done his best with Alina, he'd always felt he'd let her down as well, since Belle was not there with them, and he'd blamed himself for her loss. To have his son say that he saw decent qualities in him, the old monster, and valued the lessons learned from a former coward, nearly caused him to choke up. He was used to seeing himself in terms of his failures, so to have Bae praise him like this was an unlooked for and unexpected gift. It made him do something he hadn't done in a long time—feel worthy of being a father again.

--- Break ---

Tuesday afternoon, after school, Henry stopped by Gold's pawnshop. Alina had to hurry home, she was going shopping for some clothes with Belle, who had acquired a fake wig that looked almost real, of ash blond hair, and was going to spend some quality time with her mother and Bae, who had volunteered to escort them, just in case anyone recognized his stepmother from the asylum.

"I'll see you later, Henry!" she called as she raced up the street, her backpack banging against her.

"Have fun with Papa!"

"Okay! I'll call you later," Henry waved, then entered Gold's shop.

At first he didn't see his grandfather anywhere, and spent a few minutes looking at the different things in the display cases. He saw two odd dolls on a shelf, and some watches and gold jewelry. A crystal mobile hung from a cord, and a lovely satin ballgown hung on a dress form in the corner. Glass slippers and red tap shoes stood side by side in another case.

Henry gently placed his backpack on the floor and leaned against a case holding some old toys and a music box. He could hear Gold's quiet voice in the back room, probably talking on the phone with a customer. He leaned on the glass counter and studied the various games and other paraphernalia on the shelves above it.

He was intensely curious about half the things in here, and wished he dared to explore the shop, as
Alina occasionally did when it was slow and there were no customers. But even knowing he was related to the owner now didn't free Henry from the constraints he felt as Regina's son. Another child might have taken his position as the mayor's son to mean he had an exclusive right to do as he pleased, but Henry always felt guilty about the way Regina treated the citizens of Storybrooke, especially after reading the Book, and so he didn't take liberties the way he might have had been another child.

Gold came out of the back room, limping slightly, and smiled when he saw Henry. "Hello. How's your ankle today, Henry?"

"It's getting better," Henry replied, for it was. He'd reapplied ice and warm towels at night and kept it wrapped up and it wasn't hurting him all that much now. "Regina even wrote me a note so I don't have to take gym class for two weeks, though she did say I was stupid to have hurt myself like I did."

Rumple frowned. "That woman never ceases to amaze me with her coldness. Then again, I ought to know better than to expect differently. Did Alina tell you about her little shopping trip this afternoon?"

"Yeah. That's why she's not here with me," Henry said.

"I was going through some boxes a few days ago and I found a few things that I thought might interest you," Rumple said. "I have them here in the back room."

"That's cool," Henry said, and then he followed Gold into the back room where he kept his desk and some very rare things that he only showed select customers.

A box was on the desk and Henry halted before he started poking into it, allowing Gold to show him the objects inside at his own pace.

Gold reached into the box and withdrew a soft blue tunic and gray trousers, complete with a tan leather belt. "This used to belong to your father. I saved it after he . . . disappeared. I thought you might . . . like to have it. You could wear it like a costume for Halloween," he said, hoping the boy didn't think he sounded like an idiot.

Henry gently took the clothes and hugged them, saying, "These are great, Rum! They're soft and . . . you made them, didn't you?"

"Yes. I made all of Bae's clothes, and my own too back then, before the dagger's curse," Rumple admitted.

"That is like . . . so wicked!" his grandson said, his eyes shining. He held the tunic up against his skinny frame. "I think this'll fit me okay."

"Then you . . . like it?"

Henry nodded. "A lot! Thanks, Rum!"

"There's also a pair of boots," Rumple said, showing him them. "But those I didn't make."

"Neat!" Henry said. "I can try them on when my ankle gets better."

"They should fit, I think you and Bae are of a size," his grandfather said, sounding pleased.

He removed another item from the box. "This is a blanket that I made one very cold winter." He
showed Henry a thick woolen blanket dyed a smoky gray-blue color. "The color didn't hold up quite as good as I'd hoped, but it's woven with triple thick cloth, and lined with sheepskin."

Henry caressed the blanket, and then buried his face in the wool. It smelled sort of like woodsmoke and sort of like pine needles and cedar and he felt oddly close to Bae when he held it. "Wow! It's better than one you can buy from a catalog!"

"I'm glad you like it," Rumple said, pleased at the boy's enthusiasm over these ordinary things. Then he reached into the box and took out the last thing inside. "And this is a small amulet I made out of wood, horsehair, and a leather cord one year for a birthday gift for him."

Henry took the small carving of a horse that hung on a leather cord. The horse was no bigger than his palm, and lovingly carved in a rearing posture, with a mane and tail of real horsehair, stained a gold color with a black mane, tail, and four black socks. It had a small blue stone chip for an eye. Henry traced the horse, stroking the mane and tail. "He looks almost alive."

"It's just a figure," said Gold, embarrassed. "Bae loved horses when he was your age. Especially ones of this color, they're called buckskin, and were a rare sight where we came from. Bae saw a fine stallion one day at the summer festival and it was all he could talk about for weeks. So when I was carving this amulet here, I made it a buckskin like the one he saw. He wore this until the cord wore out and then I put it away. I always intended to fix it, but somehow I never did. I strung a new cord on it though. Just in case you want to wear it."

Henry quickly pulled the cord over his head, until the little horse rested on top of his uniform. "It's really cool! Thanks so much, Rum!" His eyes shining, he suddenly threw his arms about the older man and hugged him.

Rumple hugged him back, saying awkwardly, "They're just some mementos I thought you'd like to have."

"I'm going to put them in my backpack," Henry declared, and promptly opened it and was about to dump all the contents out on the floor when his grandfather put out a hand and said, "Wait a minute. Don't do that, I'll give you another bag to put them in." He pulled an old Army surplus drawstring bag from a drawer and placed the blanket, boots, and clothes inside it. Then he handed the bag to Henry.

Henry felt like Christmas had come early. He took the bag and then zipped his backpack up and was about to leave, figuring he ought to get home and do his homework before Regina got there, when Gold said, "Now why don't we go and have some cocoa and a donut at Granny's? You can leave these here and pick them up afterwards."

"Sure! I want a cinnamon sugar one," his grandson said, then walked to the door of the shop and waited while Gold turned the sign to closed and locked up. Then he walked beside his grandfather down the street, one hand touching the horse amulet, grinning like a Jack-o-lantern.

"You look so weird with that hair, Mama," Alina remarked as she sat in the backseat of Gold's Cadillac while Bae drove them downtown to Storybrooke's little shopping center. "Sort of like Marilyn Monroe."

Bae started laughing. "How would you know about Marilyn Monroe, minx?"

"I watch a lot of old movies with Papa," answered his small sister. "And her hair's the same color
"as Mama's wig."

"I'm not sure if I should be flattered or insulted," Belle smirked.

"It's not that you look ugly," Alina continued. "Just different. But that's okay, since it's like a disguise."

"You're a trip, Alina," said her brother, thinking that his little sister reminded him of their papa, with her amusing little quips and quirky sense of humor.

Soon they reached the shopping center and Belle snagged a shopping cart while Alina chattered to Bae about beating the latest level in Candy Crush on Rumple's phone. "I'm up to level sixty-five now."

"You're catching up to me," Bae smiled down at her. "I'm going to have to play some more so you don't beat me."

"I don't think I could ever do that," his sister said. "I can only play when Papa doesn't need his phone, and he almost always needs it for business, and after he talks all day on it, he has to charge it and I can't play until later. I wish I had my own phone."

"Maybe when you're eleven, I can talk your papa into it," Belle said.

"Or you could get a tablet, like a Nook HD," Bae suggested. "That's almost like having a laptop and you could play Candy Crush all you want and read books and go on the Web too."

"Do you have one?" asked Alina curiously.

"I have a Nook Tablet," he replied. "I read on it when I'm not having classes."

They headed into the department store, and Belle began to help Alina pick out some new clothes for springtime. Both Belle and Alina enjoyed warm colors, like soft golds, rose, peach and also green, blue, and lavender. Alina enjoyed soft fitted jeans in different colors and frilly skirts with jeweled tops as well as more casual sweatshirts and blouses.

She happily modeled the clothes for her mother and brother, then after they had bought several outfits for her, insisted on dragging Bae into the men's section and grabbing a navy sweatshirt that said Welcome to Storybrooke Where Legends Live and saying, "Here, Bae! This would look so good on you! Emma would love it, and you wouldn't be freezing anymore."

Bae raised an eyebrow. "Now you're playing matchmaker too?"

"Well, somebody has to," Alina pointed out. "Because if you wait too much longer, Henry's gonna be an old man."

Belle laughed so hard she almost choked. "Alina, good heavens! He's only been here a few days. Give him a chance to breathe."

Her irrepressible daughter just shrugged. "Sorry. It seems like forever." Then she ran over to a rack of jeans and said, "You should try these on, they match perfectly."

"Uh, is there something wrong with the ones I have on?" Bae queried, biting his lip.

"They're a little worn. Good for riding your bike, but you need new ones if you're going to take Emma out someday," Alina informed him.
"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really," Alina said. "Trust me. If there's one thing I know about, it's clothes."

"You get that from your father," Belle said, smothering another laugh. "He's taught you well."

"And how about this shirt?" Alina yanked a blue and gold plaid button down flannel from another rack.

Bae just stood there, then he said, "She's like a whirlwind, Belle."

"You can tell her to stop, you know," Belle said, her blue eyes sparkling.

"No. I think it's safer to just let her pick out clothes," her stepson answered. "Otherwise she might decide I need help picking out a ring or something."

"Don't give her any ideas," Belle snickered. "She's as much of a romantic as her papa and me."

Bae just shook his head, amused. Usually he found buying clothes rather boring, a necessity, but with Alina there, the chore was more like a fun game, as the little girl proved she was a true daughter of her spinner father by putting together colors, fabrics, and patterns in innovative styles.

By the time she was done, Baelfire had not only a sweatshirt, a flannel, and jeans, but several other colored T-shirts and flannels and soft stonewashed pants and more jeans. She never asked his size either, but showed an uncanny ability to pick out the correct one, something that he supposed she had also gotten from Rumple.

She even picked out a pretty pink collared sweatshirt for Belle with a teacup on it, and then a matching one for herself. "Now we can do mom and daughter outfits," she cried, her brown eyes glowing.

"Are we done yet, or are you going to buy out the store?" Bae asked.

"No. I think that's enough for now."

"Good, because I was beginning to feel like a clothes horse," her brother chuckled.

Alina pushed the cart, which was now very full, down the aisle past the electronics department.

"Hold it," Bae said, then he went up to the clerk at the counter and spoke with her for a few moments. The salesclerk reached behind the counter and handed him two Nook HD tablets and Bae gave her his Visa Gold card in return.

He walked back to where Alina and Belle waited and handed his sister one of the bags with the tablet in it. "Here, minx. Papa said your birthday's coming up in a month, so here's an early birthday present from me."

Alina's eyes bugged out. "Wow! Thanks so much!" Then she jumped up and hugged him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Bae, you didn't have to do that," Belle began.

"I wanted to. It's been too long since I've had someone to buy gifts for," he said. "I got one for Henry too. But don't tell him anything, I want it to be a surprise," he told them.

"You're your father's son all right," Belle smiled. "Rum always liked giving gifts to people he cared
about."

Bae seemed pleased with that comment, and soon they had paid for everything and decided to stop for some takeout. Belle called Alice on her cell to tell her not to bother cooking that night. They took home crispy fried chicken, corn, onion rings, mashed potatoes with gravy, and brownie sundaes.

When they arrived home, they found Rumple reading the newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee and Alice doing a book of suduko puzzles.

"I take it the shopping trip was a success?" queried Rumple as they trooped into the house with all the bags.

"In more ways than one," his wife laughed.

"You can say that again," Bae agreed. "Where's Henry?"

"He had to go home. Regina wants him to eat dinner there with her," Rumple said.

"Too bad. We brought home fried chicken and all the fixings," Bae told him.

"Let's eat," said Belle. "All of a sudden, I'm starving."

"But first, look at my new sweatshirt, Papa!" Alina said excitedly, wearing her new pink shirt with the pretty teacup on it.

"You look incredible, sweetheart," her father said upon seeing it on her. "That color suits you very well and that design is perfect for you."

"Like father, like daughter," Bae smirked, then brought the takeout bags into the kitchen and began to lay the food out on the table while Belle and Alice poured the drinks and got out the dishes and silverware.

Over at the Mills residence, Henry ate his grilled lemon chicken with a baked potato and green beans, listening with half an ear as Regina told him about her day at the office. But as soon as she had eaten her apple turnover and Henry had a piece of peanut butter pie, he scooted upstairs to read his book for English, and carefully hid the clothes and boots Rumple had given him in the bottom drawer of his dresser and got into pajamas, wrapping himself in the cozy blanket and lying on his bed reading *The Dark is Rising*, one hand stroking the horse amulet while turning the pages, imagining himself curled up beside his father, safe and sound, while Emma made popcorn before settling down next to him to watch a movie, just like a real family.
Storm Breaking

Chapter Summary

Bae returns to Phoenix to move his dojo and a bad hurricane strikes Storybrooke and causes chaos

On Thursday, Bae got a phone call from Paul Winslow, his temporary instructor at his dojo, asking if it were possible to come home right away, there was a problem with the delivery of some student uniforms and supplies and the warehouse they dealt with refused to deal with anyone else but the owner of Fire Mountain Dojo. "I'm sorry to call you like this, Neal. I know you told me only for an emergency, that you were on vacation, but . . ."

"It's okay, Paul," Bae told him calmly. "I'll catch the first flight I can back and be in Phoenix by tomorrow at the latest."

"Hey, did you ever, uh, reconnect with that old girlfriend of yours like you hoped?"

"Uh . . . yeah . . . and things are . . . good between us again. Talk to you later. Bye." Bae clicked off his phone, then he stood in the middle of his room and sighed.

Well, if I have to go back, it might as well be sooner than later. I can gather up all my things and ship whatever I need back here. I guess I'd better talk to Papa about that plane ticket, he thought.

He stuffed his phone in his jacket pocket and headed downstairs.

Baelfire paused before he went through the security checkpoint at the gate to hug Emma and Henry. What had felt awkward only a week and a half ago now felt as natural as if he'd been doing it for years. He shared a brief kiss with Emma before he said, "I'll be back in a few days. Just as soon as I settle everything with Paul, I'll come home."

"Call me," Emma said, feeling suddenly bereft, even though she knew he was going only to return.

"Will do," Bae said, then he knelt to ruffle Henry's hair. "Behave, tiger. No more crazy stunts like climbing out of windows, okay?"

"Okay. I'll wait till you come back," Henry joked, smiling at his father. "Have a good flight."

"I'm sure I will, considering this ticket my father got for me is first class," Bae said.

"Enjoy the free drinks," Emma reminded, grinning.

"Uh, yeah . . . I guess I will. See you soon." He gave Henry one last hug before he stood up and slung his carry-on bag over his shoulder.

Then he turned to go, waving just before he went through the checkpoint and boarded the plane.

As he walked up the carpeted tunnel to get on the plane, the man who was just ahead of him turned
around and said, "Business trip, huh?"

"Yeah, you could say that," Bae replied.

"Going to be away long?"

"No. Just a few days."

"Ah. Hardly enough time to miss your wife and kid then," chuckled the man.

Bae nodded, not bothering to correct the man. In a perfect world, buddy, that's what they'd be, he thought as he walked onto the plane, stopping at the first class window seat and staring for a moment at the wide leather seat and the accompanying foot rest as if he'd never seen one before. He had, but had never flown like this before.

He went and sat down, rummaging in his carry-on for the paperback he'd borrowed from Belle. As he did so, his fingers encountered a box and he peered down and saw Henry’s tablet peeking at him. "Damn!" he swore softly. "I forgot to give this to him. Oh, well. I can give it to him once I get back."

He found the paperback of The Elfstones of Shannara by Terry Brooks and tucked the bag under his seat. Then he buckled his seatbelt and waited for the plane to take off. He usually disliked flying because the seats were so stiff and there was never room enough to stretch his legs. Except here he had plenty of leg room and the seats were roomy and cushioned.

'I'll have to remember to thank Papa for this. I can take a nap in this seat for once and not end up with a stiff neck."

He smiled at the flight attendant as she came around and asked if everything were all right and welcomed him aboard the aircraft.

Once the plane had taken off, Bae put his seat back and relaxed, reading the first chapter of his book and then ordering a small bottle of wine along with the lunch they were serving. Yes, he could get used to this. Maybe when the curse was finally broken, he could take Emma and Henry to Disney World or Universal in Orlando. And they could fly first class. It would be a blast. But of course, he had to go to Phoenix first. He could dream about family vacations later.

He sipped his wine and looked out the window, planning everything he needed to do in his head.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

During the next four days, while Baelfire was in Phoenix settling his affairs and packing up his apartment and shipping all his furniture and half the dojo over to Storybrooke using the express delivery service Gold had put him in contact with, Henry and Alina continued going to school and having more magic lessons with Rumple.

Emma couldn't attend the latest sessions because she was busy trying to track down a stranger who'd arrived in town a day after Bae had left, a biker riding a Yamaha with a leather jacket and an odd box strapped to the back of it, a man who said little but saw much, somewhere in his late thirties.

In this latest session, Rumple taught them to levitate objects and form a small protective shield with their magic. As they were eating a snack in the kitchen afterwards, Henry said, "I'll tell Emma what we learned today, since she's busy trying to track down the stranger that talked to me yesterday.

Regina asked her to, said she doesn't trust a guy who accosts little kids and tries to get information
"For once Regina and I are in agreement," Rumple stated firmly. "If that stranger approaches you again, Henry, or you, Alina, you just ignore him and walk away and come get me. If he wants to talk to someone about what goes on in this town he can talk to me, and leave our children alone."

"He didn't seem all that dangerous, Rum," Henry said, eating a Linzer cookie.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Rumple said shortly. "Just remember what I said."

"Your grandfather's right," Belle added. "We don't want anything to happen to you."

Henry felt a warm feeling come over him then. It was nice to know that he had someone else looking out for him while Bae was away. "Okay. Don't worry, I don't want to end up on a milk carton."

"You wouldn't," Alina assured him. "Cause if he tried anything, I'd kick him hard in the knee and stomp his toes and then we'd run like crazy to your shop, Papa."

"Very good, Alina. Bae teach you that?"

"Uh huh. And he said he'll teach me some more stuff once he gets his dojo up here. He said he teaches self defense classes for women and little kids," Alina said, eating a cookie.

"Maybe I should attend one," Belle mused.

"I think you both should," Rumple said.

"I wonder if Regina would let me?" Henry said. "Guess I'll ask her once he gets back." He hoped she would say yes, since it was an excellent way to spend more time with his dad without Regina knowing.

Emma was almost glad for the distraction hunting down the stranger provided, for then she didn't have time to miss Bae. For miss him she did, the way you missed a lost tooth, or a friend who had suddenly stopped calling you, with an abrupt pang that left you aching and lonely, even though she knew he'd be returning on Monday. It was a good thing too, for the weather reports indicated a large nor'easter storm system moving into the area, almost like a hurricane, in a few days. Mary Margaret was already running to the store to stock up on non-perishable food, candles, batteries, and flashlights. Emma thought of Gold's pantry and almost wished she were staying there during the storm. Then she shook off the worry and concentrated on finding the stranger.

She spent all day Saturday trying to track the guy down, and finally she went back to Granny's, discouraged with herself, and sat there nursing a cup of coffee, trying to figure out who in hell he could be.

"Mind if I join you?"

She looked up to see the very guy she'd been following. "You."

"Me. You've been chasing me all day," he said, with a roguish grin. "Been a long time since a pretty lady's done that. I figure you want to talk?"

"Maybe. Why were you talking to Henry the other day?"
"Is Henry the little kid with the scarf? I stopped to ask him directions. And he sure asked me a lot of questions. He seems really—precocious."

Emma ignored that. She'd do the questioning around here. "Why were you outside his house?"

"My bike broke down. That's why I was asking for directions to the nearest gas station."

"Uh huh," she gave him a suspicious look. "That why you decided to take a long walk with your mysterious box?"

"Who said it's mysterious."

"Okay. Then what's in it? And don't play with me, mister," she warned, her eyes glinting dangerously.

"It's frustrating, isn't it? Not knowing?"

"Just tell me."

"Why? Is it illegal to carry around a box here?"

"No, of course not. Just odd."

He grinned at her. She didn't even twitch her lips in return. She'd known rogues like him her whole life. "You really want to know?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Well. you're gonna have to wait. A long time. You're gonna have to wait and watch me carrying it around and letting your imagination run rampant making up all kinds of stories about what's in there. A severed head? A magic machine? A stack of secret documents? A device to take over the world?"

"Don't get cute. I could force you to show me, since you're very suspicious."

"Or we could do it the easy way. I could buy you a drink and show you right now."

"A drink?"

"Yeah. One drink."

She eyed him, and let her magic tell her if he were on the level with her. He was, oddly enough. "Okay. One drink."

He reached over and opened the box. Inside was an old fashioned typewriter.

"That's it? Why not a laptop?"

He shrugged. "I'm no good with computers. I'm a writer. And this place inspires me."

Emma wondered what was so inspiring about this sleepy little town. Surely he didn't know about the curse? No one did except Henry and the Golds. Maybe he needed a change of scenery for his next novel. In any case, she would watch him carefully. "What's your name?"

"August. August Booth," he replied. "Name your poison."
Without missing a beat, she said, "Coffee. Cream, one Equal. With cinnamon on top."

"I meant a real—"

"I know what you meant," she replied smoothly. "But I don't drink with strangers. And you never specified alcohol, August. Or should I call you Gus?"

"All right. You win, Sheriff Swan. One coffee it is." He signaled Ruby to come over and ordered it.

While they waited for it to arrive, Emma pondered the mystery that was August Booth. And she wished Bae would hurry up home.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

On Monday morning, Bae arrived home, and Emma came and picked him up at the airport and brought him back to Storybrooke. Some of his furniture had arrived and he spent part of the day fixing up the apartment upstairs in the warehouse, and the other half of the day hiring a few crews to help him begin to set up the space for the dojo.

Some of the boxes from his Phoenix apartment had arrived as well and he began to go through them while Emma watched. "You want some help?"

He looked up at her, his dark eyes twinkling. "Miss me?"

"Maybe."

"Liar." He stood up and walked over to her, moving in that graceful way she loved so well, like a panther prowling. "You missed me as much as I did you, only you're afraid to admit it."

"I am not," she refuted.

"Are so."

"Am not!"

"Prove it. If you didn't miss me, wild swan, give me a kiss."

"Baelfire! You're asking for it!"

"Am I?" he teased, his lips curling roguishly into a smirk.

Then she kissed him, and from the moment their lips met it was like fireworks had gone off in her head. She couldn't get enough of him, he was like ambrosia, sweet and so very satisfying.

When he drew back, he said, "I'd love to see the welcome I'd get if you really did miss me, Emma."

"Okay. You got me," she admitted.

"Thought so," he smiled at her. "I couldn't wait to get home, Emma. If you want to help, you can start unpacking that box over there," he waved a hand at a smaller box. "That stuff goes in the kitchen."

She moved and started unpacking the box, which was filled with kitchen items.

By the time supper rolled around, they had unpacked half of the boxes and Emma's stomach was growling.
Bae looked up from putting his CD's into their CD holder and said, "Sounds like you're hungry. Want to go over to my father's or shall we have dinner at the restaurant over here? There's a little seafood bar that serves fresh fish."

Deciding to be daring for once, Emma said, "Let's go have dinner at that seafood place. We can stop over at Rum and Belle's house after for dessert."

"Sounds like a plan," he said, then grabbed his jacked and pulled it on. "Let's go, lovely lady."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The restaurant was small and not very crowded, most people were concerned about the storm that was due to arrive Tuesday night and were too busy to go out to eat. Emma and Bae practically had the place to themselves. Emma had a whole lobster, salad, and some fried oysters for an appetizer, while Bae had stuffed clams, she-crab soup, and soft shell crabs and mussels in white wine with a side of broccoli.

They toasted each other with some Pinot Noir and tried each other's dinners. They talked about what it would be like when Bae finally had his dojo up and running. "I plan on holding a self-defense class for women," he remarked.

"Good. I think I could get you some students. Like Mary Margaret and Ruby. Probably Belle too. Unless you'd think it was weird teaching your stepmother?"

"No. I'll teach anybody who wants to learn. How about you?"

"Me? I know how to defend myself."

"I'll bet I can teach you some things you've never known," he challenged her. "After all, you're supposed to be this savior, according to Henry. And you ought to know how to kick some ass."

"All right, Master Obi Wan. I'll take one of your classes. And we'll see how good you really are."

"Fine with me, babe. I'll let you know when I'm holding the first one."

"I'll be waiting," she reached for her purse.

Bae put a hand over hers. "I've got it, Emma."

"No, I can pay for myself . . ."

"Another time. This is on me," he insisted.

"Bae . . ."

"Emma. Just shut up and let me treat you to dinner, okay?"

"You're impossible!"

"Yeah, but who cares?" he said, flashing her a grin. Then he pulled out his wallet.

"Thanks. But next time, I've got it."

"Sure, Emma."

Once he had settled the bill, they made their way over to the Gold residence. They were just in time
for coffee and dessert, Alice had just put out crème brulee with fresh fruit.

"Bae! You're home!" Alina cried, getting up and running over to hug her brother.

"Hey, kid. I haven't even been gone a week," he said, hugging her back.

Henry got up too and came over, he hesitated a little, but then he hugged Emma and once Alina had released Bae, he walked into the other's embrace, clinging to his father like a monkey for a few moments. "Hey, when did you get back?"

"While you were at school," Bae said.

"How was your trip?" asked Rumple.

"It was good, especially the plane ride. Thank you again, Papa," his son said, coming forward to hug his father and then Belle and Alice.

"Don't mention it," Rumple said, then gestured to the table. "Come and have some dessert."

They sat down at the table. As he was eating his crème brulee, Bae recalled that once again he'd forgotten Henry's tablet and swore silently to himself. *What's wrong with me? I can't be having senior moments already! I'm not even thirty. I'll have to drop it off tomorrow, before this storm comes. I'll charge it for him tonight, maybe download Candy Crush too.* "Henry, you have email?"

"Yeah. Why? Do you want it?" asked his son.

"Yes. And I'll give you mine," Bae answered. He pulled out a business card. "It's on the bottom there."

Henry took it. After the logo of Fire Mountain Dojo was Baelfire's email — ncfire. Henry grinned. Now he had yet another way to communicate with his dad. Bae handed him another card. He took it and wrote his own on the back. His was fairytalechronicler.

"Can I have it too?" asked Alina.

"Sure. Matter of fact, here's some of my cards. They have the wrong address on them, I'll have to make up more once I get settled, but my email hasn't changed." Bae handed around cards to everyone.

Rumple took one and put it in his pocket, making a mental note to have some business cards made up for his son as a gift when the dojo finally was open.

"Dessert was great, Alice!" Alina exclaimed. "Now let's all watch a movie!" She looked over at Henry. "You can stay, right? It's only six thirty."

"Yeah. Regina'll be gone till nine thirty at least. She's really busy since this storm's coming," he answered.

"Why don't you two go and pick something out while we clean up?" Belle suggested.

The two ran into the den and opened up the sliding DVD case that was built into the wall. Soon they were arguing good naturedly over the choices there, but finally managed to agree to watch an old romance/fantasy film.

"I'll get the popcorn!" Alina told Henry, and then went into the pantry to grab three bags of her favorite kind, which was a gourmet blend with caramel and Vermont cheddar. She got three bags...
so all of them could share one—her with Henry, Emma with Bae, and her parents. Alice didn't really like that popcorn, so she got her a bag of Cheetoes instead. She also got some bottled water and Cokes from the fridge.

"What are we doing, camping out here?" Alice asked, raising an eyebrow. "I thought we just ate."

Alina turned to look at her. "It's atmosphere, Alice. You can't have movie night without snacks and drinks."

"Oh. Okay," the housekeeper smirked. "How about candy?"

"I'll get the Milk Duds and Hershey bars," Alina said.

"Don't worry. I'll bring them before you drop everything," Alice chuckled.

"I won't. Look!" Alina opened her hands and showed Alice how she could make a bag of popcorn float.

"Neat trick, but better not let your papa see. You know his rule," Alice wagged a finger at her.

Alina sighed. "Yeah, I know." Then she curled her arm about the popcorn again and went back into the den.

Once they had gotten everything set up, the appropriate snacks out where each couple should be sitting and the DVD was in the machine, they called the adults over. "We're ready!" Henry yelled.

"Looks like we're being summoned, Belle," Rumple joked, and rose from his seat, taking her arm and leaning on his cane with the other.

"I just hope we're not watching some sappy Disney flick," Emma muttered as she followed them.

"You never know with Alina," Alice chuckled, carrying in the candy.

Bae's eyes went wide when he saw the popcorn and soda. "What's all this? I'm still full from dessert."

"I'm still full from dinner," Emma muttered.

"It's atmosphere," Alice remarked. "Hershey bar?"

"Oh, what the hell," said Bae and took one.

"Men!" Emma said, rolling her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" queried Bae. "I saw you slip those Milk Duds in your pocket, Swan."

Emma said nothing, merely went and sat down, but she was careful about it. Bae sat next to her on the large sofa.

Henry sat next to him, with Alina taking the middle, next to Belle and Rumple.

"Push play, Papa," Alina told him as Rumple picked up the remote.

"What are we watching?" asked Emma.
"Ladyhawke," answered Henry.

"That's one of my favorites," Bae exclaimed.

"It's mine and Henry's too," Alina said happily.

"I even like it," Emma stated.

"I've never seen it," said Belle.

"Oh, then you're in for a treat, dearie," her husband said. "Just wait and see."

Alice dimmed the lights, then sat down on the end of the couch next to Rumple. "So I can grab you when the really scary parts happen," she joked.

The sorcerer wriggled his eyebrows at her. "Better not grab me too much, Alice. Or else Belle will get jealous and beat you over the head with a skillet."

"Or stab you with a fork," her best friend joked.

Alice snorted. "Uh huh. If you want to avoid any awkwardness, Belle, just jump in his lap first."

"That's good advice, Swan. Maybe you'd better take it," Bae murmured in her ear.

"In your dreams, Baelfire," Emma retorted. "I'm not eighteen anymore."

"C'mon, guys! The movie's starting!" Alina hushed them as the opening credits came on the TV.

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Everyone enjoyed the movie, ate popcorn and candy, and Bae snuck Milk Duds out of Emma's pocket until she caught him and smacked him on the ear. "Hey! Those are mine!"

"Didn't anybody teach you to share?" he teased.

"Nope. I grew up in the school of hard knocks, like Philippe over there," Emma replied impudently, then she bit the top off the rest of his Hershey bar.

Henry and Alina exchanged glances and Henry whispered, "They're worse than a couple of five-year-olds."

Alina giggled.

"Be quiet, tiger," ordered Bae. "Just watch the movie." Then he ate some popcorn and twined his fingers around Emma's.

On the other side of the couch, Belle was riveted to the screen, and Rumple fed her popcorn while he had his arm around her.

By the time the movie ended, Rumple was sandwiched inbetween Belle and Alice as they hugged him and rhapsodized over the ending, and Emma was sitting on Bae's lap drinking the last Coke.

Henry glanced around and started laughing. "Oh, my God! We have such a weird family!"

"But they're fun," Alina said, also snickering. Then she ate some more popcorn.

"Yeah, if you like being crushed and used as a chair," her nephew muttered, then he jumped as Bae
reached out and swatted the back of his head.

"Behave, kid. Or else I won't give you my surprise," his father ordered.

"What surprise?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out tomorrow," he answered enigmatically.

"I know what is." Alina sang. "But I'm not telling."

"I'll tickle you," Henry threatened.

Alina jumped off the couch and ran and hopped onto Rum's lap. "Help! Papa, he just threatened me with bodily injury."

"So? You want me to sue him?" Rumple chuckled.

"You'd sue your own grandson?" Henry asked cheekily.

"Depends," his grandfather smirked.

"Rum!" Belle scolded.

"What? It's a quip." As Alice turned on the lights, he looked at his watch. "Hmm. Almost nine fifteen. Time to be heading back to the Mills mansion."

Henry groaned. "Regina ruins everything even when she's not here."

Alina looked at Rumple hopefully. "Papa, maybe Henry could stay over?"

"Afraid not, lovely girl. You know how Regina is when we don't clear things with her first," Rumple sighed.

"Damn witch!" muttered Emma.

"I second that," Bae growled. "Along with another word that rhymes with it."

Reluctantly, Henry got his backpack and his jacket then headed out to Gold's Cadillac after he said goodbye to them. He hoped that after the curse broke, he could finally stay where he belonged—with his true family.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

They only had half a day of school the next day, to prepare for the big storm, so Henry met Bae at his castle. He took the Book out of his backpack and set it down in the castle, ready to show it to his father.

Bae rode up on his Harley and parked it on the street, then jogged over to the castle carrying his helmet under one arm and a white bag also. "How are you doing, Henry? The wicked witch been keeping her distance?"

Henry jumped down from the castle ladder and ran and hugged his father. "Pretty much. She's been with the town council, helping to give out blankets and food to people for the storm down at the town hall."

"How's the ankle? You shouldn't be jumping too much on it, kid," Bae warned gently.
"It's okay. It doesn't even hurt anymore."

Bae knelt and gently examined it, saying, "Okay, you're good. Now be careful."

"Okay. See my castle? I come here when I want to just be by myself. Sometimes Alina comes too, though. We used to make up stories here, until Miss Blanchard gave me the fairy tale book," Henry told him.

"It's a nice place," Bae said. "When I was your age, I had a glade in the woods near my village where I used to go. And nobody ever knew about it except your grandpa."

"He . . . he gave me some stuff of yours last week," Henry said. "Some . . . uh . . . mementos he called them." He tugged the carved horse out from under his shirt. "This is one of them."

Bae knelt to cup the horse amulet in his hand. "Hey, I remember this. He made this for me for my ninth birthday. I can't believe he kept it all this time."

"He kept a lot of things of yours," Henry said. "He gave me a blanket he made for you too. And . . . um . . . a set of clothes and boots. He said I could wear them like a costume on Halloween."

Bae gave his son a sad smile. "Guess that proves he always missed me, huh?"

Henry nodded. "I think . . . I think he missed you even when he couldn't remember you. He didn't like to talk about you . . . or Belle either. Alina said it made him too sad to even think about it. I never knew anybody that . . . um . . . loved their kids like that. Regina sure doesn't."

"Regina's psycho, Henry. She's not like regular people. It's funny, though. Even when I was mad as hell at my father, I never stopped loving him. Guess that goes both ways," Bae remarked. Then he said, "It goes for you too, kid. I know I've missed half your childhood, and I wish it weren't so, but don't ever think it was because I didn't care. It was because I didn't know about you. If I did, that rotten witch would have never gotten so much as a glimpse at you. We'd have been a real family, you, me, and your mom."

"I know. I'm not mad at you or anything," Henry said.

"That's good to know. Because I feel guilty enough as it is, not being able to do things for you that my papa did for me," Bae admitted. Then he reached for the white bag he'd placed on the ground. "Here, Henry. I figured you could use one of these. This is the surprise I was talking about last night."

Henry took the bag and opened it. His eyes grew huge. "A Nook! For me? Wow!" He removed the tablet from the bag. "That's so cool!" Then he threw his arms about Bae and hugged him tight. "Thanks . . . Dad."

Bae felt himself choke up upon hearing those words. He hugged his son close, not replying for a few moments.

Henry, fearing he'd somehow overstepped, said softly, "Is it . . . okay if I call you that? When we're alone, that is?"

"Sure, tiger. It's who I am, right?" he managed to say after a few moments. He couldn't quite describe how hearing that word made him feel. Sort of awed and joyful and just plain good about himself. And happy that Henry actually considered him worthy of being his father.

He cleared his throat, then said, "Umm . . . you want to take a ride on my bike over to the diner?"
They have WiFi there and we can set this up, and maybe have a snack too, before I take you home." He glanced up at the sky, which was turning a leaden gray color and the wind was starting to pick up. "On second thought, maybe I'd better take you home now. I don't like the look of that sky."

"Okay, Dad," Henry said, the word coming easier to him now. "We can set it up at my house, Regina's not home yet."

Bae shook his head. "I can't believe that woman considers herself a real mom. She's never there when you come home."

"She used to have babysitters for me when I was small," Henry recalled. "It's only since I turned ten that she let me be home alone, and mostly because I'm not usually home, I'm over Alina's."

"She puts her career before you, and that's not a good thing," Bae said angrily. "I understand that you have to make a living, but damn it, she should be there for you most of the time. Come on, let's get going." He shepherded his son over to his bike, and Henry climbed on it. "Scoot over a bit, son. There you go. I'd give you my helmet, but it'd just fall off you. So I'll drive real slow. Until I get you a helmet, you can sit in front of me."

Bae got on his bike behind his son, then started it and drove slowly down the street and towards the Mills residence. Because of the upcoming bad weather, there were hardly any people around, and so no one saw Henry riding with a strange man up to his house.

Henry reveled in the feel of the wind through his hair and the thrumming of the bike beneath him, as well as Bae's strong arms clasping him securely. The ride was all too short, he thought, as they pulled up into the driveway. "Aww! That was too short!"

"Some other time, I'll take you for a longer ride," Bae promised. "Once you've got a helmet, I can go faster than a baby crawling. But let's get inside now."

Henry hopped off the Harley. "I've got my key this time, so you don't need to pick the lock."

"Shoot! And here I was hoping to get in some more practice," Bae teased. "Not!"

Henry let himself inside, and Bae followed. He led his father into the kitchen, which was a huge pristine white affair. He waved a hand at the table. "Have a seat. We've got Coke in the fridge if you're thirsty. Or Arizona iced tea."

"Iced tea's good. I try not to drink much soda. It's not really that good for you," Bae said, sitting down in Regina's spot, though he didn't know it.

Henry got two glasses out of the cabinet, saying, "Regina thinks so too. She only buys soda when it's on sale. I like it, but I like Arizona better." He opened the fridge and got out two cans of iced tea and poured them over ice into the glasses. He carried them over to his father, and they drank them while setting up the Nook.

"See, now you can email me. And I'll be able to answer you once I get my laptop up and running," Bae told him. "You can also IM Alina with this, since she has one too."

"Cool!" Henry grinned at him.

Bae took the tablet and opened the library on it. "Okay, look. I put a few apps and a couple of books on here for you." He showed Henry where he had downloaded some games, like Candy Crush, Jeopardy, Oregon Trail, and Dragon Heart, a new fantasy quest game. He also showed him
some books, like *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Belgariad Parts 1 & 2*, *King Arthur and his Knights*, *The Crystal Cave*, and a few books on folklore, myths, and legends.

"Have you read any of these?"

"All of them, back when I was a kid," Bae said. "And sometimes I re-read them even now. I figured you might like them. And it'll give you something to do during this storm we're getting. If you charge the tablet now, you won't need to worry about the battery going down if the power goes out, like I think it might."

"I'll do it right now," Henry said, plugging the charger into the wall and then into the Nook HD. "And if Regina asks, I'll tell her I traded some comic books for it at Mr. Gold's shop. She won't know the difference between a new tablet or an old one."

There came an ominous rumble of thunder. Bae frowned. "Henry, I don't like leaving you here by yourself."

"Don't worry, Dad. I know where all the candles and flashlights are in case I lose power. And my cell's charged and Regina should be home soon. So you'd better go."

"Okay. You take care, tiger. I'll see you later," Bae said, then reluctantly parted from his son and left on the Harley.

Just as he rode down the street, he saw Regina's Mercedes coming down it, and thought it was lucky he'd left when he did. For there was no telling what Regina might do if she had discovered Henry with a strange man in their house, and she would have put two and two together once she saw Henry next to him, for their relationship was unmistakable.

Baelfire arrived back at his apartment to find Emma waiting for him, carrying some Chinese takeout in her arms. "Hey! Thought you'd be over at the town hall doing emergency disaster procedures."

"Been there and done that already," she groaned. "I thought I'd bring over some Chinese and we could . . . uh . . . have some. I hope you like egg foo young, shrimp lo mein, egg rolls, and steamed dumplings."

Bae started laughing. "You still remember how we used to go to Lo's back in Phoenix and that's what we'd always order."

"Uh, yeah. I don't know how good this place is compared to that, but . . . I'm starving."

"Then let's go eat."

By the time they'd eaten, rain was pelting down, splattering the sidewalk and making odd tinkling sounds against the windows. Emma frowned. "Bae . . . that's not just rain."

"No. It sounds like hail too," he remarked.

"Damn! I don't dare drive home in this. The Bug's not built for such conditions," Emma swore softly.

"Then stay here for tonight," he invited.

"Uh . . . but I didn't . . . bring anything with me," she protested.
"You can borrow one of my sweatshirts," he said. "It'll be big, like a nightshirt." He rose and went into his bedroom, where he was mostly unpacked. He picked up one of his sweatshirts, it was an old one, black, with the Fire Mountain logo on it. "Here. That should do."

Emma caught it. It smelled like Tide and Old Spice. "Thanks."

"It's a good thing I got most of my furniture here before this hit," said Baelfire, going to light up some candles. "I've got a deck of cards here. We could play Texas Hold'Em."

"Why not? Then I can see if I can still beat the pants off you," Emma challenged.

"Only 'cause you cheat, Swan."

"Liar. You just suck, Gold."

"We'll see, won't we?"

They were in the middle of the third hand when the lights flickered and went out.

"Uh oh," Emma said.

The wind had picked up and was now screaming outside the window. The candles Bae had lit danced in funny shapes along the wall.

He laid down his hand and said, "That doesn't sound real good out there."

"No," Emma agreed, looking nervous. "I hate storms like this."

Bae came and put his arms around her. "Shh, wild swan. It's okay." Then he was kissing her, not a brief peck like earlier, but a real kiss, one that made her toes curl.

Before she knew what she was about, she'd kissed him back, fierce and sweet.

Without saying a word, the kissing progressed to someplace she hadn't been in ten years. "Bae..." she gasped as he trailed kisses down her neck.

"Don't worry, Em," he said, as if reading her mind. He showed her a small blue foil packet. "I've got it covered."

"It's a good thing," she replied, then smiled up at him and began to remove her shirt.

They spent the remainder of the storm curled in each other's arms, indulging themselves in all too many guilty pleasures.

Page~*~*~*~Break

Gold residence:

Alina had been upstairs reading on her tablet and dozing off on her bed when suddenly the lights went out. The sudden absence of light combined with her half-asleep state and fear of the dark caused her to panic. She groped for her tablet, but succeeded in knocking it to the floor.

The darkness was stifling, thick and murky, and she could hear the wind screaming like a lost soul and something rattling out her window, like hands down a blackboard. She whimpered in terror.

Suddenly there came a terrific boom of thunder and a flash of lighting and the window shattered.
Alina screamed, petrified now, and her magic roused, causing several stuffed animals and books to suddenly fly about the room, banging into the walls with muffled thumps as the storm raged.

Icy pellets of rain surged in through the broken window, stinging her face and she shrieked again just as her door opened and Rumple came through it, holding a flashlight in one hand.

"Alina, dearie, are you okay?" he called. He blinked as the beam of light revealed the little girl curled up on her bed, the broken window, and the flying animals. "Sweetheart, calm down. It's all right. A branch just broke the window, now stop screaming."

He limped rapidly over to the bed and hugged his shivering child to him.

"Papa! It's dark!" she gasped, tears starting from her eyes as she buried her face in his chest. "And something . . . blew up the window!"

"Shh! It's okay. It's just a nasty storm out there," he soothed, stroking her hair.

As she started to calm, so did her magic, and the stuffed animals and books fell to the floor. "I hate the dark."

"Yes, I know. Come on, let's go over to my room, your mom and I are—were—reading in there before the power went out."

"Papa, the window—"

"Don't worry about the window. We'll fix it in the morning. Come on, dearie. You can sleep with us tonight. It's like a hurricane out there, so who knows if I'll even sleep tonight."

Alina managed to let go long enough to pick up her Nook off the floor, and then she followed her father down the hallway to the master suite, where Belle was lighting several jars of scented candles, and the smell of cucumber melon and vanilla cupcakes permeated the air.

"Rumple? Is everything all right?" she called, holding the lighter in one hand.

"Fine, Belle. Alina's window broke and that was the noise we heard. Scared her half to death but otherwise we're okay," Rumple replied as they came into the bedroom.

Belle took one look at her daughter's pale face and came over and hugged her. "You poor thing! Alina, it's all right. My God, it's like a hurricane out there, but it's just a lot of wind and noise and water."

"Mama, I was asleep, almost, and then the lights went out and it was too dark . . ." Alina whimpered, clinging to Belle and shivering.

"Yes, and the dark can be scary when it's like this," Belle murmured. "But look, I've lit some pretty candles and it's not that bad now, see?"

Alina raised her head. The illumination of seven or eight candles about the room caused shadows on the wall, but there was light to see by. And her papa was still holding the flashlight, which was one of those big ones that threw a beam of light in a wide swath. Slowly, the panic began to leave her.

"Let's get you tucked in bed, dearie," Rumple encouraged, and he gently led the little girl over to his huge king sized bed and Alina climbed on it.
She burrowed beneath the soft sheets and the thick comforter, still clutching her tablet.

"I'm going to see how Alice is doing," Belle said. "I know she's probably asleep, since she took that headache medicine, but I just want to make sure."

"Take this," Rumple handed her his flashlight. "And be careful you don't trip on the stairs." He placed his cane beside the bed and climbed on it. "Alina and I are going to read while you're gone, right, sweetie?" He gently took the girl's Nook from her and Alina snuggled next to him.

Lightning flickered against the drawn curtains as Belle took the flashlight and left the room.

Alina almost jumped out of her skin as another peal of thunder echoed outside.

Rumple stroked her hair and said, "Relax, love. I know it sounds like the world's about to end, but the storm will pass. Now, what were you reading?" He tapped the tablet and found Alina's current book. "Ah. The Secret Garden. That's always a good one. Okay, we'll start here . . ."

He began to read, his voice deepening slightly, and its rich timbre drowning out the terrible howl of the wind and the rain that lashed the house. Alina leaned against his shoulder and the fear spawned by her phobia of the dark faded as she listened to Rumple's voice and cocooned herself in the warmth of the blankets and the smell of the scented candles wafting about the room.

Belle returned after ten minutes, saying, "Alice is out like a light, and everything's okay down there, as far as I can tell. Rain's coming down in buckets out there though. Rain and sleet, it's almost like a curtain of silver water."

She laid the flashlight on the end of the bed so it lit up part of the room and then climbed on the other side of the bed and snuggled next to her daughter, putting an arm about her. "Alina, it's almost like a slumber party. Look, I brought up some chocolate," she pulled out three Hershey bars from the pocket of her robe and handed them out. "And here's some iced tea too." She then removed three cans of Arizona from her other pocket.

Alina smiled at her mother and said, "It's not so scary now, Mama," and unwrapped the Hershey bar and ate some while Rumple continued reading.

He read to the end of chapter three, then handed the Nook to Belle, who read the next one, her sweet voice keeping the old fear at bay as Alina snuggled between them, finishing her tea and candy, and growing sleepy as she listened to the tale of Mary Lennox in the strange creepy house on the moor.

Thunder boomed intermittently now and the sound of the rain upon the old Victorian was rather soothing now, the little girl thought, as she lay like a silk worm, safe and sound, with her parents beside her. She hoped Henry was doing okay and so were Bae and Emma. Her eyes drifted shut in spite of herself.

Belle finished the chapter and looked down at her daughter. "Look, Rum. She's asleep."

"Mmm. And so am I, almost," he mumbled.

Belle set the Nook HD on the nightstand and curled about Alina, singing softly an old lullaby that her mother used to sing to her when she was young and scared of the dark. "Hush-a-bye, don't you cry, go to sleep my little baby. When you wake, you shall have all the pretty little ponies. Blacks and bays, dapples and grays, running in the night . . ."

Her voice was soft, like silk and honey, it flowed over the half-asleep girl and she slipped deeper
into sleep, dreaming now of children who could talk to animals and herds of ponies running out on the moor, carrying her away to a land of sunshine and wide open spaces.

Belle's voice trailed off, as she realized that both her child and husband had fallen asleep, and she smiled and gently caressed Rumple's cheek as it lay on the pillow next to Alina's before she also burrowed down into the comforter and fell asleep, unmindful of the storm causing wrack and ruin outside.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Henry had fallen asleep trying to IM Alina, and when he woke up the next morning at nine o'clock, most of the storm had blown itself out, though he could see a lot of trees had been knocked down over in their neighbor's yard. But the apple tree still stood, though the power was still out.

As he stood gazing out at the gray skies and drizzle from the front window, he recalled with a sudden horror that he'd left the Once Upon a Time book at the castle yesterday. In all the excitement over seeing Bae and receiving the tablet, he'd forgotten to grab the Book from the cubbyhole in the castle.

He raced upstairs and got dressed, intending to go and get it, maybe ride his bike down to the park, but when he came down again, Regina was up and she said, "You probably don't have school today, Henry. Not with the amount of damage the storm did, so you can go back to sleep if you want. I'm going to head over to the town hall, I think the phone lines are down, so only my cell works. I just managed to call Sydney and some of the others on the council. We're going to organize some clean-up crews."

Normally a day without Regina would have been heaven for the boy, but not now. "Mom! I left my fairy tale book in my castle yesterday and I need to go get it!" he burst out.

"What? Henry, don't be ridiculous. You're not going anywhere in this weather."

"But Mom . . . it's my book! I have to see if it's still there!"

"Oh, for God's sake. I'm sure it is, nobody would have touched it, not with the storm. And even if it is, it's probably all soggy and ruined by now, so just forget about it," she said dismissively.

"No! I need to get it," he insisted. Didn't she know how important the Book was? He stared at her pleadingly.

She sniffed. "All this fuss over some silly book of fairy tales," she said coldly, her eyes chill as black ice. "Tell you what. I have to go over to the park and see what kind of damage the storm did. I'll take a look in your castle for it then."

"Can't I come with you?" he pleaded, not wanting her to get her hands on the Book, which was the only piece of evidence he had that he wasn't crazy.

"Absolutely not. I'm busy and I can't take care of things with you clinging to me. Stay here and watch TV or something until I come back."

"I can't. The power's still out."

"Well, go back to bed or whatever, but don't pester me right now, Henry. Especially over some stupid book," Regina said sharply.

Frustrated, he yelled, "It's not stupid!"
"You watch your mouth, mister! Before you find yourself locked in your room the entire day," she growled. "Maybe it's a good thing that book was left there. At least if it's gone you won't be obsessing over it and feeding your unnatural dependency."

"It's not unnatural. You know everything I said is true," he objected.

"Only in your mind, Henry," she rolled her eyes. "Maybe you need more sessions with Dr. Hopper, because clearly you're still delusional. Now, take a nap or whatever until I get back. You've got a day off from school, that should make you happy."

Then she took her purse and walked out the door.

Henry heard the telltale click as she locked it, and longed to throw himself at the door and scream.

But then he recalled that he had Bae's number, and he went upstairs and grabbed his iPhone and dialed it.

Only to find that he had no bars left and he groaned and tossed it on the bed. Without power he couldn't charge it and it was useless.

Depressed, he flung himself on the bed, and picked up his Nook. At least that was still charged. He opened up Candy Crush and began to play to alleviate the boredom, but his heart wasn't in it. He couldn't believe he had forgotten the Book there. He hoped the storm hadn't damaged it and that Regina would do as she said and look for it.

**Page~*~*~*~Break**

Bae woke up and discovered his apartment was freezing and quickly pulled on his clothes, tugging the Storybrooke sweatshirt over his T-shirt. He walked into the small kitchen to find Emma eating a package of Oreos at his kitchen table and drinking some Coke. "Hey, wild swan. You look good in my shirt," he said, yawning, and indicating her attire, which was his black Fire Mountain sweatshirt.

Emma flashed him a grin. "Too bad I can't stay in it, but I've got to get dressed and go down to the station. They'll need me to check out people and assess the damage and stuff. Regina left me a message on my cell to that effect."

Bae made a face. "Ugh. Her Majesty calls," he helped himself to an Oreo. "Guess you'd better get going then. Sorry I don't have any coffee with the power down."

"This is good enough," she said, waving a hand at the Oreos and soda. "It's cheap Five Hour Energy."

"Breakfast of champions," he said, and kissed her lightly. "I'll be here, finishing unpacking. Hopefully the power will come on again soon and I can call Henry. I tried, but there was no signal."

"Okay. I don't know how busy we'll be, so . . . I'll see you when I see you," she sighed reluctantly.

When she emerged from the bathroom, dressed in her clothes from yesterday, she went to hand him his sweatshirt back.

"Keep it," he said. "I've got other ones, and it's colder than a witch's ass out there."

"Your blood's thin from living in the desert," she chuckled.
"Whatever." He stole another kiss, then sat down at the table with some peanut butter and began to eat it and some Oreos.

"Bye, Bae. If I can, I'll call later and see what's up," she said, then she picked up her purse and left, still hugging his sweatshirt to her.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Baelfire used the time the power was out to do a quick warm-up routine and then unpacked more boxes. By midmorning, the power was working again, and so was the heat, for which he thanked God. He put his phone on to charge and unpacked his sixth box, putting his collection of fantasy books up on the bookshelf of his entertainment system, next to the TV.

He carefully unwrapped a jade statue of a horse rearing, that he'd gotten in Japan, and put it above the TV on the shelf. It made him recall the horse amulet Rumple had given to Henry and as if that were a signal, his cell rang.

He picked it up and answered it. "Hello? Hey, Henry. How you doing?"

"Dad! Dad, you have to come get me. I left my book in the castle and she locked me in here and I need to get it. Please!"

"Whoa! Slow down, I can barely understand you. What book are we talking about?"

"The fairytale book," Henry explained. He told Bae what the Book was, and how he needed it to prove that everyone was who he said they were. By the time he'd finished, he was sniffling into the phone.

"Okay, don't get upset, tiger. I'm on my way," Bae reassured him. "I should be there in ten minutes, maybe a little more depending on how the roads are. I think there were a lot of downed wires and trees, so it might take me a bit longer. Just sit there and wait for me, no climbing out any windows, you hear?"

"Okay. Hurry," Henry urged, then he hung up.

"Damn her!" Bae snarled to himself as he grabbed his jacket and helmet from the tiny closet where he'd hung them. The keys to the Harley were inside a pocket, and all he had to do was grab the keys to his apartment and shove them and the phone in his other pocket before he took the stairs down to the warehouse level, where he'd parked his bike, and soon he was on his way to the Mills mansion, cursing Regina to kingdom come as he detoured around the fallen wires and tree branches that had come down on this side of Storybrooke.
Chapter Summary

Henry and Bae attempt to save the fairy tale book, but it's too late. Bae finally puts his foot down about Regina's treatment of Henry and asks Gold to help him get custody of his son.

By the time Bae arrived at the Mills mansion, Henry had almost paced himself through the floor. He couldn't explain it, but he felt that somehow the Book was in danger, or something like that. He also felt guilty because he was the one who had left the Book in the castle. He had considered summoning it, but Gold's rule about not using magic without him stopped him from doing so. After all, Gold was his grandfather, and also the most powerful sorcerer in the realms, so he would know, above anyone, the price of magic. And Henry didn't want to risk getting his grandfather angry with him.

So he bit his nails hard and waited for his dad to come and pick him up.

The moment he heard Bae's Harley in the drive, he was at the door, waiting.

He heard a slight noise and then the doorknob turned and opened and there was his father on the doorstep. "Dad! We gotta hurry!" he gasped, giving his father a brief hug and then running over to the Harley, which Bae had left with the keys in the ignition.

"Slow down, tiger," Bae admonished gently as he re-locked the door and pocketed his lockpick. "The book isn't going anywhere."

"It might not be, but . . . I just have this weird feeling that something bad might happen to it if I'm not . . . if I don't get it back soon," Henry told him.

"All right. Hold on, kid," Bae said, and hopped on the bike behind his son. "Damn, I really wish you had a helmet," he lamented. "I don't like you riding without one. Too dangerous."

He gunned the bike up to a mere twenty-five miles an hour, and drove down the street.

Henry frowned. "Dad, can't we go any faster?"

"Henry, I won't go any faster because you don't have a helmet and God forbid I have to stop short because something's fallen in the road," Bae said firmly.

Henry understood that bit of reasoning, for there was debris scattered all over from the storm, but it did nothing for the sense of urgency in his gut.

Bae drove carefully around the downed tree limbs and other detritus that had made its way into the road, arriving at the park in a little under twelve minutes. As he parked the bike along the street, Henry hopped off, staring in dismay at the large caterpillar and the other construction equipment that were digging up the park, removing shovelfuls of dirt and broken tree limbs . . . . and the broken remains of his wooden castle.

"No!" he yelled suddenly, and started to run forward, towards the machines, as if he could stop
them from tearing apart the playground, from removing the pieces of his broken castle, and the Book that had held all the knowledge of Fairy Tale Land in its pages. "Stop!"

Bae looked up, and saw his son running right into the path of a damn bulldozer. "Henry! God dammit!" he yelled, his heart rate suddenly accelerating rapidly as he sprinted forward, snatching his son up before he committed suicide over a book.

"Are you crazy, kid? You almost got yourself killed!" he cried.

"Dad, the Book . . . it was in the castle! She promised to get it and now . . . the castle's gone!" his son wailed, struggling against the strong arms that held him.

"Henry! Hey, listen to me!" Bae snapped. "Stop fighting me and think!" He held onto the boy until he quit struggling to get away and was still in his arms.

"Okay, you can let me go," the boy said, somewhat sullenly.

"You going to stay put and not go charging over there like you've got a death wish?" his dad demanded.

"Yeah, sure."

"Okay, then." Bae released him, only to take him by the shoulders and say softly, "Kid, you damn near gave me a heart attack! Don't ever do something like that again, y' hear?"

Henry nodded quickly, seeing the fear and concern in the older man's eyes.

"Okay, now listen to me. I'm going to go over and talk to that construction crew, see what's going on here. I'm going to ask if your stepmother the Mayor was here, maybe she got the book before they started digging up the place. And you're going to park your little butt right here on the sidewalk and watch my bike, clear?"

"Okay, Dad," Henry said, responding automatically to the new authoritative tone in his father's voice.

Bae ruffled his hair before turning and jogging over to where some of the construction crew had congregated.

Henry watched as his father questioned them, then walked around the huge hole where the castle had been—was it really truly gone—and over to a man in jeans and a sweater wearing a hard hat.

Bae spoke with the man for a few more minutes, then turned and jogged back to where Henry waited.

Henry could tell from the look on his father's face that the news was bad.

"Henry . . . she wasn't here," Bae began, shaking his head. "But she gave the order for the construction team to go ahead and demolish the castle, because it had fallen down during the storm. And that means . . ."

"The Book's gone," Henry said, feeling a part of himself go into shock. "She promised me . . . and she lied. Like always."

"I'm sorry," Bae said sadly, seeing the utter loss creeping over his son's face.

"She lied to me!" Henry yelled, tears suddenly falling down his face. "She knew . . . she knew the
Book was important . . . she didn't want me to have it . . . so she . . . made sure nobody would . . . now I can't prove anything . . . it's all gone, Dad! I was going to show you . . ." he trailed off, his throat suddenly frozen.

"Aww, kid!" Bae said, and suddenly he grabbed his son and held him. He was furious at Regina Mills, so mad he almost couldn't see straight. She had hurt his son, for nothing more than spite and malice, and though he had never met her yet, he already detested her. He stroked Henry's hair as the boy pressed his face into his jacket and cried bitterly. "It's okay, tiger," he murmured soothingly. "Don't cry, son. You don't need the Book to convince me of anything . . . I already believe you . . . don't forget where I came from, huh?"

All the while he was watching the construction crew demolishing the castle, and wishing he could demolish Regina. How long would it have taken to find the stupid book for her son? Her coldness reminded him of another woman he'd known long ago—Cora the Queen of Hearts.

He continued to hug his son until the boy had stopped crying into his jacket, then said softly, "Hey, why don't we get some ice cream or something, okay? Maybe a waffle sundae, huh?"

Henry sniffled. He didn't really feel like eating anything, the loss of the Book was devastating to him, but at the same time he really didn't want to be alone in his house, thinking about how she had betrayed him this last time.

>You knew she couldn't be trusted, a small voice in the back of his head hissed. She's the Evil Queen!

Yes, he had known, but he had thought that just once . . . she might have some pity for him, some small bit of compassion, and do what she had said she would for the boy she called her son.

He had been so stupid! He swallowed and brushed a sleeve across his face. Then he looked up at his dad and said, bravely, "Sure. Let's go to Granny's and get some."

They got on the bike again and Bae drove off towards the main center of Storybrooke, still seething over Regina, but determined to comfort his son as best he could, poor as that was.

A pair of emerald eyes watched him go.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

The man who called himself August Booth congratulated himself on getting to the Once Upon a Time book before Regina had had a chance to see it destroyed. The book was slightly damaged by the water, but it was nothing he couldn't fix, he thought, trying to pick out the stitches in the binding so he could add something to it—a new story that needed to be told.

He yelped as the Book suddenly glowed blue and . . . repelled him, throwing him halfway across the room he'd rented in a tiny apartment beside Storybrooke's docks. "Oww! Flaming hells!" he swore, picking himself up. Nobody had ever told him the Book was magic.

As he rubbed his singed fingers, trying to figure out the best way to go about doing what he wanted, a voice behind him spoke. "You won't be able to take the Book apart, stranger."

He spun around, groping for the tire iron he always kept handy. "Who the hell are you and how'd you get in here, lady?"

A tall statuesque woman with long honey-blond hair and green eyes, looking somewhere between twenty-five and thirty stood there. She was wearing a long brown trench coat, dressed in skintight
leather pants and boots that came up to her mid-thighs, wearing a silvery shirt that seemed to sparkle and was belted around her slim waist by a belt with a dragon buckle.

"All doors are open to those who know how to walk through them," she replied.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Do I know you?"

He sincerely doubted that. He'd remember someone this hot, he knew he would.

She shook her head. "Not yet you don't. I was born long before your time . . . Pinocchio."

He blanched. "How . . . that's not my name . . . it's August Booth."

"Is it? You can call yourself whatever you wish, but that's not your true name. And I make it my business to know the true names of things."

He bristled. "Quit playing games with me, lady. What's your name?"

She laughed, low and sultry. "I have been called many things. But the one most know me as is . . . Vasilisa the Wise."

"You're the Enchantress of the North?" he gasped.

"I am. Some know me as the Chronicler," she answered. "And that is my property," she indicated the book on the table.

"The Book? It . . . It belongs to—" he began.

"The one who made it. Which is me," she replied. "I was the one who wrote down all the stories within it, chronicling the major events and lives of most of the influential people in Fairy Tale Land. Because someday I knew it would be needed."

"How did you know?"

"I have my ways, little puppet boy," she answered mysteriously. "When the Wicked Queen cast the curse, I made sure the Book fell into the right hands—that of Mary Margaret, or as she was known back in our realm, Snow White. And she in turn would give it to the one who would use it best."

"The mayor's son?" August laughed in disbelief.

"Henry Mills. Who is much more than that. Much more," Vasilisa said. "As you will learn in time." Then she walked forward and put her hand upon the Book.

It glowed a brilliant gold then the pages that had been damaged were mended and it looked brand new again. She flipped the Book open, and showed him a new chapter of it. "There! This is what you wished to put in, isn't it, writer? Your tale?"

He gaped as he perused the chapter. "You . . . how do you know my story?"

"I know a lot of stories, Pinocchio. Stories about everyone. Some are written and some are yet to be. My Sight shows me what I need to know. It is why I am the Chronicler."

He shivered suddenly. "What do you want, Vasilisa?"

"Only what is mine," she answered, picking up the Book. "I will keep it safe. And return it to the one who loves it best in the proper time." Then she looked straight at him with her emerald eyes,
eyes that seemed to see straight into his soul. "One other thing. Don't be fooled by appearances. The one known as Mr. Gold is not your enemy. Don't turn him into one."

He started to sweat. "You . . . I only just thought . . ."

"I know. But this is my only warning. Heed me, Geppetto's son."

"Why do you care what happens to Gold?"

"Long ago he saved me. That is all you need to know. For now."

Then she was gone, like mist off the moors.

If he hadn't known better, he would have thought it all in his imagination. But there were water stains on the desk where the book had been. And his fingers still throbbed.

Gold residence:

Alice opened the door to admit Baelfire, smiling when she saw the martial arts instructor. "Hey, handsome. Long time no see. You okay after the storm?"

"Hey, Alice. I came through the storm all right. Where's my father?"

"He's in the kitchen, having lunch with Belle and Alina. Something wrong? You seem upset."

"I am. But not with anyone here," Bae said, his jaw tight. He stalked into the kitchen, tension radiating from him like a blast furnace.

Alice followed, curious as to what had the younger man looking like a pot about to boil over.

Mr. Gold, dressed in his usual conservative gray Armani suit and red tie, was sitting at the table eating a ham sandwich and drinking a cup of coffee. He had been at his shop earlier, checking to see what damage had been done by the storm. Thankfully, the shop had sustained minor damage to the awning and roof, nothing that would require major repairs, and he decided to open for business later that day.

Beside him, Belle was eating a tuna salad on wheat, wearing a pair of blue slacks, a fuzzy gray sweatshirt, and sneakers, her dark hair pulled back in a tail. She was smiling at Alina, who sat next to her, wearing her pink teacup sweatshirt, a pair of jeans, and her white Keds.

Alina had just bit into her BLT on wheat toast when Bae walked into the room. She opened her mouth to say hello to her brother, but then swiftly closed it when she saw the dark expression on his face.

"I want to murder that damn bitch!" were the first words out of Bae's mouth.

Gold turned around to look at his son. "Hello, Bae. And what bitch are we talking about here? Although I think I know."

Bae sighed. "Hello, Papa. Sorry, I should watch my mouth," he smiled at Alina and Belle. "Hey, Belle, Alina. I'm just so mad I could spit."

"No, Papa, thank you," Bae said, and sat down. "Who I'm talking about ought to be easy for you to guess. She's the mayor."

"Regina," said Alina. "What's she done, Bae? Did she hurt Henry?" That was the only reason she could see for her brother to get all steamed, if something had happened to his son.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Bae said. Then he told him about the Book and Regina's promise to Henry and what she had done instead of keeping it.

Alina looked horrified. "She destroyed the fairy tale book? What a—"

"Alina Rose!" Belle warned. "Don't you dare say that word. You're not old enough."

"—witch," her daughter finished. "What, Mama? I know better. But what she did . . . it's horrible!"

"Yes. I'd assume from your reaction, that Henry's pretty upset about it?" Gold asked Bae, shaking his head.

"That's putting it mildly. I'm sick and tired of her hurting him, Papa. I want to know how we can get him away from her. I want custody of my son," Bae declared fiercely.

"That won't be easy to get, Bae," Gold sighed.

"I don't care, Papa. I'll fight every inch of the way for him. She doesn't deserve him, and he has family now who care about him. He belongs with me. He's a Gold."

"All right. Let's go discuss this in my office. I have some files on my computer you ought to see," said Gold, rising to his feet and grabbing his cane.

As the two men walked from the room, Alice said to Belle, "Regina better watch out, because that man there is ready to kick her evil ass!"

"And I'm ready to help him," Belle said, her blue eyes flashing.

"Me too!" said Alina. Somehow she had the feeling that battle lines had suddenly been drawn, though Regina didn't know it yet.
Gold and Bae plot to take Regina to court and Gold reveals what he knows about Henry's adoption and how it just may be possible to gain custody if certain conditions are met.

Gold took Bae into his office, which was on the second floor, a large airy room with golden oak paneling and a huge antique rolltop desk where he had his computer and a large bay window in the back of it to let in plenty of light. Thick green drapes were fastened back at the sides, and it had a large floor to ceiling brass lamp in the lefthand corner behind the desk. A huge bookshelf was on the right against the wall, it was filled with law books, computer texts, and business manuals. Arranged tastefully along with the books were a few collectables, such as a Ming vase from China, a marble horse head from Rome, a jade panther from India, a golden kachina statue from Peru, and a hand carved wolf made of black ebony from the Cheyenne reservation in South Dakota.

A thick Turkish carpet covered the floor, a mosaic of beautiful patterns and colors, and upon it were two comfortable brown leather wingback chairs. Behind the desk was Gold's cushioned red leather rolling chair, modeled after the President's own chair in the White House.

Bae looked about as he stepped into the room, saying, "This is a really nice place you've got here, Papa."

"Thank you. Since I spend a lot of time in here doing accounts and such, I decided a long time ago to make this room as comfortable as possible. Bring a chair around here by mine and I'll show you a few things on my computer regarding Regina's adoption of Henry."

Bae's lip curled at the mention of Regina Mills. "She's no real mother to him, Papa! Any more than Milah was to me." He pulled one of the wingbacks around to the side of the desk so it faced the computer screen and sat in it.

Gold limped about the other side and settled into his chair, saying in some surprise, "I didn't think you had all that many memories of your mother, since she left when you were four."

"I have enough," Bae said shortly. "Enough to know she cared more about herself than her own son and her husband. Both of them are coldhearted bitches. But what I'd like to know is how Regina managed to finagle an adoption as a single parent. From what I understand, it's difficult to do that. The system favors a two parent household, and I ought to know since I was adopted by the Cassidys."

"You're right. It's always preferable to have a family unit if possible. But there are, on occasion, exceptions. In other words, money talks, son. And Regina has enough of it to show that she could provide a stable financial environment for a child, a well paying job, and standing in the community. She pulled strings, Bae," he said softly, and tapped a few keys on his keyboard.

As he typed in several passwords, a file popped up on the screen. It was labeled "Mills Adoption" and listed the facility where Henry was placed as a newborn baby and the particulars of it.
"Arizona State Foster Care Facility," Bae read.

"That was where I found him," Gold said. "I'm a little ashamed to admit this now, but I was the one who assisted her in finding a baby to adopt. Of course, I had no idea back then who she was, who I was, or anything else about our past lives. I was a lawyer and a businessman and she was the mayor and I owed her for my position in this town. She called in her favor, and I didn't know then what I do now. So I helped her find a suitable child to adopt. At the time, I didn't really consider her role as a single parent as all that detrimental, after all, I was one myself, and I saw to it that Alina never wanted for anything—materially or emotionally—except I couldn't stand to talk about her mother. But she had me and Alice—who was called Saylah back then—and together we tried to give her all the love and affection we could, to make up for Belle not being there. Sometimes I think maybe it still wasn't enough, but it was far better than what Regina gave Henry."

Bae snorted. "Papa, a snake was probably a better mother! If I know you, and I ought to since you raised me until I was fourteen, you did a wonderful job with my sister. I can see how close you two are, she loves you to pieces, and she wouldn't unless you loved her that way in return."

Gold gave him a small grin. "I do, just like I do you. Some people would say that's my greatest weakness, that I love too much, when I allow myself to love at all. Regina once remarked that my love for Alina was almost unnatural in its intensity."

"Ha! She's a fine one to talk! She's unnatural, with the way she treats Henry. I don't even think she has a heart, with the way she behaves. What I want to know is why the hell she bothered to adopt a kid in the first place if she was going to leave him alone half the time and not love him like she was supposed to?" his son asked heatedly.

"Well, that's something that I've wondered too lately," Gold said quietly. "I don't think Regina has much of a heart left given what she did to us all in the name of her own selfish hatred and bitterness. Casting the Dark Curse required a sacrifice of extreme measures, I made it that way on purpose, for the greater the spell, the greater the cost. It didn't matter to me, since all I cared about at the time was finding you, and I had nothing I cared about back then. This was before Belle or Alina came into the picture, by the way."

"So what did she sacrifice to make this curse work?"

"The only person who loved her in the world. Her own father."

"My God! That's . . . disgusting! What a sick depraved woman!" Bae looked as if he were going to vomit. "And she dares to call herself a parent?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Gold sighed. "You ask why she chose to adopt a child once the curse was in effect? After all, she had everything she ever wanted—all the power, all the glory, all the wealth she could desire. But there was one thing she didn't have . . . someone to admire her, someone to love her, and in her own twisted way, I think she missed that. Perhaps she was even lonely, and since she would never marry and allow a partner to "rule" with her, she needed to find another way to get what she wanted. Her solution was to adopt a child. And since she would tolerate no rivals, she didn't want a daughter—she'd already had that with Snow White—so she wanted a son instead. Perhaps in a strange sort of way she hoped to replace her father. I believe it's why she called the boy Henry."

"Now that I know what she did . . . naming the boy that seems so . . . wrong," Bae said, the revulsion plain upon his face. "She kills the man she professes to love and then names her adopted son after him? Ugh!"
"That's Regina for you. No one ever said she made sense, at least not to normal people. Then again, we're hardly normal ourselves, son. At any rate, one day she came to me and asked me to arrange an adoption for her. She stipulated that the child must be a boy, still a baby, and oddly enough, it had to come from somewhere other than Maine. She also wanted one whose mother had signed off on her maternity rights. So I set about finding a suitable child. I used my database here and incredibly, found a child for her in Phoenix. It was almost like fate. He met all her criteria, and I arranged for her to speak with the director over the phone. I believe she even made a visit out there and talked with him."

"Then she can leave Storybrooke?"

"She cast the curse, Bae, and is therefore unaffected by it," replied his father. "After I had arranged certain specifics, and they had accepted her application for adoption, I really had nothing more to do with the whole process. I looked over the legal papers and so forth for her, and arranged for Henry to be brought to Storybrooke, but other than that, I had my own daughter to look after and my own affairs to mind. I didn't pay too much attention to her or to Henry until he was about six. Until that time I assumed, like most of us did, that he was fine and given everything he could want."

"When did you first notice something wasn't right between him and Regina?"

"After Alina and he were friends awhile. They became friends when the two of them had just started school, they met while playing softball at the park. They banged into each other literally, Alina was playing third base on the opposite team and Henry was running and they collided. Of course I was right there and went over immediately to see if they were hurt, luckily neither of them needed to go to the emergency room. Regina was on her cell phone at the time, and didn't even notice what had happened. And Henry was . . . well, he didn't really know me back then, and most kids would have been crying for their mama, but he didn't even look at her. Instead he looked at me and said, 'I'm okay. I've hurt myself worse falling out of my castle.' Alina was complaining her head hurt and I made her sit down and got an ice pack from the coach and put it on her. I got one for Henry also, because Regina was still talking on the phone, and seemed more concerned about whoever she was talking with than her own kid. And when she did get off the phone and I told her what had happened, she was irritated and said he should be more careful. It was only later on that I thought that was a strange reaction for her to have over an accident—like he was somehow inconveniencing her by getting hurt."

"Maybe to her he was. So you didn't know then who he really was?"

"Your son? No, of course not. I couldn't remember my own true name, much less anything else. I didn't realize the resemblance between you was so pronounced until I saw you together that first time. And then I knew."

"So what do we need to do to make a case against her?"

"We have to lay a foundation for her unsuitability and show that you are better suited to raise Henry and give him what he needs to grow up into a healthy individual. Now you have three things going for you, Bae. One, you're his natural father, and if the court wants proof, which it will, all you'll need to prove that is a simple DNA test. Two, you have a good career and can provide for a family, and three, you love the kid. Now, you need to get your business up and running in order to establish your credentials as a solvent parent. And it would also help, as I said before, if you and Emma would show that you're a couple."

"Even better if we're married, right? I do plan on asking her, Papa. But I want to give her more time to get used to the idea."
"That's good, Bae. I need time anyhow to start these proceedings. . . and get my hands on those records. You need to ask Emma if she named you as Henry's father on his birth certificate. If she has, that'll make things easier on us. Regina might have prestige, power, and money on her side, but we have something she'll never have."

"Integrity? A heart?"

"Yes, but I'm talking about the rights of the birth mother for her child."

"But I thought you said Emma signed away her rights."

"True, but a mother can always change her mind. The law allows for that, since it considers the bond between the birth mother and child almost inviolable. I can make a case that Emma was desperate to give her child a life she couldn't provide for him, which is true. She herself would admit that. She almost had no choice but to give him up, since what could she give him in a jail cell? You were gone and she had no one to turn to. But that was then and this is now."

He clicked on Internet Explorer and went online. Then he typed in several keywords and waited for the computer to bring up the results. "Look at these cases, Bae, and you'll see that in most of these, the birth mother has been allowed visitation rights and in some cases the child has been allowed to live with them. But in our case, we want full custody, so we'll need to provide examples of a good home environment and to show that Regina, despite her wealth, can't provide Henry with anything close to that emotionally."

"That shouldn't be too hard, Papa. I mean, we have all these examples of how she treats him from you, me, Emma, and himself."

"Yes. That will count heavily in our favor."

"I'm almost all moved into my apartment over here. Hmm . . . it might help if I asked Emma to move in with me. I really need to have a talk with her."

"Yes, you do. Explain to her what we discussed and finish getting that dojo of yours up and running. Ideally, what we'll need to show a judge is a two parent household that's financially capable of supporting a child and giving him all the love and affection and material things he needs. We have two advantages—Regina's arrogance in assuming she can treat Henry anyway she pleases and the fact that she doesn't know about you yet. I plan to use them for all they're worth. While you're doing that, I'll pull some strings of my own and get those adoption records and petition the state court for a suit."

"I'm going to talk to Emma as soon as possible," Bae told him.

"And there's one more thing. If it comes to it, I have one sure method of proving Regina's true colors, because I'm sure she's going to point out that Henry's in therapy and all. Of course, I'll need to talk with her first, and talk with Dr. Hopper so I can get those records, but we have Belle to prove that Regina's a crazy vindictive bitch."

"Because how else would you describe a person who's kept a woman locked away for years and deprived her of seeing her family and allowed that family to think she died?" Bae murmured.

"Exactly. And while I don't like involving Belle that way, I will if I have to, as long as she agrees to it." A hard light came into his eyes then. "Regina doesn't realize it yet, but I know what she cost me and Alina. And I plan to collect on my debt, one way or another."

Bae nodded, an identical light glittering in his own eyes. "So do I. If the mayor wants to play
While the two men were upstairs in Gold's office, Alina finished her lunch then got out her Nook and got online and IM'd Henry to see what was up with him. Since the power lines were out still from the storm and the cell reception was patchy at best, this was the best way for her to talk to him.

RumbelleGirl: Hey, Henry. What's up? You OK?

She typed that message in and waited for a response.

In a few minutes she received a reply.

Swanfireboy: Hey, Alina. I'm fine. The storm didn't really damage anything except the power lines over here. The Evil Queen's out right now and I'm here alone. I'm sort of glad, because I'm so mad at her I might do something stupid if I saw her right now and get in major trouble. Did my dad come by?

RumbelleGirl: Yeah. I know about the Book and the castle. I'm so sorry, Henry. That witch doesn't deserve to live. She's hurt all of us so bad. Your dad and mine are talking upstairs. I think Bae wants to sue her butt, he was like breathing fire.

Swanfireboy: Good. Got a call from Her Dark Majesty on my cell just b-fore you. She told me the book was ruined and she'd get me a video game to replace it. Like that'd help!

RumbelleGirl: A video game? She's totally nuts! What'd you say?

Swanfireboy: I said sure, Mom. Get the new Resident Evil one. I HATE her!

RumbelleGirl: Me too! I really hope you can go live with Bae someday soon. She's getting worse.

Swanfireboy: Yup. TTYL, I think I hear her coming in the door. Bye!

RumbelleGirl: Bye!

Alina stopped IM-ing then, thinking all kinds of nasty thoughts about Regina. Belle and Alice were discussing taking one of Bae's self-defense classes once they were available, and Belle turned to her daughter and asked, "Would you like to sign up for one too, sweetie?"

"Sure I would, Mama. And I think we could even get Mary Margaret, Ruby, and maybe Ashley in on it too. It'd be really cool. Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Belle, Alice, and Cinderella can all learn to karate chop their enemies and kick their butts. It'd be like The Karate Kid, fairy tale style!"

"You're right, kid," Alice said approvingly. "No more of this damsel in distress business. Now we're the damsels of destruction."

"You said it, Alice! And while I really like Mr. Miyagi, I think we'll all be happy Bae's teaching us," Belle smirked.

"You can say that again!" Alice chuckled. "I know he's your stepson, Belle, and he's sweet on Emma, but God, he's way hotter than that little Japanese dude! And believe me when I tell you I haven't felt like that about a guy since my damn husband disappeared."
"Maybe we can find out what happened to him once the curse breaks," Alina said softly. "I just finished IM-ing Henry. He told me the Heartless One called him and told him some fake story about the book being destroyed and how she felt bad and was going to buy him a video game, Mama!"

Belle scowled. "A video game?"

"Yeah, you know, an electronic game that you play on the TV. Like I showed you on my Nintendo DS," Alina explained.

"You mean . . . she thinks one of those . . . thingamajigs can replace a book?" Belle repeated, outraged. "That's impossible!"

"Uh oh. Reggie just committed the ultimate sin—she told a kid that there's a substitute better than the written word to the High Priestess of Literary Excellence," Alice said, her blue eyes sparkling gleefully. "She's wakened a sleeping dragon sure enough, kid!"

Belle's eyes were blazing with righteous indignation. "Alice, don't be ridiculous! There's no substitute for a good book, especially not one of those—things! Books are the cornerstone of civilization, of great minds, they encourage creativity and original thought! Books encourage children to think, to wonder, to use their brains for something more than mindlessly pushing buttons. Books are precious and . . . and . . . it's utterly disgusting how she thinks she can replace something so incredible with some cheap plastic thing that makes kids zombies!"

"See? It's like watching a volcano erupting!" Alice laughed.

"Rumple told me how she closed down the library," Belle continued, scandalized. "Because she said there was no need for it! No need to give people an outlet to learn, a place to go where they could use their minds, and become something more than good little drones nodding their heads and saying "yes, madame mayor" and "may I kiss your feet, madame!". No wonder why this damn town's frozen in time! She's done her best to suppress original thought, the tyrant!"

"Yeah, you said it, girlfriend!" Alice cheered. "Now let's go burn the wench! We'll tie her to a stake and light up a bunch of Playstation games beneath her and watch 'em all go up in smoke!"

"Belle, dearie, why are you shouting?" asked Rumple as he and Bae entered the kitchen again.

"Belle's plotting a literary revolution, Mr. G," Alice smirked. "She's declared war on Her Majesty the Queen and we're going to picket in front of her house and threaten to burn it down unless she reopens the library and stops suppressing the masses. It's like the intellectual crusades."

"Rumple! That—that witch told Henry that she'd replace his book with a video game!" Belle cried, incensed.

"It's heresy! We ought to burn her!" Alice hooted.

"As if some bunch of-of ions and electrical whatevers can ever replace what he just lost!" Belle snapped. "It's too bad you don't have your magic back, Rumple! Then you could curse her good for trying to corrupt our grandson!"

"Go, Mama!" cheered Alina, clapping.

"Dearie, I'm not the Dark One any longer, remember?" Rumple reminded her gently. "Though I'm sure I could find some spell that wouldn't jeopardize my soul for you and cast it on her if I had my magic back."
"Where there's a will, there's a way," Bae grinned. "I'd love to stay and plot Regina's demise with you, but I have to be getting back to my place and seeing to a few things. And talking to Emma. So, I'll catch you later."

They all said goodbye, then as the door shut behind her brother, Alina said, "Papa, can I download a new book? I finished *The Secret Garden* this morning and I need something else to read. I think I'll try *Watership Down* next, Bae said that was really good."

"Sure, sweetheart," Gold said. "Just give me your tablet once you're ready to purchase it and I'll type in the password. You'll like that one, Alina. I read that a few years ago."

"I never have," Belle said. "Do you still have a copy, Rum?"

"Of course. It's on the bookshelf in the den, dearie."

"Oh, good! I was getting bored re-reading *Sense and Sensibility* for the fiftieth time," his wife said happily.

"When the curse breaks, Rumple, you're going to have to re-open the library," Alice told him. "So the High Priestess can get some new converts to the faith and worship there."

"And you're going to be the first in line, right, Alice?" Belle poked her playfully.

"Sure I am, sugar. Right after I take my rolls out of the oven."

"I'd be happy to, dearie. Just as soon as I clear up a few things on my current agenda, okay?" Rumple crooned, and he kissed Belle lightly on the mouth.

"Hey, guys! No PDA's, there's a kid under twelve over here," Alice teased. She winked at Alina. "There's more than one reason she wants to open that library, girl. Then she'll have an excuse to drag your papa back in the stacks and read some new literature to him that wasn't available back in his castle!"

Alina giggled and Belle and Rumple mock-glared at her.

"Watch it, Alice. Before I buy you the entire set of Rachel Ray cookbooks for Christmas," her employer threatened.

"I'll quit first, Mr. G!"

"Don't worry, Alice. Kissing's okay, that's getting to first base," Alina commented.

Gold stared at his daughter in horror. "Alina Rose! You shouldn't be knowing about getting to any base, first or otherwise!"

"Oh, come on, Papa! It's the twenty-first century, not the Dark Ages. And I already know kids don't come out of cabbage patches anymore."

"Thank God you're here now, Belle. Otherwise I'd be calling Mother Superior up at the convent," Gold said. "Or shooting myself, I'm not sure which."

"Mr. G, you're positively medieval," Alice remarked cheekily.

"Be quiet, Alice!" he half-growled. Then he looked at his daughter. "You download that book yet?" He took Alina's Nook and typed in the password. "There! Now go read about the bunnies, dearie! That ought to keep you busy."
Alina took the Nook and went upstairs to read, and behind her she heard Alice say, "Bunnies, Mr. G?" and crack up.
Bae unpacked one last box, staring down at the katana wrapped in cotton batting, to protect it while it was shipped over here via Fed Ex. He'd fought in a lot of tournaments with that sword, it had been a gift to him from his adopted father, Neal Cassidy. His hands traced the blade and he thought of how far he'd come since then. Then his whole life had been winning tournaments and making enough money to open his own martial arts studio. Now it appeared his life was taking a new turn, and he was not just martial arts instructor, but dad. And perhaps, if he could talk Emma into it—husband as well.

He patted the blade and gently closed the box on it and his velvet drawstring pouch of shuriken. His sai—twin daggers, were in yet another case, next to his composite bow and quiver of metal tipped arrows. He knew how to use all the weapons he hung up on the walls of his dojo, though he was best at using the blades and the shuriken, less so with the bow. He could shoot pretty well, but that wasn't his weapon of choice half the time.

He thought of Emma, his wild swan, the woman he had loved and thought lost forever. Now she was found again, along with their son. But he had to fight to keep Henry, and perhaps Emma too. Then again, he was accustomed to that. Nothing in his life had ever been easy. Holding on to his son and the woman he loved wouldn't be either. But he would never give up, never stop fighting, for to surrender was to die a quick death of the spirit, and that he had never done, not even when he was Cora's page.

He picked up his jacket and shrugged into it, deciding to meet Emma down at the station and see if she'd like to have dinner somewhere. First he would talk to her about what his father and he had discussed, and see if she had any suggestions about trying to get custody of Henry. He hoped she would see the merits in them getting back together—not just for Henry's sake, but for their own.

As he locked up, he whistled an old tune by Journey, one of his favorite bands, Send Her My Love. Then he pocketed his keys and started his Harley. The bike was great for traveling around a city as congested as Phoenix, and excellent on gas, but maybe he ought to look into getting a car now. Then he wouldn't have to worry about picking up Henry and driving around Storybrooke was a lot different than traffic in Phoenix.

Emma was just heading out to her Bug, when Bae drove up to the station. "Hey," she called, her heart doing a funny leap when she saw him. "Any damage on your end from the storm?"

"Not really, at least none to the building. There were a lot of downed wires and tree branches though," he said, killing his engine, and resting his helmet on the handlebars.

"There's been a lot of that all over town," she acknowledged, rubbing her eyes.

"You look beat, Em. What do you say to getting some food and just hanging out at my place?" he
"I wouldn't mind that," she said. "But I'd like to get changed out of these clothes first. How about you come over to . . . uh . . . Mary Margaret's place with me. You can meet her and . . . umm . . . talk while we wait."

"Sure, why not?" he said. "I mean, I ought to meet your mom, right?"

Emma started. "You know . . . about that?"

"Henry told me about how everyone's related here. So, yeah, I know she's Snow White and your mom, and her husband's Charming, and your dad. But here, they're Mary Margaret and David Nolan and they don't remember who they are, like everybody in this town. Except for my father, Belle, and Alice. Must make for some awkward family reunions, huh?"

"Kind of. But I never knew them as my parents until now, so . . . well, it's complicated, Bae."

"Mmm . . . yeah, I can see that. So I'll just play it by ear. Oh, and I go by Neal to anybody outside my family or you. It's how I registered my dojo here with the town council. So don't be surprised when I introduce myself as Neal Cassidy, okay, hon?"

"Sure, Mr. Bond," she joked.

"Hey, I thought I was Obi-Wan."

"You're both. Like your dad's Rumple and Master Yoda," she smirked.

Bae started laughing. "You called him Master Yoda? To his face?"

"Uh, yeah. But if you start calling me Leia, we're going to have problems, buddy."

"How come? You're technically a princess."

"Yeah, but this princess doesn't need to be rescued. This princess does the rescuing, big guy."

"Got it, babe. And I like a woman who can take care of herself," Bae grinned. "Just remember, you don't have to do everything alone. I'm here whenever you need me."

Emma blushed. "Umm . . . right. Okay. So . . . let's go back to Mary Margaret's." She unlocked her Bug and got into it. "Follow me."

"Anytime, wild swan," he said, and put on his helmet.

Page~*~*~*~*~*~Break

Bae followed Emma to Mary Margaret's apartment, memorizing the way as he did so. He allowed her to lead the way into the small two bedroom apartment, calling hello to the schoolteacher as she did so.

"Mary Margaret, there's someone I'd like you to meet," Emma called.

Mary Margaret turned to see her roommate and a tall man enter the room. "Wow, Emma! You never told me about him!" she exclaimed. She came forward and held out a hand. "Hi, I'm Mary Margaret Blanchard. I . . . umm . . . teach at Storybrooke Elementary."

"Hi, Neal Cassidy," Bae shook her hand. "I'm a martial arts instructor. I've just moved here and will
"You . . . teach too? Like self defense and that sort of thing?" asked Mary Margaret.

"Self-defense for both kids and women. Anyone who wants to learn, really," Bae said.

"Neat! Maybe I'll sign up for a class," the teacher said eagerly. "How about you, Emma?"

"I've already done that. Sort of," Emma said. "I . . . uh . . . will be right back, Neal." She walked across the living room and into her bedroom.

Mary Margaret invited Bae to sit down at their tiny kitchen table. "So . . . how long have you known Emma?"

"Oh, we've met before. A long time ago, in Phoenix," he answered. "In a way, she's why I'm here now."

"You're . . . reconnecting?" Mary Margaret queried, thinking if she found an old flame like Neal back in town she'd be all over him. Instead she had David . . . who didn't know if he ought to love her or Kathryn.

"Yeah, you could say that," Bae chuckled. "Reconnecting. I like that. I'll put your name down for my first self-defense class, Mary Margaret. It ought to be an interesting one."

"I'll say. I'll ask Ruby, she's a waitress down at the diner, and Ashley, she might be able to, if she can find someone to babysit, join me."

"You could see if Alina's available, Mary Margaret," suggested Emma, returning dressed in jeans and Bae's Fire Mountain sweatshirt.

"Right. If Gold allows her to work on a school night," the teacher reminded. "How long are these classes?"

"About an hour and a half," Bae answered. "At least for beginners. The more advanced classes are two and half hours. And I'm sure Mr. Gold wouldn't mind . . ." then he trailed off.

"You know Mr. Gold too?" Mary Margaret asked.

"Yeah, but not like Emma. I'm renting the building from him," Bae said quickly. "We . . . uh . . . talked a bit and he told me about his little girl."

Mary Margaret smiled. "He adores her. I think he'd give her the moon on a silver platter. I think it's so refreshing to see such a loving relationship between a parent and child these days."

"Unlike the one between Henry and Mayor Mills," Emma said quietly.

Bae raised an eyebrow. "Uh . . . why don't we get something to eat, Emma?"

"Fine with me. What do you feel in the mood for, Neal?"

"I don't know. How about . . . a hamburger and fries?"

"Granny's has the best ones," Emma said.

"Then that's where we'll go," Bae said, rising.
"Don't wait up for me, Mary Margaret," Emma said, her blue eyes twinkling.

"Have a good time," her roommate said. Then she looked at Emma's shirt and back at Baelfire. "Is that . . . the name of your dojo?"

"It is," Bae affirmed.

"He gave me his shirt," Emma explained. "I . . . uh . . . got caught in the rain and . . . umm . . ."

"I understand," Mary Margaret said, smirking. "Like I said, Emma, have a good time."

"Sure I will," she said, managing to keep from flushing slightly. Then she thought, you have no idea, Mary Margaret.

"This is one of the best hamburgers I've ever eaten," Emma said, biting again into the juicy combination of ground beef, lettuce, tomato, cheese, pickles, and ketchup.

"Better than one of mine?" Bae inquired, eating his own.

"I said 'one' of," Emma corrected. "You've got that thing with the onions and spices down cold."

"And the Thousand Island. And the grill, can't forget that," he teased, dunking a fry in ketchup and devouring it.

"Yeah, Obi Wan. You are the grill master," Emma smirked. "You're like fire's best friend."

"Only sometimes," Bae chuckled. "Not when I was a kid. I got in serious trouble once for starting a fire."

"You played with matches?" Emma snickered.

"In a manner of speaking. I was very stupid. I made a bet with another kid that I could . . . uh . . . call up a djinn from an old lamp we found by lighting a fire under it. Not only didn't we do that, we almost burned down the forest."

"Oh my God! How old were you?"

"Eight. Old enough to know better. We almost barbecued half the village. And once my father found out, he nearly roasted me."

"He . . . punished you with magic?"

Bae snorted. "Hell, no! He had none back then, and even if he had, he'd never have used it on me. That was the one time he ever raised a hand to me. Gave me the worst spanking of my life. I never played with fire again, I'll tell you."

"Sounds like you were a real hellraiser."

"Yeah, don't give me that, Swan. Like you were an angel."

"I didn't say that. But I was rather like Henry. I behaved until I saw a reason not to," Emma admitted.

"Speaking of Henry, Emma, we have to talk. But not here. At my place."
"You sound angry. Did something happen?"

"Yeah, but it's not something he did. It's something That Woman did," Bae answered, eating the rest of his fries.

Emma stiffened. "What'd she do?" she half-growled.

"Tell you later. Too many ears around here. Want some ice cream? Or hot cocoa?"

"I shouldn't. My waistline's growing."

"Not from what I can tell."

"Yeah, well, I don't burn off tons of calories like you. So I have to watch."

"I can show you a workout that'll make you quit worrying about what you eat forever, babe," he grinned provocatively. "Share a banana split with me?"

"Fine. You twisted my arm," she said, laughing.

Bae insisted on paying for dinner, and while he was settling the bill with Granny, Ruby stopped by their table and whispered to Emma, "Okay. Where've you been keeping him? Handcuffed to the bed?"

"Actually my closet," Emma joked. "I let him out for good behavior."

Ruby eyed the lean muscled martial arts instructor appreciatively. "You let me know if he's got brothers at home, okay? He's positively yummy."

"You're out of luck, Rubes. No brothers. But he's got a little sister," the sheriff said.

"Damn! Because he is one fine looking man, girlfriend," she sighed longingly. "Well, if you ever . . . get tired of him . . . give him my number."

Emma laughed. "Yeah, right. See you around, Ruby."

"What was that about?" Bae asked when he returned to the table.

"She wanted your phone number. I told her it was unavailable."

"It is. To anyone except family. And you, wild swan. Come on, let's go back to my place. Like I said, we need to talk. Among other things."

"I hear and obey, Master Obi Wan."

He rolled his eyes. "Cute, Swan. But I know better."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"So . . . what did you want to talk to me about?" Emma asked lazily, curled up in his arms, her fair hair drifting across the sheets and spilling onto his shoulder. "What did that witch do now?"

Bae told her about the castle and the book. "I've just about had it, Emma. I'm tired of her hurting him and then getting away with it because she's who she is in this town. I went through a similar kind of abuse with the Queen of Hearts, and I'll be damned if I'll let it happen to my kid. She's not his mother, I don't care what some piece of paper says. You are. And together we can give him
what she never can. A real home and a family."

"How, Bae? I signed away all my rights to him when I put him up for adoption," Emma protested.

"Papa says that doesn't matter. You're still his birth mother. You can change your mind, especially under the circumstances. There's precedent—legal precedent. And there's me."

"You want to take Regina to court? You really think we can win?"

"Oh, yeah. I want to smear her pretty face in the mud. I want to kick her ass so bad she'll spend the rest of her days sitting on a damn pillow. But there's only one way I can do it right. I need your help, Emma. I need you to back me. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

Slowly, she nodded. "You're asking me to . . . get back together again. To . . . marry you."

"I was working my way up to that, but yeah. And it's not just because of Henry. I still love you, Emma. I never stopped. You mean . . . everything to me. I want . . . to wake up to you like this every morning. And fall asleep every night hearing you breathe in my ear. Back in Phoenix, I thought my life was complete. Only it wasn't. You weren't in it. There was this great gaping hole. And now it's gone. I came here because I wanted a family again. You, me, Henry. The way it should have been."

"I . . . want that too, Bae. I've always wanted it," she admitted. "Only . . . are you sure about this? That you're not marrying me because you're Henry's dad?"

He cupped her face in his hands. "Sweetheart, I'm marrying you for that and because the God's honest truth is I can't stand to be without you. Yes, I love my son. But I loved you first, Emma Swan. You captured me when I first saw you standing there with that damn crow bar, trying to steal my car."

"There was no try about it, Obi Wan. I did steal it," she said, kissing him fiercely.

"Mmm . . . and you stole my heart while you were at it," he murmured huskily.

"Best heist I ever pulled off," she smirked, her blue eyes dancing. "You sure we can do this? I'm not just talking about getting Henry. I'm talking about raising him. I don't know if I'm good mom material, Bae. I never had any kind of example growing up."

"Hey, I didn't either. Not until Kristine Cassidy, and I was a fifteen year old sarcastic brat then and drove her nuts. Not that she'd ever have said so. She took a lot of crap from me. God, and I could kick my own ass for it now. You'll do fine, wild swan. You've got good instincts. Papa told me that parenting is one tenth that and the other nine is trial and error."

"He's a good father, Bae. Never thought I'd say that, considering what he is, but it's true. And Belle . . . she's a good mother."

"Uh huh. Alina's one lucky little girl, sweetheart. And Henry will be too, once we get him away from her. And show him this is how a real family behaves. We might not be the Brady Bunch, Swan, but we'll be ours. And we'll make it all work. Together."

"I . . . almost believe that."

"Believe it, Emma. You say you're worried because you didn't have any example growing up. So make your own example. Be what you'd have wanted your mom to be, love."
"I can't bake cookies to save my life. And we're lucky there's WalMart, because if we had to rely on my sewing we'd all be wearing fig leaves like Adam and Eve."

Bae roared with laughter. "Aww, Em! Mine's not much better you know, and I'm a spinner's son. But there's something you can teach him that nobody else can. How to love. Love's not about baking cookies. It's about being there. It's about sacrifice. And doing your best for your kid, no matter what it costs you. And forgiving the little wretch for almost burning half the town down. You can do it, Emma. Nobody expects you to be perfect. Least of all Henry."

"I'm scared, Bae. Scared of messing up."

"Uh huh. Me too. But it'll be okay. And nothing you could do would ever be as screwed up as what Regina's doing to him. Trust me."

"You're right. I won't run away this time. I'll stay, no matter what."

"And I'll be right beside you, sweetheart."

"God, I love you, Bae. Okay . . . so what exactly do we need to do to prove it's in Henry's best interest that we have custody of him?"

"Number one, I need to get my business established here. And number two, we need to say I do. And then we need to prove Regina's psycho bitch and unfit to take care of a cockroach."

"Holy shit!"

"Yeah, but don't sweat it, babe. Together we'll do it. One step at a time."

"Right now I think the first step is to get some sleep."

"Yup. I always think better when I've gotten forty winks," Bae yawned, then he snuggled next to Emma and closed his eyes.

In about half a minute, she followed his example.

Regina tapped her pen against her desk as she studied the man before her. There was something . . . almost familiar about him, but she couldn't place it. A certain look in his deep brown eyes, the way his hair fell across his forehead. It was almost surreal. Like they'd met before. But she knew they hadn't. She'd remember someone this . . . handsome. She wondered idly if he was attached. In a way he reminded her a little of Graham. She shook her head.

"So, Mr. Cassidy. If I agree to give you the permits to open up your dojo here, what advantages do you offer the citizens of Storybrooke?"

"Several, Madam mayor. One is peace of mind. The peace of mind that comes with knowing you can protect yourself from someone who threatens you. That you're not helpless. Martial arts is more than just self-defense though. It also promotes a healthy body, mind, and spirit. It encourages a sense of community too, because you learn how to work with others to benefit everyone, not just yourself. I think this town could use something like that, Mayor Mills. Don't you?"

She was taken aback by his sudden challenging gaze. Once again, she was reminded naggingly of someone. She blinked. "Why, yes. I do. Very well. Sign here, Mr. Cassidy. How long do you think it will take before you're open for business?"
"Oh, not very long at all. I've hired some good people to set up. Say, about another couple of weeks? A month? Would you perhaps be interested in taking a class?"

"Me? No, I'm far too busy," she laughed. "But maybe my son might. It might be good for him. Teach him some discipline, that sort of thing."

Bae nodded. "Of course. I'd be happy to teach him." He signed the permit with a flourish. "Thank you for your time. I'll be seeing you then."

He turned to go.

"Wait. Mr. Cassidy . . . how would you like to have a drink sometime? At the Enchanted Rose?"

Bae almost choked. "Uh . . . sorry. I'm . . . in a relationship already."

"Oh. Well, if you change your mind . . ." Regina said, pouting a little.

Bae just nodded and hurried out the door of her office. The only date I want to make with you, lady, is in front of a judge! He shivered, feeling like a fly that had just escaped a spider's web. Wait until Emma heard that! She'd be breathing fire. And I think I need a shower. Because all of a sudden I feel filthy, he thought, suppressing another shudder.

Then he hopped on his bike and gunned the engine, heading back to the building where the dojo would be, to keep an eye on the renovations. The sooner he had Fire Mountain up and running, the better he'd feel.
Martial Arts and Magic

Chapter Summary

Magic lessons with Gold and martial arts with Bae plus a surprise visitor at the end of the chapter

Emma parked her Bug in Gold's driveway and got out, locking the door, and then going up the front walk, a pensive expression on her face. Today was Saturday, the day when Gold held magic lessons for her, Henry, and Alina. It was also two more days until Bae opened his new branch of Fire Mountain Dojo here on the East Coast. Since Bae's Harley was also parked in the drive, she knew everyone was here.

She knocked on the door, and heard a familiar voice calling, "I'll get it!"

A second later, Henry opened the door, and said, with a fake British accent, "Hello, Sheriff Swan, how may I help you?"

"Henry, let me in the door," Emma ordered, laughing.

Grinning, he stepped back to let her in the grand old Victorian. "You're just in time to have some of Alice's peanut butter blossoms, Emma. They're so good we could put Mrs. Fields out of business if we sold them."

"Peanut butter blossoms?" Emma repeated. "What's that?"

"Come on!" Henry grabbed her arm. "Before Rum and Dad eat them all!"

Emma allowed herself to be dragged down the hallway and into the kitchen, where the whole family was gathered around the table, eating cookies and drinking coffee or coconut milk, in Bae's case. "Save any for me?" she queried. "God, I could use a good cookie right now, after the day I've had."

"Help yourself, sweetie," Alice said, grabbing the plate from the middle of the table.

"Hey! I was going to—" Bae protested as the plate was taken away.

"Hush yourself, boy, and let your girlfriend have some!" Alice chided, smirking, as she offered the plate to Emma.

"Thanks, Alice!" Emma took what looked like a Hershey's kiss sticking up out of a peanut butter cookie off the plate and bit it. "Oh my God! It's like . . . oh my God!"

"That's what I said, babe," Bae smirked at her from across the table.

Emma snatched another one from the plate before Alice put it back in the middle of the table. "I feel like I've died and gone to heaven."

"It's how most of us feel, which is why Alice made four dozen of them," Belle laughed.
"And I'm taking some home," Bae stated.

"There won't be any left if you keep eating them," Alina pointed out.

"Look who's talking, Miss I-Hid-One-Under-the-Table," her brother replied.

"So I made sure there was one left," his sister answered. "So sue me, Bae."

"Nah. I'd rather sue Regina," he said, and dunked a cookie in his glass of milk and ate it. "What's up, Emma? The Wicked Witch get on your case again? Somebody needs to throw a bucket of water on her."

That reference caused the two younger Golds to start snickering, but Emma just ate her other cookie and sighed. "It's too bad I couldn't drop a house on her, that's for sure." She looked over at Mr. Gold, who was calmly eating one of the three cookies lined up in front of his chipped cup. "When are you gonna teach us how to summon up a tornado?"

He looked up at her, his brown eyes crinkling slightly. "Not for awhile yet, dearie. That's a bit beyond your scope right now, and tampering with the weather is usually a big mistake." He waved her to a seat. "What's Regina done now?"

"She's made me arrest Mary Margaret," Emma said gloomily.

"Emma, you put my grandma in jail?" Henry gasped. "Your own mom?"

"I had no choice, Henry," his mother sighed. "She didn't have an alibi last night, and that's when Kathryn disappeared."

"What about David?" asked Alina.

"He was with Leroy, down at the Rabbit Hole," Emma answered. "When he got home, Kathryn was gone. He waited up for her past midnight and tried calling her cell several times with no answer. Then he called the emergency missing persons hotline. About that time I got a call from Ruby, she was jogging along the road near the edge of town and found Kathryn's car in a ditch, and she was gone."

"I'll bet Regina took her," Henry predicted.

"Yeah. Like she did Mama, and locked her up somewhere," Alina agreed.

"Maybe we ought to go and check my basement," Henry said.

"Or the hospital. What if she brought Kathryn there under an assumed name and is keeping her drugged so she can frame Mary Margaret for it?" Alina suggested.

"Kid, you watch too much Law and Order," Alice said.

"But Alice, it could happen!" Alina argued. "Henry, let's get my detective kit and look for clues."

"Okay, and if we find some really incriminating evidence, Emma can lock up Regina," Henry said, his eyes shining. "Where is it?"

"Hey, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, hold it!" Bae ordered. "Last time I checked there was no sheriff attached to either of your names. So you two just settle down and let the professional handle this, okay?"
Henry sank back down in his chair. "Aww, come on, Dad!"

"Bae, you can't just—" Alina began.

"But I can, Alina Rose," Gold interrupted, and he gave each of the would-be investigators a certain Look.

Both children immediately quit protesting and muttered, "Yes, sir."

Emma stared at her magic tutor. "Okay. I want to know how you do that."

"Do what, dearie?" queried Rumple.

"That. That Look. What you just did. It's like magic or something."

"You mean this?" he queried, and Looked at her.

"Yeah. That. Do you like, take a class on how to do it? Or practice in front of a mirror?"

Rumple started chuckling. "It took me awhile to get it right. I practiced a lot on Bae though."

"Yeah, I got that a lot when I was little," her boyfriend said. "And I always behaved afterwards."

"Except for the time with the forest fire," Emma teased.

"Forest fire?" Henry asked, his ears perking up.

"Let's not go there," Bae said quickly.

"What fire, Papa?" asked Alina curiously.

Bae flashed him a strange expression. Rumple saw and said, "It happened a long time ago, dearie. Right now, we need to be going downstairs and starting your lessons. After you finish eating, that is."

"I'm done!" Henry announced.

"Me too," Alina seconded.

"But I'm not," Emma said.

"So we'll wait," Gold instructed. "You two, practice your breathing."

Alina and Henry heaved twin sighs of impatience, but then they did as instructed.

Emma just shook her head. Whatever Gold's secret was, she was determined to learn it before she married Baelfire. It was an invaluable tool for any parent. She ate the rest of her cookie and thought about what Alina and Henry had suggested. They might only be ten, but they had wonderful instincts. And what if they were right, and Regina was involved? Emma wouldn't put it past her. She might have to look into it, because she was pretty certain Mary Margaret wasn't guilty. Or David either.

"Ready?" Gold asked her solicitously.

"Lead the way, Master Yoda."

"Emma, really!" he said, looking pained. "Just because I have a cane . . ."
"Yeah, well, I heard you used to be green also, once upon a time."

He rolled his eyes. "God help me."

"I think she means it as a compliment, sweetie," Belle said, giggling.

"Yeah, Mr. G. After all, Yoda was like the Master of the Force," Alice added.

"Mind if I watch?" Bae asked.

"Why not?" Gold said. "Between the three of them, it's like a circus down there."

"What's that supposed to mean, Rum?" Emma asked sharply.

"Figure it out, dearie," he returned, and then started down the stairs to his workroom.

That lesson, Gold decided to teach them some defensive magic, and also a way to use their ability to call light as a weapon if needed. He didn't know why, but he had a feeling this was something they would need to know soon. "I want you all to concentrate and think of a glowing globe that surrounds you and keeps everything else out. Just that, and nothing else. Remember, magic is dependent on the will of the caster, and with focus and determination, you can make magic do what you want."

His three students did as he had told them, concentrating hard and first Henry, then Alina, and then Emma had glowing shields about them. Henry's was his signature blue, Alina's purple, and Emma's green.

"Very good!" Rumple praised. "Now, let's see if you can block what's attacking you." He turned to Bae. "I could use your help with this, Bae. Pick up those rubber balls there and throw them at one of them."

Bae picked up four balls in his hand and threw one at Emma and the other at Henry. Both balls bounced off their shields.

Gold threw a ball at Alina, and it bounced as well.

"Now let's do two, and throw them harder," Gold instructed.

Bae did, and because the shields remained up after that, started pegging balls at them rapidly, as per Rumple's instructions.

When his students had held their shields for over eight minutes, and they started to flicker, the master sorcerer stopped throwing balls at them. "That's good. Drop them!" he barked.

Emma let hers go with a groan. "I feel like I've been holding a twenty-pound weight over my head."

"I feel like a wet noodle," her son added.

Alina looked a bit tired, but not as bad as Emma and Henry. "I... don't feel that bad, Papa."

"Your talent lends itself to such charms," her father told her. "You'll find that based on your affinity, you can cast some spells easier than others. Okay, rest for a bit. Then we'll do some sparring with light spells."
While his students rested, Rumple meditated, and Bae leaned against the wall and watched his girlfriend, son, and sister, thinking that they would also do well in his martial arts class. They were focused and receptive and those were qualities that would stand them in good stead in his class.

After ten minutes, Rumple called for them to turn and face each other, and prepare to use their ability to summon light to try and stop an enemy. "Remember, light magic can be used in a variety of ways. Let's see what you can do."

Henry started off casting all kinds of glowing colored balls at Alina.

She retaliated by sending bursts of light at him, making him flinch and step back.

Emma attacked Alina by using pulsing balls of light so bright they almost blinded her.

"Nicely done, Emma!" Gold said in approval.

For some reason, Emma found that little bit of encouragement buoyed her spirits, and she smiled a little at him.

Then Alina got an idea and while Emma was distracted by smiling over at her teacher, launched a sneak attack of her own.

She used some hard-learned gymnastic ability to do three somersaults in a row, halting just before Emma and then using her magic to cause a sharp flare of light right in Emma's eyes.

"Whoa, kid!" the sheriff cried, shielding her face with a hand. "Damn! I can barely see."

"Very good, Alina!" Gold praised. "That's what I want to see. Something unexpected."

"Hey, Emma, you okay?" Henry asked, concerned. He approached his mother slowly, wondering if maybe Alina had hurt her with the spell.

Emma kept her face turned away.

Henry approached her, saying, "Emma?"

Alina also approached. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to really hurt you."

At that instant, Emma whirled on the two children, her hands coming up and throwing a burst of light at them that made them yelp and jump back, their eyes stinging from the brightness.

"Gotcha!" Emma cried.

Gold applauded. "Excellent! Now you can all see the value of surprise. Light might not be a super powerful spell, like say a fireball, but used like you've just demonstrated, it can be a powerful weapon against an unsuspecting opponent. Most enemies expect the destructive spells from a magic wielder, not to be caught off guard by a blinding light. Remember, you don't necessarily have to kill an enemy to take him or her out. Disabling one like you all did works just as well."

Bae nodded, agreeing with his father. That was what he would have told them also.

After they had experimented for another five minutes with their light spells, Gold called a halt and said they needed to rest and replenish their magical reserves.

As they went back upstairs to get something to drink, Gold put a hand on Emma's arm. "Wait a minute, Emma. Take this and post Mary Margaret's bail." He handed her several hundred dollar
bills. "She's not the one who ought to be locked up in there. If that's not enough, let me know."

Emma gaped at him. "You . . . you're paying her bail?"

"Yes. We both know who ought to be behind bars, dearie, and it isn't Miss Blanchard. Get her out of there and find the real culprit, Emma."

"I will. Should I tell her who got her out?"

"You may, but remind her to keep quiet about it. I don't want to tip my hand to Regina this soon."

Emma took the money and stuffed it in her pocket. "That's really generous of you, Gold. This should be sufficient."

"Like I said, she's not the one who needs to be put away." Then he turned and limped up the stairs.

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Bae noted Emma seemed a lot more cheerful after her magic lesson, and paused to ask her what had gone on between her and Mr. Gold. "Did Papa tell you something that made you happy, wild swan?" he asked as they went upstairs.

"He did something that made me happy, Bae. He posted bail for Mary Margaret. Now I won't have any guilt over putting my mother in the slammer anymore."

"That's good, Emma. Now you can concentrate on finding out why Kathryn Nolan really disappeared. Or who's behind it. I happen to agree with Henry and Alina, by the way. Regina's behind it."

"Me too. Now I have to prove it. And that won't be easy."

"But you'll do it," Bae told her, and hugged her.

Emma hugged him back. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime, sweetie," he said, and kissed her lightly.

She pulled him to her and would have returned the favor, but then Gold called, "Bae? Can you come here for a moment? I need to ask you something."

"Be right there," he called and said, "Meet me tonight for supper, Emma?"

"You've got a date, Bruce Lee," she grinned, then dug her keys out of her pocket. "Now I've got a relative to release."

Bae caught her hand as she started up the stairs. "Well, I'll be damned! You still have it."

"Have what?" she asked.

"The keychain I got you," he said, indicating the swan keychain on her keyring.

Emma blushed. "It was all I had to remember you by after . . . I gave up Henry. The keychain was a simple one, a black metal diamond with a raised silver swan in the center of it.

"Someday soon, I'm going to give you something a lot more memorable than that keychain," Bae promised, his fingers gently stroking her hair. "See you Monday, Emma. Tell Mary Margaret I said..."
hi. Don't be late, class starts at seven sharp."

Then he turned and took the stairs two at a time, moving as gracefully as a panther in his jeans, Storybrooke sweatshirt, and black high-top Reeboks.

"Show off," Emma murmured affectionately and then followed.

"You wanted to see me, Papa?" Bae asked upon finding his father sitting in the den beside Belle on the couch.

Gold nodded, looking rather nervous. There was a small white box beside him. "Bae, I . . . know you don't want me to . . . err . . . help you out financially with your business, but I . . . thought you might like to give these out to your students on Monday." He handed his son the box. "It's just a little something to . . . celebrate your grand opening."

Bae took the box and opened it. Inside were gold business cards with red borders. The Fire Mountain logo was displayed prominently in the center with the name of the dojo in red across it and below was written Neal Cassidy, owner and sensei, the address of the dojo, his email, and the phone number.

"Papa, this is . . . it's great! I was going to get some made, but these are . . . way better than what I was going to do." Bae smiled at him. "Thanks so much!"

"I'm glad you like them. Belle helped me with the layout."

"Thank you too!" Bae said to Belle. "You're going to be there too Monday night, right, Belle?"

"Wouldn't miss it, Bae," she assured him. "And Alina and Henry will be going to your first children's class in the afternoon."

"I'm bringing Alina and I assume Henry's being dropped off by Regina," Rumple told him.

"I'd better be careful she doesn't see us together then," said Bae.

"You shouldn't have to worry about that. I'll detain her while Henry gets inside," his father assured him.

"Thanks, Papa. How's the case going?"

"The documents are on their way. Once I have Emma's permission, I'll unseal and read them. Then we can start gathering the evidence."

"Guess I'll need a blood test," Bae said.

"Yes, and so will Henry. Emma can take care of that."

"And Rumple's told me that I can be a character witness if you need it against Regina," Belle said.

Bae looked at his stepmother and said, "You sure you want to do that? These hearings can get pretty ugly."

"If it means getting Henry away from that witch and you getting custody of him, I'll do whatever I have to, Baelfire. She still owes me for stealing away half of my life and keeping me from my husband and daughter. And one way or another, I mean to see she pays for it."
"Say the word and I'll kill her for you, dearie," Rumple offered.

"No. Not you, Rumple. I don't want you to risk your soul killing that piece of trash," Belle said swiftly. "I'll figure out a better way. Maybe I'll accidentally run her over with your car one morning. I could always say I didn't see her crossing the street."

"Dearie, you can't drive."

"I know. Then it won't be a lie when I say it's an accident," Belle replied.

Bae started laughing. "Oh, boy! I don't know if you really need me teaching you self-defense, Belle. You seem quite capable of taking care of yourself."

"Only against certain things," Belle said. "I want to be able to do some damage to her if she tries to magic me, Bae."

"Okay, lady. I'll teach you how to kick her ass, with pleasure."

"Thanks," she smiled at him. "And if all else fails, there's always the car."

"That's pretty vindictive, dearie," her husband said.

"Regina started this. But I'll finish it . . . if I have to. Because nobody hurts my family, Rumple," Belle said softly.

Gold drew her into his arms. "That's my brave beautiful wife," he said, and promptly kissed her hard.

"Bye! See you later!" Bae said, tucking the box under his arm and beating a rather hasty retreat out to his bike. "You are one lucky son-of-a-gun, Papa! I just hope I am when I finally get a ring on Emma's finger."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Fire Mountain Dojo

Storybrooke chapter

Monday afternoon:

Henry made sure he jumped out of Regina's Mercedes right after she'd pulled up at the curb. He turned and waved at her as he entered the building. "Bye, Mom! See you!"

The front of the refurbished warehouse was now done in brick facing, with a huge glass window featuring some crossed swords wrapped in leather scabbards and karate helmets and red and white gloves and a white gi with the Fire Mountain logo on the right breast. Etched on the window was the dojo logo, a red mountain with flames behind it and a snarling panther jumping out of it.

Fire Mountain Dojo was written in red across the top of the building in Japanese style block lettering. On the door was the times the dojo was open and also the telephone number.

Henry pushed the door open and went in.

The lobby featured a desk and the walls were covered in posters and several framed certificates, stating that Neal Cassidy, proprietor was a master at several martial arts disciplines, and some of his major tournament wins. A stack of gold business cards were on the desk, as well as several
brochures telling about the kinds of martial arts taught and how much each class cost depending on
the package you wanted. Regina had, of course, gotten the most expensive package, one that
included all the equipment Henry might need. Behind the desk was a door and a large glass
window where you could see the room where most of the classes took place.

Off to one side were several comfortable chairs and a couch, a small coffee table, and a water
cooler. A table with hot and cold cups and tea bags with stirrers, creamer, and sugar was next to it,
as well as a vending machine with candy, snacks, and soda.

Several mothers and smaller children were sitting in the chairs, anxiously awaiting the return of
their little darlings.

Behind the desk was Ashley, dressed in a soft navy blouse and a jean skirt. "Hey, Henry!" she
greeted. "Your class is right through there. Just remember to take your shoes off before you go into
the room. Mr. Cassidy doesn't like people walking all over the mats with shoes on."

"Hi, Ashley!" Henry said. "How's the baby?"

"She's doing great! Sean's watching her while I work today. I'm so glad I got this job, Mr. Cassidy's
really nice and he even gave me free classes since I'm his secretary. I can take them after I'm done
here for today."

"Will you be in the same class as Emma and Ruby?"

"I think so. Mary Margaret too. Better get on inside now. Your class is going to start soon."

"How about my . . . umm . . . uniform?"

"Mr. Cassidy will explain everything. Now hurry up!" she waved him through the door.

Henry paused and tugged off his sneakers, then walked into the big room.

On the mats were several of Henry's classmates from school, including Alina and Paige, who
waved him over as soon as he walked in. Henry saw the Zimmerman twins, Sarah, Timmy, Luke,
Maddie, Steve, Connor, and Peter. All of them were sitting down with their shoes in their laps,
dressed in normal clothes.

Henry went to sit beside Alina and Paige. "Hey, guys. How are you doing?" he asked.

"We're good," Paige said, brushing her soft blond hair behind her ears. "Alina was telling me about
Mr. Cassidy, since she met him when her papa came here to talk to him about the building. She
says he's really nice and he won lots of awards back in Phoenix, so he's a great teacher. I'm glad,
'cause I need to know how to beat up bullies like Tommy Mason."

"Yeah, before you end up getting your head bashed in," Alina said.

Henry nodded, kneeling on the blue mats beside his aunt and friend, looking eagerly towards the
other end of the room, where a lone door stood.

The door opened and Bae walked in, dressed in the traditional black gi with his dojo logo on the
front and a black sash about his waist. He wore black tabi on his feet and his curly hair was tied
back with a white headband with the Fire Mountain logo on it.

He came to stand before the children, giving them a friendly smile. "Hello, kids! I'm Neal Cassidy,
welcome to Fire Mountain Dojo. I'll be your teacher, or sensei, which means teacher in Japanese.
When you're in class, I'd like you to all call me sensei or sensei Neal, because all good students treat their teachers with respect. Right?"

"Yes, sensei!" they chorused.

"Good! See, you kids are smart," Bae said. "Now, all of you are here to learn basic karate, and I'm going to call your names in a little bit, and when I do, I'd like you to stand up and bow to me, and then I'll bow back to you. That's the way a student and teacher greet each other in Japan, which is where I studied for several years. And since karate originated in Japan, we're all going to pretend we're over there for as long as you have class. Okay?"

When he received nods all around, he said, "First, I want you to line up across the floor, and when I call your name, stand up and say, "Here, sensei!" and then bow to me."

He waited until all the children were sitting in a line across the mats, then he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and said, "Alina Gold!"

"Here, sensei!" Alina said, and she stood up and bowed slightly to her brother.

"Good job!" Bae said, winking at her and returning the bow.

Alina sat down, and Bae went down his list, calling out each student's name.

Once everyone's name had been called, and Bae saw they were present, he put the list away and said, "Before I assign you all a locker and get you your uniforms, which by the way are called gi, I want to explain to you the rules of this class. Karate means "the open hand", and it was intended as a method of defending yourself for a poor farmer or craftsman against someone trying to rob or attack you during the feudal Japanese era. It was taught to any man willing to learn, but not as a means of hurting people, only as self-defense."

Bae walked up and down in front of the children, gesturing as he did so. "That means, you don't use what I teach you here to bully some kid you don't like on the playground. You don't go and karate-chop your little brother, or your cousin, or anybody to show off. The moves I show you are for self-defense only, to protect yourself if necessary from somebody trying to hurt you, like a stranger trying to kidnap you or someone trying to beat you up and steal your lunch money. Not to impress your friends and run up and throw some poor schmuck to the ground just because it's cool."

He shook his head, his voice soft but serious. "That's not the right way to use karate, and any of you who think you're here to take my teachings and do that should just walk away now. I don't teach self-defense to bullies and if I catch any one of you doing anything like I said, you're out of my class. No exceptions. I don't care who your mommy or daddy is, it's my way or the highway. Fooling around like that can get somebody seriously hurt, maybe even killed. Understand?"

"Yes, sensei Neal!"

"Good. Then we understand each other. Now, this class is meant to be fun, not a competition. That means most times you won't be paired with each other, but work as a class and follow me when I show you katas. Katas are certain sets of moves in karate. I'll be teaching you a few words in Japanese, like how to count to ten, and other stuff like that."

Timmy raised a hand.

"Yes?" Bae asked.

"When do we get to break wood and use weapons and stuff?"
"The weapons you see here," he gestured to the walls, where several kinds of weapons were hung. "Are not toys, kids. They're real, and they belong to me. You're never to touch them without my permission. You won't be using weapons for a long time. Karate students usually don't, since karate is meant to be a form of self-defense using your own two hands and feet."

"How about the wood?"

Bae raised an eyebrow. "Did the wood ever do something to you, Timmy?"

"Uh . . . no. But . . . you see people who do karate break wood all the time on TV."

"That's TV. What you see on TV and what I'm going to teach you are two different things. Can I break wood and concrete with my bare hands? The answer is yes, I sure can. It requires concentration and focus and knowing how to strike a certain way. But why would I want to? Doing that is sort of like showing off for people. And that's not what karate's about. Karate's about discipline and focus and protection. Did you ever get beat up by a block of wood? No? Then why do you want to break it in half?"

"Uh . . . just because?" Timmy frowned.

"Doesn't that seem kind of silly to you?" their teacher asked.

Slowly, his students nodded.

"Right. So . . . forget about breaking wood apart. What I'm going to show you are ways you can protect yourself from someone trying to hurt you. That's a lot more useful, right?"

"Yes, sensei!"

"Okay. Now I want all the girls to line up on the right, and the boys on the left. When I tell you, I want all of the girls to go into the back through that door there and go see Sheriff Swan. She'll ask you your size and get you your uniform. I want you to wear it when you come to class next time. Once the girls are done, the boys will go back and see David Nolan and he'll give you your uniforms. Ready, girls? Go ahead."

Henry watched as Paige, Alina, and the rest of them all walked towards the door and entered the back room.

In about ten minutes the girls came back with a folded white uniform in their arms and then it was the boys turn.

Once everyone had a uniform, Bae taught them how to count in Japanese, and then had them count off numbers. "I need you to remember the numbers I gave you, and when I call yours, come up here by me. I'm going to show you a simple blocking technique. Because first you learn to block and then to strike. Oh, and one more thing. Not all of you will be able to do a move the first time or even the third or fourth time I show you. That's okay. Everyone learns differently and just because one of you can do a move right away doesn't make you better than your classmate. Here, you're supposed to learn about cooperation and help one another, so don't ever let me catch you making fun of somebody because they can't do something. Otherwise you'll sit out for five minutes or run five laps around the room. And if you do that continuously, I'll ask you to leave, because I don't tolerate that behavior. Any questions?"

When nobody said anything, he moved in front of the large mirrors and called out a number in Japanese. Luke came up to the front of the room and stood facing Bae.
Bae showed him how to put out a hand, palm raised, facing out, and yell, "Hai!"

"Good, Luke!" Bae said. "Anybody know why you're always yelling something in karate?"

Henry raised his hand.

"Henry?"

"It's so you learn to focus and concentrate better," he answered, having read up on a few things last night on Google.

"Very good! That's essentially why. But eventually you'll learn to focus silently, but for now we'll do it this way."

After each student had a turn being shown how to block, Bae had them line up in rows, with three students to a row, and they all practiced standing on one foot for a few minutes. Then he had them stand on the opposite foot, and hop around in a circle.

"Karate's all about balance, you see. Balance both within and without. If you can learn how to balance correctly, not just your body, but your mind too, you can do almost anything."

He demonstrated, standing still on one foot, and then slowly extending his leg out, with his arms out to either side.

"Any of you ever see a crane? How it stands so still on one leg for hours, waiting for a fish to go by? And then, once he sees it, he pounces. Like this!"

Suddenly he moved, springing forward and kicking out with his opposite leg, and bringing his two hands together. He did it so smoothly and swiftly it was like watching a bird in flight. He landed, perfectly balanced, on the same leg he'd started with.

"That's the crane kata. You'll learn that later on. That's what you can do when you achieve perfect balance. Right now I want you all to stand perfectly still. Pretend you're a mouse in a roomful of cats. Now I want you to try and slow your breathing. Breathe in and out . . . slowly. You're a mouse and you don't want those hungry cats to hear you. As you breathe, I want you to count in Japanese. Ready?"

As he led them through the steps of basic meditation, which Henry and Alina recognized from their magic lessons with Mr. Gold, Emma watched from the one way window behind the mirrors in the back room.

She had to admit that Bae was a natural, teaching the children with a combination of firmness, patience, and playfulness that was wonderful to behold. He reminded her suddenly of his father, as they both seemed to radiate an aura of unflappable calmness and wisdom. She wasn't sure how they did it, but it got results.

"He's good, isn't he?" David said, smiling as he watched also.

"Damn good. Those kids are like mesmerized," Emma laughed.

"Makes me wish I'd learned karate as a kid," David said.

"Me too," said Emma. "You sign up for a class?"

"Not yet. I figured I'd better wait. Until . . . I find out what happened to Kathryn," he said sadly.
"People are saying I . . . might have wanted her to disappear, so I could go and have an affair with Miss Blanchard. But that's not true. I might not . . . love Kathryn like I should, but that doesn't mean I'd want something like that to happen to her."

"I know, David. And I'll find out what happened to her," Emma said. "I promise."

"Thanks, Emma," he said, then he returned to watching the class.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"So, how was it, dearie?" Rumple asked Alina when he picked her up after the class was over.

"It was great, Papa! We all had a good time and Bae was a super teacher. But in class we all call him sensei, it means teacher in Japanese," Alina told him, holding her new uniform in her lap.

"Glad to hear it. Well, I think Alice is making barbecued beef tonight with baked beans and coleslaw, so we'd best get on home."

"Is Bae gonna eat over?"

"No, I think he's going out with Emma to get something before he has to teach the class your mama's going to at seven," Gold replied, driving up their street and turning into their driveway.

As he parked the car, Alina peered through the windshield and asked, "Papa, who's that?"

Gold frowned as he saw a tall man with dark hair wearing dark pants and a white shirt with a black jean jacket carrying a top hat under his arm standing on his front porch. "I'm not sure, Alina. Stay here, dearie," he said and started to get out of the car, reaching for his cane.

The man rang the bell, and the door opened.

Alice stood there, holding the door with one hand, her standard greeting on her lips. "Hello, this is the Gold residence, how may I help—" the rest of her words trailed off as she gazed into a familiar face, one she had never thought to see again. Her long lost husband. "Jefferson?"

"Alice?" he gasped, equally shocked. "My God!"

Her blue eyes flashed like chained lightning. "How dare you come here, after all these years?" Her fist clenched.

"Honey, I can explain," he began, almost stammering.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" she snarled. Then she swung at him.

The next thing he knew he was flat on his ass, his ears ringing from her solid right hook to his jaw, and she had slammed the door in his face.

As he rubbed his jaw, making sure all his teeth were still there, Mr. Gold came up the walk.

"Well, that's a first," he remarked. "I've never seen Alice get mad enough to hit anyone before. Do you two know each other or did you try to sell her something?"

"No. Uh, sorry, I'm Jefferson Carstairs," Jefferson said. "I'm Alice's husband. Or at least I was before the curse."

"From the way she greeted you, it looks like she wants a divorce," Gold said, helping the other
man to his feet.

"Nah. She still loves me," Jefferson said, rubbing his jaw. "I just need to explain a few things to her. Damn, I forgot she had a good right hook."

"Be careful. She also has access to a cast iron skillet. She hits you with that and you'll be taking a nap for a month," Gold warned. Then he called Alina to come out of the car.

"Papa! Who is he?" Alina asked, running up to them. "Hey, mister. Did Alice really punch you out?"

"Uh, yeah, she did," he held out a hand. "Jefferson Carstairs, I'm Alice's husband."

"The one she couldn't find for years and years?" Alina gasped. "Oh my gosh! You're lucky she didn't kill you."

"Yeah, I'm beginning to see that," Jefferson winced. "And here I thought she'd forgotten about the last fight we had before I left with my company."

"Alice has a long memory," Mr. Gold said, opening the door and going inside.

"Come on in," Alina invited. "Papa won't let her kill you. Mama doesn't like blood on her floors."

"That's good to know," Jefferson said, and followed her inside.
Jeff's Tale

Chapter Summary

Jeff tells his story and reveals what really happened to him and to Grace

Jeff followed Alina and Mr. Gold into the kitchen, where they found Alice looking like she wanted to take a meat cleaver to her husband's head, she was telling Belle about how Jefferson had suddenly come over unannounced. "And he just . . . expects me to forget that he . . . abandoned me before our baby was born and welcome him back with open arms."

"Alice, maybe you'd do better to hear his side," Belle began, trying to calm her friend down.

"I feel like smashing his damn head in, Belle, not listening to him talk," Alice growled.

"Honey, at least let me tell you about what happened," Jeff said.

Alice spun on him. "Get out! Right now!"

Rumple stepped forward, holding out a hand in a conciliatory gesture. "Alice, why don't you calm down a little, dearie, and at least hear him out?"

"Calm down? Rumple, why did you let him in here?" she demanded. "Why are you taking his side anyhow? You men are all the same! I ought to punch you in the face!"

"Alice! Watch how you talk to my husband, otherwise we're going to have a serious problem here!" Belle cried angrily, coming to stand beside Mr. Gold.

"Stop it! All of you—just stop!" Alina cried, horrified at how her family had suddenly turned upon one another.

A plate leaped in the air and several forks and spoons spun about in a crazed dance and a box of raisins upon the counter suddenly exploded, sending raisins all over.

All of the adults turned to stare at her, standing there with her brown eyes filled with tears, her hands clenched, purple magic flaring and crackling about her.

"Please . . . just stop fighting," she whispered.

"Hells bells!" Jefferson exclaimed. "She's a sorceress."

"Like me. Alina, dearie, calm down," Rumple began soothingly.

"I can't . . . I'm sorry . . . I just . . ." she gestured helplessly.

"Breathe, sweetheart," he encouraged, going over to her and putting his hands on her shoulders. "You can control it. Don't be afraid. Just call it back, Alina."

"How, Papa?" she asked, the objects still swirling in the air.

"First breathe, dearie. Then concentrate. You can do it, Alina."
His brown eyes stared into hers, and something in them calmed her fear and enabled her to recall the breathing exercises he'd taught her, and she shut her eyes and called her wayward power to heel.

The forks and spoons quit flying about and so did the plate, landing on the table with a thump, and the raisins scattered all over the floor suddenly gathered themselves up into a pile on the counter.

Alina opened her hands and the purple glow about her faded.

"Good job, sweetie!" Gold said.

Alina hugged him then, pressing her face into his shirt. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," her father said, hugging her with one arm.

"I'm the one who's sorry, Alina," Alice said regretfully. "I shouldn't have lost my temper." She looked at Rumple. "I'm sorry, Rum. I should never have said that."

"And I shouldn't have jumped at you like that," Belle said softly. "But I'm a little . . . overprotective of my husband."

"Thought you were going to slug me for a minute there," Alice said with a rueful grin. "The kid's got more sense than all of us put together." She frowned at her husband and pointed a finger at him. "All right. I'll make some tea and we'll all sit down, okay? But you have some serious 'splaining to do, Jefferson Carstairs!"

He quirked a smile at her. "Okay, Lucy. Just hear me out before you grab that damn skillet."

"Fair enough," Alice said, putting the kettle on and then sitting down at the table.

The others all sat around them, with Belle next to Rumple, and Alina sitting on her father's lap, because after that magical outburst she needed to be comforted, and being held by him was the ultimate comfort.

"Start talking, Jeff," Alice said, resting her elbows on the table. "Why didn't you come back to me all those years ago, before our baby was born? You promised me you'd be back and you never came."

Jefferson cleared his throat. "I couldn't, Alice. Because I was trapped in Wonderland, a prisoner of the Queen of Hearts. She wanted my magic hat, that I used to walk the realms, and when I wouldn't give it to her, she threw me in her dungeon and kept me there for a long while. I don't know exactly how long, since time's different there. But believe me when I tell you that I wanted to come back, I would have moved heaven and earth to get out of there, but without my hat I was helpless."

"The Queen let you go? How did you get back from Wonderland?" asked Alice, her gaze softening somewhat.

"No. She tried to chop off my head, but she failed. Then I managed to grab the hat and get out of there with it," Jefferson continued. "By the time I arrived back at King Maurice's castle, they told me that Belle had died of a fever and so did you of childbirth. I nearly went out of my mind."

"Who told you that, Jeff?" Alice gasped. "I lived but our baby died."

"Hold it! You thought Grace died?" Jefferson stammered.
"Grace? You . . . named our baby?" Alice whispered hoarsely.

"Yeah, I did. That was the name we chose, remember? But she didn't die, Alice."

"Jeff, of course she did! They told me . . . right after I woke up that she was dead!" Alice cried.

"Then whoever told you lied, honey. Like they did to me. I got home and everything was draped in black crepe, and they told me you and Belle were gone and . . . they gave me Grace," Jefferson told her. "Here's your daughter, old Malinda said. At least you have her to remember her mother by, she said."

Alice looked like she was about to faint. "You're telling me that our daughter is . . . alive?"

"Not only is she alive, Alice, she's here . . . right here in Storybrooke. Cursed like the rest of the people in this town. Except . . . all of you seem to remember everything, or am I crazy?"

"You've always been a little mad, Jeff," Belle said, smiling. "But you're right, we all have our memories, even though the curse hasn't been broken yet."

"Alive. My baby is alive," Alice whispered joyfully. "She'd be Alina's age, right?"

"How old are you?" Jefferson asked Alina.

"Ten, but I'll be eleven in a month," Alina told him.

"Uh huh. That's how old Grace is. She's probably in your class at school. In Storybrooke, she's known as Paige."

Alina gasped. "I know her! She's my friend, and Henry's too. It's just like you and Mama, Alice."

A dazed Alice murmured, "Yeah, kid. I just can't believe . . . who the hell would hate us so bad they'd tell such lies about us? I thought Malinda was my friend, why would she tell you I was dead? I wasn't, I just wasn't there at the palace any longer. I'd gone to the Dark Castle to be with Alina and Rumple, since I couldn't bear to stay at Avonlea any longer without Belle and a king who tried to murder his own granddaughter."

"I think I know who was behind it," Belle said, her hands twisting upon the table. "But please continue, Jeff."

"Well, after I heard that news I was pretty much a wreck for awhile. But I couldn't afford to indulge myself, since I had a baby to look after. So I packed up my things and took Grace out of the kingdom, I couldn't stand to stay there any more, it reminded me too much of you, Alice. We moved into the Enchanted Forest, where Regina ruled, and lived there until Grace was almost ten. That was when Regina found me and convinced me to come work for her. She told me if I did, I'd never want for anything again, and my daughter would grow up safe and happy."

Alice's lip curled. "Good God, Jeff! You actually believed that?"

"Hey, I didn't have much of a choice, honey. It was either that or Regina would have taken our little girl. She wanted me to use my hat to gather a bunch of magical items for her. So I did. While I was hopping around the realms, Snow and Charming won back her kingdom from George and Regina and threw them out. By the time I returned, Regina had cast the curse and spirited all of you away. Grace was gone, and I had to find her. So I used the hat to make a portal, and followed the curse residue here."
"Wait a minute," Alina said suddenly. "It took ten years for Regina to cast the curse? But . . . Papa you always said I came here when I was like eighteen months or something like that."

"That's true, Alina. Time within the Dark Castle runs differently than elsewhere, dearie. It's slowed down significantly. You only began to age when I took you away from it and brought you to Snow's palace, along with Alice, to try and help stop Regina from casting the curse. It didn't work, however, and we ended up in Storybrooke like the rest of them, but because Regina didn't know about you or Alice, you weren't named in the casting, which is why you were somewhat immune to the effects of it. I believe it's also why Alice aged as Saylah, that could have been a consequence of both the curse and my own spell to alter time. It's rather complicated, though, and I'd have to study on it some more."

"So that's why I never recognized you," Jefferson murmured. "Because you looked older. How did you . . . uh . . . regain your memories and all?"

"Because of Belle," Alice said. "She touched me with her rose pendant." She went on to explain how Belle had been locked away by Regina before the curse, saved as a bargaining tool against Rumple, and how she had lied to him and told him she was dead. She explained about the magic in the pendant and how it had kept Belle from forgetting who she was and how it had restored Alice to herself. "But how did you remember me, Jeff, if you were under the curse too?"

"I never was, Alice. Regina cast that before I returned to her. I was away, realms hopping, and when I returned everything was totally ruined. It took me a long time to figure out what in hell happened and follow her here. Then, once I did, I was trapped too, in this land without magic. My hat didn't work and I couldn't go anywhere. I've been right here for the last twenty-eight years. One of the only ones to remember the truth, and all I've been doing is watching Grace—Paige—through my telescope and dreaming of the day the savior could break the curse and I could get her back. I never knew you were here too until today."

"Then what brought you here?" asked Belle.

"I came to talk to Mr. Gold," Jeff said, nodding at Rumple. "I wanted to ask him about Emma, who I'd seen come here before. And instead I found the wife I thought had died alive and ready to knock me into next week."

"Maybe I was a bit hasty," she conceded, smiling at him ruefully. "But I thought you'd abandoned me, Jeff. I was alone and grieving the loss of my best friend and my child, and you weren't there. And people were all whispering behind my back about how I was friends with Belle, who'd given her heart to a beast and bore an abomination. I couldn't stay in the castle any longer, not with Maurice as king, and knowing full well what'd he'd tried to do to his own kin. So I went to Rum, because I knew he'd need help with Alina, and being there was better than being at Castle Avonlea."

She rose and poured tea into the blue and white china tea service and brought it to the table, along with some more peanut blossoms. As they all munched on cookies, she said softly, "What I don't understand is why one of my best friends would tell me my baby died, and then turn around and give her to you and lie again and say I did? What purpose did that serve?"

Bell paused with a cookie halfway to her mouth. "I think . . . I may know the answer to that, Alice. And you aren't going to like it. There could be only one reason Malinda did so. She was under my father's orders. You know how . . . crazy he was once he found out I was pregnant. He wanted me to . . . to get rid of my child . . . to use herbs to abort the pregnancy. He insisted I was . . . tainted, he refused to listen to me when I told him I loved a man and not a beast. You know how he tried to kill Alina after she was born, and how we barely got her out of the palace before Gaston and his
men came searching. He would have known somehow someone helped me. And logically, it would have been you, since we'd been best friends since we were girls. So when you came back for me... he sought to... to punish you... by taking your baby away from you and making Malinda tell you she was stillborn. Maybe she was even... supposed to... kill her too, but she couldn't do it, so she hid her until Jeff came home and then gave her to him. Maybe she told Jeff you died so he'd leave and Maurice wouldn't find out she'd disobeyed him. Since she's still under the curse we can't ask her... or my father what really happened that night.

"That... That's monstrous, Belle!" Alice cried, horrified. "If it did happen like that... and I'm beginning to think it might have, because it makes sense... then your father robbed me of my baby... of my husband... of my life! And for what? Some petty need to revenge himself upon me and his own grandchild? I swear, when the curse breaks, I'm going up to him and bashing *his* head in with my skillet!"

"I'll help you," Jeff said angrily.

"You'll have to get in line, since I'm first," argued Rumple.

"No, I am," Belle disagreed. Her eyes flashed. She put out a hand and covered Alice's with her own. "Oh, Alice! I'm so sorry. He's got a lot to answer for... but this... I really don't know how he could do that to you... it makes me sorry I'm even related to him."

"Hey, it's not your fault. I don't blame you, Belle. We can't pick our relatives," Alice said, hugging her. There were tears in her eyes as she said, "My baby's alive... I baked her cupcakes for her birthday one year and didn't even know it... I've seen her in the supermarket with her mom too... we have to get Emma to break the curse soon! Then I can finally get to know her... and we can be a family again, Jeff."

"Then you don't want to kill me anymore?" he teased.

"No. Now I want to kill Maurice and Regina," she answered, going around the table to him. "Now shut up and kiss me, you big lug."

And he drew her into his arms and kissed her until she was breathless, like all the heroines in all her favorite romances.

Belle, Alina, and Rumple smiled. Yet another couple had found their way back to each other, despite the curse, and it was a beautiful thing.

When Alice drew away, it was only to ask, "You staying for supper, Jeff? I've made barbecued beef sandwiches, coleslaw, baked beans, and corn. You used to like that, or am I losing my mind?"

He grinned at her. "You're sharp as a tack, hon. That's one of my favorites, and I would *love* to stay for supper. If you don't mind, Gold?"

"Not at all. You're welcome here anytime, Jeff. Alina, why don't we set the table, dearie? We'd better eat before I have to drive your mama over to Bae's dojo for class."

Alina climbed carefully off his lap, saying, "Can I practice floating the plates?"

"One or two, yes, but be careful," he agreed, and went to get the silverware from the drawer.

"I'll get the drinks," Belle said, and walked over to the fridge to grab some, while Alice and Jeff stole another quick kiss before she went to turn off the Crock Pot.
Belle's guilt over Maurice's duplicity overwhelms her, she has her first self-defense class with Bae and Belle and Bae go shopping for something special and sparkly

Belle picked at her dinner, even though Alice's cooking was wonderful, like always. The knowledge that her father, Moe French here in Storybrooke, King Maurice back in Fairy Tale Land, had engineered the loss of Grace, Alice's daughter, and also her husband, ate at her like a bitter draft of wormwood.

It boggled her mind to even think the man she called 'Father' could have taken part in something so heinous, but she knew of no other way that deed could have been accomplished except upon his orders. Back in Avonlea, his word had ruled, had been absolute, and no one, especially not a mere kitchen maid, would have disobeyed his orders.

It made her cringe and want to scream, that her own father had treated her best friend so disgracefully, hurt her so badly. And her husband and daughter as well, depriving them of wife and mother. Like he deprived me of Alina, and Rum and Alina of me, she thought wretchedly.

I thought I knew all there was to know about his dark deeds, but I was wrong. God in heaven forgive me, but I was wrong! She bit into her sandwich, and chewed mechanically, wishing she could taste the spicy sweet bar-b-quet beef and mellow crunchy coleslaw, but it tasted like sawdust on her tongue. Even the sweet corn on the cob tasted stale and she felt like she was chewing on rubber. She forced herself to swallow the bite she'd eaten, then set the remainder of her sandwich down and just sat there staring down at her plate. Father, why? Why did you do such things?

She had no answer, and would not until the curse broke and Moe regained his memory. Then, maybe, she could get some answers. Even if they would be answers she didn't want to hear.

Rumple finished his own sandwich and glanced curiously at his wife. "Are you not hungry, dearie?" he asked softly, concerned by the haunted look in Belle's blue eyes.

"I'm fine, Rum," Belle said swiftly, not wanting him to worry. "I'm just . . . not eating right now because I have to go to Bae's class. I don't want to get sick or anything when we start doing some exercise. I'll eat later when I get back." She gave him a lukewarm smile, praying he didn't press her further.

To her relief, all he said was, "All right. It's almost time, maybe you'd better get ready to go."

Belle nodded and rose to get her Marilyn Monroe wig, as Alina had nicknamed it, from the closet in her bedroom. She hated wearing it, but she knew it was necessary lest someone from the asylum recognize her. For now. Once the curse broke she would be free of disguises forever.

She fastened the wig in place with several bobby pins and thought that perhaps this would be a good way to relieve stress. At least she could hit something hard that wouldn't bleed or break all over.

Rumple drove her over to Fire Mountain Dojo, saying, "I'll be back at nine-thirty to pick you up,
sweetheart. Have fun."

"Bye! See you soon!" she blew him a kiss and walked into the dojo.

Inside she found several of the women of Storybrooke lined up and eager to attend this first self-defense class with the handsome Mr. Neal Cassidy. Belle bit back a smirk as she heard Ruby telling someone about what a hunk he was. "He like, blows away Christian Grey from *50 Shades.* Swear to God! Saw him with Emma one day at the diner and ooh baby, was he hot! Like smokin'!"

"That's what I heard too," murmured another woman.

"All these martial arts instructors are like chick magnets," said someone else.

"I can't wait to start," a teenage girl giggled.

"Yeah, Emily, maybe you can get his phone number," sniggered her girlfriend.

"You never know," said the girl, blowing her bubblegum.

"I heard Sheriff Swan's dating him."

"Really? I never knew that! Man, she moves fast!"

"No fair, I wanted him!" cried another girl. "Aww!"

Belle smiled secretly to herself. *You can kiss that wish goodbye, baby, because there's only one woman Baelfire Gold wants to put a ring on his finger for, and it's not you!* She greeted Ashley, who seemed very happy to be there, and gave the bouncy mother of baby Alexa her name, Isabelle French.

Ashley looked slightly startled. "Hey, are you related to the florist?"

"Moe?" Belle replied. "Distantly."

"Okay. Are you all set for class?"

"No, I still need a uniform," Belle said.

"That's okay. Everyone does. You'll get one tonight. Just remember to take off your shoes before you go on the mats. Mr. Cassidy insists."

Belle nodded and went into the main room.

She found herself next to Ruby, with Mary Margaret on her other side and Emma in front of her. She introduced herself to the waitress and the school teacher.

"Just wait till you see him, Belle!" Ruby gushed. "He's like . . . hot enough to melt a glacier."

"Ruby! You don't even know him!" Mary Margaret gasped.

"Doesn't matter. It's too bad Emma's claimed him because I'm majorly crushing on him," sighed Ruby longingly. "Wish he had a brother. Or a cousin. Hey, Emma! Do you know if Hot Pants has a cousin?"

Emma turned around and smirked over at Ruby. "No idea, Rubes. But you can hope."
"Oh, boy! I'm crossing my fingers here. Maybe I should spit over my shoulder too. Or throw salt."

"That's to ward off evil magic," Belle laughed.

"Oops! Maybe he's cast a spell on me," Ruby laughed with a wicked grin. "And I'd not mind a bit. The devil himself isn't half as sexy. Damn!"

"Don't faint, Ruby, when he comes out here," Emma teased.

"Shut up, Swan!" Ruby cried. "I ain't no fangirl."

"Uh huh," Emma snorted.

"Emma, be nice," Belle mock-scolded.

"I am, Belle. Sweet as pie. She can look, but don't touch," the sheriff said. The she turned to face the front of the room.

Ashley entered after she had checked in the last student and joined the others on the mat.

Just as she did so, the back door opened and Neal came in, moving with that panther's glide that made any girl over sixteen drool and plot to murder Emma. Even Ashley, who was happily married to Sean, could feel some of that magnetic attraction, and she wondered if Mr. Cassidy even knew how he affected women. Probably not, since he wasn't the least bit arrogant or conceited.

"Hello, ladies. Welcome to Fire Mountain Dojo. I'm sure you all know I'm Neal Cassidy, the owner and instructor of this establishment. This is my first time here on the East Coast, I'm originally based in Phoenix, Arizona."

"Where the temperature's hot, and he's hotter," Ruby sighed, until Belle elbowed her in the ribs.

"Some of you probably have seen me teaching your kids in my first karate class this afternoon, and so you'll have a good idea of what to expect here. I want to start off by saying that I teach self-defense to anyone who wants to learn, men, women, or children. I believe it's vital for you to learn how to protect yourself, especially in this day and age, when some psycho could be right next door, and attempt to mug, abduct, or rape you right in broad daylight. Here at Fire Mountain, my goal is to teach you how to fight those creeps off, and not only that, but to assess a situation and know whether it could be a potentially dangerous one, and to always be prepared. . . ."

Belle listened, finding Bae's presentation quite good, but it still didn't alleviate the nagging guilt within her, since her own father was one of those creeps he'd mentioned.

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Once they had all gotten their uniforms and put them on in the women's locker room, and their purses and clothing in their lockers, with their combination locks on them, they all filed back into the main room. Bae taught them how to count in Japanese, and had them count off from one to ten, and then start again, since there were about twenty-six students there. After that he paired them up, with the student closest to them on the right.

That meant Belle was paired with Mary Margaret, Ruby with a girl named Tina, and Emma with Ashley, who had walked over to the only available space left open before Neal came.

Belle soon discovered the school teacher—Emma's mother and Henry's other grandmother—was quite dedicated and focused. She performed the standard blocks and the single kick to the back of
the knee Bae taught them with a tight focus that Belle felt she lacked, try though she did to concentrate.

"That was good for a first try!" Mary Margaret praised after Belle had become the victim in their pair and performed the maneuvers on her.

Belle shook her head. "No, it wasn't. I was awful, you can say it."

"No, really!" Mary Margaret smiled at her encouragingly. "Sometimes it's hard for you to . . . look on another person as an enemy. I know because I had the same problem."

"And what'd you do about it?" Belle asked softly, thinking if she pretended Mary Margaret were her father, she might not have a problem, then felt guilty just thinking that.

"Uh . . . I made myself think about someone I really didn't like at all and . . . pow! It worked," she replied.

"Who? Kathryn Nolan?" Belle blurted before she could think better of it. Then she put a hand over her mouth. "Oh . . . my God, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Mary Margaret, I'm really sorry . . . I've had a . . . shock today and I'm not myself . . ." Good job, Belle! You really stuck your foot in your mouth that time!

Mary Margaret gave her a wan smile. "It's okay. You'd think I'd hate her, right? But . . . it's the strangest thing. I really just . . . feel sorry for her. I mean, she's supposed to be her husband's true love and . . . I don't think she is and . . . now she's kidnapped and who knows what's happening to her? It's all rather sad, you know?

"I really am sorry . . ."

"Never mind. Actually, there is someone I'm not . . . all that fond of."

"Who?" Belle queried.

"Uh . . . you're going to think this is so . . . clichéd, but . . . would you believe it's my stepmother? I know it sounds so stupid, but . . . I really couldn't stand the woman . . . I tried so hard to make her like me but she never did and I just . . . gave up after awhile, I guess. And now . . . whenever I need to focus and I have to . . . to do something like this . . . I just imagine her in front of me . . ."

Belle's eyes widened. She knew Mary Margaret didn't remember her former life as a princess, when she had been Snow and Regina was her stepmother. Or did a part of her subconsciously remember? Perhaps Snow was starting to regain her memories because Emma was here now. And if that were the case, Belle could hardly fault her for imagining Regina's face and then smashing it. It was how she felt about the woman too.

"Oh. That's not . . . so strange, actually. Thanks for the tip. Maybe that'll help me focus," Belle said, and they went back to sparring.

Bae came around and corrected some of their stances and showed some of them, like Ruby, how to block better. When he touched Ruby's arm, Belle thought she might faint, but she didn't, just gave him a delirious look which he totally ignored. Ruby looked disappointed, but then he moved on over to Belle and Mary Margaret.

"How's everything over here?" he asked them, grinning at Belle.

"We're good!" Mary Margaret chirped. "Can we demonstrate?"
"Go ahead," he nodded.

"Okay, Belle. I'm going to grab you, now remember to focus," the schoolteacher said, and reached out and wrapped her arm about Belle's middle.

Belle stiffened, then she recalled what Mary Margaret had said, and she imagined it was Regina behind her, holding her prisoner. Then she just . . . reacted . . . drawing her foot up and then bringing it down on Mary Margaret's instep like Bae had said.

"Ouch!" she yelped. "Oh, that was good, Belle!"

"Nice job!" Bae said. "I think you've got it. Just remember, this isn't really your enemy."

Belle blushed suddenly. "I know. I'm sorry, Mary Margaret. I just got . . . carried away."

"It's okay. See, I told you we were good, sensei Neal," Mary Margaret said happily, then she rubbed her foot. "But it's lucky we're not wearing shoes. Can you imagine the damage a high heel would do?"

Belle shuddered for a moment. That would really hurt! But she wouldn't give a damn if it were Regina.

"That'd really hurt," Bae said, and winced. "But it's good you're thinking outside the box, Mary Margaret. That way you can always catch an enemy off guard . . . at least long enough to run and get help. Keep up the good work, ladies!"

Then he moved up to the front of the room again to demonstrate how you could surprise an attacker with a single key held just so in your fingers . . .

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Belle was grateful when the class was over, not because she didn't like it, but because she liked it too much. Once Mary Margaret's suggestion had taken root, she found it impossible to not think about how much she wanted to clobber Regina, and these feelings of anger and . . . dare she say it . . . hate . . . were all new to her . . . and they almost scared her with how strong they were.

I've never hated anyone like this before, she lamented as she waited on the sidewalk for her husband to come. Then again, I've never been treated like a pawn before and had my whole life stolen away for petty revenge or whatever reason Regina had for locking me up. Guess that would make anybody mad, and I'm no angel, no matter what Rum thinks.

She was quiet when she slid into Gold's Cadillac and he drove home, causing him to ask if something were the matter.

"No. I'm fine, sweetheart," she said, though of course it wasn't.

"Did your class go well?"

"It was very . . . enlightening," she told him. "I learned how to stomp on a guy's foot and disable them like that," Belle snapped her fingers for emphasis.

"That's good, dearie. Just please, don't try it on me," Gold joked. "Because I don't need two canes."

"I would never hurt you, Rum!" Belle cried.

"Hey, I was kidding, sweetheart. Don't get upset, okay?" he said, alarmed.
"Sorry. I'm just . . . oh, never mind . . ." she sighed, not knowing how to explain the feelings swirling within her.

"You feeling okay, Belle?" Gold was looking at her with vast concern now.

"Of course. I'm just a little . . . tired. I think I'll have some tea and . . . take a nice hot bath and . . . go to bed," she said, covering her mouth with a hand. Hopefully that would take the edge off.

"And don't forget to eat something, dearie. Alice saved your sandwich," Rumple reminded her.

"She went over to Jefferson's house, by the way. I think they needed some time alone. And Alina's watching The Next Karate Kid in her room. I think Bae's class today inspired her or something. So you can just . . . relax, love."

Belle thought that was a great idea.

But she found that even after a nice hot cup of tea and a soak in their huge sunken tub with rose and vanilla bubble bath, she was still upset. She put on her soft gold colored nightgown and matching peignoir and went to sit on her bed and read her book, but after a few moments she put it down and just stared out the window, her mind playing over and over Jeff's words about being lied to and losing Alice . . . and Alice's words about losing her family and her life . . . all due to her father . . . he destroyed their lives, like Regina did mine . . . how can she ever forgive me . . . I'm his daughter, God help me . . .

Tears pooled in her eyes and despite her resolve, they escaped and rolled down her face.

She didn't even realize she was crying silently until she heard Rumple say, "Belle? What's wrong, dearie? Why are you crying?"

His soft tone totally undid her then, and she looked up at him and whimpered, "It's all my fault, Rumple!"

"What is? Hey, don't cry, sweetheart," then his arms were around her, enfolding in his embrace, and she threw her arms about his neck and promptly fell apart, crying all over him.

A horrified Rumple just held her close and rubbed her back, whispering, "Belle, Belle, please tell me what's wrong. Did I do something? Whatever it is, I'm sorry."

She shook her head frantically. "No. No, Rum. It's . . . not you . . . I'm just upset . . . because . . . my father . . . he . . . oh, God, Rum . . . I can't forgive him for what he did to Alice . . . he stole away their lives . . . like Regina did to me . . . and I can't . . . I don't know what to do . . . I'm so angry . . . at him . . . and at her . . . and I feel so bad about what he did . . . I don't know . . . how Alice can stand me . . ."

She dissolved into tears again.

"Shh. Shh. It's okay, sweetheart," Rumple crooned, stroking her dark hair and hugging her so tightly it was almost as if he could absorb her into his being. He felt her pain like a physical blow, his chest ached and his leg throbbed, and his heart was breaking to see her so hurt. "Belle, it's not your fault. It's not. Dearie, he made his own choices, and it's him who has to live with them. Nobody's blaming you. Nobody."

As he carded her hair, he wished he had Moe French still tied to a chair in his cabin, so he could beat him some more with his cane. The man deserved it for hurting his beloved Belle so much . . .
and Alice too . . . and Jeff and Grace . . . and Alina. His eyes went dark with fury and he thought how lucky it was that he didn't have his magic back, because he'd be in danger of losing his soul for cursing Moe French . . . and Regina too.

_Nobody hurts my family. Nobody._

An instant later he pushed away the red hot rage and just concentrated on comforting his wife. She needed _him_ now, and he would be there for her, just as she had been there for him when he needed her after Bae had returned.

"Belle . . . what your father did . . . has nothing to do with you. _He_ chose to hurt Alice and Jefferson . . . to lie and separate them . . . but you can't blame yourself for his mistakes, Belle. Alice would never want that, dearie. _She_ doesn't blame you, so please, don't blame yourself. God knows, I'm the last person who should judge anyone after what I've done, but . . . that . . . _man_ has done things as bad, if not worse, than what I did as the Dark One, and I don't know what his excuse is, since he wasn't under any curse."

"I know . . . I know you're right. I know we make our own choices . . . that he chose a long time ago to . . . be the way he is . . . and nothing I said or did can change that. But I still feel . . . so guilty, Rumple! He hurt my best friend so much! And I want . . . I want to smash his face in! Him and Regina both!" Belle said, her eyes wet with tears, but a determined look on her face.

"Sweetie, so do I," Rumple soothed. "But you know what? That's normal, Belle. You're not a monster because you feel like that. Anybody would."

She laughed a little. "I know . . . I'm not a saint. Even if you think I am."

"Compared to me, you're a damn angel," he whispered hoarsely. "But I'd love you even if you were the devil's own daughter. _I do_ love you, my Belle. No matter what. I love you . . . you are my heart . . . my Polaris . . . don't ever doubt it . . . and don't let what your father did make you upset. _He's_ the one who ought to feel guilty, not you."

"Oh, Rumple! You always make me feel so . . . wonderful . . . even when I feel so lost . . . and ugly inside . . . You say I'm your heart . . . well, you're mine, Mr. Gold. My heart, my soul, everything. God, how I love you!"

Then she kissed him, searing and hot, and in that single instant her pain was transmuted into love and a desire that burned hotter than a bonfire.

He responded to her touch eagerly, glad that he could make her forget, at least for now, her pain and guilt, kissing her back with a desire that equaled her own, loving her, needing her, wanting her with every fiber of his being. Now, forever, and always.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The next morning, much to Rumple's relief, Belle's mood was much improved and he found an envelope from the law offices of Myrtle and Burns, which he knew was the documents he had requested a month prior, concerning the adoption and Henry's birth certificate. He called Emma on his cell and requested she meet him down at the courthouse, so she could sign a paper saying she gave him permission to unseal the documents and look at them.

Emma met him promptly at ten o'clock, and together they approached Judge Moore, who had married Belle and Gold, and explained what they were there for and he was a witness as Emma signed the paper approving Mr. Gold, as her attorney, to open the envelope and see the documents.
Once that was done, Gold was free to read what was inside, and he promised to notify Emma once he’d done so and formulated a case for the custody suit. "It shouldn't take me long, so be prepared for a call from me in about a week, okay, dearie?"

Emma nodded. "If you're sure we can do this?"

"I am, Emma. We just need a few more pieces to fall into place."

"You mean me and Bae," she clarified. "We need to get married."

"Well, I'm not denying it'd help."

"Then he'd better start shopping for a ring, don't you think? And making a trip to the hospital with me and Henry."

"Would you like me to suggest that?"

"Please, be my guest," Emma said, then she blushed. "Oh my God! I can't believe I just said that! I hope you aren't . . . offended."

Gold laughed. "No, dearie. You and Bae are adults, and if you're happy, then so am I. And Henry. He deserves this chance . . . to be happy too, with people that love him best."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Emma said, then she gave Gold a smile. "You know, at first I thought you were this hardass bastard, and I wasn't sure I even liked you. But now . . . now I'm glad I met you. And I'll be glad to be a member of your family someday soon."

"Thank you, Emma," he said sincerely. "And I'm glad to have you here, and not just because of the curse. Do you know what the gold standard is? It's a standard of excellence and I'm happy to say that you meet it . . . and then some. Together we can beat Regina at her own game, and show her that she can't have everything her own way."

"Now there's a dream worth fighting for," she declared. "Be seeing you, Gold. And waiting for that phone call."

"Which one?" he called after her, smirking.

"Both," she answered, then hurried to her car.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The next afternoon, Emma was sitting at the station, going through some phone records, trying to find any evidence if Kathryn had made a phone call to anyone before she disappeared, but having no luck at all, when her cell rang. When she looked at the caller ID, she found it was from Bae.

"Hello, Emma Swan here."

"Hey, wild swan," Bae greeted, sounding oddly happy. "You up for some lunch? How are things going with that missing person case? You find anything?"

"Not yet," Emma sighed. "So I think I'll take a break from it. Where do you want to meet?"

"How about we get out of town and go over to that seafood place in whatever that other town's called near here?" Bae suggested. "I could go for some grilled shrimp and crabcakes. How about you?"
"Sounds heavenly. Meet me at the station?"

"Sure thing, babe. Be there in ten."

"Ten? You planning on breaking the speed limit?" she demanded. "Don't make me arrest you, Baelfire."

He chuckled. "You mean cuffing me and knocking me to the ground isn't on your top ten list of naughty fantasies, Swan?"

"Cassidy, you're pushing it," she mock-growled. "And I'm not answering that question."

"You already have," he laughed huskily. "See ya."

Emma rolled her eyes and tucked her phone in her pocket, then checked the message machine once more to see if anything had come in while she was talking to Bae. Nothing. She grabbed her gun and her keys, put on her jacket, then locked the door.

She had just started walking towards her car when Bae rode up on his Harley.

"That wasn't ten minutes, Gold. That was more like seven. You're lucky I'm your girlfriend," she said, shaking a playful finger at him.

"Sure I am, wild swan," he purred, coming over to her and taking her into his arms and kissing her. "Now let's get out of here. I'm starving. And I've got some good news to tell you."

"Good, because I could use some," she said, getting into the driver's side of the Bug.

As they drove out of Storybrooke, Bae told her he'd gone to the hospital and gotten the DNA test, and Henry had gotten a blood test too. "Don't ask me how Papa finegaled it, but he did, and nobody asked us anything about why we were there, they just drew our blood and said they'd call me with the results."

"That's wonderful!" Emma smiled. "But who are they going to call with Henry's results? Not Regina, I hope!"

"No. They'll call me, and they'll send me the printed copy as well. So that's one down. And now that Papa has the documents, he can go ahead and get a court date set for the hearing."

"There's one more thing we need to do, Baelfire," she reminded.

"I know, Emma. And we will . . . but give me a chance to do it right, okay? Like it's supposed to be," he said, smiling over at her.

"Okay. Just don't take forever," she teased.

"Why? You in a hurry to shackle yourself to me, Swan?"

"Maybe," she laughed. Despite no new leads in Kathryn's case, she was feeling very happy indeed.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The next afternoon:

Belle had just finished baking a batch of chocolate chips with Alina, since Alice was over at Jeff's house again, when Bae knocked on the door. "Come on in, it's open!" she called.
"Hi! Something smells good in here," he said, running his fingers through his tousled dark hair.

"Hi, Bae!" Alina said, and ran up to him and hugged him. "We're baking chocolate chips. Want one?"

"I'd love one," he grinned at her and hugged her back. Then he snagged a cookie right off the cooling rack and juggled it lightly between his hands until it was cool enough to eat. "Mmm! Delicious! You gotta teach Emma how to make these, Belle. Or else I'll be here more than I'm at home."

"I'd be glad to, Bae. So . . . have you popped the question yet?" she asked, turning to look at him, her blue eyes glinting mischievously, one hand encased in an oven mitt.

"Uh . . . not yet. I need to go shopping first," he admitted. "And I was wondering . . . hoping actually . . . if you'd come and . . . umm . . . help me out?"

"You're going shopping for a ring, right?" Alina asked, her eyes shining.

"That's right, imp," her brother nodded. "And since I'm not too savvy about women's . . . uh . . . fashions, I'd like your mama to come along and give me advice. How about it, Belle?"

"Uh . . . well . . . if you think I'd be any good," Belle said uncertainly.

"Mama, you'd be perfect!" Alina put in. Then she added wistfully. "Wish I could come too. But if you're going out of town . . . I'm stuck here."

Bae looked over at her and said, "Sorry, kiddo. But I kind of have to . . . unless I want the news that I just bought a ring to be all over town by tomorrow night. Then my surprise will be ruined. But once this curse breaks, I'll take you and Henry both out somewhere out of Storybrooke, okay?"

"Is that a deal, Bae?"

"You got it, sister," and he held out a hand to shake.

Alina closed hers over his larger one and shook to seal it. "Okay! Now let's bake the rest of the cookies, Mama, so you and Bae can leave. Pick out a real pretty one, all right?"

"As pretty as Emma," Bae promised, then ate another cookie.

In about fifteen minutes, Bae and Belle were on their way out of Storybrooke, having borrowed Emma's Bug for the occasion. They had left Alina home with Mr. Gold, the two of them were watching Nanny McPhee while eating cookies and gourmet popcorn.

"Does Emma know why you're driving her car?" asked Belle curiously.

"Umm . . . I told her we needed to go on an emergency shopping trip, so I think she kind of suspects. But . . . it's not definite," he said, giving her a roguish grin. "I'm really glad you agreed to come with me, Belle. You're the only woman I trust to help me do this right."

Belle felt her cheeks grow pink. "That's so sweet of you, Bae! Most men would never trust their stepmother to help them pick out a ring."

"Well, you're nothing like Regina. And if Papa trusts you with his heart, then I can trust you with helping me with winning mine," Bae said, making the turn that led to the large shopping plaza outside of Storybrooke, situated on the highway.
"I feel so . . . honored," Belle said. "And I'll give you the best advice I can."

"That's what I was hoping for," Bae sighed in relief.

Then they entered the jewelry store.
Chapter Summary

Rumple takes Belle out for a night on the town to make her feel better and gives her a special surprise.

"Close your eyes, dearie, I have a surprise for you," Mr. Gold told Belle, his wife of just a few months.

"A surprise? For what, Rumple?" she queried, puzzled. "What's the occasion?"

"The occasion is us," he replied. "No peeking now!"

Belle obediently shut her eyes, wondering what on earth he was up to. She had discovered after just a few weeks of being married that her husband loved surprising her, sometimes with things, or other times with activities, some of which they did alone, as a couple, or sometimes with their ten-year-old daughter, Alina.

She felt Rumple's hands on her neck, gently touching and fastening something around it.

"Okay, you can open them," he said, smiling.

Belle did, and immediately gasped as she looked into the beveled glass mirror in their bedroom. Around her neck was a gorgeous diamond necklace, sparkling like ten thousand stars fallen from the heavens. She didn't even want to know what this had cost him, it was the most amazing piece she'd ever seen, even counting when she had been a princess of Avonlea back in Fairy Tale Land. Its setting was white gold, and no mere straight line of center cut diamonds, but an ornate piece with a double strand of oval shaped diamonds and a beautiful shaped triple tiered teardrop in the center.

"Oh! It's a beautiful necklace!" she exclaimed. "Rum, you shouldn't have!"

"Of course I should," he answered. "I know things have been . . . difficult for you lately, Belle, and I just wanted . . . to make you smile again. Besides, I never really gave you an engagement gift or a wedding gift so . . ."

"Rumple, you don't have to give me anything!" she protested, putting her hand on the necklace. "This is . . . it's the most beautiful necklace I've ever seen, even back in our old world. Where did you get it?"

"It came from an antique jeweler in New York. I believe this was, at one time, part of the crown jewels of the Russian czarina Alexandra. Some of them were smuggled out of Moscow before it fell to the Red Army way back when. And he ended up with this piece. When I saw it, he emailed me a picture, I knew I had to have it. It's as lovely as you, my sweet, gorgeous, Belle."

She just stared at the fortune around her neck, then whispered, "It sparkles like crazy."

"I know. Do you like it?" now he sounded uncertain, as if he feared her rejection of his gift.
"Rumple, I love it," she reassured him, turning around and kissing him. "Because you gave it to me."

He kissed her back, glad he had made her happy. Her happiness was one of the most important things in the world to him. "I thought that we could also celebrate by going out somewhere to eat here tonight and maybe seeing some of the nightlife, though don't get your hopes up, there's not much of it in Storybrooke."

"I'll enjoy it just because you're with me," she said. "But . . . what about Alina? And how can I go out with out my . . . umm . . . wig?"

"Alice and Jeff have agreed to take Alina and Henry to see a movie, I forget what it's called, something about half-angel hunters and demons, and forget the wig, dearie, we're going to dye your hair."

"Rumple! What do you mean?"

"What I said. Don't worry. Alina told me it was easy. A three-year-old could do it," he reassured her. "See? Here's the color, something called Auburn Rose Sunset. It'll make your hair a bit lighter and where we're going, no one should recognize you, since it's a rather pricy restaurant." He held out a box of Clairol hair dye.

"Rumple, are you sure?"

"What, don't you trust your husband, dearie?"

"Of course I do . . . it's just . . . you're a sorcerer, not a hair dresser."

"I tried it on Alina first, and it came out okay. She has practically the same shade of hair as you do, so it should be fine, sweetheart," he said, then he gently unfastened the necklace. "Here's one of my old T-shirts, and here's one of those capes they use at the barber's. Now we just have to wash your hair."

"Okay, Rum. I trust you with my heart, I guess I can with my hair. Just don't make me bald!"

An hour and a half later, Belle was sitting at her vanity, as Rumple gently combed her now reddish locks and blowdried them. Finally after ten minutes, he lowered his brush and whipped off her cape, saying, "Voila, dearie! Look, it's a new you!"

Belle looked and smiled. "Oh! I almost . . . don't recognize myself. This . . . it makes me look . . . somehow softer . . ."

"Like a Boticelli Venus," he crooned, coming up behind her and kissing her neck, his brown eyes alight with desire.

"In your T-shirt?" she teased, half-turning around so her lips met his.

"I think you look very sexy in my shirt," he smirked, once he could talk again.

"Maybe we should just stay home," she suggested.

"Not after all my hard work! Besides, don't you want to get all dressed up and go out wearing my gift?" he asked, sounding like a little boy told Christmas was going to be late that year.
She gazed into his eyes, which sparkled with love for her, and smiled. "All right. Let's go. Wherever we're going. What should I wear?"

"Something that'll match my suit. Want me to pick it out?"

She giggled. "Why not? God, you must have gotten plenty of practice on Alina, my brilliant spinner."

"I did . . . sort of. Actually, I liked clothes shopping more than she did when she was little," Rumple admitted. "The fabrics and styles here are so amazing and well, sometimes I got a little carried away."

Belle could just imagine how carried away the former spinner and weaver had gotten, given the choices that were available in this land. "Go ahead, Rumple. Have a ball."

Smiling, he threw open her closet door.

Ten minutes later, Belle found herself wearing a classy dress of midnight blue silk dusted with mini silver sparkles and matching heels. Her hair was partially caught up in a barrette that was shaped like a rose and glittered madly with sapphires and diamonds. The dress had a delicate bodice shaped like a heart and long elegant sleeves.

Belle twirled about in front of the mirror. "I feel like a goddess!"

"You are. Mine," he said, giving her a slight bow.

He was dressed in a smart Armani silk suit of pearl gray and his shirt was midnight blue silk. His tie was silver and blue striped, and set off the shirt to perfection. He wore a diamond tie pin in it, and his shoes were Gucci black leather. In one hand he held his gold handled cane.

"Come, sweetheart. Time to have some fun."

Belle smiled, feeling almost like a schoolgirl on her first date, and took his hand in hers.

Gold took her to The Enchanted Rose, an upscale restaurant in Storybrooke, in fact it was the only upscale restaurant in town. A fact he knew perfectly well, and arranged a private corner table for them, with a beautiful dozen red roses waiting on the table for them when they arrived, and two glasses of Moscato d'Asti also.

Gold pulled out her chair and held it for her, and then seated himself across from her. He picked up his glass of sweet white wine and clinked it to hers. "Here's to us, dearie. Married three months and we haven't killed each other yet."

Laughing, Belle clinked her glass, and said, "I'd sooner kiss you than kill you, love. Here's to tonight, and many more just like it." Then she drank, feeling the Moscato flow down her throat like honeyed fire, icy sweet with a slight bite at the end. Rather like Rumple when he made love to her, she thought wickedly.

"My thoughts exactly," he purred. He took the menu and perused it leisurely. "Want to share an appetizer?"

Belle frowned. "What's that?" Living in an asylum for twenty-eight years had hardly prepared her for dining out in style.
"It's the course you eat before dinner," he answered. "We could get the shrimp scampi on toast points, or the mussels d'oro with white wine and garlic with pita bread for dipping, I hear the sauce on this one is fabulous."

"You mean, you don't know?" she asked, surprised.

"I've never had much reason to eat here, dearie. Until you returned to me, Alina and I usually ate home, there's not much call to go to a restaurant like this with a ten-year-old. Hamburgers, fries, and sundaes at Grannys are more her style."

"Let's get both, and we can share with each other," Belle said.

"All right."

So that was what they did, with Belle having the shrimp scampi and Gold the mussels, and they were both divine. Then came a lovely salad with Greek dressing and Kalamata olives and some crispy rolls with olive oil and spices to dip them in.

"I'm almost too full to have dinner," Belle said.

"Aww, come on. You have to have something. How about the veal saltimboucca with fettucini and some steamed broccoli?" Gold suggested.

"Hmm. Or how about this one? Bourbon glazed salmon on a cedar plank with almond rice pilaf and braised asparagus tips?"

"Sounds divine. Choose whatever you like."

In the end, Belle went with the salmon and Rumple with the veal, and they spent half the dinner feeding each other bits from their plates, drinking more Moscato, and enjoying themselves thoroughly. The food was excellent, though Belle said nothing could compare to Alice's.

"The chefs here are gourmet trained," Gold stated. "Alice is a magician."

"And we're so lucky to have her with us," Belle said sincerely. "I'm so happy she's found Jeff and once the curse breaks, she'll have Grace with her as well."

"And they'll all be one big happy family. And so will we," her husband said. "As soon as I win the custody hearing for Emma and Bae with Henry."

"I know you can do it, Rumple," Belle told him, her eyes shining.

"I certainly hope so, dearie. I'd hate to disappoint everyone by letting Regina win."

"You won't. I have faith in you."

"Thank goodness for that," he said, then asked, "Want dessert?"

"After eating all that? You'll have to cut me out of my dress!"

"Hmm . . . could be very interesting, dearie," he said with a wicked smirk.

"Rumple!" she mock-scolded. "We're in public!"

"I doubt anyone overheard and if they did . . . oh, well . . . let them dream."
When the check came, he paid it with his Platinum Master Card, and then he escorted his wife out, walking proudly beside her, and smiling slightly at the murmurs that accompanied them as they caught sight of Belle in her midnight blue silk with the necklace sparkling about her slender throat.

*My beautiful Belle. I'm going to make this a night to remember.*

---

They stopped at all the usual places in Storybrooke that people normally hung out, like the Rabbit Hole and Dark Hearts nightclub, but both of them found the atmosphere not convivial to their taste. "You want to get out of here, Belle?" Gold asked her over the thumping bass called music these days.

She nodded, hardly able to hear herself think over the volume coming from the stereo.

"Okay, sweetheart. Let's get in the car and go someplace more private," he said, and led her outside.

"Where are you taking me, Rumple?"

"You'll see. Someplace you've never been yet," he said mysteriously.

"There are a lot of places I've never been," she said.

"Just wait and see."

"You and your surprises," she tilted her head and smiled at him.

"I like surprises. Especially ones that make you smile," he returned.

He drove steadily through the night and Belle almost fell asleep in the Cadillac, it was so comfy, with its heated seats and the radio softly playing *In Her Eyes* by Josh Groban.

But then they arrived at the small cabin in the woods.

Gold helped her out of the car, and for a moment, they both stood staring up at the sky, which was a brilliant deep cobalt blue glowing with stars, like midnight set afire.

"So beautiful," Belle whispered. "It's as if it was made just for us."

"It's as beautiful as my wife," Gold whispered, his breath caressing her throat, sending tingles down her spine. "And I am, without a doubt, the luckiest man on earth tonight."

"And so am I," she said, and then took his hand, allowing her to lead her inside the cabin he often used for vacations with their daughter.

Inside she found it was a charming blend of rustic and modern, and he led her to a seat on the sofa while he started a fire in the old fireplace and turned up the CD player, which had several romantic songs in it, like Dean Martin's *Return to Me*, Elvis's *Love Me Tender*, Celine Dion's *The Power of Love*, Kelly Clarkson's *Beautiful Disaster* and *Back to December*, Surrender to Me by Richard Marx, *Send Her My Love and Open Arms* by Journey, and *Somewhere Only We Know* by Keane.

As the music played, Gold coaxed the fire to a crackling leaping new life, then said, "Be right back, love. I need to get something from the kitchen."

Belle gave him a rather sleepy smile, thinking how pleasant it was to just lie here on the brown
suede couch and stare into the fire. She toed off her heels and curled her feet under her and allowed herself to be swept away by the music.

Soon Rumple returned with a bottle of chilled Moscato and two glasses, as well as a plate of chocolate covered strawberries.

"Rumple, did you plan this all along?" Belle asked upon seeing the wine and strawberries.

"Um . . . sort of. It was a contingency plan," he admitted. He set the tray with the fruit and wine on a table. "Just in case we . . . uh . . . struck out at the other places."

"I'm glad you did," she said, pulling him down to sit beside her.

"Me too," he said huskily, then reached for a strawberry and fed it to her.

"Mmm!" she said, as the delectable taste burst upon her tongue. "My turn!"
She plucked a strawberry from the plate and fed it to him.

He nibbled her fingers, making her giggle.

"You taste sweet as sugar," he purred, his eyes twinkling.

"You wretched beast!"

"Do you love me then, dearie?"

"Forever and always," she replied, and captured his mouth with hers.

The kiss lasted but a minute or so, but it felt like an eternity, one long blissful moment of eternal harmony.

When they drew apart at last, Belle said, "You know, I'm kind of thirsty."

"Well, there's the wine," Rumple said, gesturing.

"I've had more wine tonight than I usually do," she admitted.

"So have some more. Who cares?"
She poured herself a glass, and then him as well.

They drank, eyeing each other over the rims of their glasses.

Half-an-hour later, they were giddy and giggling and the bottle was gone and a second was halfway there.

"Oh God! I think I'm drunk, Rumple!"

"You know . . . I think I am too," he remarked, giving her a silly smile. He rose, a bit unsteadily. "Shall we dance?"

"Uh . . . if you're sure you can?" she said, somewhat uncertainly.

"Sure I can. This is the only way you'll ever get me to, when we're alone like this," he said, and she took his hand.
The next thing she knew, she was in his arms and he was twirling her gently to the music.

She clung to him, gazing into his beloved face, and said, "This . . . is a magical night, Rumple."

"Every night's magical with you, sweetheart."

"I love you, sorcerer mine."

"I love you more, my brave beauty."

"No, I do."

"No, me."

They fell on the couch, laughing.

"We sound like a pair of five-year-olds," Belle snickered.

"So what?" Rumple said, and playfully tickled her bare foot.

She yelped and returned the favor, tickling his ribs.

Soon the tickling turned to something much more heated and passionate, and soon they were almost undressed on the couch, with pieces of his clothing strewn all over the floor and her dress hanging off the arm.

He began to kiss her slowly, leaving a trail of fire from her collarbone down to her chest, until she gasped in ecstasy and pulled him to her by his tie, which was almost all he had on by then.

"Rumple," she whispered his name as if it could conjure him, her voice soft with desire.

"Belle," he returned, his eyes nearly amber with passion.

"Love me."

"I already do," he grinned.

"You know what I mean!" she wound herself about him.

"Your wish is my command, dearie," he said, then he kissed her again, his fingers dancing across her shoulders, as he proceeded to show her just how much he cherished her and always would. Now. Forever. Always.

Much later, they lay entwined in each other's arms, her head resting on his shoulder, his face buried in her hair, while the fire slowly burned down to embers and lit the room with a faint coppery glow. It glanced off the empty bottles of Moscato, the silver tray, the empty glasses, and Belle's necklace, which sparkled from within, glowing and burning like a celestial Aurora Borealis, a silent testimony to true love redeemed.

In his sleep, Rumplestiltskin Gold caressed the necklace and then hugged Belle close. It had been, indeed, a night to remember.
After Belle and Rumple's night on the town, so to speak, and once Gold had been assured that Bae's shopping trip was successful and he was going to pop the question very soon, the pawnbroker set to work on engineering the custody hearing with a vengeance. In his eyes, as well as the rest of the family's, getting Henry away from Regina and having him live with Emma and Bae was of paramount importance. One, it would give Henry two parents who truly cared and loved him, two, it would make the boy and his parents deliriously happy, which would, three, then let Emma concentrate on learning how to use her magic to break the curse, and four, it would slam Regina and let her know in no uncertain terms that she could lose and just because she had orchestrated this curse and "won", didn't mean people couldn't fight back and kick her ass. Gold was actually looking forward to it, he'd missed being in a courtroom, and while this hearing wasn't going to have a jury, he'd still get to exercise his skills as an attorney.

Bae had given him copies of the DNA test results for him and Henry, they were, of course, positive, and he had also the documents of the adoption, with its qualifications, and circumstances, and Bae's name on Henry's birth certificate. Now he just had to formulate a good defense, wait for Bae and Emma to get married, and consider using Belle as a character witness against Regina.

Even though he knew Belle was willing to expose herself like that, Gold was reluctant to do so. He didn't want his wife hurt, and he feared that revealing who she was put her at risk to be hurt again by Regina, and he felt helpless without his magic to really protect her.

He sat at his desk in his study, staring at the documents scattered across it, the old feelings of inadequacy creeping up on him, his brow drawn with worry, when Alina came in.

"Papa, do you know where Mama is?" she asked. "Sorry if I'm disturbing you, but she said she would be downstairs to watch Lord of the Rings with me and it's been fifteen minutes and I thought she might be up here with you, helping you."

Gold looked up at his daughter, whose physical resemblance to Belle, save for the eyes, often make him smile. "No, I haven't seen her since dinner, Alina. Did you ask Alice?"

"Alice was going over to Granny's for milkshakes with Jefferson, remember?" Alina reminded him.

"Oh, yes. That's right. Now I remember that," Gold said, a bit sheepishly. He rubbed his forehead. "This case . . . I'm concentrating too hard and it's making me forgetful. Maybe I need a break from it. Tell you what. I'm sure she's around here somewhere. You go down and wait for us in the den, I'll go and check up here and out in the rose arbor, and grab a few snacks from the pantry. Okay?"

"Okay, Papa. See ya!" Alina said, then ran down the stairs.

Gold went and looked in the bedroom, calling, "Belle? Are you here?"

But their bedroom was empty, as was the connecting bath.
Shrugging, he made his way downstairs, figuring she was probably in the small rose arbor she and Alina had planted last week, watering the rose bushes and cutting a few.

But when he limped out onto the patio and called for her, there was no answer. He could see the arbor from here, and Belle was not among the small bushes.

A frisson of pure fear shot through him. Where could she be? He could feel his heart rate accelerating as he considered the possibility that they had been discovered and Regina had sent someone to kidnap his wife.

Now, don't panic, Rumple. Belle knows self-defense, she would have put up a fight if anyone tried anything, and you'd have heard something. Besides, she was inside fifteen minutes ago, and everything's locked, so someone would have to break in here, and that would set off the alarm system.

Thinking logically, he gripped his cane hard and walked back inside, locking the sliding glass door behind him.

Then he thought he heard a noise in the kitchen. "Sweetheart? Is that you?"

He looked around. No Belle, but then what was that sound coming from the pantry?

He walked over to the huge closet, big enough for a restaurant, as Alice often joked, and opened the door. Or tried to. It was stuck, and he jiggled the handle hard before it released, allowing him to walk inside. The recessed lights came on and he looked down the rows of shelves. "Belle?"

There came a small urgent whimper from back in the corner.

Gold turned and saw his wife, dressed in her comfy quilted blue robe and matching nightshirt, curled up on the floor, her eyes wild with terror. "Belle? Hey, what's wrong? Why are you on the floor? Did you fall and hit your head?"

He limped rapidly over to her, and saw that she was trembling, and when her eyes focused on him, they were wide and staring, as if she were seeing something that wasn't there. "Belle?"

She whimpered again, an animal-like sound, and then she hissed, "I'm so cold . . . all alone . . . the dark . . . the walls are closing . . . closing in on me . . ."

"Belle! Sweetheart, it's okay," he murmured, kneeling as best he could to take her by the shoulders. "It's not dark, look the lights are on, and I'm here. Right here. My God, you're skin's like ice!" He hugged her to him.

Shaking, she grabbed him and clung, sobbing softly. "R-Rumple . . . help me . . . get me out . . . I can't breathe . . . can't get out . . . trapped . . ."

"Shh . . . shh . . ." he murmured, trying to figure out what was wrong with her. "It's okay, sweetheart. You can breathe, I'm here and we can walk out of the pantry any time you want." His hands stroked her back, massaging and rubbing as she trembled like a mouse in his arms. "Breathe, love. Come on, you can do it."

He could feel her hyperventilating in his arms, and he kept rubbing her back and encouraging her to take a deep breath. The pantry door must have closed and gotten stuck while she was inside, he surmised. And then the lights had gone out. But why hadn't she called for help?

Because she was too damn scared, he reproved. She's terrified and she could be having some kind
Belle's breath hitched in her chest and slowly the suffocating panic began to recede as she started to come out of the flashback that had possessed her. For several long terrifying minutes she had been back at the asylum, locked away in solitary for refusing to take her medications, and the flashback had brought on an attack of claustrophobia, as had the fact that the door of the pantry had shut, trapping her in the dark.

She leaned against Rumple's chest, trying to breathe, trying to listen to his heartbeat, feeling the panic start to die as he held her.

"You're safe, Belle. I've got you. Nobody's going to lock you up. You're safe with me," Gold said, keeping his voice even and soothing, though he wanted to break and smash things, especially Regina's face. How dare she hurt his wife this way? His brave sweet wife was reduced to a shivering wreck because of her cruelty.

"Papa? What are you doing in the pantry?" came Alina's voice.

Belle suddenly stiffened. "Don't . . . Rumple . . . don't . . . let her see . . ."

Gold knew immediately that this wasn't something any child should see a parent going through. He gently disengaged himself from Belle and thinking fast, grabbed a bag of popcorn and some Oreos from a shelf and limped over to the door. Opening it, he said, "Here, Alina. Take this back to the den, your mama's not feeling too well and she went upstairs to lay down. I'll be along in a minute, I just want to get her some Tylenol."

"What's wrong, Papa? Is she sick?" Alina asked, concerned.

"It's nothing to worry about, dearie. Just a . . . headache," Gold said breezily. "Now go, I'll come and watch with you after I get her settled."

Luckily, Alina fell for his little deception and went off towards the den without asking anymore questions.

He turned and started back towards his wife.

Belle was standing now, her newly dyed reddish brown hair disheveled and falling across half of her face. "Rumple . . . please . . . let's go upstairs . . ."

"Okay," he agreed, fearing she was about to fall apart. He put an arm around her and together they walked out of the pantry and he managed to get her upstairs to the bedroom without Alina noticing.

Once they were safely inside the bedroom, Belle collapsed on the bed, huddling on the huge bed and sniffling.

Rumple sat beside her and whispered, "Sweetheart, why didn't you tell me you were . . . having claustrophobic episodes? When did they start?"

Belle buried her face in his shoulder. "It . . . this was the first time since . . . the asylum . . . I thought . . . they'd just gone away . . . until the pantry door shut and all of a sudden it was dark . . . I tried . . . I tried to walk over to the door and then . . . it happened . . . I was back there . . . they used to . . . put me in this dark little room . . . for b-behavior modification . . . they called it . . . b- because I wouldn't take the drugs they . . . gave me . . . they'd leave me there . . . for hours . . . in the dark and cold . . . and I was like a rat in a trap . . . I couldn't get out and the walls . . . were crushing me . . ."
Gold held her and rocked her, horrified at her account, and his facile mind coming up with a way to sue the damned asylum for patient brutality while imagining shoving Regina in a dark hole in the earth and burying her alive.

Gradually, Belle calmed in his arms, and he asked, "Are you going to be okay in here? Alina wanted me to watch a movie with her, but I can tell her I need to stay with you instead."

"No . . . go on and stay with her. I don't want her to think there's something seriously wrong with me . . ." Belle gave a soft laugh, her blue eyes teary. "Even if there is."

Gold kissed her gently. "There's nothing wrong with you, love, that some sessions with Archie can't fix. I'll make an appointment with him for you, okay? Tomorrow while Alina's at school."

Belle made a face. "I don't know . . ."

"Please. Dr. Hopper's a good psychiatrist. He won't hurt you. No drugs. I promise. Will you try, Belle? For me? Please?"

She gave him a tremulous smile. "Okay. For you, Rumple."

He hugged her tightly. "Oh, Belle. You'll get through this. I don't want you to be afraid any more. You're brave, not a coward like me."

"Don't you say that, Rumplestiltskin!" she cried, her nails suddenly digging into his shoulders. "You're not a coward. You never were. Don't you call yourself that, you hear?"

"Belle, I've always known—"

"No! You've always been told that. There's a difference. You were told that so much you believed it. Don't. Don't believe it. Not anymore. Believe me. Believe me."

He winced. "Okay. I believe you."

She released him. "No, you don't. Not yet. Anymore than I'm over my fear of small spaces. But I'll help you, Rumple. My husband is a brave wonderful man, not a monster. And I'm going to tell you that everyday until you believe me, because it's true."

He shook his head. "Dearie, we need to concentrate on you, not me . . ."

She put a finger to his lips. "Both of us, Rumple. I'll go to counseling with Archie if you promise to listen to me and let me help you regain your self-confidence. Deal?"

"Deal, sweetheart."

She kissed him hard. "Okay. Now go and watch that movie with Alina. I'm going to read and then go to sleep."

"You sure you'll be all right?"

"I'm fine now," she reassured him. "Now get!" She gave him a gentle shove.

He rose and stood looking down at her. "First thing tomorrow, I'm making that appointment."

"Uh huh. Now go watch Legolas kick some orc butts," Belle said, yawning.

Still troubled over her condition, Gold reluctantly made his way downstairs. He hoped Archie had
an open slot right away, for he wanted Belle to be seen as soon as possible.
Therapy

Chapter Summary

Belle starts therapy and so does Rumple

psychiatrist had never bothered to hire a secretary. But he could care less about Hopper's office protocol. Just so long as Belle was seen and got help. "Dr. Hopper, this is Mr. Gold," he began.

"Mr. Gold . . . is this . . . about my rent?"

"No, nothing like that. I want to make an appointment," he answered.

"For yourself? Or is it Alina? I can help her with her fear of the dark. I know several—"

"Yes, I'm sure you do. But the appointment is for someone else. Dr. Hopper, I'm going to invoke patient confidentiality when I tell you this, and remind you not to break it, because I doubt you'd survive my lawsuit. Am I clear?"

"Y-Yes, of course, Mr. Gold. I would never do so. Who is the appointment for?"

"My wife, Belle."

There was dead silence on the line. Gold feared he'd been disconnected. "Dr. Hopper? Hopper, are you there?"

Finally, Archie squeaked, "Y-Yes. But, Mr. Gold . . . isn't your wife dead?"

"This is why I need that confidentiality, Hopper. What I'm about to tell you must remain secret for now. My wife is not dead. I thought she was dead . . . all of us did. My wife is alive, and has been a guest of the Storybrooke Asylum for twenty-eight years, until she escaped and came home to me. Mayor Mills kept her in that place, against her will, against my knowledge, under an assumed name—Lacey Beauregard—and they did . . . unspeakable things to her, Dr. Hopper. . ." Gold's voice went hoarse with anger and sorrow as he described the medieval practices they had forced upon his wife. "And as result of them, she is left with an acute claustrophobia. That's why I need her to be seen by you. Today, at your earliest convenience. I also need to stress that any treatment you give her be without any kind of drugs whatsoever. Understand?"

Archie had listened to this amazing tale with horror and shock, but now he managed to find his voice again. "Of course. I can treat her without drugs, Mr. Gold. It might take longer, but it's certainly feasible. Are you going to sue Regina?"

"What I do to Regina is my own business," Gold said tightly. "What time shall I bring her there?"

"Oh, come around . . . ten o'clock this morning. Is that a good time? Or we could do ten thirty?" Archie suggested.

"Ten is fine. Belle's still sleeping. One other thing. Is it possible for you to get her records from the asylum? I'll need them if I ever do decide to sue Regina," Gold asked.
"Yes. I can get them," Archie said confidently. He knew a nurse who worked there who could get the file and not ask any questions about why.

"Good. We'll be seeing you at ten o'clock sharp."

"I assure you, Mr. Gold, she's in good hands," Archie said.

"I know that, Hopper. Otherwise I wouldn't have called you. Goodbye." He clicked off his cell, then left the room to talk to Alice, whom Belle had said could know about her condition, since she was her best friend.

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Gold drove up to Archie's office and parked at the curb. He looked over at Belle in the passenger's seat and asked quietly, "Do you want me to come in with you, sweetheart?"

Belle shook her head. "No, Rumple. I'm a big girl, I don't need you to hold my hand."

"I'm sorry, I just thought you might need my . . . umm . . . support . . . never mind . . ." he stammered awkwardly.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Rumple . . . I'll be fine. But thank you anyway." She kissed him lightly. "I love you."

"I love you too. I'll pick you up at eleven thirty," he said, kissing her back. He watched as she got out of the car and walked into the office. He prayed Archie could help her, because this was something he didn't know how to deal with.

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Archie smiled as he shook Belle's hand. "Hello, Mrs. Gold, I'm Dr. Hopper. Pleased to meet you."

"Please, call me Belle," Belle said, smiling back at him. When she was in the asylum, the appearance of doctors often heralded a panic attack, as they usually tried to drug her, this one did not. He wasn't even wearing a white coat, but just some nice slacks and a cardigan.

"Come in, Belle," he held open the door to his office and Belle walked inside. "Make yourself at home," he gestured to the very comfortable couch and the table where a small tea service was set. "Feel free to have some tea while we talk."

He sat opposite her on the sectional, which went around the table.

Belle took her time, making a cup of tea and putting cream and Splenda in it before she looked up at him. "I suppose my husband has told you why I'm here?"

"Yes, he has. But now I need to hear it from you. When you were a patient at the asylum, what was it like?"

"I was more a . . . prisoner than a patient," Belle began. "Patient implies someone who's there willingly to get help for a problem. But I wasn't . . . I was brought there by Regina, as means to . . . manipulate my husband . . ." As she talked, all the old feelings of fear and inadequacy came back to her, as well as the helpless anger. "I was trapped there . . . unable to leave, to contact anyone . . . my family was lost to me . . . you cannot imagine how that feels . . ."

"Tell me about it."
Belle told him everything. The drugs . . . the solitary confinement . . . and her attempts to be free of what they were doing to her. "Once I could think straight again, I knew I had to escape . . . to regain the life they stole from me . . ."

"How did you do that, Belle?"

She told him. "And then . . . I found Mr. Gold's shop . . . and my husband whom I'd been separated from for the past twenty-eight years. And now . . . now I find that I'm still . . . not whole, Dr. Hopper . . . this episode last night proved that."

"What happened last night, Belle?"

"I . . . It's very silly . . . but . . . I got locked inside my own pantry . . . I was going to get some snacks and watch a movie with my daughter and the door shut by accident and I was stuck inside . . . in the dark . . ."

"And that triggered your claustrophobia," Archie said.

"Yes, it did. I had . . . a very bad attack . . . Rum . . . he had to help me upstairs, I was a wreck . . . is there anything you can do to help me?"

"Yes, of course there is. Belle, your claustrophobia is a learned thing, brought on by the illegal practices of those in the asylum. You learned to fear closed spaces and the dark. You can unlearn it. Now, I know you don't want any more drugs, in your case, I can understand that completely. So, here's what I propose. Sessions with me and use of cognitive and relaxation therapy, which are proven methods of overcoming an anxiety disorder without drugs. We can begin some of that today, with some soothing music and deep meditative breathing. You need to remember that most anxiety attacks are triggered because you feel out of control and helpless, like you did in the pantry. My goal is to teach you how to control your fear and not let it control you. Now, let's start by relaxing all the muscles in your neck . . ."

By the time Archie had finished his session with her, Belle was feeling very comfortable and relaxed and had started to understand her claustrophobia and anxiety much better and how she had to combat it. Archie had suggested that she practice the relaxation techniques at home with Mr. Gold, and even get used to walking in and out of the pantry with the door open, to show herself that it wasn't a trap and she could go in and out as she chose.

"We'll have another session on Wednesdays and then Friday also. I think three days will be sufficient if you also practice what I show you at home." Archie said.

"I will," Belle promised. "Uh . . . one other thing. If you wanted to . . . say help someone who has a . . . self-confidence problem, what should you do?"

"Well, you could start by giving that person some affirmations, like small statements, that show how much you believe in them, and tell them what you think are good points about them. You could get a journal and have them write down things they did well or . . . there's also books of encouraging statements and so forth . . ."

"And where can I find such books, Dr. Hopper?"

"Oh, any bookstore will have them. The Storybrooke book shop does, all you have to do is go to the section on self improvement," Archie told her.

"Thank you so much, Dr. Hopper," Belle said. "You've helped me tremendously already."
"Great! I'll see you on Wednesday, Belle," Archie said and shook her hand before she left.

Belle found Gold waiting in his Cadillac. "Hi," she greeted him as she got into the car.

"How did it go?"

"It went very well," she told him happily. "I think I can beat this, Rumple!"

"Of course you can, sweetheart. And I'll help you any way I can," he said, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Good. Because we need to go to the bookstore, Rumple. Right away."

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Storybrooke police station

That same morning:

Emma was feeling frustrated and out of sorts this morning, as she had no new leads in the Kathryn case and Regina was breathing down her neck to find a suspect. The mayor was furious that someone had posted bail for Mary Margaret and wanted someone's head to roll, figuratively. of course, for it. Currently, she was directing her ire at Emma, and it was making the sheriff's life a nightmare.

As she munched some trail mix, she went over the phone records again. Nada. Zip. Zilch. She had spoken again with David. More dead ends. As she sipped her third cup of coffee, she wondered if this were all a ploy by Regina to make her look incompetent, so she could point a finger and tell Henry, "See? Your birth mother can't even catch a criminal right. Are you sure you want to be related to such a deadbeat?"

Her cell vibrated and she hesitated, fearing it was another angry call by Regina, but then she picked it up without looking at the caller ID. "Sheriff Swan."

"Hiya, babe," Bae's voice greeted her, making her smile.

"Hey. What's up?"

"The sky."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Cute, Gold."

"I was wondering if you were free tonight."

Emma didn't even bother to glance at her calendar app on her phone. "All night. Why?"

"Because I wanted to take you out to dinner. At that seafood place outside of Storybrooke."

"Okay. I could use some Alaskan king crab legs. What time?"

"Six thirty, seven?"

"Sounds good. Meet you at Fire Mountain."

"Be seeing you, wild swan. Love ya. Bye."
Emma cradled the phone in her hand after he'd hung up, her eyes going dreamy. At least she had one thing to look forward to tonight.

Bae tucked his phone in his pants pocket, whistling happily as he took down his practice katana down from the wall and prepared to do a quick routine with it before he had a class to teach at eleven. Emma didn't know it yet, but a certain box that he had upstairs in his apartment would be coming along to dinner tonight and playing an important role in the dinner conversation.

He pulled on the traditional tabi as he prepared to workout, thinking that if it wasn't so damn cold here he'd do this routine like he used to back in Phoenix, barefoot. He considered putting on his gi, then shrugged and figured it didn't matter what he was in for an informal spar, his old master used to say clothes didn't matter, and they really didn't.

After doing about ten minutes of warm up stretches, Bae lowered the katana to the first position and began his routine.

He used several techniques from different disciplines during his spar, some from ninjitsu, some katas from karate, even some moves from kung fu. All of them were designed to bring balance to what had used to be a troubled soul and provide him with a measure of peace, as well as honing his body to peak physical performance.

As he stabbed, thrust, and shadow fought in front of the mirrors, so he could judge his technique, he heard the door to the dojo open, and wondered if Ashley had gotten there early. He continued his spar, not bothering to turn around, twirling his katana in an overhand chop designed to take an enemy's head if necessary.

He heard a throat being cleared behind him and turned around, lowering the wooden blade. "Can I help you?"

There was a man standing there, wearing a leather jacket and jeans, rather scruffy, gazing at him. "You're Neal Cassidy, right?"

"That's right. I own Fire Mountain. Are you here to sign up for a class? My secretary will be here in half-an-hour."

"No. I'm not much for karate," the stranger said, with a faint disparaging note. "My name is August Booth, and I'm here because we have a mutual acquaintance in common. Emma Swan."

"You know Emma?" Bae asked, though something about the man made the skin on the back of his neck prickle in warning.

"A long time ago. We grew up together in the same foster facility. Part of the reason I'm here is because of her."

Bae raised an eyebrow. "We could go out for drinks sometime."

August frowned. "You're exactly the problem, Cassidy."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a distraction from her true purpose here," the other said bluntly.

"I'm a what? A distraction?" Bae scowled. "Listen Booth, Emma's a big girl, she can decide what
she wants to do with her free time."

"Emma doesn't have free time, Cassidy. She's here on a mission. One she needs to accomplish soon, and you're distracting her from it," August said bluntly.

Bae's eyes flashed. This guy was really starting to irritate him. "Buddy, last I checked, Emma had no brothers listed on her contacts. So quit acting like you're protecting her from me. What she does with me is nobody's business except hers."

"You're wrong. She's losing her focus and she needs to get back on track. I'm here to be sure she does that. And my equation doesn't include you. I'm here to ask that you leave her alone. For the time being."

"Booth, you aren't her brother, and you don't have the right to tell me anything."

"I'm as close as one," the other said hotly.

"Funny, cause she never mentioned you to me before."

"You don't know everything, Cassidy," August began.

"I know plenty, and I don't appreciate you coming over here and threatening me," Bae said warningly. "There's nobody I respect more than Emma, and I'll tell you right now that whatever your grand plans are, you can forget them, because Emma does as she chooses. Always has, always will."

"You don't understand. There's more at stake than just personal pleasure."

"If you're talking about the curse over this town, I already know about it."

August looked startled. "She told you?"

"Actually, Henry did. I know about it."

"Then you know what she's meant to do. So quit distracting her."

"My being with her is hardly a distraction, Booth. Now you quit sticking your nose into my business, okay? Because you really don't want to meddle in affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger," Bae quoted softly, his warning unmistakable.

"You're quoting Tolkien at me?"

"If you've read it, then you know the same goes for martial arts instructors. Got me?" his voice was level, but the look in his eyes spoke volumes.

"Cassidy, you're no good for her. Not now."

"I think Emma can be the judge of that. Back off, Gus. Your crystal ball's foggy," Bae said shortly.

"You're putting everyone in this town in jeopardy," August snapped.

"Hardly. Like I said before, you're on dangerous ground. Now, I'm busy, and if you're not here for a lesson, please leave," Bae told him, his tone forbidding and ice cold.

"You're going to regret this," August snapped, then he turned and left.
As he did so, Ashley came in, carrying her purse and a small lunch tote. "Hi, Mr. Cassidy! Sorry, I'm a little late, the baby was fussing and I had to help Sean put her down for a nap . . ."

"It's okay, Ashley. Did you happen to see that guy that just walked out of here?" asked Bae.

"Yeah, he's new in town. Came here just before you did. Why?"

"He comes here again, let me know. And don't let him any further than the front desk."

"Of course. Why?"

"Let's just say there's something shady about him and I don't trust him. If he tries anything with you, call me and I'll come kick his ass."

"Sure thing, Mr. Cassidy." Ashley went to put her coat and purse in the back, wondering what could have happened between Cassidy and the stranger. Whatever it was, her employer looked pretty steamed, and if that stranger wasn't careful, he'd end up smeared all over the pavement.

Bae went back to his routine, attacking the shadows with more vigor than before, and imagining Booth's meddling face before him. The nerve of the guy, warning him off Emma like they were fifteen or something! He wondered what fairy tale character he was, because Bae didn't recognize him. Maybe he'd ask Emma . . . after he'd given her the surprise. Then he shook his head. He wasn't going to waste anymore time on Booth now. He had more important things to do.

But if that guy thought he could come here and try to tell Bae to leave Emma alone, he had another think coming! He brought the katana around in a classic thrust, right through the heart, then drew back, breathing slightly harder than before. Tonight was going to be a night to remember, and he'd be damned if he let anyone spoil it.

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Gold residence

Several hours later:

"What's this, Belle?" Gold asked upon finding the leather journal sitting on his pillow as he changed out of his work clothes.

His wife was sitting in the middle of their bed, in the lotus position, practicing some exercises Archie had shown her, and so didn't answer him right away. After she had completed a set of breathing mantras, she looked up at him. "That? That's the beginning of your therapy, Rumple. It's a journal."

"I know that. Why do I need one?"

"Look at the first page and you'll see why," Belle replied mysteriously.

Gold opened it and saw, in Belle's script, the following message, "Love is layered, a mystery to be uncovered. I love you, and here's one reason why. You can always make me smile, even when I'm depressed, your concern wraps me like a fuzzy blanket, and makes me feel safe. Only you and no one else can do that, sweetheart.

Their eyes met and he said, his lips curving in that seductive sweet grin she loved, "Thank you. But what is this?"
"This is a feel good about yourself journal. Every day I'm going to write another thing you ought to feel good about yourself for, and I want you to study it and think about it. Remember, you promised to let me help you, Rumple. And this is one way."

"Belle, I . . ."

"Together, Rumple. That was our deal."

"Okay. But I don't know how reading these . . . uh . . ."

"They're called affirmations, and being positive about yourself can really help you. I believe in you. Now you need to start believing in yourself."

"I'll try," he agreed, pulling on a more casual collared shirt.

"Oh, and you also might want to write down something meaningful in there. Like something you want to accomplish or that you're proud of yourself for doing," Belle said, recalling the book she had just read.

"I'll think about it, dearie. Right now I need to write an opening statement for the hearing." He leaned over and kissed her leisurely.

Just then a knock came. "Papa, can I invite Henry over for dinner tonight?"

"Yes. Tell him Alice is making chicken cordon bleu and some kind of scalloped potatoes," Gold called back.

"Okay, 'cause otherwise he'd be stuck eating a TV dinner, since Regina's going out with some of her . . . constituents," Alina said.

"On a school night?" Gold frowned.

"That's what he says. Can he come over and do homework here?"

"Yes. That way he won't be home alone," her father said. "And that's why I need to hurry up and finish my opening statement," he said to Belle. "I hope Bae plans to propose sometime soon."

"Oh, I think he's going to sooner than you think," Belle answered, her eyes twinkling.

"Good. Then we'll have another brick in the wall we're building against Regina," he said. "Have fun meditating, dearie." He tucked the journal beneath his pillow and went out of the room and into his office.

Belle closed her eyes and imagined herself on a desert island, with the sun beating down on her, the waves crashing against the shore, and Rumple running his fingers through her hair. She began a second set of breathing exercises, smiling as she did so.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

"Did you get the answer to number five yet?" Henry asked Alina as they did their math homework at the kitchen table, with glasses of milk and some of Alice's shortbreads in front of them.

Alina nodded. "Yeah. Did you?"

"Almost. You're faster than I am."
"I hate some of these word problems," the little girl said with a sigh. "They're so boring."

"Only 'cause you're a genius who can do chemistry problems," Henry returned.

"Hardly," she said, finishing up the sixth problem. "And I only do those if I'm in trouble."

"Yeah, but you can still do them. I can't even make sense out of one of them," her nephew reminded her.

"Only 'cause you never learned all the formulas and algebra," Alina said. "Once you learn that, it's easy."

"Okay, Einstein. Whatever you say," he smirked at her, then lowered his voice and said, "I think I may have found out something important."

"Like what?" she asked, whispering in his ear.

"I was coming downstairs with my backpack when I heard the Evil Queen talking to someone on her cell," Henry whispered back. "I don't know who she was talking to, but she was asking how she was doing and then she said it would only be a few more days at most. It sounded suspicious. Then she said don't worry, I have it all under control."

"Has what under control?" Alina frowned.

"Maybe she was talking about Kathryn," Henry speculated. "I think she set up Mary Margaret."

"That's obvious. So you think she was talking to Kathryn's kidnapper?"

"Maybe. All I know is that when she saw me, she quickly hung up the phone, like she didn't want me to hear what she was saying. Then she told me she had to run, she was late, and she wouldn't be home till this evening."

"Maybe she's planning on putting evidence somewhere for Emma to find. False evidence," Alina said.

"Probably. I know she's been on Emma's case to find a suspect and she wants people to think Mary Margaret's guilty," Henry said softly. "She was so mad when Miss Blanchard was let out by that anonymous benefactor she burned our dinner that night and we had to eat pizza. Like all of a sudden she was stir frying some chicken and when Emma called her to tell her about Mary Margaret's bail being posted, the fire just flared up and burnt the whole pan black. Her magic did that."

Alina nodded, knowing all too well what uncontrolled emotions made magic do. "But how's she going to frame Mary Margaret?"

"I don't know. But if Kathryn's alive and she's keeping her somewhere . . . maybe we could . . . I don't know . . . find her."

"How?"

"With tracking magic," Henry hissed.

"Henry, we don't know how to track people yet," Alina reminded him.

"I know. But you can ask your papa how."
"You want to try and track Kathryn?"

"I want to help Emma and Mary Margaret find her before Regina does something and ruins everything," Henry said.

"Henry . . . maybe we shouldn't get involved . . ."

"But finding Kathryn's important," he argued. "Where can we find information on tracking spells?"

"Papa's library in his study. But he's in there now."

"Hmm . . . okay, where else?"

"If we had the Book we could look in there," Alina sighed.

Henry thought hard. "Hmm . . . I seem to remember a story where Charming had a ring to track Snow with . . . it was enchanted by your papa, and he said . . . he said that with something that belonged to the one you wanted to find . . . it would always lead you to them."

"That's it! Now we need an object of Kathryn's," Alina said excitedly.

"Or an object of Regina's, so maybe we can follow her to Kathryn," Henry said, grinning.

"Can you get something of hers?"

"Sure I can. All I have to do is go home and get a sock or something out of her dresser drawer." Henry shut his math book with a thump.

"What are you doing?" Alina frowned.

"Getting something," he replied, then he said, loud enough so Alice overheard him, "I forgot the book, I'd better go home and get it!" He smirked at Alina. "Operation Chameleon has begun!"

Then he sprinted out the front door, on his way back to the Mills mansion.

As he did so, Alina was trying to figure out a way to sneak a peek in one of Rumple's spellbooks without him knowing.
Finding Kathryn

Chapter Summary

Some touching moments with the Gold family occur and then Henry and Alina team up to help find Kathryn before Snow is convicted by using their fledgling powers.

While Henry was running down the street back to his house to grab something of Regina's, Alina was thinking hard about the books in Rumple's study. Most of them, in fact almost all of them, were law texts and business manuals, but there was one section, high on a shelf at the very top, that were old leatherbound volumes covered in gold leaf and spidery script, that she knew were probably spellbooks. And she also knew, without being told, that she shouldn't touch them. But she had to help Henry find Kathryn, she knew without quite knowing how that Henry was right, finding Kathryn was important, and until they did, Regina would keep trying to get Mary Margaret (Snow) framed for her disappearance.

And the only way for them to learn a tracking spell was to look it up in one of Rumple's spellbooks.

Alina just hoped that they could read it once she got it, and that the spell was one they could cast, and she could get the book put back before Rumple returned to the study. God forbid he caught her with it, because she'd probably end up grounded for the rest of her life and doing chemistry and algebra problems forever.

Is it worth it, Alina Gold? Her conscience needed her.

She thought about it. Then decided that yes, anything that prevented Regina from trying to hurt people was worth any price.

Now she simply had to think of a way to get Rumple out of the room and all before Henry came back.

She slipped upstairs and pondered the best way to get her papa away from the room without faking dying, an accident, or the house being on fire, because she couldn't act well enough for any of that. The fact was, she was a God-awful liar and always had been. Gold had always been able to see through her small fibs as a very little girl in about two minutes.

"Rumple?" she heard her mama's voice calling from their bedroom. "I've got a crick in my neck here. Would you mind coming and massaging it?"

"Be right there, Belle," she heard him call, and wanted to cheer. Not that her mama was hurt, but that she had gotten him to leave without Alina having to do anything.

She walked into her room just as Rumple limped down the hall to his bedroom, his cane thunking slightly on the cream colored carpet.

Peeking around the doorframe, Alina scurried down the hall, which was covered on one side with framed pictures of herself at all ages, and several with her papa and some with both of them and Alice, as Saylah, and a few with Henry also.

She snuck into the study and immediately ran to the shelf where the spellbooks were kept. She
gazed up at them, they were high above her head and there was no way to reach them. She could try dragging her papa's desk chair over, but even that wouldn't be tall enough. She needed a ladder. Or magic.

*You know how to summon things,* she reminded herself. *Now . . . just do it.*

She breathed in and out three times, focusing herself. Then she opened her hands and thought about how much she needed and wanted the spellbook that would help her track Kathryn. She concentrated upon the feeling within her, that sharp feeling that Rumple said often helped when you cast a spell for the first few times. *You have to want it, dearie. Want it so much that your magic responds.*

She bit her lip. *I do want it. I do. Come to me. Come!*

She felt her magic bubble up within her, like a swift flowing stream it cours ed through her, and then a spellbook flew off the shelf and into her hands.

She was almost knocked back by the force of it, and thought maybe she'd put a bit too much *want* in there. But she'd succeeded! Operation Chameleon was underway!

Tucking the book under her arm, she ran back to her room and hid it inside her backpack. They could take it out to the treehouse and read it as soon as Henry returned with whatever he'd gotten from Regina. Alina really hoped it wasn't her underwear. Then she giggled as she tried to imagine what sort of underwear an evil queen would wear. Not Fruit of the Loom. Maybe Victoria's Secret? Something black or red and lacey. Maybe something with apples?

She went back downstairs and pretended to be doing her homework, but couldn't help smirking. Alice went by and said, "What's so funny, sweetie?"

"Um . . . nothing," Alina said, managing to look innocent, but inside she was laughing hysterically at imagining Henry holding Regina's panties.

Her brown eyes shimmering with suppressed mirth, Alina bent her head to her composition book again, biting her lip hard.

Henry returned just then, carrying a schoolbook in his hands. "Got it!" he announced to the room, then came over to Alina and whispered in her ear, "And something else too. Now what?"

"Now we're going to go upstairs and get my backpack and go to the tree house," Alina whispered back. "Because we're done with our homework."

"Oh. Right," Henry said, then grabbed the remaining cookie off the plate and ate it. "Let's go to the tree house," he said, making sure Alice could hear him. "We can practice our lines for the play there."

"What play?" Alina hissed.

"You know, the one Miss Blanchard assigned us for Miner's Day?" Henry 'reminded' her.

"Oh, yeah. That one. Let me get my backpack. Be right down."

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Five minutes later, the two fledgling magicians were sitting in Alina's treehouse poring over the
stolen spellbook from the study. Some of the writing was cramped and difficult to read, but it could be read, though Henry thought it might have been written in another language and translated, "Because who says thou art anymore? And some of the spelling's totally weird. But who cares, as long as we find the spell we need?"

It took ten minutes of flipping through the book, which was sometimes long on interpretation and short on actual directions, before they found what they were looking for.

"Here it is!" Henry exclaimed excitedly. "A spell to follow someone whither thou goest."

"Lemme see!" Alina said, and together they peered at the book.

"First ingredient—an object of the person's or similar thing to that which ye seeke," Henry read.

"We've got that. What did you get of Regina's? And please, tell me it's not . . . umm . . . underwear," Alina said.

Henry looked horrified. "Ugh! No way! Gross! I'm not a pervert! I got a scarf of hers. See?" He opened the history book he'd gotten and inside was a delicate black scarf.

"Oh, thank God!" she muttered. "What else?" She peered at the page. "A drop of blood from a hound or other keen nosed animal? Eew! Okay, I'm not cutting open no dog, Henry! That's just sick!"

"Yeah, and the only dog I know we could even get to is Pongo, and he's not a hound, he's a Dalmatian," Henry sighed. "What about something else?" He read further. "If suche blood is not available—it sure isn't—ye may use these other things . . . a potion made of these herbs . . . we don't have time to do that . . . a hair of the person you wishe to follow . . . hmm . . . I think one of her hairs is on the scarf," Henry said, examining it. "Yup, here it is! Okay, now what?"

"Wrap the hair in a piece of parchment and waft it under a candle flame, then waft the object also and chant by earthe, air, fire, water, power seen and Unseen, latch upon the object here, follow close, far and near, till they reach thy journey's end, power to thy will be bent!" Alina said. "Okay, let's do it! Then I can put the book back and we can follow the scarf whenever we want."

"I just hope it works," Henry said.

"I'm sure it will. Papa's a great sorcerer, he wouldn't keep something that didn't work," Alina said. She ripped out a piece of paper from her composition book and folded Regina's hair in it.

"Can you summon a candle, Henry?"

"Yeah. Gimme a sec," he said, and then concentrated hard.

In a minute a white candle, summoned from Gold's dining room, came into the tree house. "There! Okay, now you light it," he said to Alina.

Once she had done so, they completed the rest of the ritual.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Upstairs in his bedroom, Rumplestiltskin paused as he massaged Belle's neck and shoulders. He'd felt an odd tingle at the back of his neck and he rubbed it absently. It was almost like the tingle he got when he was around someone using magic. What's Regina up to? He wondered, then he sighed and continued massaging Belle, saying, "How's that feel, dearie? Better?"
"Wonderful, Rumple," she said, and turned around and kissed him.

He soon forgot all about the annoying tingle in the back of his head.

That same night:

Emma thought Bae seemed a little . . . nervous as they drove up to the restaurant, and wondered why. This was just another casual dinner, even if he was dressed in gray slacks and a red collared Izod shirt instead of his usual jeans and sweatshirt. Emma herself had taken some time to change into a soft pink blouse and a pair of cashmere black pants and boots, wearing the silver swan pendant Belle had bought her on their shopping trip outside of Storybrooke. She didn't know why she wanted to wear it that night, but she felt it was . . . appropriate.

"You look nice, Emma," was one of the first things out of Bae's mouth when she picked him up at Fire Mountain.

"You do too. That new?"

"Uh, yeah. Alina picked it out," he laughed.

"She's got good taste," Emma said.

"She's her father's daughter, all right," Bae agreed, getting into the Bug. "Shall we get this show on the road? I'm starving."

"Cool your jets, Gold," Emma grinned. "I don't want to get a ticket."

"Now how funny'd that be? The sheriff of Storybrooke gets pulled over for speeding," Bae quipped. "Do they do like second chances for law enforcement people?"

"Oh, shut up. 'Cause we're not going to find out," Emma said, and drove down the road.

When they pulled up at the restaurant, Bae hopped out and said, "Let me snag us a table and see if there's a wait while you park the car."

Emma waved him away and went to park, while Bae went to speak with the hostess and whoever was waiting on the table they'd be sitting at.

"We're back here," Bae said to Emma, and led her to a table off in corner which was lit with a small lantern, casting an amber glow across the table. "It's really busy and this was the only table available," he lied glibly. He'd actually asked to be put here.

"It's okay. I like the privacy," she said, and sat down, putting her coat behind her.

"Me too. So . . . what are you up for, wild swan? Want a Chardonnay? Pino Noir?" he named wines he knew she liked.

"Pino Noir Gold," she said, scanning the drink list and smirking.

"You wanna drink me, babe?" he asked, his eyes dancing.

"Well, I'm not Alice, but . . . why not?" she returned saucily, and then she ordered a glass from their server.
They had crab dip and fried shrimp for appetizers and Alaskan king crab, baked potatoes, string beans almondine, and hush puppies on the side. The crab legs were boiled in a special Maine bay crab pot with delicious spiced seasonings.

When Emma saw the size of their dinner portions, she almost passed out. "Okay, if I eat all this, I'm never going to be able to have dessert."

"Then save some and take it home, wild swan, 'cause the dessert here's something special tonight," Bae said.

"Will do," she said, cracking a crab leg. "Umm . . . so good!" she said, eating some after dipping it in butter.

"Yeah. They really know how to do them here," he said, and winked at her. She smirked back, then ate a hush puppy. "God, but the food here is out of this world tonight."

"Food always tastes better with the right company," Bae answered. "Least I think so." He cracked another leg and pulled out the meat.

Emma drank her entire glass of wine and then asked for some water, and ate almost three quarters of her dinner before wrapping it up. "Okay, now what's for dessert?"

"They're bringing it now. It's a special tonight. Called Chocolate Surprise. It's a chocolate torte with a molten center and raspberry sauce over it, topped with whipped cream and real raspberries."

"Sounds totally sinful," Emma grinned.

"Yup. And we're sharing," Bae said, fingering something in his pocket. "But you get the first bite. And I'm going to feed it to you."

"Here? In public?"

"So? People won't be looking at us, Swan. They'll be eating their crab legs and lobster," he returned.

The dessert came, brought by a server with a knowing grin, who placed it and the forks right in front of Bae. "Okay, sweetheart, now close your eyes and open your mouth," he ordered, as he cut a piece of cake with his fork and added something to it.

Bae brought the fork to her lips, careful to give her a taste of the cake first before he drew back and said, "Good, huh? Now you can open them."

Emma's eyes popped open . . . she saw the fork still inches from her mouth with a piece of delicious cake still on it . . . and something sparkling on top of it.

"Oh . . . my . . . God! Is that . . . what I think it is?" Her blue eyes went wide as saucers.

Bae deftly plucked the diamond ring from the fork and knelt before her. "I've got one question for you, Swan. Will you marry me?"

Emma was speechless for an instant.

She looked at Bae, smiling and holding out the ring, looked at the server, who was grinning, and everybody else near them was looking at her too, waiting for her response.
This was what she'd been waiting for. Ever since Bae came to Storybrooke. She hadn't known it then, but she did now.

She took the ring and slid it on her finger. It fit perfectly. "I will, Baelfire Gold! Thought you were never going to ask!"

He grinned at her. "Patience was never your strong suit, wild swan. I love you, Emma," he said, then he rose and kissed her.

The people watching applauded and Emma was too delirious to even care that everyone was staring. "Love you too, Bae. Forever and ever, till the end of time." She kissed him back, her heart singing within her, and the diamond winking on her finger, as if it had always belonged there.

"Oh, that's so romantic!" the server gushed, wiping her eyes. "It's like watching a movie!"

Emma wound her arms about her fiancee and thought, lady, my whole life is like a movie . . . and I'm still not sure how it's gonna end. But this part . . . this part she knew the steps to very well, she thought happily.

Bae felt himself flush with desire as he tasted chocolate and wine on her lips. He had to force himself to recall that he was in public. "What do you say we go back to my place after this and . . . celebrate?"

"Fine with me, but then we really ought to go over to Gold's and show them and Henry," Emma purred into his ear. "He's going to be over the moon when he sees it." She admired the ring on her finger. "It's gorgeous. You pick it out yourself?"

"With some help from Belle," Bae admitted.

"You've got good taste. Both of you," Emma said, then ate some more dessert. She felt all hot and tingly, alive with nerves, and she knew that on this night nothing could go wrong. Not after this.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"You really did it!" Henry wore a grin as wide as the Atlantic Ocean once Emma showed him the ring. "So . . . when are you going to have the wedding?"

"Dear God, Henry, I've only just got engaged," his mother laughed. "My head's still spinning around."

"And your eyes have stars in them," Belle said, smiling.

"And she still has that dazed look in them too. Like he just cracked her upside the head with a board," Alice smirked gleefully.

"Thanks, Alice! That's so romantic," Emma said, sticking her tongue out at her.

"Actually, I was thinking that's probably how I looked when Jeff showed up here on the doorstep," she replied.

"Before or after you punched his ass out?" Bae queried, smirking.

"Definitely before," Alice laughed. "After that, he was the one seeing stars."

"Congratulations, dearie!" Rumple said, and he hugged Emma. "Now, if he gives you any trouble, you come call me and I'll teach him some manners."
"'Cause he kind of forgot the first time around, right, Papa?" Bae taunted.

"Don't get smart with me, young man," his father scolded, and cuffed his smirking son on the back of the head.

"Hey! I'm not fourteen anymore!" his son objected.

"Sorry, must be old age. I forgot," Rumple teased, his brown eyes shining.

"Uh huh. Forgot, my ass," his son muttered, rubbing the back of his head. Then he added gleefully, "Y'know, Emma, any bad habits I picked up from him."

"Why, you wretch!" Rumple cried.

"Gotcha!" Bae laughed, then he hugged his father.

Alina said the ring was beautiful, like a star captured from the heavens, and she hugged both her brother and his new fiancée happily before saying, "So . . . who's up for a game of Twister?"

"Me!" Henry cried eagerly.

"Count me out," Rumple shook his head. "My leg won't let me."

"I'll just watch, thanks. I already pulled a muscle doing yoga today," Belle said.

"How about you, Bae? You oughta be real good with all the martial arts you do," Alina said.

"Uh . . . yeah . . . I bet I can beat you, Emma," he challenged.

"Like hell. I can twist you right around my finger, Baelfire," she returned.

"Now this I gotta see," Alice chuckled.

"Lemme get the game," Alina said, and ran over to the closet. Henry followed, and she handed him her backpack with the spellbook inside.

He ran to put it upstairs and return the book to the shelf using his conjuring magic, which could send something away from him when he wished it.

Alina "found" the game once Henry returned and they all went into the living room to play it. Alice moved the coffee table and the furniture a bit so there was now a large space to put the plastic board.

Gold and Belle sat down on the sofa as Henry and Alina set it up, and then Henry handed the spinner to Alice. "Okay. We're set."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Gold thought afterwards that watching his son, daughter, grandson, and daughter-in-law play that game was funnier than watching a night of stand-up comedy. Belle was in stitches after the second round, when Henry stepped on Bae's hand with his left foot.

"Ow! Watch it, tiger! My hand's not invulnerable," his father yelped.

"Sorry, Dad. Next time get Grandpa to magic you," his son said.
"What do you mean, I'm supposed to put my foot over there on the green space?" Emma gasped. "I'm not Wonder Woman, Alice!"

"Nope. You're the savior of Storybrooke," Alina called. "And you can do anything . . . kind of."

"Watch it, kid," Emma smirked and then maneuvered her leg over Bae. "God, I wish I was ten again!"

Eventually, everyone was all twisted up like pretzels and laughing their behinds off.

"Damn, Swan! You'd better lay off those Oreos," Bae remarked slyly as Emma reached over him to put her hand on a blue dot. He was practically spread-eagled on the board beneath her.

"What are you saying? That I'm fat?" his fiancée growled, and rabbit punched him in the ribs.

"Oww! I didn't say that!"

"You implied it, mister!" Emma glared at him.

"Yeah, Emma! Teach that boy some manners!" Alice hooted.

"Hey! Papa, she hit me. I'm citing police brutality," Bae called.

"I'll give you brutality, buster!"

"Now, children. Play nice or you can go to bed," Gold wagged a finger at them, chuckling.

"Really?" Emma grinned. Then she burst out laughing and collapsed on top of Bae.

"Oh . . . my . . . God!" he gasped, howling with laughter. "Did he just . . . tell us . . . to go tobed? It's lucky I'm already on the ground!"

"Rumple! Do you realize what you just said?" Belle gasped, also laughing.

"Belle! My God, I didn't mean it like that!" Gold protested, rolling his eyes.

Alice was hysterical too.

Alina and Henry eyed each other. "God, my parents are totally crazy!" Henry said, shaking his head.

"I feel bad for you, having to live with them." Alina said impishly. "But I think we won."

Page~*~*~*~Break

Emma's cloud nine mood lasted until the next morning, when she went to work and found Ruby waiting for her.

The waitress told her she had found something Emma needed to see at the site where Kathryn's car had been abandoned.

Puzzled, Emma got in her car with Ruby and they drove out to the spot.

"It's over there," Ruby said, pointing and shuddering.

Emma went over and found a shallow depression down near the drainage ditch where water gathered. Digging a little with her hands, she found a medium sized jewelry box. Gasping, she drew
her hand back, for she recognized that box, having stared at it many times on Mary Margaret's dresser. "How did this get here?" she thought, and opened it.

To find a heart inside it.

Ruby screamed. "Oh my God! Is that . . . Kathryn's?"

"I don't know. We'll have to . . . get it tested," Emma said, feeling sick. But she did know one thing. The jewelry box belonged to her roommate. Which meant Mary Margaret was a prime suspect again and would have to be arrested.

Cursing, she closed the box and got back into the Bug with Ruby. There were some days that it wasn't worth it to get up in the morning.

Ruby was so shaken by their discovery that she didn't even notice the ring on Emma's finger, for which Emma thanked God, because she really wasn't up to discussing Bae at the moment. Not with a murder investigation on her hands.

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The next day it was splashed all over the Mirror and talked about all through the halls of Storybrooke Elemetary. Miss Blanchard was arrested and taken in for questioning and her class had a substitute teacher, one of the nuns from the convent, for the time being.

Everyone was talking about the murder, and Alina and Henry felt terrible, until Henry got Alina alone during recess and said, "This has to be a set up. You know who placed that heart there, right?"

"I know. But what can we do?"

"Wait till I get some kind of sign that Regina's going to find Kathryn, or wherever she's hidden her," Henry whispered. "Because if she were dead, Regina would have put her body there, not just a heart."

"Okay. IM me when you do," Alina said. "I've got the scarf in my backpack."

The next day Alina was on tenterhooks waiting for some sign from Henry that Regina was going to Kathryn's hideout. But for two days there was nothing to report, as Regina did everything the same as usual, and Henry went to school. The only boring thing was their substitute, who Alina complained could put a dead person to sleep.

Her father said that all the nuns he'd known could make a wooden stump look lively, so no wonder Alina was bored. He told her to read ahead in her textbooks if she was falling asleep, and hope Emma found something that got her teacher off the hook.

Alina prayed Regina made her move soon.

Finally, Henry IM'd her on Saturday, and said that she had to come over right away, because Regina was going somewhere after a sudden phone call. So Alina arranged to meet Henry down at the park and they'd use the scarf to follow Regina from there.

She left a note to let Belle and Rumple know where she'd gone, ate a breakfast bar and grabbed a bag of chips for later, then raced down the street to the park. She got there just as Henry was getting out of Regina's car.
The two pretended to play on the swings for a bit, letting Regina see and then leave. As soon as she was gone, Alina pulled the scarf from her backpack and whispered, "Find her!"

The scarf seemed to glow with an eldritch light, and then Alina felt a sharp tug on it. "Henry! She's this way!"

She led him down the street.

After walking what seemed like several miles and hours, though Henry's watch said it had only been an hour and a half since they started, they found themselves down by the Storybrooke docks near an old abandoned bait and tackle shop. Regina's car was parked across the street and she was speaking to a pudgy rather sleazy looking man in a red cap. She was gesturing angrily, and pointing to the shop. The man was shaking his head and saying something she clearly wasn't pleased to hear.

"Let's go see what's in there," Alina said, and Henry and she ran over to the back of the shop.

There was trash everywhere and they picked their way through scattered cans, broken bottles, and empty candy wrappers. In the back of the shop was a dirty cracked window.

"Henry! Pick me up so I can see!" Alina ordered.

Henry knelt and cupped a hand, allowing Alina to step on it and he lifted her up to the window. "Can you see anything?"

"Yeah! Henry . . . she's here! Kathryn's here! She's in this room . . . tied up!"

Henry almost dropped her. "She's alive?"

"Uh huh! Now what?" Alina panted.

"Now we get the heck outta here," Henry said. "And then I talk to Emma on my walkie-talkie."

"No, you can't do that! Then they'll know. We can . . . uh . . . leave her an anonymous tip on her phone at the station," Alina said. "Then she'll find Kathryn and we'll be left out of it."

"Okay. Let me call." Henry said, and dug his cell from his pocket.

After he'd left the message, they headed back to the park, thinking they had worked everything out perfectly. But what Henry had forgotten was that Emma could trace calls, and she could also recognize voices, especially her son's.

She hadn't gotten the phone when it rang because she was with Mary Margaret and Mr. Gold in the other room, asking questions of her best friend for the record. Gold was present because he was Mary Margaret's attorney.

When the phone rang, they had all ignored it.

Until they heard the answering machine pick up and Emma gasped and stared at Mary Margaret and Gold in horror. "That's . . . that's Henry! I'd know his voice anywhere! What does he mean, he found Kathryn alive? It was Kathryn's heart we found!"

"Maybe not, dearie," Gold shook his head. "And if not . . . you know who put it there."

"I know. And Henry . . . he's . . . he could be in danger . . ." Emma cried.
"Alina was meeting him this morning by the park," Gold recalled. "Dammit! Where he is, so is she, sure as God made little green apples."

"Oh no!" Mary Margaret cried. "Emma, you have to help them!"

"First I need to lock you up again, sorry," Emma apologized. "Then I have to . . . go to the docks and find a dead woman. Gold, would you . . . umm . . . see if Henry and Alina are by the park?"

"Yes. And if not, I'll wait for them," Gold said, his eyes glinting with worry and anger.

"Hurry, Gold!" Emma said, and she practically ran out the door after she'd locked Mary Margaret back in the cell. Her heart was pounding with worry and fear for her son, and a distinct wish to throttle him as well.

Mr. Gold was feeling much the same thing as he drove off to the park to find his two disobedient apprentices.

On the way to the docks, Emma made a single phone call.

When she got there, she found a certain Harley waiting for her, and together she and Bae walked up to the bait and tackle shop.

Bae jimmed the lock open and they walked inside, finding Kathryn tied to a chair.

She was bruised and dirty, but very much alive.

"Henry was right," Emma said to Bae after they'd freed Kathryn and driven her to the hospital and called David and Regina to tell them she was found. "But I'm still killing him for this."

"Me too. What is he, nuts? I told him to stay out of this!" Bae said angrily. "I feel like turning him over my knee."

Emma sighed as her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Emma, it's me. Don't worry, dearie. They're both with me," came Gold's voice.

Emma sighed in relief. "Okay, Gold. We'll meet you at your house."

"We?"

"Bae and me. We found Kathryn and released her. She's at Storybrooke General getting looked over, but she seems okay."

"Good. We'll see you there," Gold said, then hung up his phone. He turned to eye his grandson and daughter, who were huddled in the back seat of the Cadillac. "We're going home now. I don't think I need to tell you that you two are in serious trouble." He gave them a sharp Look, that made both children cringe slightly.

"I think . . . we're dead," Henry whimpered.

Alina nodded, swallowing hard. "Yeah, maybe we ought to start planning our funeral."

"Darn! And I really wanted to see eleven," Henry groaned, wondering just what was going to happen to them. Whatever it was, it sure wasn't going to be good.
Wedding Interrupted
Chapter Summary

The would be detectives have the law laid down to them, Emma confronts August about his meddling, and Bae and Emma's wedding gets suddenly interrupted!

When they got back to the old Victorian, Gold told them quietly to go and sit on the couch in the den, accompanying the command with one of his sharp disappointed Looks that made Alina feel lower than a worm and Henry flinch, but both children went and did as he'd said without arguing.

Emma and Baelfire were in the kitchen, and both gave huge sighs of relief when they saw Gold limp into the room. Belle came downstairs as well once she realized who was here, looking a bit alarmed. "What's going on?"

"Well, we found Kathryn," Emma began.

"Dead?" Belle asked.

"No, alive. Thanks to Henry and Alina," Emma sighed. "To give them credit, they did find her before we did, don't ask me how."

"Magic, of course," Gold replied. "It's how or where they learned it that I want to know."

"Wait. Wait a minute," Belle said. "Start from the beginning."

So Emma did, telling Belle about the call she'd gotten at the station from Henry while questioning Mary Margaret. "So then I went down to the docks to see if Kathryn really was alive and I called Bae to help me."

"In the meantime I found our two detectives heading back to the park and picked them up," Gold continued. "They knew before I even opened my mouth that they were in trouble. Alina said she was sorry and Henry said they had to do it and I just told them to get in the car. I think they assumed I knew everything."

"Usually you do," Emma said.

"Or he likes to make you think he does," Bae refuted. "He used to make me spill my guts when I was kid by doing that. I used to come home from doing something and he'd look at me and say "You going to tell me what happened?" and next thing I know I was singing like a canary. I thought he knew exactly what I'd been up to, and the fact was he didn't know anything and I told on myself."

"Damn, that's clever, Rum!" Emma said approvingly.

"I find guilt is a great motivator, dearie. As long as you have a child who regrets his or her actions and dreads disappointing you. Which I think Henry does, just like Alina does for me and Belle. Now, what shall we do about it?"

"I think first we ought to hear their side of it, then decide on a punishment based on that," Emma
said, looking questioningly at Bae. "That sound good to you?"

Bae took a moment then nodded slowly. "Yeah. Papa always let me tell my side of it before he gave out any punishments."

"Then let's hear what they have to say," Belle said.

They filed into the den and stood in front of the two miscreants, rather like a disapproving jury. Emma crossed her arms over her chest. Bae frowned and shook his head. Belle had her hands on her hips in the classic lecture pose. And Rumple leaned on his cane and fastened one of his Looks on them.

Henry thought he'd rather face a firing squad than all four of them. Alina was lucky, because she only had to worry about Gold and Belle, since Bae was her brother and Emma her sister-in-law, sort of. He, on the other hand had parents and grandparents mad at him.

Emma cast a glance at Gold, clearly asking him to start, as he was the one with the most parental experience here.

Gold cleared his throat. "All right. Who wants to explain to me why you thought it a good idea to interfere in Emma's investigation and put yourselves in danger?"

Henry looked at Alina, who shrugged, then he said, "It was my idea to try and track Kathryn with magic. I wanted to help Emma and Mary Margaret find her before Regina did something to ruin everything like she usually does. So I asked Alina to help me find a spell to track Kathryn . . . actually to track Regina, since we didn't have anything of Kathryn's but I could get something of Regina's."

"And how did you two learn the spell to track someone?" Rumple asked.

"We . . . umm . . . borrowed one of your spellbooks, Papa," Alina said in a small voice.

"You . . . took a spellbook from me?" Rumple demanded, his voice soft yet at the same time sharper than steel.

"We put it back," Henry said quickly. "We just needed to look up the tracking spell and put it on Regina's scarf."

"That's not the point," Rumple shook his head. "Where is this scarf you enchanted?"

"In my backpack," Alina said.

"Get it for me."

She went and did so, handing the black scarf to him and then returning to the couch.

Rumple stared down at the silk in his hands, he could feel the magic in it even if he couldn't use his own yet.

"Did they do it right?" asked Emma curiously.

"Oh, yes. They did. Then again, Alina wouldn't have much trouble doing so, since she's an enchantress." He tucked the scarf in his pocket. "How many times have I told you not to use magic without my permission?"

Henry gulped, Gold's eyes were drilling into him like laser beams. "A lot."
"And why did I tell you that?"

"Because magic's price might be too much and kill us," Alina answered.

"Right. What you two did was meant for good, but could have had serious consequences if Regina or her henchman caught you. What would you have done then, huh?"

"Umm . . . we'd have told her we were playing," Henry said quickly.

"I see. And you think she'd have believed you?" Gold asked.

"She might have," Henry said gamely.

"And she also might have hurt you," Emma interjected. "Henry, your heart was in the right place, but you should have called me before you tried to track Regina. Finding missing people is my job, not yours. Or Alina's."

"We just wanted to help, Emma," Alina murmured.

"Henry, what happened to listening when I said not to get involved in this case?" Baelfire asked sternly. "You remember when I told you that was your mom's business and to just let her do her job?"

"I know, Dad, but . . . we had no choice. Regina was leaving to go there and if we didn't follow her, we'd of never found Kathryn," Henry defended.

"No, no, don't give me that," Bae shook his head. "You always have a choice, kid. And you chose to do something you both knew was wrong. You had good intentions, but that still doesn't make what you did right."

"Bae's right," Belle spoke next. "While we understand that you just wanted to help Kathryn, the way you went about it was plain wrong. Stealing your papa's spellbook, Alina Rose—or borrowing it or whatever—was wrong, as I'm sure you knew. Using your magic without supervision was wrong too. Putting yourself in danger was also. Do you realize what could have happened to you? You crossed Regina—the same woman who slaughtered hundreds and put their hearts in boxes, who trapped me in an asylum, she's a dark witch of the highest order—and if she thought it necessary, she wouldn't hesitate to kill either of you—even you, Henry—if it interfered with her plans. And if that ever happened, if anything happened to you, we would be devastated. It would destroy us. Do you understand?"

Alina nodded, looking at her sneakers. "Yes, Mama. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," Henry said, also looking unhappy. "It's just . . . we thought we could finally do something good, like all the heroes in my Book."

"Kid, this isn't a storybook," Emma sighed. "This is real and you could get really hurt and really killed if you're not careful. I know it might seem cool to try and . . . and capture bad guys and rescue people and stuff . . . but there's a cost that comes with that too. Like Rum always says—all magic comes with a price. And so do actions."

Bae nodded. "That's why I told you to stay out of it. You're too young to have that kind of responsibility. Leave the crime fighting and solving and whatever to the adults. Am I clear?" He fastened a Look similar to Rumple's on his son.

"Okay, Dad," Henry murmured, shrinking into the couch a little.
Emma pursed her lips and thought enviously, *hell, how come he can do it and I can't? It's not fair! What is it, some kind of genetic thing?*

"And all choices come with consequences," Belle continued. "You two think about that while we discuss your punishment."

"Are you gonna kill us?" Henry asked apprehensively.

"Figuratively, maybe," Rumple replied, then he turned and followed Belle back into the kitchen. Bae and Emma gave Henry one last frown before they also departed.

"I think we're gonna be grounded forever," Henry groaned.

"And I'm gonna be doing chemistry problems till next year," Alina sighed.

"Or scrubbing the floor," he added. Then a new thought occurred to him. "Hey, you don't think they'd . . . spank us, do you?"

"Papa doesn't usually do that . . . I mean he could . . ." Alina bit her lip.

"Emma probably wouldn't . . . but what about my dad?"

"Well . . . he was raised by mine . . . so he could too . . ."

"We're so screwed," Henry moaned. Then he added gamely, "But I think it was worth it."

"Definitely," she agreed. "I hated doing it the way we did, but at least we saved Kathryn from Regina and whatever she had planned for her."

"Well, what's done is done," Henry shrugged. "I wish they'd hurry up and just do whatever they're going to. I hate waiting."

"So do I."

In the kitchen, the four adults were debating on what they should do.

"I think we ought to definitely ground them," Emma said quietly.

"That goes without saying, dearie. And, of course, I'll give Alina some math problems to do since she detests them."

"Why?" asked Bae.

"Because she's good at math and doing them bores her to tears," Gold answered.

"I think they should both write essays," Belle interjected. "Our lectures were good, but nothing brings home a point quite like composition. And that's how my father punished me when I was Alina's age."

"How'd that work?" asked Bae.

"Quite well. I always thought before I got into trouble next time," Belle admitted.

"I think they also need a few days scrubbing something," Bae said. "I used to hate doing the laundry when I was in trouble. More even than carding wool."
"We could make them scrub your dojo, Bae," Emma said, nodding.

"That ought to keep them out of trouble," he agreed.

"Okay, so . . . we ground them for . . . a week?" Belle clarified, receiving nods from Rumple, Bae, and Emma. "And during that time they have to come straight home from school do their homework, no playing, and they have to help Bae in his dojo, write essays on what they should have done and why what they did was wrong, Alina has math problems, and what can we have Henry do while Alina's doing that? Any ideas, Rum?"

"Hmm. He can weed my herb garden," Rumple said then. "It's not fun, it's dirty and boring, but he'll be helping me as well as being punished for touching my spellbook."

"That sounds pretty fair to me. Better than locking them in their rooms till they're twenty-one," Emma said.

"Or walloping their backsides with a ruler," Bae said.

"Bae! I never did that to you!" Rumple gasped.

"Never said you did, Papa. That was the Queen of Hearts," Bae told him, wincing.

"The bitch!" Rumple swore. "How dare she?"

"She dared plenty," his son sighed. "But what's done is done now. Okay, let's put 'em out of their misery. I remember the worst thing about getting in trouble when I was a kid was the waiting part."

"I never made you wait for long," Rumple objected.

"Yes, you did," Bae argued.

"When?"

"The time I set the damn forest on fire," Bae replied. "You made me wait ten minutes before you finally came back and spanked me."

"That was because I had to convince myself I had to do that," his father said.

"You what? You had to convince yourself?" Bae repeated. "Holy hells, why? I knew better, I almost roasted half the village by being so idiotic. I deserved what you gave me. I probably should have gotten worse."

"I know that. But knowing doesn't make doing any easier," Rumple told him. "Trust me on that. If you ever have to spank Henry, I'm going to ask you how long it took you to get up the nerve to do it, because then you'll see what I mean."

"Hopefully, I won't," Bae said. "But if I ever do, I'll remember to hug him for a long time afterwards, like you did."

"You'll be a good dad, Bae," Emma assured him.

"God, I hope so. And you'll be a good mom, Emma."

Then they returned to the den to tell their offspring the terms of their grounding.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break
While Henry and Alina were weeding, scrubbing, and writing after school, Regina was plotting, trying to figure out a way to keep Mary Margaret and David apart. Even though Kathryn was back at home, she didn't feel it was enough to keep those two from seeing each other. But at the moment, she could think of nothing terrible to do to them, and instead was pondering the new development between Emma Swan and Neal Cassidy. Rumor had it they were engaged and probably getting married soon, and for some reason that bothered Regina.

Except for the fact that now she could tell Henry his birth mother probably wouldn't be bothering too much with him now that she had a new husband and soon enough maybe another kid too. Maybe that would keep Henry home and not over the blasted Golds so much, or pesterling Emma down at the station.

In a way, the mayor thought, it was almost providential that Emma was getting married, because with a new family, she'd leave Henry alone, and he would see that Regina was the only family he needed. A pleased smirk crossed her lips as she went down the street, heading towards the town hall.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

In another part of town, a writer in a leather jacket almost put his fist through a wall when he finally heard the rumors between Sheriff Swan and the martial arts instructor. This was a disaster! Emma was the savior, she needed to concentrate on breaking the curse, not smooching her fiancée! He swore, then got on the Web via his cell and began looking up Neal Cassidy, trying to figure out if he had anything in his background that was . . . shady.

After fifteen minutes, he found something that looked pretty good, and smiled as he called the number. Once Emma learned about this, she'd never want to marry the guy.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Belle continued to go to sessions with Archie, finding the doctor very compassionate and easy to talk to. She used the techniques he suggested at home, and started trying to venture into the pantry with the door open as he'd suggested. It was hard at first, but after awhile, she became calm and able to walk in and out as she chose.

It was a great improvement.

And she wasn't the only one making strides. Every day, Rumple found a new entry in his journal, and reading the small affirmations started causing his self-confidence, a shaky thing, to grow in leaps and bounds. It was strange, but he discovered that having Belle believe in him and love him, without any kind of strings attached, caused him to actually feel good about himself, and that wasn't something he'd felt in a long time. Watching Emma and Bae fall in love was also fulfilling to him, as was teaching his three family members magic.

Before, his powers had made him feared and respected, but people only came to him if they wanted help with a deal, because he had something they wanted that only he could give them. And deep inside he'd still thought of himself as a worthless coward, as others had called him. He'd never had a real relationship with someone as a friend or a mentor. Until Alice had come with Alina. Now he had a grandson who admired him, a son who had forgiven him for the sins of the past, a wife who loved him despite everything, and Emma, who had become a good friend and hopefully would be more than that soon.

Gradually, their regard was starting to overshadow the specter of the coward and the Dark One, and banish the terrible insecurity he'd had since the day he'd limped off the battlefield and found
his wife hated him.

He completed his opening statement for the hearing and had Archie fax him "Lacey Beauregard's" records from the asylum. The records detailed all of the treatments they'd done and were the proof that some of their methods were barbaric and inhumane. They were sure to prove to a judge that Regina was unfit to take care of a cockroach, much less a small boy.

The only thing left, Gold mused, was for Emma and Bae to marry.

Emma was discussing dress styles with Belle after work one day, for she and Bae had set a date for the wedding at last—they would marry on April 1st, a kind of joke on Regina. A week before Alina's eleventh birthday, and sometimes Emma felt it couldn't come fast enough and other times that everything was happening way too fast, like a runaway roller coaster. But she and Bae had both agreed that the sooner they were married, the better, as Gold could then set a date for the custody hearing, as he had all of the evidence gathered that they could use against Regina. Emma wanted Henry to start living with them, so they could start their new lives together, as a family.

Like the Golds, Bae and Emma would get married in a small ceremony at the courthouse, with Alina and Henry as attendants, along with Gold, Belle, Alice, Jefferson, Mary Margaret, and David for witnesses. Even though Mary Margaret and David couldn't remember who they really were, Emma still wanted them at the wedding.

Finally, based on Belle's advice, and some input from Rumple as well, Emma chose a lovely dress of champagne silk and satin, which looked almost like a cross between a fairytale and modern princess gown. It was T-length, but had lovely sleeves that fluttered at her wrist like swan's wings, and was embroidered with seed pearls and Swavroski crystals on the bodice and hem.

It was made by Versacci, and at first Emma loved it, but not when she saw the price tag. "Oh, no way! That's ridiculous! I'll have to find something else."

"Nonsense, dearie! That dress looks incredible on you," Rumple argued. "Right, Belle?"

"He's right, Emma. You do look stunning."

"I can't. It's fifteen hundred dollars . . . and that's on sale," Emma groaned. They were in an exclusive bridal boutique in Storybrooke.

"That's a good deal, Emma," Gold said. "Trust me."

"Good for you, maybe," the sheriff shook her head.

"Here. Take this and buy it," Rumple pressed a black card into her hand.

Emma looked at it and gasped. It was a Black American Express, a card that only the most wealthy businessmen owned, and they had to be invited to join that exclusive number, since the card had no credit limit.

"No. Oh, no, Gold." She made as if to hand the card back to him.

"Take it, dearie. Once you say I do, you're a Gold, and I won't have my daughter wearing rags," Rumple said, closing her hand firmly over the black plastic card.

"I haven't said it yet," Emma pointed out.
"Technicality, Emma. You said yes when you accepted Bae's proposal," Rumple argued.

"You're splitting hairs, Gold."

"No. I'm giving you an early wedding present. Buy the dress. Go on. You know you want to."

Emma shook her head. "Belle . . ."

Belle smiled and shook her head. "Just do it, Emma. He likes to give surprises to his family members."

"Fifteen hundred dollar ones?"

"You don't want to know what the necklace he gave me cost," Belle chuckled.

"Emma. Listen to me, dearie. Once I spun straw into gold, and here I practically own the entire town. I have more money than I know what the hell to do with, so you'd be doing me a favor if you'd help me spend it. Plus, you're my apprentice, and it's the duty of a master to feed and clothe his apprentice until he or she has learned the trade he teaches. At least according to the laws where I come from. So . . . buy the dress, Swan."

"Okay," she agreed. "And thank you so much!" Then she did something she never had before. She hugged Rumplestiltskin.

"You're very welcome, Emma," the old sorcerer said, then he handed her the dress and shoved her gently towards the cashier.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

She was telling Ruby about the dress the next morning over her usual coffee and egg and cheese sandwich, but instead of smiling at her, Ruby looked rather nervous. "Emma . . . I don't know if you've heard . . . but there's been some rumors going around . . ."

"Rumors? Of what?"

"Neal. Look, I figured it'd be best to hear it from me. They say . . . they say that Neal was . . . involved with someone before you . . ."

"Involved? Ruby, if he was dating before he came here, that's nobody's business but his," Emma began, though a corner of her heart cringed thinking about Bae with another woman.

"Not just dating . . . they say he was almost engaged . . . If I were you, I'd ask him about it. Just to make sure," Ruby said.

Emma frowned. "I don't listen to gossip. Half the time it's wrong. But . . . maybe I'll ask him. Even if that was true . . . he's not engaged now, except to me."

"True . . . but . . . I'd hate for you to marry somebody who . . . plays the field."

"Neal's not like that," Emma said. "And I'll arrest anyone who says so for slander."

"Okay. I'm just saying," Ruby said, then backed away and went to serve her other table coffee.

Emma chewed on her sandwich, wondering who in hell had started these stupid accusations.

Regina came immediately to mind, but Emma was at a loss to figure out why.
So that night, Emma asked Bae as they were walking up the walk to Gold's Victorian. Henry and Alina were done with their grounding and had made them a special dinner with Alice's help.

"Bae . . . I was wondering . . . have you heard any of the rumors about town lately?" she began, a little diffidently.

He looked at her. "You mean the ones that say I used to be engaged?"

"Yeah. Those. It really doesn't matter, but I . . . just wanted to ask . . ."

"It doesn't, though I'd like to know who the hell ever found out about something I did two years ago in Phoenix," Bae said. "Truth is, Emma, I used to go out with a woman awhile back, she wanted more than I was ready to give, though, which was why I broke it off. We weren't even semi engaged, babe, just went on a couple of dates. Her name was Tamara. And she was very . . . uh . . . pushy and demanding, which is why I ended it. I refused to marry my mother. And that's all."

"Your mother?"

"My mother was a bitch and a half to my father. Left when I was four, to chase a pirate. I never saw her again," Bae said. "But enough about her. And this stupid rumor that Tamara means anything to me. I'm marrying you, not her. Now let's go eat, I can't wait to see what Henry and Alina made for us."

Relieved, Emma hugged him and they went inside. She had told Ruby there was nothing to worry about.

A few days later, Emma found an anonymous note on some white paper that read—Are you sure he really loves you? Don't do something you'll regret. She found it tucked on the windshield of her Bug when she came out of Mary Margaret's apartment to go to work, and immediately crumpled it up and threw it in the garbage.

Now this was really beginning to irritate her.

Especially when she found other missives around the sheriff's station. Don't be played for a fool. Men with ex's are always trouble. He's not worth your time. Forget him.

She almost threw them away too, but at the last minute decided to save them. They were proof of harassment.

If only she could figure out who was sending them! But when she tried to dust them for prints, she found nothing. Whoever put them around knew to wear gloves.

Despite the petty annoyances, Emma grew more and more excited as April approached.

Finally, the day of the wedding came and Emma picked up her dress from the shop and with Belle and Mary Margaret helping, put it on.

"Ooh, you look so lovely!" Mary Margaret cooed.

"Neal's jaw's going to hit the floor," Belle predicted, fixing Emma's hair.

"And how!" laughed the schoolteacher. "Okay, I think she's ready, Belle."
"Yes. Let's go, Emma. Mustn't keep the groom waiting."

Emma followed them out to Gold's Cadillac, which Mary Margaret was driving.

"I can't believe Gold actually let you borrow his car," her friend cried. "Hope it didn't cost you too much."

"Not really. I had Henry ask him, and nobody can refuse Henry, not even Gold," Emma smirked, and winked at Belle.

They drove up to the courthouse and parked. Standing on the steps were David, Henry, and Jefferson in tuxedoes and on the other side were Alice and Alina. Alina wore a pretty emerald green dress and matching shoes and Alice the blue pantsuit she'd worn at Belle's wedding.

Mary Margaret was wearing a peach pantsuit and matching heels, and Belle had on a sweet midnight blue sparkly dress, though she wasn't wearing the necklace, as this was Emma's day.

Emma was shocked when Rumple handed her out of the car. "Rum?"

"I know, dearie, this ought to be your father, but things being what they are, I decided to do it instead. Unless you'd rather I tell David?"

"No. It's okay. I mean, it won't be the same if you have to tell him to walk me down the aisle. I'm just glad they're here for the ceremony," Emma said, taking his arm. "It's not normal, but then . . . I never did normal anyway."

"If you're sure?"

"I'd be glad to have you with me," Emma assured him.

Smiling and waving, the rest of the witnesses processed into the courthouse, where Bae waited near the justice's desk.

Bae wore a grin that stretched from ear to ear when he saw Emma and Gold come down the aisle.

Rumple had just escorted Emma over to Bae while the piped strains of a wedding march played, and stepped back beside Belle, when the courthouse door opened and a tall woman in her early thirties came in.

She was wearing a black and white dress slit up the side, black heels, and an upswept hairstyle. Her hair was dark and complemented her dress. She was quite pretty, but a pout turned down her expressive mouth and she held a large purse in one hand.

"Wait! You can't marry that . . . tramp, Neal!" she cried.

"Excuse me?" Emma gasped.

"Dearie, I think you've made a mistake," Rumple declared. "Now leave."

She turned and gazed haughtily at him. "Shut up! Neal, you're making a mistake."

"Neal? Who the hell is she?" Emma cried.

Bae turned to stare at the woman in shock. "Tamara? What . . . are you doing here?"

Belle was frowning. "Rumple . . . I thought strangers hardly come here."
"They don't. Unless someone invites them," he replied.

"Who would do that?" Mary Margaret gasped.

Tamara was clinging to Bae, saying that she had made a mistake and she wanted to reconsider their relationship.

Bae was horrified. "Tamara, get off me! In case you don't realize it, I'm getting married. Now please leave!"

"No! I got the text you sent, Neal! You love me, not her!"

"What? I never sent you any text!" he cried. "Who told you I was here?"

"I asked Paul, he said you'd moved to Maine. Then I got your text and I came here to . . . Storybook or whatever you call it. Ditch this bitch, Neal, and come home to Phoenix with me."

"You're crazy!" Bae shouted. "I don't love you, I love Emma."

David stepped forward. "Lady, I think you'd better go."

"Mind your own business," Tamara snapped.

"Dearie, you're causing a scene . . . now leave before I have you arrested for disturbing the peace," Rumple ordered, limping forward.

Tamara looked him up and down. "Listen, Grandpa—"

"Hey! You watch how you talk about my husband, you tart!" Belle snarled, glaring at the other woman.

"And my papa!" Alina added.

Tamara's eyes widened. "What'd he do, rob the cradle?"

"Tamara, get out!" Bae ordered. "You're not welcome here, now go the hell home."

"I will not! You can't tell me what to do, Neal Cassidy!"

"Then I will!" Henry called angrily.

"Who are you?"

"His son," Henry replied.

Tamara gaped at him. "You've got a kid?"

"Yes. And I'm marrying his mother," Bae told her shortly.

Alina stalked forward, her brown eyes glittering. She gave Tamara a glare reminiscent of the Dark One. "Lady, you're wrecking my brother's wedding, now you take your big fat ass out of here right now before I bitch-slap you right into the next county!"

Tamara gasped and started to back away.

Gold covered his face with his hand and muttered, "Alina Rose, God help you!" But that was all. He looked at Belle. "She's your daughter, all right, dearie."
"Yours, too, Rumple," his wife retorted.

"Yeah, tell her off, girl!" Alice cheered.

"Alice! Don't encourage her," Belle hissed, though she actually agreed with her daughter.

At the same time Henry discreetly thrust his hands out and Tamara found herself propelled backwards down the aisle as if she were on a slidewalk at the airport. "Oops!" he muttered apologetically and glanced guiltily at Gold, who just shook his head.

"Hey!" Tamara screeched as she was suddenly shoved through the doors.

"How'd that happen?" asked David.

"She was wearing magnetic shoes," Henry answered glibly.

"Sometimes they get stuck to the floor," Alina added. "That's how come she tripped." She made a quick gesture and the doors locked, so Tamara couldn't get back in.

"Okay, whatever. I'm just glad she's gone," David said.

"If we're all quite ready to begin?" asked Judge Moore, eyeing Bae and Emma.

"Sorry, Your Honor," Bae apologized. "I don't know how she ever got over here . . . never mind," he took Emma's hand in his.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of these witnesses . . ." the judge began, and the ceremony was performed without any more interruptions.

As Bae took Emma in his arms and kissed her breathless, everyone watching cheered and clapped, with Henry clapping the loudest of all. Finally, everything was settled between his parents. Now all that remained was to win the hearing and he could finally have a real family again.
Motivations

Chapter Summary

Emma and Bae's reception an wedding night occur, August has encounters with a mysterious woman and also Emma and Henry's book is returned.

33

Motivations

"I sure hope that Tamara lady isn't outside when we leave," Henry said, as he walked up the aisle with Alina, just ahead of Mary Margaret and David, and beside Gold and Belle. Jefferson and Alice brought up the rear. Bae and Emma led the way towards the doors, which Alina unlocked with another quick gesture.

"If she is, I'm gonna give her a black eye," Alina declared fiercely.

"You'll do no such thing, Alina Rose," Gold spoke from beside Henry. "If . . . that woman is outside here, you're going let an adult handle it. And you're lucky I'm letting what you said to her go and not making you eat soap for your mouth."

"Sorry Papa, but what I said to her was true," Alina pointed out. "She was wrecking Emma and Bae's wedding."

"Yes, and that's exactly why you're not in trouble," Gold returned.

"And because he agrees with what you said too," Belle added knowingly.

"Belle!" Gold muttered.

"What? You know perfectly well I'm right. And if she starts anything with Bae again, I'm going to give her a black eye. Among other things," his wife said. "The nerve of that hussy!"

Gold sighed. "You see?" he said to Henry. "That's where Alina gets it from."

Henry just smirked.

Belle mock-glared at her husband. "She gets it from both of us, Rumplestiltskin Gold, so don't try and play innocent with me. If you'd had your magic back, that woman would be slithering out of here, because you'd have turned her into a snake."

"Snake's too good for her, dearie. I'd have turned her into a slug . . . and made her crawl through salt," Rumple snorted.

"Ugh! Rumple, that's disgusting," Belle made a face. "And you think I'm bad?"

"You started it, dearie," Gold defended.

"Tamara better start praying," said Henry to Alina.
"Or running. Like right out of town," Alina said. "Before Emma arrests her."

But when they finally got out of the courthouse, Tamara was nowhere to be seen.

They all got into their respective cars, Bae and Emma got into her Bug along with Henry, while Gold reclaimed his Cadillac and he, Belle, Alina, Alice, and Jeff got in it, while Mary Margaret and David got in David's truck and they all headed back to Gold's Victorian for a small reception and brunch, made by Alice, of course, with help from Belle and Gold for a few appetizers.

When Bae and Emma got out of the Bug to walk up to Gold's front door, Henry and Alina popped out of the bushes and threw rice on them, yelling, "Congratulations!"

"Uh . . . aren't you supposed to do that right after you get married?" asked Emma, brushing rice out of her hair and grinning.

"We couldn't," Alina told her. "Henry forgot the rice and Papa said we could do it later."

"So it's later," Henry grinned.

The happy couple entered the house, and were led into the dining room, which had been decorated with white and silver streamers and balloons and a sign that read Congratulations Baelfire and Emma! The table was done up in white linen and had white and gold china plates and gold plated cutlery on it. All the food was set up in crystal and silver chafing dishes, and Jefferson played butler and handed out glasses of champagne to everyone, even Henry and Alina got small glasses for the toast.

The food was phenomenal, given who cooked it. There were crepes with strawberries and cream and some with peanut butter and bananas drizzled with chocolate syrup. There were deviled eggs and scrambled eggs with cheese, spicy potatoes, a whole ham which David carved, maple sausage links, tiny eggs rolls, steamed dumplings, and crab Rangoon. There were drunken hot dogs, made by Belle, a smoked turkey carved into slices, rolls, and Gold had made his grilled cheese and bacon sandwiches, teaching Alina how to cast a spell to keep them hot with magic before they'd left for the courthouse. There were mini cheeseburger and grilled chicken sliders, clams casino, oysters on the half shell, shrimp cocktail and scallops wrapped in bacon. There was salad and sautéed mushrooms and asparagus with Hollandaise sauce as well. Plus a platter of fresh fruit carved in tiny bell shapes.

Bae stared at the array of food, then asked, "Okay, how did you make all of this in one day?"

"I didn't," Alice laughed. "I've been cooking a little at a time for weeks, ever since Emma told me the date. Most of this was already done, I just had to heat it up. Your father was making grilled cheese this morning while I did the crepes and scrambled eggs and Alina helped by keeping all this stuff hot with magic. Belle did the fruit and salad while we were frying and so forth."

"We all helped," Belle said, eating a clam. "Mmm! Alice, this is divine."

"So are the deviled eggs. I like 'em hot and spicy," Jefferson said, and popped one in his mouth.

"Because you're hot and sassy," Alice returned, and winked at him. Then she ate one of Belle's hot dogs. "Just the right amount of bourbon here, Belle."

Henry gobbled down a cheeseburger, declaring, "This is better than McDonald's."

"It ought to be. That's top grade Angus beef," Gold told him, eating a grilled cheese.
Emma just stared at all the food. "My God, there's enough here to feed half of Storybrooke, Gold!"

"Well, you're only married once, dearie," her father-in-law said. "Here. Have a sandwich." He placed a grilled cheese and bacon on her plate.

Emma was suddenly drooling, and she took it and bit into it, nearly burning her tongue on the gooey cheese. "Oh my God!"

"Too hot, babe?" asked Bae, who was eating a dumpling and some crab Rangoon. "Here's some soda." He handed her a glass of Coke with ice.

"No . . . it's so good!" Emma told him. "I've never had anything like this. Alice, you're amazing!"

"Thanks, Emma, but I didn't make those. Rum did," Alice said.

"You did?" the bride gaped at Rumple.

"I can do more than just magic, dearie," he laughed.

"Emma, you never had the Gold special?" Henry said, also eating one.

"No. Bae, you've got to learn how to make these," Emma said, devouring hers.

"Okay, Em. Papa, got time next week?" Bae asked, sipping some champagne.

"Of course. I close up shop at six, so anytime after that. And you do know you're taking some of this home, right?"

"Hell, yeah. Then we won't have to cook for like a week," Emma laughed. She finished her grilled cheese and then ate a scallop and some potatoes. "Thanks, guys. This was real sweet of you."

Henry and Alina waited until Emma and Bae were sitting down before they tapped their forks on their glasses and started chanting, "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" They were promptly joined by Alice, Jeff, David, and Mary Margaret.

"Hey, who taught you that?" Bae chuckled.

"You can blame Alice for that one," Belle laughed. "Her and all her romantic comedies."

"Well, are you going to or not?" Henry demanded impudently.

"Be quiet, kid," Emma ordered, then she obligingly turned and kissed her husband. "Happy now?" she asked her son.

"Walking on air," he replied and then drank the rest of his champagne, beaming.

After Emma and Bae had cut the cake, which Alice had made also, it was a three tiered cannoli filled vanilla one, they all had fun dancing to the music Gold played on his Bose outside on the lawn, which had been transformed into a dance floor with a platform and a canopy with silver ribbons and white swags. Emma found herself dancing to *Butterfly Kisses* with David, much to her shock, and when she looked across the platform, Gold winked at her, as he had control of the playlist with the remote in his pocket.

Emma mouthed a thank you to him and smiled at David, who told her she looked beautiful and said he was glad she'd invited him to share in her special day.
"It wouldn't have been the same without you and Mary Margaret here," Emma said sincerely, and wished he had his memory back.

Bae found himself dancing with Belle after that, and Rumple played What A Wonderful World for them.

"He planned this," Bae smirked as he twirled about with Belle.

"Of course he did. Your father's a closet romantic, or didn't you know that?" Belle smiled at her handsome son.

"I do now. I think you bring it out in him," Bae said sincerely. "You two make a great couple, Belle."

"Thanks, Bae. And so do you and Emma."

"I hope we make equally good parents," Bae said, looking over to where Henry was dancing with Alina and stepping on her feet.

"You will. All it takes is patience, practice, and love."

"And us winning the custody hearing," Bae reminded.

"Have faith in your father, Bae. He'll do it, or my name's not Belle Gold," she said.

"I do. It's not him I'm worried about. It's Regina," said Bae. "I'm worried she might throw a monkey wrench into things and win on a technicality."

"Rum's planned for that, don't worry. He doesn't plan on serving her with the papers until the day of the hearing. That way she doesn't have time to plan anything. She only has time to show up."

"Sneaky! I'm glad he's on our side," Bae smirked.

Across the floor, Henry was apologizing to Alina for stepping on her foot. "I'm really bad at this dance stuff, sorry."

"It's okay," Alina said.

"Want us to show you how it's done?" Mary Margaret asked. She took David's hand and he put it around her waist. "See? You start like this."

They promenaded around the floor, dancing gracefully.

Henry sighed. "I'll never be able to do that."

"Just listen to the music, Henry. You don't have to be able to move like a swan to dance," Gold said suddenly, appearing at Alina's elbow. "Shall we, dearie?"

"You can dance?" Henry gasped. "With your leg and all?"

"If I do it slowly enough," Rumple answered. "Watch."

Henry watched as he gently twirled Alina about, moving slowly enough so Henry could see what he did.

Alina grinned up at him. "I remember you used to dance like this with me on my birthday."
Rumple smiled at her. "And I will again this year, Alina mine."

Soon they were rejoined by Mary Margaret and David.

After a few more minutes, Mary Margaret said, "Want to try again, Henry?"

"Sure," Henry said, and then he went and partnered her, while Rumple handed Alina to David, saying he could only dance for a few minutes at a time.

As they revolved to a different tune, Bae spun gracefully with Emma, and Alice with Jefferson, as Belle accepted a glass of champagne from her husband and they toasted their growing family.

Finally the newlyweds headed back to Bae's apartment. They were slightly tipsy, stuffed, and very very happy. Bae picked up Emma and carried her across the threshold. "Home sweet home, wild swan!" he crowed and set her down, only to kick the door closed behind them and then picked her up again.

"Bae! What are you doing?" she giggled.

"Bringing you into the bedroom," he replied.

"I can walk, you know."

"I don't want you to," he said, and carried her into the bedroom and set her on the bed. Then he removed his jacket and tie, tossing them on the chair in the corner.

Emma eyed him leisurely. "What's this, Gold? Chippendale's?"

"Better, Mrs. Gold," Bae answered, kicking off his shoes. His hands went to his shirt. "Wanna help?"

"My pleasure," she answered, and stood up to undo the buttons. "I'll do yours and you do mine. Just be careful not to rip it. It's Versacci."

She quivered as his fingers gently undid the buttons on her dress and then she concentrated on unfastening his shirt.

As she tossed it aside, she kissed him, feeling passion quicken through her blood like fine wine. "Bae . . . sweet God . . . hurry . . .!"

"Almost there, love. And what's the rush? We've got all night, y'know." He unhooked the last button and gently drew the dress down. "My beautiful wild swan." His fingers caressed her, making her weak in the knees. "I love you, Emma Gold. Forever till the end of all things."

"As I love you, Baelfire. Always," then her mouth was on his, stealing away his breath for an instant.

Somehow they found the bed and fell on it, entwined about each other, and lost in the passion true love had conjured.

It wasn't until much later that they finally woke, basking in the moment, before they fell asleep again.
The next day, Emma moved out of Mary Margaret's apartment, assisted by her husband, Ruby, Ashley, and David. Once all her things, which weren't many, were in Bae's —their— apartment, Emma had to go to work. She kissed Bae goodbye and then drove down to the station. Since Kathryn's case had been solved, she had little to do, and that gave her time to ponder on who had let Tamara, who had left Storybrooke, into town.

Her first guess was Regina, but that left her pondering why Regina would bother to interfere in her private life. What did she gain by it? Emma didn't think she gained anything. Regina might dislike her being here, because of Henry, because she was supposed to be the savior, but the mayor would do nothing without a motive.

Then who did gain something by breaking her and Bae up?

And who would have had access to the outside world in order to find Tamara and send her a text to come here? She, Bae, and Belle were the only ones besides Henry who could leave Storybrooke at will, and only she and Bae had ever come into Storybrooke from the outside.

No . . . there was someone else.

August Booth.

Emma didn't know where he'd come from or why.

What were his motivations?

She turned on her laptop and began a search, trying and failing to learn who he really was. Finally, after two frustrating hours, she slammed her hands on her desk and rubbed her eyes. "God, I need some coffee."

"Coffee's good, but this is better," said a soft voice.

Emma jerked up to see a tall woman standing in front of her desk. She had long honey blond hair and green eyes, green as the depths of the forest. She looked young, but there was a look in her eyes that spoke volumes. "Who are you?"

"A friend, Emma Gold."

"Do you have a name?"

"Many. But the one most know me as is Vasilisa."

"How did you get in here?"

"All doors are open to one who knows how to enter. All you need to do is walk through them." She reached into a pocket and withdrew a familiar looking book.

"That's . . . that's Henry's book! I thought it was destroyed!"

"It might have been. But the Book's never been easy to destroy. I should know, since I made it."

"You made it?"

"Yes. I am the Chronicler. I write down what should be preserved, the lives of those who have lost their memories, the lives of those who exist in stories and songs in this world, but who must never be forgotten," Vasilisa said. She set the book on Emma's desk. "Read it. There's something in here you ought to know."
"I have read it."

"Read it again. There's a new tale in here . . . which might help you in your search."

"Why do you want to help me? I don't even know you."

"But I know you, Emma. Daughter of Snow White and Charming. Wife of Baelfire Gold. Student of Rumplestiltskin. Who was also, a long time ago, my teacher as well. One of them, anyway, and the better of the two, I might add."

"Gold . . . taught you magic?"

"Yes. But he did more than that. He gave me a home, a place to belong, he saved my life. I owe him a debt for it. Which someday I'll repay. In fact, by giving you this, I'm repaying just a bit of what I owe."

"How?"

"Family helps family, dearie," the sorceress replied enigmatically.

Emma frowned. "Gold uses that expression."

"Yes. It was quite . . . commonplace where he grew up."

"And you also?" Emma asked.

"Well . . . in a way," Vasilisa smiled. "I'll be seeing you again soon, Emma. When you're done reading, give the Book to Henry. Tell him it's an early birthday present if you like. Take care, dearie."

Then she vanished.

Emma stared at the Book, touched its pages hesitantly. Then she opened it and began to read.

Soon she found the new tale Vasilisa had spoken of and then she knew who August Booth was at last.

She shut the Book with a thump and then called Bae.

"Emma. What's up?"

"Bae. You'll never guess what just happened. Or what I found out," she began.

"Tell me."

Emma did. "And I found out who August is too."

"So who is the little bastard?"

"You sound like you don't like him. Did you two meet before?"

"A few weeks ago he came by the dojo."

"To sign up for lessons?"

"No. To tell me to stop seeing you."
"He what?"

Bae told her about the conversation he'd had with the writer.

By the time he was done, Emma was furious. "How dare he? Bae, I think he might have been the one who contacted Tamara and brought her here."

"Really? And why in hell would he do that?"

"I don't know. Except maybe he thought it was the right thing to do."

"Screwing up our wedding? For what? Who is he anyway?"

"Pinocchio."

"The wooden puppet who became a boy?" Bae snarled. "I ought to knock his block off. Or break both his kneecaps."

"You couldn't. Your hands are lethal weapons, sweetheart. Hurt him, even though he deserves it, and I'd have to arrest you."

Bae sighed. As a martial arts instructor, he knew just how deadly he was. "You going to talk with him?"

"Yeah. And afterwards I'm going to come home, have some lunch and wait for Henry to get back from school and give him a surprise. Oh, and one more thing. I didn't find anything about Vasilisa in the Book."

"Maybe she's going to put it in later. Enchantresses are notoriously closed mouthed about themselves sometimes," Bae told her. "Just ask my father."

"I'm going to. Later on tonight. See you later, love. Bye."

She put her phone in her jacket, then tucked the Book in her bag and went to lock up. She had a man to see about a text message.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

August looked up from working on his latest attempt at a novel when he heard the knock at the door.

Going to open it, he found Emma on the other side.

"Sheriff Swan. To what do I owe the pleasure?" August asked, smiling at her.

Emma didn't smile back. "It's Gold now, August. In case you didn't know, I'm married."

August stared at her in horror. "To . . . Mr. Gold?"

"No, idiot! To his son," Emma declared, slamming the door behind her.

"Gold has no son. He lost him long ago," August refuted.

"Well, he came back. And he's my husband. Guess you don't know everything, do you, Pinocchio?" she growled.
"You're married . . . to Balefire? You married into that cursed family?"

"My family is not cursed!" Emma snapped. "And who the hell made you judge and jury over me anyway?"

"Emma, you don't know what you're saying. I'm just trying to do what's right."

"How? By trying to get me to leave Bae? You were the one who put those damned notes all over the place, right? And you were the one who contacted Tamara and invited her here. Why? Why would you do that?"

"Because you're supposed to be the savior! To break the curse! You're not supposed to fall in love with Rumplestiltskin's son and marry him! That's not your destiny!" August cried.

"My destiny, August, isn't up to you! It's up to me. Who the hell died and made you God?"

"I was sent through the wardrobe to protect you."

"And you did a great job of that, didn't you?" sneered Emma. "Where were you when I needed a friend when I was working nights all alone in Phoenix? When I was desperate and stole a damn car and got thrown in jail, huh?"

"It's . . . complicated," August began.

"No it's not. It's simple. You weren't there when I needed you. And now that you are here, you think you can tell me what to do. But you can't!"

"You have to listen to me, Emma! Breaking the curse should be the most important thing to you. Not giving the Dark One's son a good time—"

Emma hit him. One quick punch to the jaw and he fell over in astonishment. "Shut up! And the stay the hell away from me. You keep away from Henry, away from Bae, and you leave us all alone. I'll break the damn curse when I'm good and ready and for your information, Gold's been helping me more than you ever will!"

"You've been taking lessons from the Dark One?" gasped August, rubbing his jaw.

"His name's Gold, and I don't give a damn what he used to be. He's not the Dark One here and he's given me a hell of a lot more than you ever did, so shut your trap about him. He's the only one who's done more than just tell me I'm supposed to break a curse, he's actually showing me how I can do it."

"And what was his price? You marrying his son?"

"Don't be an ass! He didn't even know Bae and I knew each other till the day Bae came riding up on his Harley. His price for teaching me was to break the curse. What did you think it was? My firstborn child?"

"This is all wrong!" August moaned. "It wasn't supposed to be like this!"

"Too bad. The best laid plans of mice and men, August . . . I'm sure you know how that ends!" Emma snapped. "Do yourself a favor, Booth. Quit meddling in my life. Or else someone's going to get their nose bloodied. And it's not me!"

Then she stalked out the door, feeling an insane urge to hit something. So she slammed her fist into
a tree, then swore as her knuckles throbbed and bled. Damn that puppet boy!

Bae took one look at her hand when she got home and got out some bandages, antiseptic, and an ice pack. "You get that beating up puppet boy, Emma?"

"No. I got it from bashing my hand into a tree trying to avoid strangling him," she answered shortly.

Bae shook his head and began to clean up her hand. "Next time, sweetheart, just come home and punch my bag here. It'll help you with stress and you won't hurt your poor hand."

She smiled at him. "Being around you makes me feel so much better. And so will the look on Henry's face when he sees the surprise I have for him."

She couldn't wait for her son to come home from school.
Winning Back Henry

Chapter Summary

The custody battle for Henry occurs—find out who wins!

Emma met Henry and Alina as they were walking home from school, hugging her son and sister-in-law, and saying excitedly, "Henry, I have such a great surprise for you."

"Like what, Emma? Ice cream at Granny's?" Henry guessed.

"A new ebook?" Alina queried.

"Better. Can you come home with me to my apartment, or do you have to stop in at Regina's first?" Emma asked, hoping the former.

"I can come, Emma. Regina's never home till six at least, and I can always call and leave a message that I'm eating over Alina's," Henry told her.

"You go with Emma, Henry. I'm going to stop by Papa's shop and see him before I go home. If you want to come over later and eat supper, just IM me, okay?" Alina told him.

"Okay. Bye!" He waved at his aunt as she trotted down the sidewalk, heading for Gold's Pawnshop. "Let's go home," he said, eager to get his surprise.

Emma drove over to Fire Mountain, and together mother and son entered the dojo. Bae was having a class, teaching some fishermen and miners basic karate, so they carefully tiptoed into the elevator that led to the top of the warehouse, which was where the apartment was situated, and Emma unlocked the door and let Henry into the apartment.

Henry tossed his backpack on the couch and then said, "Emma, I'm kind of hungry. Got anything to eat?"

"Look in the fridge, we've got tons of food from your grandparents from the wedding brunch," she said, and hurried into her bedroom to get the Once Upon a Time book.

Henry ran to open the fridge, and called, "Got any of the Gold special left?"

"Look in there. I don't know, because your father might have ate it," she answered, grabbing the Book and going to sit down on the couch.

Henry dug through the containers of leftovers, then yelled, "Yes! Here's some," when he found the grilled cheese and bacon sandwiches. "Want one, Emma?"

"No, I'm good, kid. I ate enough yesterday and probably gained ten pounds," she said.

"Okay." He pulled out one sandwich and found the small grill under the stove and began to heat it up, putting the sandwich on top of it once it was sizzling.

In a few minutes, the sandwich was hot and melted again, and Henry put it on a paper plate and
brought it into the living room along with a glass of iced tea. "So, what's the surprise?" he asked, sitting down next to his mother.

"Eat first," Emma said, then sighed. "Damn, that smells good even the next day."

"I could make you one," Henry offered.

"No. I'm fine."

She watched as he devoured his sandwich, wishing she were ten again and didn't have to worry about watching her weight. She knew Bae would tell her she was fine, but she knew her metabolism was starting to slow down.

"Okay, I'm done. So where is it?"

Emma pulled the Book out from behind her back with a flourish.

Henry gasped, his eyes widening. "My Book! You found it! How?" He took the Book and hugged it. He looked as if Emma had just given him a million bucks.

"Well, there was this lady that came to the station this morning . . . " Emma told him.

Henry listened as she told him about Vasilisa. "And she made the Book? I've never heard of her before."

"Neither have I," Emma said. "But she's from the Fairy Tale realm. She told me she used to be Mr. Gold's apprentice, a long time ago."

"Neat! Maybe he can tell us who she is," Henry said, running his hands lovingly through the Book's pages. "It looks new."

"Yeah, but guess what? There's a new tale in there, Vasilisa told me. You should read it." Emma said, happy that her son was so pleased with her surprise.

"Really? Awesome! I gotta read it!" Henry said, and opened the book to the contents. "Maybe Vasilisa took the Book so she could write this one in it." He began to read, and Emma lost the battle with her stomach and went into the kitchen to heat up her own grilled cheese.

"God, this sandwich tastes almost as good today as it did when he first made them," she said to herself as she ate it. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Rum put a spell on them."

She heard the door to the apartment open and Bae saying, "Hi, Henry! I see your mom showed you her surprise."

"Yeah, Dad. Isn't it great?" Henry said, running over to hug his father, still holding the Book in his hand. "Do you know who Vasilisa is?"

"Nope, afraid not. She must have come along after I left," Bae said, hanging up his jacket in the closet. "You'll have to ask your grandfather about her."

"When? Tonight?" Henry asked.

"I guess we can go over and eat there. As long as it's okay with him," Bae said, mussing his son's hair.

"It is. I'll IM Alina and tell her to expect us around six thirty," Henry said.
"Is that when they usually eat?" Bae asked.

"Uh huh. Rum usually doesn't come home till six, so Alice makes dinner for six thirty," Henry said knowingly.

"Gee, you know more about my papa than I do, Henry," Bae said, chuckling.

"Well, I've been friends with Alina since we were five, so I've known Rum practically my entire life. And unless Regina's home, I eat over there a lot."

"Seems like you nearly live over there," Bae said.

"Sometimes I wish I did. Or here with you," Henry said wistfully.

"Be patient, tiger. As soon as your grandpa calls and tells me when he's set the date for the hearing, we can see about getting you to live here permanently," Bae told him.

"I can't wait till that happens."

"You seem awfully sure it will," his dad said. "So you're not afraid we might lose?"

Henry shook his head. "No way, Dad. Regina doesn't stand a chance. Rum's the best lawyer in Maine, maybe all New England. He'll whip her butt."

Bae chuckled. "How do you know that?"

Henry shrugged. "I just do. Cause we're right, and Regina's wrong." Then he went back to reading the Book.

Bae went into the kitchen, where he found Emma eating the rest of her sandwich. "Hey, love. Having a snack? Think I'll have one too. What have we got in here?" He opened the fridge, and pulled out some bacon wrapped scallops, deviled eggs, salad, and a can of iced tea.

After he'd microwaved the scallops, he sat down beside Emma to eat them, saying, "Well, Henry sure liked that surprise, Emma."

"I know. And now he can't stop talking about Vasilisa," Emma smiled. "I think he's going to chew your dad's ear off tonight."

"Maybe I'd better warn him," Bae joked, eating an egg.

"Don't. I want to watch the great Rumplestiltskin squirm," Emma said with an evil laugh.

Bae snorted. "You'll be waiting a long time then. How was work?"

"Okay. Quiet, thank God. How was yours?"

"Not bad. I've got several good students in this last class," Bae said, and drank some iced tea.

The two continued discussing their respective jobs while Henry finished reading the Pinocchio tale and IMing Alina, who was still over at Gold's shop.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"Papa, Henry wants to know if it's okay if he comes over and eats supper with us?" Alina asked, as she dusted a case filled with odds and ends.
"Yes, he ought to know the answer by now," Gold called, as he rearranged some jewelry and placed an old antique locket beside some necklaces.

"Oh, and Emma and Bae too," Alina said, putting down her dustrag to examine a book that was on a shelf. "The Tale of the Firebird," she read, and gently picked up the book in her hands. It seemed as if it had been illustrated and written by hand, as it was twice the size of a paperback and had an old fashioned hand stamped cover of leather. The cover showed a beautiful bird with fiery wings and a twinkling jeweled eye above a tree with golden cherries in it. The writing on the cover was ornate and beautiful.

Alina opened it to discover that it was beautifully illustrated, with each picture drawn in bold colors and the script was a gorgeous golden calligraphy. "Oh! What a lovely book!" she exclaimed in rapture.

"What book's that, dearie?" Gold asked, straightening up.

"This one," Alina showed him it.

"Ah. That's an old book of mine, Alina. Something I almost forgot I had. It used to belong to a student of mine," Rumple said.

"Can I read it?" she asked, her eyes shining.

"You can have it, dearie. It's been gathering dust here for who knows how long," her father replied.

"Really? Thanks so much!" Alina cried, and she ran around the counter to hug him. He looked rather embarrassed. "It's just a book."

Alina shook her head. "No it's not. It's an heirloom. I love it! Wait till I show Mama."

"Hmm. Maybe I could find a book in here for her too," Rumple said, and limped over to his shelf of rare and out of print books.

As he was looking through them for something to give Belle, Alina went and put the firebird book beside her pink schoolbag in the back room. She almost went and sat down to read it right there, before she recalled she had agreed to help her papa dust. She patted the book and said, "I'll read you later, okay?" Then she went to fetch the dustrag and finish her task.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"I can't believe you got the Book back," Alina said later to Henry while they were all eating dinner over her house.

"I didn't get it back, Emma did," Henry told her over his lasagna and fried eggplant.

"I was given it, I didn't find it," Emma said, setting down her glass of water. She looked over at Gold. "Rum, do you know a woman—a sorceress called Vasilisa?"

Gold set down his fork, a strange light coming into his eyes, a far away look. "Vasilisa? You saw her, Emma?"

"Yeah, I did. She gave me the Book. Told me she'd made it. That she was called the Chronicler or something like that. She told me to give it to Henry. She also said she knew you, that you were her teacher once upon a time."
Gold nodded. "I was. She was my last apprentice before the curse was cast . . . and the best one."

"She told me you saved her life," Emma recalled.

"That's true, in more ways than one," Rumple answered. "Vasilisa was . . . running away from her former mistress, a sorceress of great power, cruel and ruthless. Her name was Baba Yaga, the Witch of the North. She wanted to use Vasilisa, because the girl was a powerful Seeress, one of the most powerful prophetesses ever born. She wanted to keep the girl as her personal . . . pet, force her to See for her, and then change the outcome of certain Visions so they worked in her favor. Vasilisa refused, and eventually she escaped and came to my castle. She asked for sanctuary from me . . . and I granted it."

"For a price, of course," Bae said.

"She offered to See for me if I would protect her from Baba Yaga. I agreed, but when she tried . . . she nearly killed herself doing so . . . she was very weak from hiding and running for weeks . . . and I had to work pretty quickly to make a potion that would strengthen her so she didn't die. She was sick for weeks, sometimes I wasn't sure if she would live, but something within in her refused to give up . . . and she lived."

"So you took care of her," Belle said softly.

"I did. This was after you left me, Belle. And I was . . . different. I found that I . . . cared about this young girl. She was fifteen, and scared to pieces that her mistress would find her, she used to have terrible nightmares, wake up screaming . . . and wake me up also . . . and it was the strangest thing. Understand, the Dark One I used to be wouldn't have cared at all for her, but there was something about her . . . it reminded me a bit of you, Bae, and I found myself trying to comfort her, awkward and terrible as I'm sure I was at it . . . and it worked. Gradually, her nightmares faded and she grew better, I fed her restorative cordials every day, and she came to trust me . . . and I actually was glad of it. Finally, there came a day when she was fully well, and she offered to See for me again. But I told her to wait, that she needed more time to regain her strength. I didn't want her to hurt herself, and I could afford to wait."

"Did she ever See for you?" asked Henry curiously.

"Yes, but not till months later. And by then she had become my apprentice. She was very gifted, very intelligent, and I enjoyed teaching her. She loved to write, she was always scribbling in her journal or on spare pieces of paper, and she liked inventing new spells. She could do things with magic that I'd never thought possible . . . and yet she never sought power for its own sake. Once I tried to teach her how to control someone with a spell and she just looked at me and said, "What for? I'd rather learn how to free myself from those who want to control me. Teach me that, Rumple." And I did. She was the first apprentice I taught no dark spells to, the first apprentice who didn't demand I teach them the ways of power, and she also never feared me. But I'm the Dark One, I used to say to her. And she would look at me and say, so? You're also just Rumplestiltskin, who saved my life. She was right. And for her, just being Rumplestiltskin was enough. She taught me . . . to see past much of my bitterness, to find the joy in magic I had lost, and I became very fond of her. She stayed at the castle with me until Alice brought you to me, Alina. Then she told me she had to leave, that there were things she had to do, her Sight had shown her what could be and now it was time to act. Then she left, but not before she told me about Regina and how she wanted revenge on us all. She'll use your magic against you, Rumple, to destroy all you hold dear, all everyone holds dear. That much, she said, she could See for me."

"Did you ever see her again?" asked Henry.
"Yes. She came back to me when Alina was a year or so old, to warn me that Regina was very close to figuring out how to cast the curse and unless I acted I could lose everything. So I left the Dark Castle and went with Alina and Alice to speak with Snow White, and make a deal with her. It didn't turn out quite like I'd planned, since the curse was cast anyway, but it was the best of the possible futures Vasilisa had Seen for me."

"Funny, that she hasn't come to say hello or something," Emma mused.

"Vasilisa has always . . . done things in her own time," Rumple said. "She's a free spirit, and her Sight often dictates certain things. When she feels it's right, she'll come to visit me."

"Then we'll have another ally against Regina," Henry cheered. "She's pretty powerful, right?"

"Oh, yes. And I've no doubt she's grown even more so over the years," Rumple said.

"As strong as Regina?" asked Belle.

"Most likely. And given her ability to use magic differently, I'd say she might even be stronger than Regina in a fair fight. But then, Regina's never fought fair."

"You can say that again," Henry groaned. "I think she has a different version of what's fair than everyone else does. And it's only fair when it benefits her."

"And she thinks she can have everything her own way," Alina said.

"Just because she thinks that, doesn't make it so," Bae stated.

"True. And on Friday, we're going to prove to her that thinking and getting are two different things," Gold said.

"You've set a date for the hearing?" Emma cried.

"Yes, I have, dearie. Everything I need is here in the way of evidence and witnesses. It's time to teach Regina a lesson she should have learned a long time ago."

"Am I going to be there?" Henry asked.

Gold nodded. "Yes. You're one of my key witnesses."

"All right!" Henry was delighted to finally be included in an important undertaking. He couldn't wait for Friday, the day when he would finally be free of the Evil Queen, and able to live with his mother and father, a real family at last.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

If Friday couldn't come fast enough for Henry, it was the opposite for Mr. Gold. Despite all of his painstaking preparations and planning, he found he was not as eager as he should have been to play prosecutor at this hearing. In fact, he felt downright distressed and nervous. Afraid that he might have overlooked something and it would cost them the case. Afraid that he would disappoint them all, and let them all down.

His anxiety and unease caused him to lose sleep and barely eat. He grew broody and spent much of his time at home in his study, going over the paperwork endlessly and fretting. He even snapped at Alina when she went to ask him an innocent question about her history homework, because they were studying a famous law case.
"Not now! I'm busy, can't you see that?" he growled. "Get out!"

She backed off, hurt by his sudden irritability. "Okay, I'm going. You don't need to yell. It was just a question."

"Don't you get smart with me, miss, or else I'll—" he began, his eyes narrowed.

"Rumple! What's going on here?" Belle asked, coming into the study.

Alina ran to her, hugging her. "Mama, he needs to take a chill pill. All I did was ask him a question and he's yelling at me."

"Belle, I don't have time for this," Rumple said wearily.

"Alina, go and ask Alice your question, she'll help you. And don't mind your father, he's stressed and acting like a crab." Belle said, ruffling her daughter's hair and then letting her go.

Alina raced out of the room.

"Belle, I need to concentrate," her husband began, seeing from her face that she was about to lecture him.

Belle came around the desk and put a hand on his shoulder. "Rumple, you don't need to concentrate anymore on this, you need to stop fretting about it and relax. You're making yourself a wreck stressing over it. And you're making the rest of us a wreck too. Stop it."

"I can't. What if I missed something? Something important, and Regina finds a loophole, then what? We could lose and then Henry would never forgive me, or Bae and Emma, because I cost them their son," he rubbed his eyes, which felt gritty and sore from lack of sleep.

"Rumplestiltkin, you're worrying yourself to a shadow over something that hasn't even happened yet. That might never happen. You'll do fine, sweetheart. We've been over this, remember? You have all the evidence you need, all the character witnesses and statements, you have Henry and me, as well as Emma and Bae to testify against her. Regina won't even have time to form a good defense. You're a good lawyer, Rumple. You can do this."

"What if you're wrong?" he asked, his eyes filled with worry.

"I'm not," she gently caressed his cheek. "I have faith in my husband. I trust you, Rumple. Now start trusting yourself. You've got this." She shut the law book he'd been poring over with a thump. "Stop second guessing yourself and just relax. You're wound up tighter than a spool of thread, love."

"I guess so," he said. He gazed at her, searching her face intently. "Do you truly believe I can do this, Belle?"

"I do," she said honestly. "Now you need to start believing it. Regina can be beaten at her own game. She's lost before."

"True. Just not for long."

"That's not important." She moved behind him, her fingers slowly rubbing the back of his neck, massaging gently, removing all the stiffness and tension. "We've caught Regina by surprise. Now all you have to do is blast her one and she's done for."
"You sound so certain."

"Because I am. Relax, Rumple. What will be, will be," she continued massaging, and he gasped slightly as her clever fingers unwound all the knots in his neck and shoulders.

"Mmm. . . your hands are like magic, sweetheart. I'm sorry I've been such a beast these past few days. I need to apologize to Alina," he began, and started to get up from the chair.

"You can do that later. Now sit down here and let me finish. You're stiff as a board, Rumple," she answered, her hands continuing their task.

He obeyed, smirking. "In more than one place, dearie."

She cuffed him playfully on the back of the head. "Well, that'll have to wait."

"How long?" he teased, grabbing her hand and kissing it.

"Forever, if you don't let me finish what I was doing," she mock-scolded, leaning over and kissing him. "Unhand me, you rogue!"

"Why? I like your hands, sweetheart. Especially when you run them all over me," he purred. Suddenly he spun his chair around and pulled her into his arms.

"Rumple! What are you doing?" Belle gasped. "I'm not done yet."

"Oh, yes, you are, dearie. That part's done and now we're moving on to part two," he chuckled wickedly.

"Part two?" she playfully kissed his nose. "Rumplestiltskin, I wanted you to relax."

"And this is the most relaxing thing I can think of right now, dearie," he purred, his eyes going dark with passion. Then he kissed her until she was gasping, twining his fingers in her hair and whispering, "See how calm I am now?" and then he gave her his most charming devilish grin.

"Wicked beast," she teased, smiling back at him. Then her hands were on his tie, undoing it. This hadn't been quite what she'd had in mind, but she could indulge him.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Alina had just finished reading the last chapter in her history book and put it in her backpack when she heard the familiar tap of her father's cane on the floor. Still slightly angry at him for snapping at her, she ignored it, pretending to rummage in her bag to avoid looking at him.

Until she felt his hand on her shoulder.

"Hey. I'm sorry I snapped at you, Alina. I've been in a horrible mood lately, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. Forgive me?"

She pulled her head out of her backpack then, looking up into his face with brown eyes that mirrored his own, save for the innocence still within them. She turned than and hugged him, burying her face in his black T-shirt. "Always, Papa. You'll do great. You're going to kick Regina's butt."

He felt her regard flow through him and it restored his shaky self-esteem, making him feel as if he could do anything. He hugged her back, and said, "For sure I will, Alina. She'll be limping worse than me when she walks out of that courthouse. And Henry will be where he belongs."
"With Bae and Emma," Alina stated. "Now let's go watch a movie."

"Which one?"

"Yours, Mine, and Ours. Lucy can always make you laugh. And just imagine if you had eighteen kids, Papa," she grinned.

Rumple pretended to be horrified. "You want to kill me, Alina Rose?"

"Nah. You'd do fine. Just like Frank in the movie. 'Cause you're a great dad."

"Even when I snap at you?" he asked, astonished.

"Even then. Nobody's perfect," she said, giving him a sweet smile before dragging him into the den.

Rumple allowed her to do so, thinking that he was so far from perfect it was laughable, and yet she still loved him. *Just like your mother, sweet girl.*

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Friday morning:

Regina stared at the piece of paper in her hand, as if willing it to disappear. She couldn't believe this was happening. Just this morning she had sent Henry off to school like always and had been planning to go into the office late and now... now there was this... summons... telling her to report to the courthouse and participate in this custody hearing. Her hands tightened on the paper, crumpling it slightly. "Gold. You miserable old monster. You did this," she hissed. "I never should have brought you here. I should have killed you when I had the chance! You and your imp of a daughter. Then Henry would have only me. He's *my* son! Mine!"

Furious, she stuffed the paper in her pocket and stalked out the door. She had to be at the courthouse by nine. And then she would put an end to this farce once and for all. She'd bury Gold, Emma, and whoever else got in her way. Because Henry belonged to her, and she always got what she wanted.

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When Regina entered the courthouse, dressed in her usual black and white checked suit and Gucci pumps, she found Mr. Gold, Emma, Henry, and Neal Cassidy sitting at a table along with Judge Moore.

"Madam Mayor," greeted Moore. "I trust you received your summons?"

"What is this farce, Moore?" Regina growled.

"No farce, Mayor Mills. This is serious business. Please, have a seat. I can arrange counsel for you, if you'd like?" the judge said calmly.

"I don't need representation!" she growled. "Gold, what the hell is this? Some kind of joke?"

"No joke at all, Regina. This is a hearing to determine if you or Emma and Neal are fit to raise Henry," Gold said evenly. "Why don't you have a seat, dearie?" He bared his teeth in a shark-like grin.
"Why don't you take that cane and shove it up your—" Regina began, her nostrils flaring.

"Ah ah," Gold chided, waving a finger at her. "You really shouldn't talk like that in front of your boy here. Now why don't we sit down like civilized people, Regina? Unless . . . you're incapable of it?" His eyes glittered in challenge. She was off balance and he meant for her to stay that way.

Regina pulled out a chair and sat down. "Henry, why are you here? You ought to be in school."

Before her son could answer, Gold did. "He's here because he's a character witness. For Emma."

"What?" Regina stuttered. She glared at all three adults.

"All right," Judge Moore began. "The case of Emma Swan Cassidy vs. Mayor Regina Mills over the matter of Henry Mills shall now begin. This case will determine the suitability of each party in question to provide Henry with a loving home and family."

"I've already provided that!" Regina snapped. "Henry, tell them!"

"Tell them what, Mom? The truth? Or do you want me to lie?" he asked, staring at her disconcertingly.

For the first time Regina realized something. Her son's brown eyes reminded her of someone. Mr. Gold. She slid her gaze from Henry to her old enemy and then suddenly she found herself looking at Neal Cassidy. Horrified, she looked back at her son, and then it dawned on her. "Oh my God! You're his father!"

"That's right, Mayor. I have a test here to prove it too," Bae said lazily, and shoved the results of the DNA test across the table to Judge Moore.

The judge examined the test results, then handed them to Regina.

Regina stared down at them, her blood boiling. Then she said sharply, "Just because you're his father doesn't mean you ought to have him! Where the hell were you ten years ago?"

"In Japan, getting my master's degree in martial arts, and going to college," Bae replied smoothly. "I never knew I had a son."

Regina smiled coldly. "So she never told you."

"Because I couldn't find him," Emma said, speaking for the first time. "Circumstances at the time being what they were . . ."

"You were in jail, admit it!" Regina barked.

"Don't badger my client, Mayor," Gold broke in. "Your Honor, if I may present my opening statement?"

"You may, Mr. Gold. Go ahead."

"I don't need to hear anything this old serpent has to say!" snapped Regina.

"Mayor Mills, this is a court of law, and might I remind you that you are still a citizen and subject to it?" Judge Moore said crisply. "Therefore, you shall give Mr. Gold your attention and respect, or I shall hold you in contempt."

"You'll what? I got you this position!"
"Yes, but that doesn't mean you can tell me how to run my courtroom. Mr. Gold, your statement."

Mr. Gold cleared his throat. "Your Honor, it recently came to my attention that Henry Mills was unhappy with his current situation at home and he wished to change it and live with his birth mother, Sheriff Emma Cassidy, who then was Emma Swan. Emma came to me and told me that she would like custody of her son, as she had recently been in touch with his father, Neal, and they felt it would be best if Henry come and live with them, as they could provide him with all the material wants as well as love and affection that he'd been denied living with Mayor Mills. I advised Emma to think about providing a more stable home life for Henry and so she married Mr. Cassidy, because we all know that a two parent household is more stable than a single one."

"You're a fine one to talk, Daddy Gold!" spat Regina. "I don't see a wife in your kitchen, only that old dragon of a housekeeper!"

"Mayor Mills, might I remind you Mr. Gold is not on trial here. He is counsel, and what he does is his own business," the Judge interrupted. "Mr. Gold, please continue."

"As I was saying, this hearing was called because of a growing concern for Henry's wellbeing, and based on certain evidence I have gathered about Mayor Mills, we have determined that it would be in the best interests of the child if he were placed with his birth parents, since it has been revealed that Mayor Mills's interests are only for herself and she is an unfit mother, as we will show you through expert testimony and documentation."

"What expert testimony?" Regina sneered. "Some people you've conjured out of the air, Gold?"

"No. My witnesses are flesh and blood, Mayor Mills. And they've testified to your coldness and cruelty towards this boy, as well as countless others here. Let me give you an example. Mr. Cassidy, will you tell us what you were doing on March 5th of this year?"

"I was out walking down the street, after eating lunch at your house," Bae said. "And while I was walking along, I saw Henry coming towards me. He was limping, and when I asked him what happened, he said he sprained his ankle climbing out his bedroom window."

"What? Henry, you told me you fell down the stairs!" Regina cried.

"So you wouldn't know I'd escaped from the house where you locked me in. I wanted to go and play with Alina, because she's my best friend, and instead you locked me in the house, alone, right after that big storm, and we didn't have power or anything!"

"I had to go to work and you've stayed home alone before!"

"Has he? He's a ten year old boy, Mayor Mills. He shouldn't be left home alone without supervision. Look what happened to him," Gold pointed out. "Mr. Cassidy, tell the judge what happened after you found him."

As Bae explained how he'd fixed Henry's ankle and then told of numerous other times when Henry had admitted to him that he'd been alone at home, Regina seethed.

"This is preposterous, Moore! My son has everything he could want with me. What can Sheriff Swan offer him? She gave him up, after all!"

"Yes, I'm aware of that. Let's explore why that occurred. Sheriff Cassidy, if you will explain?" the judge asked.

Emma cleared her throat. She knew this would be hard for her to do, especially in front of Henry,
but she also knew she had to do it in order to prove she had changed, that she now wanted the son she had given up.

"Your Honor, eleven years ago I was eighteen and desperate . . ."

Moore listened as Emma told them about her relationship with Neal and how she had planned to go back to him, and then how she had been scared to admit she was wrong and found out she was pregnant. She told them about being broke and resorting to shoplifting and then being in jail and having Henry there.

"I had to make a choice, Your Honor. And there weren't a whole lot of options for me. I knew that I . . . couldn't provide for a baby, not then. So I . . . made the best choice I could at the time. I put him up for adoption. I thought it was the best thing, considering what I was, I felt I didn't deserve to be a mother, to have a child, so . . . I gave him up. But that was then. When he came to find me in Boston, I was shocked, to say the least. I thought I'd never see him again. But there he was, and it was like . . . I had a second chance to do things over. To do them right. And I want that chance now, Your Honor. I know I can be a good mother. I have a good job, and so does my husband. We've resolved our differences and are together now, as you can see. And we both love our son and want what's best for him."

"And you don't think Mayor Mills does?" Moore asked.

"No."

"Like you know anything—a former jailbird who signed away her maternity rights," Regina sneered.

"Your Honor, I'd like to state that Sheriff Cassidy's circumstances at the time were desperate and she chose a path that seemed best at the time for her son's future," Gold broke in. "But now circumstances have changed and she wishes to resume a relationship with her son, and her son wishes one with her also, as he's not getting the love and affection he deserves from his adopted mother. He also wishes to see his father, and the best way for him to do so is to go and live with them. There is precedent for the birth mother to have custody of her child, here are several cases supporting this." Gold pulled some documents from his briefcase and handed them to Judge Moore.

Regina glared at them all. "What do you mean, Gold, he's not getting anything from me? I give him anything he's ever needed. I'm the mayor of Storybrooke! I can give him more than Emma and this hobo Cassidy ever can!"

"Lady, you can buy and sell me twice over probably," Bae spoke up, his eyes dark as flint. "I can't deny that. But money isn't everything. You can buy him an expensive car, send him to college at an Ivy League school, or wherever he wants to go, but there's one thing you can't give him, one thing that all your money can't buy. And it's the one thing Emma and I have that you don't, Mayor Mills."

"What's that?"

"Love."

"You think I don't love my son?" repeated Regina furiously.

"Why don't we ask Henry that question?" Gold intercepted smoothly. "Henry, tell Judge Moore why you feel like you'd rather go and live with Emma and Neal instead of Mayor Mills."
"Yes, Henry, tell me why you're suddenly an ungrateful brat who doesn't appreciate everything I've done for you?" Regina snapped. "Must be Gold's influence, his or that impertinent daughter of his."

"You leave my daughter out of this, Regina!" Gold hissed, his eyes going hard.

"It doesn't have anything to do with Mr. Gold or Alina, Mom," Henry said, gathering all of his courage. "It has to do with you. My dad's right. You think you can buy me . . . you think that giving me things is showing me that you love me. Well, it's not. You're never home when I come home from school, you're always in meetings, and you don't care about me, not like you should. Do you think I don't know the difference? I know what love is—real love is—and you don't feel it for me."

"Henry, that's not true! Of course I love you. Look at everything I've given you!" Regina protested.

"That's just things. See, you don't get it. If you really loved me, you'd want my happiness, and you don't, all you want is your own. I'm just there to get votes. Why do you think I went to find Emma in the first place?"

"Because you're an impressionable little boy who has a big imagination," Regina scoffed. "Your Honor, surely you know that boys his age have all kinds of ridiculous notions running through their heads. Why, I have Henry in therapy because he thinks we're all under a curse here and we're all fairy tale characters from another world! Isn't that the silliest thing? You see how all this has been blown out of proportion. Clearly this is all a ploy to get attention, Your Honor. Henry's imagination has run away with him."

Henry glared at the woman he had called mom for all of his life, and felt the slow surge of anger at how she was ridiculing him, making fun of his feelings, treating him like some stupid baby who was inventing things for attention. Okay, Regina. You want to play hard ball? I can play too.

The pen on the table began to quiver, as his anger brought his magic surging to the surface.

Henry stared at it in alarm. If he made the pen move here . . . panicked, he looked at Mr. Gold.

Rumple realized he had to do something before Henry revealed to Regina that he had magic. So he went and squeezed Henry's hand and whispered, "Breathe, boy. Breathe like I taught you and pull your power back inside you."

Henry took a deep breath and then another until he felt his magic settle back inside him. Then he looked at Regina and said softly, "I might have a good imagination, Mom, but I sure didn't imagine Sheriff Graham in your bed."

Regina went white.

Emma gasped.

Bae's eyes widened and he muttered, "Jesus H. Christ!"

Even Gold looked a bit shocked.

Judge Moore leaned over at looked sharply at Henry. "What are you saying, young man? That your mother—Mayor Mills—was having an affair in your house?"

Henry nodded. "It happened lots of times. She'd invite Graham over for dinner or something and then they'd go upstairs afterwards and she 'd tell me to go to bed. And once . . . once I saw him going into her bedroom and she closed the door afterwards."
Regina regained her voice abruptly. "Henry . . . you're mistaken . . . you just thought you saw that . . . Graham and I were good friends . . ."

"Yeah, tell me about it," her son said sarcastically. "Mom, I may be a kid, but I'm not stupid. You were with Graham first and now it's Sydney. And I'm not making this up or lying either, even though you are."

"Lady, you've got some nerve trouncing Emma like that over her past when you're no better than you should be!" Bae said disgustedly. "Exposing my son to your trashy ways. Unbelievable! And that's exactly why Henry needs to come and live with me and Emma."

"How dare you judge me!" Regina snarled. "When you clearly planned all this so you could take my son away from me, you and your thieving wife and this crippled coward who defends you!"

"My mom's not a thief!" Henry cried angrily. "Well, she might have been once, but not anymore. And don't call Mr. Gold a coward either. He's braver than you, because you lie to yourself all the time and you actually believe your own lies. You pretend you're good and all, but I know the truth. You're evil and you enjoy bringing pain and suffering to other people."

Regina laughed. "Henry, you're delusional!"

"I am not!" The little boy was on his feet then, glaring at Regina. "Or are you going to tell me it was a dream that you locked Mr. Gold's wife up in an asylum for ten years too?"

"I did what? Henry, we all know Mr. Gold's wife is dead!" Regina chuckled. "You see, Your Honor, what I have to deal with?"

"The truth's always more trouble than it's worth, isn't it, Regina?" Belle queried as she walked into the room, holding some papers in her hand.

Regina almost fell out of her chair. "No! What are you doing here?" Too late she realized her mistake and said, "I mean, who are you?"

"You know exactly who I am, Regina Mills," Belle said coldly, coming to stand beside Mr. Gold. "Your Honor, my name is Belle Gold, I'm the wife of Mr. Gold here, and for years I was kept against my will in Storybrooke Asylum under a false name—Lacey Beauregard—and hidden away from my husband and my little girl. They thought I'd died, because that was what this . . . woman told them, but in reality she had locked me up and tried to get me to believe I was crazy. Here is proof of who I am, and the records from the asylum which detail their treatment of me."

She handed the judge an ID card and the papers from the asylum.

Regina finally regained her equilibrium and said, "This is clearly an imposter, Belle Gold is dead."

"You mean you wish she was dead," Gold hissed suddenly, giving Regina a glare that should have impaled her where she stood. "You locked up my wife, you scheming she-devil! And you're lucky I'm not killing you over it!"

Judge Moore was staring at Belle in shock. Then he said quietly, "Please sit down, Mrs. Gold. I . . . I must look over these."

As he began to read the papers, Regina tapped her fingers against the tabletop and sneered at Belle. "How much is he paying you . . . dearie? Maybe you ought to be on stage."

"You can't lie your way out of this one, Regina," Belle returned crisply, sitting down next to her
husband. "It's not just me claiming to be Rum's wife. I have pictures also, and Dr. Hopper can testify to my therapy for acute claustrophobia due to being locked up for so many years. I am who I say I am, and you are the cause of my misery and suffering. Hardly the sterling character you ought to have in order to be a good mother to Henry. An evil, scheming, power-hungry woman who lies to get what she wants and has affairs right and left to ensure she remains in power. Now, Your Honor, is this the sort of woman who ought to be raising an impressionable little boy in your opinion?"

"You shut your mouth!" Regina suddenly spat. "It's not like you're so pure, Belle! At least my lovers were men, not monsters!"

Belle's eyes flashed. "Because you're the monster, Regina! We all of us know it. You've hurt more people in your life than you can even keep track of. Especially this child, whom you claim to love! What kind of mother leaves her son home alone after a horrific storm? What kind of mother locks her five year old in a dark closet as punishment? The kind who's unfit to even give herself the title."

"Like you'd know what it's like to raise a child, you lunatic! Your own father paid me to lock you away . . ." as soon as the words left her mouth, Regina covered it with her hand. "I . . . I . . . mean . . ."

Judge Moore had frozen at her last words. Then his gaze hardened. "Madam Mayor, based on the testimony I have heard and the evidence presented by Mr. Gold, my ruling must be in favor of Emma Swan Cassidy, giving her and her husband, the biological father of Henry Mills, sole custody of said minor until he is eighteen years of age. Case dismissed!" He banged his gavel down on the table.

Henry whooped and went and hugged Emma, Bae, Mr. Gold, and Belle. At last he was free of the Evil Queen's shadow. Then he skipped out of the courthouse inbetween his parents, asking excitedly if they could go and get ice cream to celebrate their victory.

Regina could feel herself start to go into shock. "No! You can't do this, Moore! He's my son! Mine!"

"My ruling stands, Regina. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other cases to attend to," the judge said, rising. He looked at Mr. Gold. "You can pick up a copy of the ruling later, Mr. Gold. Good day to you all."

"He paid you off, you cheat!" Regina yowled, but Moore was already gone. She whirled upon Mr. Gold. "You think you've won, you monster, but you haven't. I'll get Henry back, see if I don't. So best watch your back, Gold. And those you love. Because this isn't over between us!"

Rumple opened his mouth to say something, but Belle beat him to it.

His wife suddenly grabbed Regina by the lapels of her coat and slammed her back against the wall. "You listen to me, you coldhearted witch, and listen good!" Belle snarled, her blue eyes blazing like lightning. "If you ever hurt anyone in my family again, I will knock you out, drag you into your family crypt, and lock you up in the cold and dark until you scream yourself hoarse and leave you there to rot! Just like you did to me. So don't f*** with me, Regina Mills! Or else you'll regret it to your dying day!"

Regina's eyes went wide and she struggled to say something, but Belle was twisting the lapels of her coat so hard that they were constricting her airway.

"Dearie, there's no need to commit murder," Rumple said softly, laying a hand on Belle's shoulder.
"Not yet anyway." He cast Regina an icy glance.

Belle drew in a shaky breath, letting the sudden rage within her die down to embers, and then she released Regina and whirled about, leaving the startled mayor rubbing her throat, and walked out on Rumple's arm.

Behind them, Regina glared daggers at their backs and hissed, "This isn't over, Rumplestiltskin!"
As Regina vowed revenge upon Gold and all his family, Belle and Rumple exited the courthouse and started to follow Bae, Emma, and Henry down the street to Granny's diner. Belle was still a little on edge from confronting Regina, but her anger was dampened now that she had faced her tormentor and proved to her that she was no meek wilted flower, but perfectly capable of kicking Regina's ass. She looked at her husband and murmured, "You know, that actually felt good back there."

Gold smiled at her. "It always does, Belle. To show those who've pushed you around that you can fight back. That's one reason I had such a hard time letting go of my dark magic. Because with it, nobody could push me around anymore."

"But all magic comes with a price, isn't that so, Master Rumple?" queried a soft musical voice. "And sometimes that price is too high."

From out of a narrow alley between two buildings strode a tall young woman, looking perhaps no older than Emma, with long honey colored hair and eyes like the depths of a greenwood. She wore black trousers and dragon-hide boots and silvery tunic over them cinched with a black belt with a dragon-shaped buckle.

Rumple and Belle halted and Gold looked at his former student and said, "Vasilisa! Dearie, it's so good to see you!"

Vasilisa smiled, a smile that lit her whole face and she moved then to hug Mr. Gold. "Rumple, I've missed you so much!"

Gold returned the embrace. Then he stepped back slightly and looked her up and down. "My God, you're taller than me now. By a bit."

Vaslisa looked vastly amused. "No one stays fifteen forever, Rumple. Not even sorceresses. And it's been ever so long since I was fifteen and came to your castle. Look at you! You're what you should have been, all those years ago."

"Am I?"

"Yes." She turned to Belle. "Hello. I'm Vasilisa, Rumple's former apprentice. And you must be Belle."

"A pleasure to meet you," Belle said, shaking her hand. For some reason she liked this woman immediately, even though she was a sorceress. "I'm Rumple's wife."

"I know. So what I Saw long ago has come to pass, as I'd hoped."

"You... Saw us together?" Rumple gasped. "You never told me that!"
"You never asked me," Vasilisa returned. "Besides, you'd never have believed me. Not then."

"Seers and their secrets," he grumbled.

"Like sorcerers and theirs," Vasilisa smirked. "I was going to come to see you sooner, but . . . there were other things I needed to do first. Where are you going?"

"Over to Granny's diner with my son and his wife and my grandson to celebrate my winning a case. A custody hearing against Mayor Mills over Henry," Gold told her.

Vasilisa nodded. "Would you mind if I tagged along?"

"Mind? Of course not," Gold assured her. "You've already met Emma, but you need to meet Bae and Henry."

"In a way I have. In my dreams, but that's not the same," the enchantress murmured.

"It never is, dearie," Rumple said.

They entered Granny's and Henry came up and said, "We're over here, Mr. Gold." Then he looked up at Vasilisa. "Hi! I'm Henry. And you are?"

"Vasilisa. Some call me wise, but really I'm just too smart for my own good."

"She's always been that," Gold teased.

They followed Henry over to the booth where Bae and Emma were sitting. "Dad, meet Vasilisa, she was Mr. Gold's student."

Bae rose to shake her hand, saying with a smirk, "Boy, I don't envy you that. He can be a tough teacher."

"Sometimes," she replied, her eyes twinkling. "Pleased to meet you, Neal." Then she lowered her voice and whispered, "Who is sometimes Baelfire Gold."

"He told you then?" Bae said, equally quietly.

"He didn't need to. I already knew. I'm happy you're back with him. Family needs family."

"Yeah. I know. That's what we were doing before. Winning Henry back."

"Keep him safe, Baelfire."

"Damn straight I will," Bae said and sat down again.

Vasilisa turned to Emma. "Hello again, Emma."

"Hey. How's it going?" Emma asked.

"For now, quite well," the sorceress said and seated herself on the opposite side of the booth, next to Belle with Rumple beside her.

After Ruby had come and they had placed their order for some ice cream, Henry said, "Is it true you write books? Like fairy tales?"

"It is. Sometimes stories are all we have to remember important things. So I'm a . . . collector, you
could say. And I write them down to preserve them,” Vasilisa answered.

“She was always writing something back when she lived with me,” Gold said. "Right, Mistress Scribble?"

Vasilisa chuckled. "You haven't forgotten! That used to be his nickname for me, a long time ago. Because half the time I went around with a pen in my hand and a notebook."

"And her fingers perpetually stained with ink," Gold recalled.

"Not anymore," the sorceress grinned, and held out her now spotless white hands, with long delicate fingers.

"So you finally used that . . . solution I gave you," Gold said, accepting the cup of coffee from Ruby.

"It worked . . . like a charm," his student returned. "As did many things you taught me."

"I can't believe he didn't scare you off at first," Bae remarked. "Weren't you frightened of his snarling and growling like a dragon?"

"I'd endured far worse than him, Neal. Far worse," Vasilisa answered, her eyes suddenly going dark with old memories, unpleasant ones. "What I ran from was worse than anything he could do to me. And dragons have never frightened me. Not even old scaly ones. Because I learned to look with my heart, not with my eyes."

"Because the heart never lies," Henry quoted. "You wrote that in your book."

"I did, because it's true. Your eyes can be fooled, can be tricked, but never your heart. It always sees true. Truer than the Sight. You simply have to know how to look." Her green eyes gazed into Henry's own. "Though some of us don't need to learn how. We're born knowing." There was a sudden kinship in her gaze then, of two kindred souls meeting.

"You're one of them," Henry said.

"Yes. And I'm not the only one," she said, giving him a nod. Then she asked innocently, "So, what's your favorite flavor of ice cream? Mine's Rocky Road."

Henry told her, then added, "And my best friend Alina's, she's Mr. Gold's daughter, is peanut butter chocolate with sprinkles. She'd like to meet you too, but she's in school right now."

"I would like to see her too. Would you mind if I came over your house?" she asked Gold.

"Not at all. Come anytime," he answered.

"Good. Because I have a story to tell you. And it's best if all your family hears it at once," Vasilisa stated mysteriously.

"What is it? More prophecies of doom and gloom?" Rum queried.

"Just a story," she replied enigmatically. "Not all prophecies are gloomy, old dragon."

Emma almost choked on her ice cream. "You call him that?"

"Sometimes. It was my name for him, when I was his apprentice. I had a very . . . unusual apprenticeship with him. But it worked for us."
"It worked okay. When she wasn't being a smartass," Gold snorted, and then he smirked at his former student.

"Who taught me that, huh, Rum?" she demanded. "Because it sure wasn't Baba Yaga."

Rumple scowled at the mention of that name. "That old bitch!" he half-growled. Then he coughed and said, "Please excuse my language, Henry."

"It's okay. I've heard Regina say a lot worse," his grandson said.

"Wonderful," Bae muttered. "The things she's taught you."

"Who's Baba Yaga?" asked Henry.

"Once she was the Witch of the North," Vasilisa answered. "Before I drove her away to wander the Trackless Waste. But that's a tale best saved for later."

"Like for when Alina comes home?" Henry asked hopefully.

"Like then," Vasilisa agreed.

Once they had all eaten their ice cream, Vasilisa reached for her wallet to pay for hers and Rumple saw it and shook his head. "No, dearie. Put it away. My treat."

The sorceress blinked. "I can afford it."

"Vasilisa. Put it away." He locked gazes with her.

Sighing, she tucked her wallet back in her pocket. "Thank you. But you know, old dragon, I am all grown up now. As my daughter would say, I know how to tie my own boots and everything."

"You . . . have a child?" Rumple stammered.

"And a husband too. But I'll tell you all about them later. That was one of the things I was busy doing while you were gone."

"Do I know him?"

"Hmm. Maybe not. Don't worry. There's no need for you to breathe fire on him. Jack's a good man, and he's always loved me."

"I still want to meet him."

"You will. When I find him."

"He's lost?"

"In a manner of speaking. That's in the story."

"Oh, you and your stories," he sniffed.

"Don't act so smug. You told me plenty of stories when I was sick, or have you forgotten?"

"What do you think I am, senile?"

"Well . . . you are quite old," she teased.
He glared at her. "Still a smartass."

"And still not afraid of you," she snickered.

"You were the worst student I ever had," he mock-growled, rolling his eyes.

"And you're a terrible liar," Vasilisa said with an impish grin, then followed him.

Several admiring glances from some of the men sitting there chased her out the door.

When they got outside, Emma was telling Henry goodbye because she had to go back to work, and then Bae looked at his son and said, "How about we go back to Fire Mountain till Alina comes home, tiger? I can teach you some new katas and you can watch me spar. And then we can play Candy Crush."

"Sure, Dad," Henry said happily.

"You can also fix up a place for him to sleep," Emma reminded him.

"Yeah, don't worry. We've got it covered," Bae waved a hand at her. "Have a good day at work."

"I'll try. Unless Regina comes after me or something," Emma sighed.

"She won't. She's too busy licking her wounds," Vasilisa told her.

"How do you know that?" Emma asked.

"She's a Seer, of course she knows," Henry said, rolling his eyes. "She can see everything, right?"

"Not everything," the sorceress corrected. "Only some things. The future is always in motion, always changing. And only some things can be known, and even then, they're not absolute."

"But what you just said—"

"Is something I Saw just now. Present Sight. It's different from foreseeing."

"How do you know the difference?"

"A great deal of practice, Henry. I've been doing this for decades," Vasilisa told him. "But even now I can still be caught by surprise."

"It sounds complicated."

"It is. Terribly so sometimes. It's why a Seer takes years to master her power. We'll talk more later, Henry."

"Okay! See ya!" he then ran and hugged Belle and Mr. Gold. "I knew you could do it," he said to his grandfather. "I told Dad you were the best lawyer in Maine."

Gold felt a sudden surge of pride and affection for his grandson. "Thank you, Henry. You're a remarkable young man, you know that? Like your father."

"Okay. If you say so," Henry said, beaming. "Hey . . . it's okay if I call you Grandpa sometimes? At home, I mean?"

Gold's heart did a sudden quick leap and he said, "Uh . . . yes, call me whatever you like. But not in
public till the curse breaks."

"I know. Belle, can I call you Grandma then too?"

"Of course, Henry," Belle said, smiling at him.

Grinning, Henry waved at them and went to get in the car with his parents.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

When they arrived home, Belle said she needed to lie down for a bit, as she was feeling suddenly tired. "Maybe it's just nerves or something after the hearing, but all of a sudden I'm so tired."

"Then go and rest, dearie. Alice and I can show Vasilisa around."

As Belle went upstairs, Rumple turned his former student and said, "Now here's a refrigerator, it's sort of like an icebox where we keep perishable food cold and prevent it from spoiling. Want to take notes?"

She waved her hand and a small notepad popped up along with a pen. "Always," she answered and then they both laughed.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Alina was delighted to meet Vasilisa, who was also a fellow bookworm. She happily showed the other sorceress her collection of books, including the new one Rumple had given her. "Isn't it gorgeous?" she asked, holding out the firebird book.

Vasilisa took the book in her hands. "I'm glad you think so. It was my first attempt at writing one."

Alina gasped. "You . . . wrote this? And illustrated it?"

Vasilisa nodded. "Yes. It's an old tale from the place where I lived with my old tutor, Baba Yaga. One of the few things I remember that wasn't tainted with blood and darkness. So I wrote it down one day while I was sitting in your papa's garden. And I left it for him when I had to go, so he could remember me by it."

"Then . . . this belongs to you," Alina said.

"Not anymore. Now it's yours," Vasilisa said, and handed her the book back.

"I'll treasure it always. I love books," Alina reassured her.

"I know. We bookworms have to stick together, huh?" Vasilisa asked, and then giggled softly, like the young girl she had once been. "Come, let's go downstairs. I have a story I need to share."

It was almost supper then, so Vasilisa waited until it was over to tell her story, perched on a small hassock in front of the couch while the rest of the Golds gathered around her on the sofa.

"Now, I know that Rumple's told you some of my story, but even he doesn't know all of it," Vasilisa began. "You might already know that once I was an apprentice to Baba Yaga, the Witch of the North. She always claimed I was a foundling she rescued, since I was about two when I came to be with her. She thought that meant that she owned me, but it didn't. At first, I thought of her as my mama, but soon enough I came to realize that there were no maternal feelings for me in her black heart. And my own heart was telling me that she was no kin of mine. Nor did she treat me
the way a daughter should be treated. Had she done so, I might have forgiven her for her wicked ways and what she did to me. But she didn't . . . and her cruelty only made me more determined to escape one day."

"What . . . did she do to you?" Henry asked cautiously.

Vasilisa smiled sadly. "Many things, child. And all of them very unpleasant. She wasn't called Grandmother Pain for nothing. But . . . she couldn't break me, because no matter what she did, I had something she could never take from me. I had hope. For I had Seen that someday it would end, and I would be free. And hope fuels our dreams. So with that I could endure anything and I did. She tried, but her dark power couldn't corrupt me. You see, hope is the greatest enemy of darkness. As is truth and love. She tried to make me like her, but she failed. Because I learned how to cast dark spells, learned enough to survive, there in that cold winter palace, among the ice and snow and howling wind, but learning is not the same as doing. I learned but never used them."

"Didn't she know that?" Alina asked.

"Oh yes. She tried many times to make me pay for my defiance, but even when she punished me with magic, I still refused. Finally she realized she'd have to kill me before I'd do her bidding, and that was not in her plans. For she needed me alive, to use my Gift of Sight, so she could defeat all her enemies and rule unchallenged. That was why she had taken me in all those years ago. She wanted me as her personal prophetess, and that was worth anything to keep me here."

"How horrible!" Belle gasped.

"But you escaped, right?" Bae said.

"Yes. I ran away many times, however, before I managed to come to the Dark Castle. Sometimes she caught me right away, other times I actually managed to do something before she found me."

"I" she eyed Belle's rose necklace. "Like that necklace you wear, Belle. I was the one who gave it to Rumple."

"But . . . Rumple, you told me you got this from an old woman!" Belle exclaimed.

"I did, dearie." He frowned at Vasilisa. "What nonsense are you spinning, Mistress Scribble?"

"Not nonsense. Truth. You see, I was the old woman you met that day at the market. I was in hiding, trying to escape Baba Yaga again, a fourteen-year-old runaway apprentice, and before I ever came to you, I'd had a Vision. I had to make a necklace, one that held True Love within it, and by doing so I'd save a soul. I didn't know then it'd be yours, Rumple. I just knew I had to do it. So I did. Then I ran away, and came to the market, disguised with glamourie as an old beggar."

"But why didn't you just . . . tell me yourself?" Rumple asked.

"Would you have believed a fourteen-year-old girl?" Vasilisa snorted. "You weren't much on believing anything back then. And you had to take the necklace, so I did what was necessary."

"Is that why I always had my memory, despite the curse?" Belle queried.

"Yes. For its enchantment was true love and true love breaks all curses," Vasilisa answered.

"Then that's why Alice remembered! I touched her with the necklace!"

"Yes. It can do that once for you. But its primary purpose is to remind you of those you love and who love you in return. In giving it to Rumple, I saved the love that might have died."
"Then what happened?" asked Henry eagerly.

"Baba Yaga caught me, as I had dallied too long, and took me back to her place again. But it was worth any price."

"How can you say that?" Rumple cried. "We were strangers, you didn't even know me! And she must have done... horrible things to you once she caught you. Because of me!"

"That didn't matter. You were more important," Vasilisa told him.

"She hurt you, didn't she?" Rumple cried, looking anguished.

"It was a long time ago."

"Yes or no? Tell me!" he snapped.

"Yes, but I would have endured ten times that," Vasilisa cried exasperatedly. "True Love saved you from darkness. I knew it could, if I acted then. So I did. There's no need for you to feel guilty, Rumple. I knew what price would be required."

"My God!" Belle hissed. "I'm so sorry!"

"For what? She did nothing to me she hadn't done twelve hundred times before," Vasilisa shrugged. "And I deemed the cost worth it. For my family, I would sacrifice all."

Rumple stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Here's the part of the story you never knew, old dragon. The part I never knew either, until I defeated Baba Yaga just before the curse was cast that ripped you away to this world. She told me the truth then, but it was too late. I had lost you again. Listen. Once upon a time, there was a poor spinner woman and her husband. They lived in a tiny hamlet in the Enchanted Forest, and the spinner was the best in her village. It was her efforts that kept her and her husband fed in the depths of winter, when most people starved. Soon they had a son, and three years later, a baby daughter too.

"It was then that the ogres started attacking again, killing and raiding like they always had. The husband was drafted into the army, but when it came time to fight, he refused. He snuck out of camp and ran away, abandoning his post and his family. He never returned to them.

"But here's where his deeds caught up with him. As he was fleeing, running as fast as he could from the battlefield, he met an old woman. He asked her for shelter for the night, and she agreed to help him, but she told him that she required something in exchange."

"Uh oh. I know how this goes," Henry muttered, and Emma shushed him.

Vasilisa continued. "He told her he was running from enemies and he would pay anything she wanted if she would hide him, the idiot! She agreed. She hid him with magic from the soldiers who were looking for him to bring him back to fight. And in the morning, she revealed her true nature. She was Baba Yaga, the Witch of the North, and now he owed her a debt. He thought she would demand his life, but she didn't. Instead she asked him about his children.

"He told her about them, about how his daughter was so clever and smart, even at two years of age. How she seemed to... know things. Baba Yaga was intrigued. She asked him a few more things... and then Baba Yaga said, here is my price for aiding you. Give me your daughter. She's a Seer, and I need someone like her."
"At first he almost refused. But he was too scared to say no to a powerful sorceress like her. So he agreed. "Take her and do what you will with her! After all, she's just a girl, and my wife will still have my son . . . Rumplestiltskin."

Everyone, including Rumple, gasped.

"So Baba Yaga came that very night, while everyone in the little cottage slept, and she stole away the little girl, and left a . . . changeling glamourie in her place."

Rumple whispered, "No! I remember . . . I was five, but I remember . . . my mother woke up the next morning and found my baby sister dead . . . dead of a sudden fever . . . we had a funeral . . . for Rhea, my little sister, and my mother and I cried all day . . ." His brown eyes glazed with sudden tears. "And you're telling me . . ."

"I'm your sister, Rumple. Who was stolen away by Baba Yaga. I didn't know when I met you at the market. Or when I was your apprentice. I only knew after I'd beaten Baba Yaga. I had her on her knees at my feet, and she laughed and said want to know a secret? A secret I've kept all these years, that even you with your sorceress Sight know not? So I said yes, and she told me what I've just told you. Do you remember, once I told you someday I'd bring you something you'd lost long ago. That something is me. I'm Rhea, your little sister."

"How do I know that for sure?" Rumple demanded.

"Look at me, Rumplestiltskin. Look with your heart, not with your eyes. Your heart knows me," she answered simply.

Rumple stood up and stared at her.

"She's telling the truth," Emma said, sensing it.

Just as Rumple felt that strange inner connection he always had to Vasilisa flare to sudden life and then he Saw . . . a little boy with brown hair in a plain brown tunic and pants playing with a small golden-haired girl in a blue flowered smock.

They ran around a patch of grass, and the little girl shrieked, "Catch me, Rumple! Catch me!"

"Rrrr! I'm a dragon and I'm going to eat you up!" he cried, and then he grabbed her and tickled her.

"I ain't 'fraid of you, you old dragon!" the little girl giggled . . .

"It is you!" he cried, and then he took two steps forward without his cane and hugged his sister hard. "Rhea . . . you've come back home to me!" Then he clung to her and tears dampened her shoulder, and his as well, as the two siblings, long lost, were reunited once more.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Rhea reveals several startling things to Rumple

Emma found she was near tears at the emotional reunion taking place before her. She surreptitiously wiped her eyes, and saw that Belle was wiping her own with her handkerchief and so was Alice. Alina was using her sleeve and even Bae and Henry looked rather emotional, though they were trying to hide it.

Gold squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again to stare into his sister's green ones. "You've got our mother's eyes, you know."

"Do I? I'm afraid I don't remember her," Vasilisa whispered.

"Well, you do. And her hair too. She had beautiful hair, I used to help her plait it sometimes, especially after she took sick and needed help with it," Rumple told her.

"How did she die, Rumple?"

"I was seven. It was some kind of sickness... probably a flu or something. In a week and a half... she was gone and I was left alone. Some spinner women, who used to be her friends, took me in to live with them. But I always missed her... and you," he said sincerely. He lifted his hand and wiped the tears off her cheeks, just as she did the same to him. "It's like... a miracle... having you back..."

"Yes. And once you meet my children and Jack, we'll all be together," Vasilisa said quietly.

"Children?" he lofted an eyebrow.

"Yes, I have a girl and a boy. They're quite close in age, about a year or so apart," Vasilisa told him. "Right now they're with their father, helping him find an old enemy."

"Your husband... is he a sorcerer too?" her brother asked curiously.

"No. My husband and son don't have magic, but my daughter does," Vasilisa answered.

He gave her a wry smile. "How very strange. I'm a brother and an uncle, all in one day."

"Well, you always were. You just didn't know it," she grinned.

Rumple withdrew from her embrace and went to sit down next to Belle.

She put an arm around him and whispered, "Oh, Rumple! I'm so happy for you!"

"So am I," he said, and smiled back at her.

Henry glanced at his parents, and then at his new aunt, at least he thought she was his aunt, or maybe great-aunt was the correct term. "Umm... I was wondering something," he began, looking at Vasilisa. "If you're my grandpa's sister... how is it you're so much younger...?"
Vasilisa looked amused. "Time never runs true for sorceresses, Henry. Let me see if I can explain it. Technically, Rumple is three years my senior, and if we aged like normal folk, we'd be hundreds of years old. Well, we are that, but we . . . don't age like regular people because of our magic. The magic . . . alters us . . . changes how time affects us . . . and there's also the stasis spells we employ on our homes and other places, that slow time down or halt it altogether. Your Storybrooke is under such a spell, and only now that Emma is here has time begin to almost resume its normal flow. Where I grew up, in the Trackless Waste in Baba Yaga's palace, time was not the same there as it was in the rest of Fairy Tale Land. Time was slowed down to a crawl, because that was how my mistress wished it. I could age there, but very slowly. She wanted it thus, because as a Seer, my gift is very difficult to master, and even worse trying to interpret the Visions I See or Dream. It takes centuries for a Seer to truly master her power, and even then, it's not an absolute. So . . . I spent centuries there in the Waste, and never knew it until I tried to escape and got back into Fairy Tale Land again. I started to age then, but once I was back in her palace, it stopped. Once I left her for good, I could then grow up normally, and I did."

"Do you age now?" Alina queried.

"Yes and no. Because of my time in her palace, my aging is slowed, now that I'm an adult. I'm not immortal, nevertheless, I shall love longer than regular people. A great deal longer," her aunt answered.

"When you defeated Baba Yaga, you didn't kill her?" was Henry's next question.

"No. That was on purpose. I could have killed her," Vasilisa said, her green eyes stormy. "I didn't because killing her would be too easy. After everything she had done to me, I didn't want her death . . . I wanted her life. So I let her live . . . but I stripped her of her powers, reduced her to the magical equivalent of a turnip, and made her keep her shape of an old beggar woman, and then I set her out into the Waste, to wander that frozen hell forever and know the pain and anguish I felt as her captive for all those years. It was by far a worse thing than killing her."

"What did you do after that?" asked Emma.

"I wandered the realms trying to find a way to be with my brother, but all of my efforts were in vain. Even though I can sometimes walk between worlds, this world was closed to me. My Sight showed me it would be so for a long time, so in the meanwhile I met my husband and we married, went on a few adventures together, and then I had two children. I spent much of the last twenty years raising them, they're almost grown now, my daughter is seventeen and my son sixteen. I was only able to find a way here because the curse over Storybrooke is starting to weaken."

Alina was thinking hard about something she had read a long time ago. "Umm . . . Aunt . . . uh, what should I call you?" she began.

"Well . . . I've been Vasilisa for over half my life, but that's a name Baba Yaga gave me. My real name, as your papa said, is Rhea. It's probably best if you all call me that," Vasilisa said.

"Um . . . so . . . Aunt Rhea, I remember reading in a Russian folktale book that Vasilisa in the tales had a magical doll that could do things for her," Alina said. "Is that true?"

Vasilisa nodded. "Yes. Though much of what is recorded here is not, that particular instance is. Back when I was Baba Yaga's student, in her icy estate, she had me doing all manner of chores for her, trying to make me compliant with all the work she gave me. But I was anything but, and I enchanted a doll and made it do a lot of work for me. So the part about the doll is true. I still have her, and when my daughter is grown, I shall pass it down to her."
"Do you . . . want the Once Upon a Time Book too?" Henry asked diffidently.

"No. That belongs to you," Vasilisa replied. "You too are a chronicler, aren't you, Henry? And thus my history is yours also. Though I may ask for it back from time to time, to record new stories in its pages. You see, stories are meant to be shared and everything I write is intended to be given away at some point. For what use is a book without someone to read it?"

Rumple chuckled at that. "I can see, Mistress Scribble, that you and Belle will soon be best friends."

"Oh, yes!" she agreed, and her smile mirrored her brother's. "Trust you, old dragon, to marry a bookworm! It must run in the family."

Emma cleared her throat. "Rhea . . . would you happen to have anything that I can read that might help me break the curse?"

"Well . . ." the Seer looked thoughtful. "I may have something. But Emma . . . all you need to break the curse is inside of you."

"I don't understand."

"I know. But you will soon. It's something I can't explain. You have to figure it out, for only by coming to your own conclusion will you understand truly."

"Now I'm really confused," Emma said.

"She's being deliberately enigmatic," Gold put in. "Seers like to talk in circles."

"Like certain sorcerers," Vasilisa snorted. "And you know perfectly well why I do, Rumple."

"Because some things can't be told, you need to find them out on your own," he answered crisply.

"Exactly," she answered, then she took a cookie off the tray and ate it. "Shortbread. One of my favorites. You'll have to give me the recipe, Alice. Although I'm not as good at baking. But I make a mean popsicle."

At that, Alice started laughing. And so did everyone else.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

It was decided that Vasilisa would stay over the Gold residence, in the green guest room, for the time being, and after some hot cocoa, Henry went home with Bae and Emma to the apartment above Fire Mountain dojo. Emma said they'd have to stop by Regina's tomorrow and get his things, hopefully Regina wouldn't give them a hard time.

"Why do we have to deal with her at all, Em?" asked Baelfire as he plumped up some pillows on the sofa for his son. "We'll wait till she's gone to the office and I'll pick the damn lock and Henry can go and get his stuff and that's it."

"I don't feel right breaking and entering like that," Emma objected.

"Oh, good God!" Bae rolled his eyes. "We're not stealing anything, we're just retrieving Henry's property."

"While Regina's away."
"Yes . . . and who cares? I really don't want to have to deal with her, Emma. She's libel to make me lose it and punch her out . . . or something close to it and I don't want to make you arrest me for assault," Bae pointed out.

"Mom . . . Dad's right," Henry said, calling Emma by her true title for the first time. "It's better if we don't have to deal with Regina. She'll try and start something. I just know it."

Emma felt her heart almost melt at the fact that Henry had called her mom. "Okay. This'll be Operation Take Away."

Henry raised an eyebrow. "Operation Take Away?"

"So I'm not good with names. And you are taking stuff away, so it fits," she smiled at Henry, and ruffled his hair.

"Your mom's right, tiger," Bae laughed. "And y'know, it's almost eleven, and you've got school tomorrow, so . . . I think you ought to get to bed."

Henry cocked his head at him. "Now you're starting to sound like a real dad."

"What? I didn't before?" his father asked, his brown eyes glistening with laughter.

"Nope. Well, only sometimes," his son said. "But now you do." He hopped off the couch and then said, "Uh . . . guys? I don't have any pajamas over here."

"Oh . . . right. Uh . . . you can wear one of my T-shirts," Bae said. "And tomorrow, as soon as Regina leaves, we can go over and pack up your stuff."

He headed into his bedroom to get a shirt for his son, and Emma went to make some tea, because for some reason she wanted some.

After Henry was asleep on the sofa, the Book sitting upon the coffee table, Emma sipped her tea in the recliner across from where her son slept and looked at her husband, who was sitting on the second recliner opposite her. "I can't believe he's really here . . . and he doesn't have to go back to Regina ever again, Bae."

"Yeah, I know. Now he's here to stay . . . and we finally have our family back together again," Bae said. "Henry with us and Rhea with my dad. I'll tell you, Emma, that was the last thing I expected her to tell us tonight. I thought my dad was going to fall over in shock when she said she was his sister. I never even knew he had a sister until tonight."

"Maybe he found it too painful to talk about," Emma said. "But what a great thing . . . to find somebody you thought was dead actually alive. I guess there really are no coincidences."

"Papa always said there weren't. That most everything happens by design," Bae said. Then he yawned. "Well, I'm starting to nod off, so I'm going to hit the hay. Coming, Emma?"

"In a minute," she said softly. "I just want to . . . look at him like this." She gazed at her son, and her eyes softened and misted with sudden tears. Her little boy. Now he was back where he belonged, and she would never give him up . . . not ever again.

She set her mug down on the coffee table, it was empty now, and got into her sleep shirt, the one that said *I'm a princess but . . . I can ride like a man, shoot like a pro, climb down from my own tower, and kick a dragon's ass. All before lunch and twice on Sundays.*
It had been a gift from Bae on their second night together as man and wife. He said he'd had it made especially for her. When she asked him where, he'd just shrugged and said somewhere in Storybrooke. Emma was willing to bet half her bank account he'd gone to Mr. Gold.

Bae was curled up half on his side, and Emma snuggled next to him.

"Hey!" he yelped. "Your feet are like ice!"

Emma chuckled. "So? You'll warm them for me," she gave a wicked chuckle and rubbed her foot along his calf.

"Gee, thanks!" he muttered.

"You know what they say, don't you?" she teased. "Cold feet, warm heart."

"I thought that was a cold nose," he returned.

She rubbed hers along his cheek. "That too." She wrapped herself about him. "Bae, I'm cold."

He pulled her to him, and kissed her hard. "Okay, wild swan. Let me warm you up."

She smiled happily and allowed her husband to work his own brand of magic on her, and soon she was very warm indeed.

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Bae woke up the next morning to find Henry already dressed in his school uniform and eating a Pop Tart and some milk for breakfast. "Morning, tiger. Got everything you need for school? Cause I'm gonna drop you off there as soon as we get your stuff from Regina's."

"Uh huh," Henry said, still eating his Pop Tart. "Are we taking Mom's car then?"

"Yeah. We have to. I'll bring your stuff back here and give it to her after I bring you to school," Bae told him, and removed a peanut butter chocolate power bar from the cabinet and made some coffee.

Once Bae had drunk a cup of coffee and taken some in his travel mug, which had the Fire Mountain logo on it, they left for the Mills mansion.

It was strange, Henry mused, as his father drove through the quiet streets, that he was going over to the house he'd lived in for ten years, his whole life, not to stay, but just to visit, just to get his things and then go home. Home to Fire Mountain. Home to his parents. Then he thought of something else. "Hey, Dad. I just realized something. I'm not a Mills anymore. Now I'm . . . a Gold."

Bae slanted a glance at him and nodded. "You're right, tiger. You're a Gold now, just like me. Only you can't let anybody know yet. So for right now . . . you're Henry Cassidy."

"So I guess I'll tell Miss Blanchard that from now on, she can call me Henry Cassidy . . . until the curse breaks and then we can tell everybody you're Baelfire, son of Rumplestiltskin, and I'm his grandson."

"And it doesn't bother you . . . that you're related to the Dark One?" Bae asked softly.

"No. Because here's the thing, Dad. He's not the Dark One, not anymore. He started to change when Belle kissed him, and he changed further when Alina came with Alice to stay at the castle. He might have the dagger still, but . . . he hasn't been the Dark One for a long time now. He's just ."
"But Henry, with the dagger still here, he's still cursed. It's just that the curse is inactive," Bae said. 
"But what happens when Emma breaks the curse on Storybrooke and everyone remembers. My dad will get his magic back . . . and that damn dagger's always been bad news. Its magic is dark and it'll make him into a monster again . . . like it did before."

"Unless we can break it, Dad," Henry argued.

"Break it how? That dagger's what makes him immortal. It's his life."

"No. His family's his life," Henry corrected. "But the dagger's curse binds him."

"I know. It has since he became the Dark One to save me," Bae said, a trace of bitterness in his tone.

"But Dad, what if we can break it?"

"Henry, how can that be possible?" Bae asked, a touch exasperatedly.

"I don't know . . . but somehow I know it can be, Dad."

"Have you talked with him about this?" asked Bae curiously.

"No. Because I know what he'll say. He thinks it's not possible too. But somehow . . . I know there's a way. I just have to talk to the right person."

"Maybe you should talk to your Aunt Rhea. She's the Enchantress of the North, so perhaps she can help," Bae said.

"All right. I will, as soon as I come home from school today," Henry said eagerly.

They drove up to Regina's house, and Henry climbed out of the car along with Bae. Bae went and picked the lock, then Henry and he went inside. Henry led the way up the stairs to his room, and they began packing up everything in several large duffel bags that Bae had brought along from the dojo.

Bae paused when he saw a familiar blanket upon Henry's bed, beneath his blue quilt. He gently picked it up, holding it to his face and inhaling the familiar scent of sheepskin, soap, and smoke.
"Hey . . . I remember this. I used to sleep with it every night. Did my papa give you this?"

Henry turned from shoving some clothes into a bag and saw his father holding the blanket Gold had made. "Yeah. Don't you remember how I told you he gave me some things he'd had of yours the day of the storm?"

"Uh . . . yeah. Now I do," Bae said, raising his head. "You know, this was my favorite blanket as a kid. I'm glad he saved it and gave it to you." He gently tucked the blanket into a bag, then helped Henry pack up the rest of his things, thinking that in all the turmoil of his childhood, still there had been spots of warmth and light and laughter, which he had forgotten about until now. It hadn't all been desperation and despair, the way some people thought. There had been good times too, though eventually the Dark One's curse had overshadowed them.

In about twenty minutes, they had taken everything Henry wanted, and then Bae led the way back downstairs and they packed everything into the Bug. As they pulled out of the driveway, Henry bid a silent farewell to the house, then faced forward, thinking that his new life as a Gold had just
Regina parked her Mercedes alongside the curb across the street from Storybrooke Elementary and watched as the children streamed out of the school and got onto the buses or into the cars waiting for them. Her eyes were trained on the doors. Then she saw him, the familiar figure with his backpack, and without really thinking about it, she got out of the car and started towards him.

Henry looked up to see his mom—no, the mayor—coming down the sidewalk towards him. For one moment he felt his heart seize, and he wondered if last night and this morning had been a hallucination. Or was he truly free of her? He glanced about wildly, then he saw Emma's Bug and breathed a sigh of relief. He was safe.

"Henry!" Regina called. "Wait! I just want to talk to you."

"No thanks," he muttered, and kept walking towards the Bug.

"Henry! Stop!" Regina ordered.

He almost did, accustomed to obeying that tone of voice.

Then he recalled he no longer had to, and kept walking.

Suddenly Bae appeared, standing next to the car, waiting for his son.

As Regina drew nearer, he gave her a look that spoke volumes. *Keep your distance, madam mayor,* he said without speaking.

Henry came over to the car, and said, "Hi, Dad."

"Hey, tiger. Get in. Where's Alina? I told my father I'd pick her up too today."

"Asking Miss Blanchard something about birds," Henry replied, opening the door of the Bug.

"Henry!" Regina called again, halting as she saw that Henry was already beyond her reach. She lifted her gaze, her heart cold within her, and met Cassidy's eyes. "This isn't over, Cassidy!" she growled. "Nobody crosses me!"

Bae met the empty black gaze, unflinching. Little did she know, he'd seen worse before—as a slave of the Queen of Hearts, even as the son of the Dark One, though reptilian as his father's eyes had become, still there had always been a spark of warmth in them. But it had been Cora Miller's eyes that had been flat and empty as black ice. Regina's eyes . . . almost reminded him of them.

"Leave him alone," he told her, with a warning growl in his tone.

"He's *my* son!"

"Was. Not anymore. Now leave him alone, before I get a restraining order," Bae hissed, his tone dark with the promise of violence.

"Against me?" Regina laughed mockingly. "You forget who I am, Cassidy."

"No. I don't. But you don't have absolute power. Not here. Now go."

Regina stiffened, then she caught sight of Alina coming over to the Bug, and she spun on the child.
"You! Tell your . . . father that he'd better watch his back. Because someday he might find a dagger buried in it!"

Alina backed up a little, one hand coming up in a defensive gesture. "You don't scare him, Mayor Mills."

"Tell him!"

"Get away from her!" Bae snarled. "Alina, get in the car."

Alina walked quickly around Regina, giving her a wide berth, before climbing into the Bug beside Henry in the backseat.

"This is your final warning, Cassidy!" Regina snapped.

"And here's yours, Mayor. Go home. Worry about yourself," Bae declared, then he turned and got into the Bug, feeling her eyes boring into him like lasers as he did so.

As they drove over to Fire Mountain, Alina said worriedly, "Bae, she told me to give a message to Papa. She . . . threatened to kill him!"

Bae sighed. "Well, she would, but don't worry about it. She's just trying to scare you."

"But Bae . . . she mentioned the dagger," Alina bit her lip worriedly.

"She might know about it, but she can't do anything," he reassured the two children. "Trust me. Papa's kept that dagger hidden for three hundred years. She's all talk."

Alina seemed to accept his words, but Henry was still anxious. So long as Rumplestiltskin was still cursed, even inactively, it meant she could harm him. She was the Evil Queen, after all, and hundreds had died by her command. And in this world, Gold didn't have his magic back. How hard could it be to kill one aging disabled attorney? All Gold had in this realm was the remnants of his reputation as the Dark One and his penchant for deals and the fear that he could buy and sell anyone twice over. Phantom power. It had kept him and his family safe, but what if it were no longer enough?

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

Vasilisa looked up from her latest set of notes that she was transcribing and found Henry at her elbow, and Alina as well. "Hello," she greeted them, setting down her pen. "What can I do for you? You look troubled."

"How do you break a curse?" Henry began.

"And how do you protect somebody from one?" Alina asked in the same breath.

"Well, that all depends. On what curse it is and who's casting it," Vasilisa answered. "Can you be more specific?"

"How can you break the curse of the Dark One?" Henry asked.

"And how do you protect Papa from Regina?" Alina queried.

"Can it be done?" was Henry's next question.

Vasilisa nodded gravely. "It can. But it requires . . . much knowledge and magic."
"Can you do it?" Henry wanted to know.

The enchantress was silent a moment, her eyes suddenly far away, as she gazed upon Visions only she could see. At last she replied. "Yes. But not alone. I'll need help. From both of you. And Belle. And Baelfire. I also need to speak with Rumple."

"But you can do it?" Henry stressed. "It's not . . . impossible?"

"Nothing is impossible. You just need the proper determination, will, and motivation," Vasilisa answered. "I'll speak with Rumple after dinner about it."

Henry let out a sigh of relief. "Okay. Alina, we'd better finish our homework," he said.

The little girl nodded. "And you can protect him from Regina?"

Vasilisa smiled. "I've already been doing that. Only she doesn't know it."

"Does Papa?"

"If he doesn't now, he will soon," the sorceress answered.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Rumple looked up from filing away the last of the papers on his desk in the study pertaining to Henry's custody suit. "Rhea," he said happily. "What can I do for you?"

His sister came and sat down in the chair before his desk. "Rumple, how inactive is your curse?"

"My curse? You mean the one that affects Storybrooke?"

"No. The one you absorbed when you took the power of the Dark One," she replied.

He frowned. "It's . . . inactive now, because there's no magic here."

"And when the curse breaks, what then?"

"I don't know. I suppose . . . if magic returns . . . then it would awaken," he said.

"What if it didn't?"

He shook his head. "It's kind of inevitable, dearie, much as I don't like to think about it."

"And what if it weren't, Rumple?"

"What are you saying, Rhea?" he leaned forward, his brown eyes glittering.

"I'm saying what if there was a way to break the dagger's power? Would you take it?" Her green eyes glowed.

"That's false hope, dearie. No one's ever broken the power of the dagger. Once it's claimed you, you're done. Unless another takes it and kills you."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I am the current Dark One. I know everything my predecessors do."

"But what if you're wrong and there is a way? Would you take it?"
"It's not that simple, dearie. The dagger is the source of my magic . . ."

She shook her head abruptly. "No. It's not, Rumple. It was a catalyst for your talent, it didn't give it to you. Magic runs in our bloodline. You had the seeds within you, you simply didn't know it."

"Then why did it never show itself until after I became the Dark One? I was desperate plenty of times before I stole the dagger."

"Maybe not desperate enough to break the conditioning that was set on you," his sister answered.

"What conditioning?"

"I didn't speak of this before, because I doubted if you wanted everyone knowing . . . but . . . Baba Yaga told me one other thing before I banished her. That night . . . when she stole me away . . . she cast two spells. One to glamourie her changeling and the other . . . to keep your latent magic dormant."

"What?"

"You heard me. She knew, even then, that you had it. Those with the Art can always sense others of our kind. And she could feel it within you. She would have tolerated no rivals."

"Then why not simply kill me?"

"Because her deal was to take me and leave Mama with her son. So she couldn't harm you. But she bound your power."

"Rhea . . . that's crazy!"

"No it's not. She would have done it. I can See the remnants of the binding if I look for it."

"Even if that was the case . . . so what?"

"So . . . it means I'm right, old dragon. You have your own power . . . you don't need the dagger."

"Yes, I do. I need it to stay alive," he argued.

"Unless the curse is broken," she insisted.

"I've been under that dagger's curse for three hundred years, Rhea! And all of a sudden you think you can break it? What brought this on?" he asked abruptly.

"Your grandson and your daughter. And a threat from Regina," she replied, and told him what Alina had told her.

"And you told them you could break the power of the dagger?" he repeated incredulously. "Good God, Rhea, why would you say that?"

"Because I believe it can be done," she answered.

"It's never been done. Little sister, when I took the Dark One's mantle I knew the price. Forever."

"No. Nothing is forever. Save true love. And true love breaks all curses. Even that one."

"Belle tried. She failed."
"No. She began it, but it remains unfinished. Rumple, I'm a cursebreaker. Baba Yaga taught me much when I lived with her. I know counters to every dark spell."

"There is no counter to this. I was a willing sacrifice," he pointed out.

"Some might say being here is the counter. Your curse is dormant now. It's never been so before. That's the key. What if I could remove it? Would you be willing to let me do it?"

"I don't think you can—"

"Rumple! Would you? Or are you afraid I'll strip you of your magic in doing so? Or do you think this some kind of . . . penance for what you did back in our world as the Dark One?" she demanded.

"If you could . . . then yes, I would allow it. But I truly doubt it."

"Nothing is impossible, big brother. And you've spent all your life searching for Baelfire. Not trying to break the dagger's curse."

"But you can, little sister?" he asked, with a hint of mockery in his tone.

She glared at him. "Don't make fun of me, Rumplestiltskin! I learned well how to break curses, how in hell do you think I survived being her puppet for all those years? She put dozens upon dozens of compulsions on me, to try and break me. None of them took. Not for long. Because I broke them all. It can be done. You simply have to do one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"Trust me, dearie. And then you'll be free."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then you'll still be the Dark One once magic returns." She gripped his hand. "But I'm not. Well?"

He stared into her eyes. "You really think you can do this?"

"There are no coincidences, Rumple. You know that and so do I. What I endured in that frozen hell had a purpose. It needed to happen, horrible as it sounds. And now I know why."

"This is . . . insane! You could kill yourself!"

"All magic comes with a price. And it's one I'm willing to pay."

He shook his head. "I just got you back. I don't want to lose you again. Not like this."

"You won't."

"Have you Seen it?"

"No. A Seer cannot see her own future. Don't you know that?"

"I . . . never knew that."

"See? You don't know everything, big brother. I'm here now for a reason. And this is it. This is the calm before the storm. And there's no better time for me to free you from the dagger's curse."

"It's not worth it."
"Oh, yes it is!" she insisted. "You are worth it, Rumple."

"Not if the price is your life. No!" he snapped.

"It's not yours to pay."

"Dammit, Rhea!"

"You don't even know the cost."

"Neither do you."

"I know I won't die."

"How the bloody hell do you know that?"

"Because I've Seen myself in another Vision."

"I thought you couldn't see your own future."

"This future wasn't mine. It was your grandson's," she replied. "And I was there."

"And me?"

"Yes. But not as the Dark One."

"What then? As Mr. Gold?"

"As Rumplestiltskin. Let me do this. What have you got to lose?"

"You."

"No. Trust me."

He stared into her eyes again, eyes that were filled with hope and love and a conviction he felt he lacked. Finally he said, "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. You'll try anyway. All right. Do it. But if you die, Rhea Gold, I'm going to the afterworld and kicking your stubborn ass, you hear me?"

She laughed. "I love you, Rumple."

He snorted. "You're insane. But I love you too."

She patted his arm. "It'll be all right. Trust me."

"With my life."

"Then that'll be enough." She rose to leave.

"Wait. What's your husband's last name? In case I have to contact him for arrangements."

Vasilisa sighed. "You won't. But his last name is Sparrow."

Rumple gasped. "Sparrow. As in . . . Jack Sparrow?"

"The same. Rumple, half the stories aren't true . . . you know what rumors are like . . ."
His eyes flashed. "Rhea . . . you married him?"

"Eighteen years ago, yes. Rumple—"

"Gods and hells! You married a pirate!"
Vasilisa crossed her arms over her chest. "Rumplestiltskin, you quit shouting at me!"

"I will not!" he yelled. "It's my house, you're my sister, and I'll yell if I want to! What do you mean, you married a pirate? Did he . . . seduce you?"

Vasilisa shook her head. "Calm down, Rumple. He's not a wicked pirate, and we both seduced each other, if you want the truth."

"That's it. I'm killing him!"

"You'll have to go through me first, big brother," she glared at him warningly. "Now stop acting like a crazy man."

Gold sucked in a breath. "Crazy! Dearie, you have no idea just how crazy I am! How could you marry a PIRATE?!"

"Why does that bother you so much?"

"Because a bloody pirate stole away my first wife! And she never came home again," her brother snapped. "She left me and my son alone and I was the one who had to tell him his mother was gone. My heart damn near cracked in two that day. Not for myself, but for him."

Vasilisa cocked her head, her green eyes suddenly glittering as she saw something in the past. "Did he really steal her, Rumple? Or did she run off with him?"

"He did both, okay? That ought to be enough," Rumple said shortly.

"Oh, Rumple. I'm sorry. Jack's nothing like that."

Her brother snorted. "One pirate's like another."

Vasilisa stiffened. "No! Jack's never been one to steal anybody's wife. Though sometimes he can be a bit . . . cavalier with other people's belongings. Now stop being a prejudiced idiot! Not all pirates are like Hook."

Gold looked startled. "How did you know that's who Milah went with?"

Vasilisa rolled her eyes. "Well, gee, old dragon, maybe I saw it in my crystal ball."

"Damn it, Rhea! Why couldn't you marry a . . . a prince, or a spinner, or a candlemaker or something? Why'd you have to go and marry a pirate?"

"Because my heart told me to. Just like yours told you to marry a princess."

"That's not a good answer."

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**Cursebreaking**

Chapter Summary

Rhea trues to break the Dark One curse
"It's the only one you're going to get, you old pain in the ass. So shut up and deal with it, dearie," Vasilisa snapped back.

"All right, dearie, I'll give him a chance. . . but I swear, if I see any guyliner I'm decking him!" he threatened.

"Rumple! What's going on in here?" Belle cried, coming into the study looking alarmed. "I could hear you bellowing from all the way downstairs."

Vasilisa turned to her. "I'm afraid I gave him some rather upsetting news."

"What news?" Belle asked.

"I'm married . . . to a pirate name Jack Sparrow. Though Jack prefers the term treasure hunter," her sister-in-law informed Belle.

Belle's eyes went suddenly dreamy. "Oh! You are? Is he really as handsome as they say?"

"Hey! Who cares?" her husband cried.

Vasilisa smirked. "He sure is! Just wait till you meet him."

"Oh, joy," Rumple said sourly.

"Rumple, quit being a spoilsport. I guarantee that once you get to know Jack, you'll get along like a house on fire," Vasilisa reassured him. "And just so you know, Jack's ship and crew might smuggle and hunt for treasure but they don't do the other things Hook and his crew do—like hurting innocents. Matter of fact, Hook is old enemies with Jack, and always has been. Hook detests him and the feeling's mutual. Last time they met, Hook swore to rip off Jack's ear, and Jack promised to give him a new smile and almost slit his throat. That was after Hook tried to steal me away when I was pregnant with my daughter."

"That scumbag bottom feeder is a dead man!" Rumple vowed.

Belle looked at Vasilisa. "I'm surprised he's not dead already for that."

"Well, Jack did try and kill him, but he escaped and hid out in Neverland for a long time," Vasilisa said simply. "I couldn't do much of anything to him magically then, since being pregnant saps an enchantress's power."

Belle gasped. "It . . . does?"

"Yes. Which is why most sorceresses avoid it like the plague. It's the one time I was sorry I wasn't a man," Vasilisa sighed. "Forty weeks without my powers, as an ordinary woman. That's why I only have two kids."

"And is he this old enemy your husband and children are chasing?" queried Rumple.

"Yes. You see, Hook deliberately picked a fight with one of Jack's officers, a good friend of ours name Will Turner. He tried to kidnap Will's wife, Elizabeth, only Will stopped him before he could get her aboard the Jolly Roger. He also tried to steal a golden harp and some other magical items Will had in his storage shed. In the fight that followed, Hook burnt Will's house down, and killed several of his servants, who were actually more friends than that when all was said and done. He also almost roasted Will and Elizabeth's kids, who were sleeping inside. They almost died, but they managed to jump out the window and his youngest, Jilly, ended up with a broken leg. It also left
them homeless. So Will swore he'd string Hook up by his balls . . . and Jack agreed to help him. So that's what they're doing now . . . trying to find the cagey eel. I would have been helping them, but I needed to help you first."

"That damn pirate never learns to keep his hands off other people's wives," Rumple swore. "You ought to be with your husband."

"No. Not yet. Jack understands. He told me to come to you. He said we've been apart long enough, and Hook was his headache right then. So he took the Black Pearl and sailed away to find him, with his crew and our children. My daughter Jessalyn—Jess for short—has magic, so she's helping him search, and my son Will—named after Mr. Turner—is one of the best navigators ever to set foot on a ship. So Jack's well supported—and Hook's food for the sharks when they finally get him. Besides, if there was trouble, one of my kids would have called me on this," she held out a clear crystal pendant on a chain about her neck. "Communication crystal. With this they can contact me wherever in the realms I am. And they're linked, so we can all find each other, once I concentrate on them."

"Well, that's a handy bit of magic. Perhaps I should make some for my family," Rumple said.

"That's a good idea," Vasilisa said. "I have extra crystals in my pack if you need them. Now, if you're all done breathing fire, old dragon, what do you say to having some more of that . . . popped corn stuff and watching that black box of yours downstairs?"

Rumple's eyes crinkled. "You want to watch a movie on my television?"

"Didn't I just say so?" Vasilisa arched an eyebrow. "Are you starting to go deaf?"

"Watch it, dearie," he shook a playful finger at her. "That's no way to talk to your much older and wiser brother."

Vasilisa rolled her expressive green eyes. "Bite me, Rumple."

Belle burst out laughing. "Were you . . . uh . . . this sassy when you were his apprentice?"

"Sometimes I was worse," she admitted, smirking.

"You see what I had to put up with?" Rumple gestured at his sibling.

"Nothing that any older brother hasn't had to put up with since the beginning of time, dearie," Vasilisa laughed. Then she spun about and disappeared through the door.

"Brat!" Rumple called, making a face at her.

Belle started giggling again. "How old are you again, Rumple?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Hush, Mrs. Gold. I'm making up for lost time." Then he kissed her and said, "Shall we join them? Or do you want to make up an excuse to go to bed early?"

"Rumple!" she swatted him playfully on the behind. "Let's go downstairs for awhile . . . then we can go to bed."

"As you wish," he bowed slightly to her and gestured her out of the room.

Page-~*~*~*~*~Break

The next afternoon, Vasilisa decided to begin trying to break the curse on the dagger, since she felt
time was of the essence. First, she asked Mr. Gold where the dagger was hidden. He whispered to her under the shield of a concealment spell she cast that it was hidden in the clock tower of Storybrooke.

Smiling, she went and retrieved it. Then she spent nearly three hours studying it with her magical Sight, looking at and trying to determine exactly how the curse had been cast and the way it was tangled up in Rumple's aura. Black spidery filaments of magic reached out and then vanished into thin air as she examined it, and she knew that were the curse able to, it would have latched onto her brother's magical lifeforce and tainted it again.

But because the curse rendered it inactive, there was nothing for the dark magic to latch onto.

Sitting crosslegged on the floor of Rumple's workroom, Vasilisa concentrated on Seeing the dagger, not physically, but magically. She used her prescience in brief touches, allowing it to show her the predecessors who had used the dagger before Rumple, she saw glimpses of many Dark Ones, and how the dagger had twisted and tainted them with its compulsions, bringing out the most vicious, most bloodthirsty, most dark side of their natures. She discovered that the Dark Ones before Rumple had been much worse than he was—they had killed and destroyed whole kingdoms at the whim of those who held the dagger, and the dagger holders were almost as bad as the Dark Ones themselves. In contrast, her brother was mild as milk, and she knew it had to do with the fact that he was not normally an aggressive soul.

Those who had been quick to anger and quick to lash out had become the worst Dark Ones, as they had succumbed very quickly to the dagger's siren compulsion and surrendered to the dagger's curse and never climbed out of the pit they had fallen into. Also, no Dark One before Rumple had ever taken the curse of the dagger for someone else. Always they had sought power for themselves, and their own evil purposes.

But Rumple's basic core was one of patience and gentleness, though Vasilisa never mistook that to mean her brother was weak, or a coward, like most would have. The greatest power does not roar, it whispers, and the gentle flow of water topples mighty mountains, she had written once, and it was true. She had brought down many a monster with her husband with a few simple magic spells, by finding out weaknesses and exploiting them, not by vanquishing them with a show of power, though she was perfectly capable of doing such. She preferred subtlety.

She learned that the dagger subverted those it cursed by using their own basic natures against them, warping their darkest desires and making them slaves to impulse. Greed, jealousy, hatred, and anger were the emotions the dagger spawned in the Dark One's cursed heart.

But because Rumple was not normally an aggressive or violent person, it had taken longer for the dagger to subvert him, she realized. Indeed, his reason for becoming the Dark One and his very "cowardice" had prevented the curse from totally destroying the good man he had been. For like most magic, intent mattered as much as power, and while Rumplestiltskin had been misguided, his intentions had been selfless, brave, and true. The dagger had taken those good intentions and twisted them, but it hadn't been able to get quite the grip on her brother as it had on the previous Dark Ones.

And it was his gentle heart that was now his saving grace. A heart that was, for all the darkness that had tainted it, still capable of love and being loved in return.

That, she thought, was the reason why she would be able to free him.

After determining the nature of the curse itself, she began to consider the options she had in breaking it.
After another exhausting hour of Seeing with Mage Sight, she determined she needed to break it in two ways. The first was a potion. The second was by redirecting the curse itself. It was the last option that would cause her the most difficulty . . . and was the most dangerous. But she knew that if the dagger were to be truly destroyed, she had to do so.

*For the beating of five heartbeats, I must hold death in my hands. I must flirt with darkness, and challenge the beast within my own soul. And then I must strike.*

Her mind made up, she went upstairs to rest before dinner, and take a small vial of a headache remedy, since so much use of her magical sight was causing her head to pound.

Rumple noted her wan appearance and queried softly, "You okay, dearie?"

She smiled at him. "Yes. Just a little drained. I'll be fine with a nap."

"Have you . . . figured anything out yet?"

"Yes. Much has been revealed to me. I need to make a potion, Rumple. But first I need to sleep."

After dinner that night, she spoke privately with some of her family members, drawing them aside in pairs. The first ones she sought were Alina and Henry.

"You remember how you came to me a few days ago and asked me if I could break the curse of the Dark One?"

Henry nodded. "Yeah. You said you could."

"That's true. But in order to do so, I need to make a potion. And I need your help for some of the ingredients."

"What do we need to do?" asked the boy eagerly.

"I need a hair from you, Henry," Vasilisa said. "And I need one from you as well, Alina."

They both gave her a strand of their hair, and Vasilisa tucked them carefully inside a small phial.

"Is there anything else we can do to help?" Alina wanted to know.

"Yes. I need you to focus on all the good memories you have of Rumple. That will create a positive aura, which I need if I am to succeed."

"How long should we do that for?" asked Henry.

"For about ten minutes every night for the next two nights," she replied. She didn't tell them that positive thoughts would act like a buffer against the dark magic that she would release during the second stage of the cursebreaking.

Next she went to Belle and Baelfire. She explained to Bae that she was trying to break the dagger curse and would need his help. "Since the curse was partially set in motion for you, you are a key player in my breaking of it," Vasilisa explained. "I'm going to need you to be there with me and Rumple when I cast the spell that will hopefully shatter the curse."

"I will," he assured her. "Just tell me when you need me."

She nodded. "Not for awhile yet. But I do need two things from you. A single drop of blood and a hair."
He plucked a hair from his head and gave it to her. Then she handed him a pin and he pricked his finger. She collected the drop of blood in another vial and added the hair to it, then capped it.

"What are you doing with them?" he asked.

"I'm making a potion with true love ingredients that will break the curse," she replied. "With something from all those who love Rumple best." She turned to Belle. "From you, Belle, I need a most important ingredient. I need a tear from you. But not just any tear. A tear cried out of joy, but that joy must be from something Rumple has done to you or for you." She handed Belle a small vial. "If you can manage to weep a tear like I've described, catch it in here and then give it to me."

"And this tear will help break the curse?" Belle asked.

"Yes. True love's tears are almost as powerful as true love's kiss. Especially happy tears. Oh, and one other thing. I need you to recall as many good memories as you can about Rumple. And not just memories, but think of why you love your husband, Belle. Say them to yourself like a mantra, every night for two days."

"That shouldn't be too hard," she said.

"Should I do that too? Think of good memories about my father?" asked Bae.

"Yes."

"What does that do?" Belle wanted to know.

"It creates a shield of positive energy around Rumple. Light to counteract darkness," the Seer replied. "I shall be doing the same each day as I meditate."

"When do you need the tear by?" Belle queried.

"In a few days, if you can get it to me," Vasilisa answered.

"Don't worry. I will," she assured the sorceress.

Two nights later, Belle washed her hair with the rose and honey scented shampoo she knew Rumple loved, making sure it clung to her tresses even after she'd rinsed it by using a conditioning mask. She also used some lotion with the same scent on it, and was relaxing on their bed with a book, lying on her stomach in her lacy golden nightgown when her husband came into their bedroom.

"Hey. What are you reading now, dearie?" he asked, giving her a lazy grin of appreciation, his eyes roaming all over her slender frame.

"It's a . . . book about lovers forced to part and a ring that brings them back together," she replied, propping herself on an elbow.

"Hmm. Sounds like Snow and Charming. Charming used a ring I enchanted for him once to find her," he remarked wryly. He sat down on the bed next to her and tossed his tie on the chair in the corner.

"Oh. Maybe they should have used a chipped cup," Belle replied impishly. She had the small vial Vasilisa had given her on her nightstand. She had spent the past twenty minutes thinking about her
husband, and all the myriad reasons why she had fallen in love with him.

"No. That's only for us," he smirked, his brown eyes dancing as they wandered leisurely over her petite figure, caressing her with his gaze. He unbuttoned his shirt, then tossed it casually on the same chair as his tie, and leaned over to see what she was reading. He gently shut the book and murmured, "I think, love, that we can do something far more interesting than read about other people tonight."

Belle rolled over and whispered in his ear, "Like what, sweetheart?"

"This." He brought his mouth down over her ear, gently teasing it with his tongue.

Belle shivered. His caress made her quiver from head to foot. "Rumple! That tickles."

He gave her a roguish smile, and then began to kiss her neck, playing with her hair and inhaling the sweet scent of honeyed roses as he did so. "Mmm! You smell good enough to eat, dearie!" he crooned, his voice a soft rumble that echoed in her ears.

She reached for him then, twining her hands in his hair and pulling him close. "Do you want to devour me, you hungry beast?"

"Yes... every night," he purred, and playfully nibbled his way down her neck.

She squealed in delight and nipped his ear.

Soon their playful love bites turned into something more heated, and they lost themselves in each other, giving and taking in a shared ecstasy that was by turns gentle and passionate.

Belle always marveled at how attuned to her Rumple was, he seemed to know instinctively what she liked and sought to please her. Tonight he was especially attentive, he brought her to the heights of ecstasy, using those fine fingered hands to give her pleasure. He was like a hurricane, lifting her up and tossing her about, then drawing her to him in a fierce embrace. He was at turns gentle as summer rain and fierce as a desert sandstorm. He made her feel joy and pleasure and delight so great she feared she would die of it.

Yet she did not, instead whispering his name like a benediction, "Rumplestiltskin!"

"Say my name, sweetheart, and tame the beast," he purred, curling around her, gasping sharply as her lips branded him with fiery kisses, her hands stroking and caressing, even his scarred lame leg was somehow made beautiful by her touch.

"Rumplestiltskin!"

"Yes, beloved?"

"I love you. So very much."

"And so do I," he said, then kissed her with such exquisite passion that it brought tears to her eyes.

As her eyes were suddenly blurred with tears, she touched her finger to her cheek and captured one tear, wept in a moment of unsurpassed joy. "Rumple, wait a moment," she said, and she turned and grabbed the vial off the nightstand and deposited the tear inside it, capping it securely before turning back to her husband.

"What were you doing? Why are you crying?" he asked, alarmed. "Did I hurt you?"
"No. No. I'm fine. These are tears of joy, not of pain."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure," she answered, then she pushed him down on the bed and growled, "See? The beauty has tamed the beast . . . because she knows his heart and she loves him best of all."

"God only knows why."

"I know why," she replied. "Let me tell you." Then she began to list everything he did that made her happy, inbetween kisses, until they lay sated at last in each other's arms.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Once Belle's tear had been acquired, Vasilisa used Rumple's workroom to mix the ingredients together for the potion. She allowed Emma, Henry, and Alina to watch as she did this, saying, "When you make a potion, the key is preciseness and accuracy. Each ingredient must be added to your cauldron at the proper time and stirred a certain number of times clockwise and be allowed to simmer at a particular temperature."

"How do you know all that?" asked Emma.

"You study the potions texts given to you by your master," Vasilisa answered. "Or you're told the proper way to make it by your teacher."

"It's almost like chemistry," Alina observed.

"Indeed. Much about brewing potions is like chemistry, only the rules and formulas are different," Vasilisa said. "Very good, Alina!"

Once the potion was brewed and decanted, Vasilisa said, "I need you three to go upstairs and call Rumple and Bae down here. And after that please continue to think of good memories about your mentor."

"Will do," Emma said, and then she headed upstairs with Alina and Henry.

While they did that, Vasilisa unwrapped the dagger from the small green cloth she had placed it in and laid it face up at her feet. She knelt in front of it, rather like a priestess at an altar, turning her palms up, and speaking softly in the language of magic.

Her hands traced several lines of a protective circle about the dagger and herself, but she did not close it. Instead she drew a silver athame from her belt, an item thrice blessed by the gods of earth, fire, and air, and pricked her finger with it. She carefully caught the drop of blood in the vial of potion.

As she heard Bae coming downstairs, she rose, the vial in one hand and the athame in the other and turned to face the stairway.

"Where do you want me to stand?" he asked.

"Over there, to the north, on the far side of the circle," she said, indicating the direction with a jerk of her head. "I also need you to do one more thing for me. No matter what happens, you cannot interfere once I begin casting. Break the circle and you break my concentration and all I've done here will fail."
"I understand," Baelfire said.

"Rumple understands that too. But . . . he might forget if things get . . . complicated," she stared directly at Baelfire. "This will not be an easy curse to break and you might . . . see things that are disturbing. But you must remain outside the circle . . . and make sure that he does as well."

"Okay," her nephew said, just as Rumple limped into the room.

He came to stand on the opposite of the circle, and looked questioningly at his sister. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"I am."

"Good. I'm going to need some of your blood before I begin. As a catalyst."

He held out a hand. "Take it."

She moved around the circle then, taking his hand in hers and nicking the base of his thumb with her athame. As the blood beaded upon her dagger, she added it to the potion and swirled it and then chanted, "With this blood I call to thee, dagger of darkness, by blood you are bound, come to me!"

The dagger on the cloth began to quiver.

Vasilisa quickly stepped back within the circle and sealed it with a wave of her hand. Then she tucked the athame back into her belt and poured the completed potion over the dagger.

It smoked and hissed as it hit the cold obsidian blade, green tendrils of energy streaming off it.

Rumple gasped sharply, as if in pain, and staggered backwards.

Baelfire caught him, holding him upright. "Papa? What in hell?"

"I'm all right, Bae," Rumple said, but there was uncertainty in his tone.

The dark magic surged up and tried to flow from the circle, seeking Rumplestiltskin, but it was repelled both by Vasilisa's magic and the aura of positive thoughts surrounding its quarry. Hissing, it coiled and withdrew, coming to swirl about the dagger once more.

Vasilisa closed her eyes and concentrated. The lines of protection upon the circle began to glow stridently and she stretched out her hands over the dagger and hissed, "Rumplestiltskin, by the love of all you hold dear, I release you from the Dark One's curse! You are free!"

She chanted that refrain three times, and each time she did, she felt the tendrils of darkness surrounding the blade grow less.

As she peered at it, she saw her brother's name become fainter and fainter.

When it had disappeared entirely from the blade, she made a quick snapping motion with her hands.

The dagger quivered harder now, and suddenly it rose into the air, glowing a sickly green color, like poisonous green slime.

Vasilisa held her hands out, knowing that with Rumplestiltskin's name gone from the dagger, it
would try and claim a new master, to steal a new soul to corrupt. But thanks to her circle, it could only seek one person.

Herself.

Green and black tentacles of dark magic curled about the blade, hissing and hungry.

Then it darted forward . . . and stabbed Vasilisa in the shoulder.

"NO!" Baelfire and Rumple screamed at the same time, but they were helpless to prevent what happened next.

As soon as the dagger penetrated her flesh, Vasilisa could feel the evil seeking her soul, struggling to grab onto it and feed.

She threw back her head, her back arching in a single spasm of agony.

The dark magic wrapped about her, clasping her in an unholy embrace.

She felt the poison of the curse enter her, and pain slammed into her, a pain like nothing she had ever known . . . but even as she thought it, she knew it was wrong.

She had endured such pain before . . . at Baba Yaga's hand . . . over and over . . .

_The drawing of five heartbeats. I must dance with death and clasp it to me._

She could feel coldness in her now, as the dagger sought to steal all her warmth and leave her dark and cold, bereft. Despair suddenly swamped her.

Her head fell forward, her hair falling across the dagger sticking obscenely from her chest and she breathed in harsh gasps, trying to contain the pain and focus upon the curse within her.

Outside the circle, Bae was struggling with Rumple, who was fighting to get away from his son.

"Papa, stop! You can't break the circle!"

"Let me go, damn you!" he shrieked, his eyes wide with horror. "It's killing her don't you see that? Rhea! Baelfire, let me go!"

Bae had his arms locked in a death grip around Rumple, knowing he couldn't afford to let the other man break free. Vasilisa's words rang in his head. _No matter what you see . . . don't break the circle._

Rumple fought to break his son's grip, but Bae was too strong, especially when he had half-lifted Rumple off the ground. "Bae! Let go! It's killing her, damn it! I'm killing her!" he clawed uselessly at Bae's muscular arms, his eyes fixed upon his baby sister, tears of remorse and terror streaming down his face.

"Papa, please! You have to stay here!" Bae said, dragging the older man a few feet backwards. "She said not to break the circle!"

"I don't care! Rhea! Don't! Don't!"

But Vasilisa could not hear his desperate pleas. A red mist obscured her vision as pain blossomed all through her and the dagger sang an insidious hymn calling to the darkness that lived in her soul to come forth, to join it, and find power beyond her wildest dreams.
To become the new Dark One.

For the drawing of three breaths, she considered what the dagger whispered to her.

Then she shook her head. Once. Twice. Thrice.

**No. NO. NO!**

She drew another breath. Fire seared her lungs. Her head spun dizzily. But somehow she remained upon her feet. Almost time. Almost.

She sucked in another breath.

Her hands closed about the dagger's hilt.

Then she ripped it from her shoulder, and shrieked in agony, throwing her head back.

Black and green tentacles sprouted from the hole in her shoulder.

She ignored them, calling upon her own innate magic.

"Dark One, I See you true! Dark One, I reject you! Dark One, I banish you! By earth, air, water, fire, and all the elements, I break the power of your binding!"

Bae stared in astonishment as the woman before him began to glow with an icy bright blue light. It spread from her fingertips down her arms and all across her body, until she glowed like a star gone nova.

It drove the tentacles of darkness from her body, and the hole in her shoulder healed, and she held the dagger in her hands above her head.

Icy white and blue tendrils crept about the obsidian knife, smothering the dark magic.

"By the power of true love, I shatter this curse!"

And the dagger exploded into a million dark shards.

Bae turned his head away as Vasilisa's aura flared violently.

Rumple sagged against his son's chest like a broken doll, shutting his eyes.

When they opened them again, the workroom was drenched in a peaceful twilight, as the circle of protection faded, leaving only a slight amber glow on the floor.

Within the circle, Vasilisa lay on the floor, her pale hair glittering like spilled gold across the stones, a comet fallen from the heavens.

Bae relaxed his grip, and Rumple jerked from his arms, crawling rapidly across the floor to grab the stricken enchantress from the floor, cradling her in his arms.

"Rhea! Don't leave me! Come back! Rhea! Come back!" he pleaded, his voice gone hoarse, his slender frame wracked with sobs. His sister lay unmoving in his arms.

Bae stared at them in disbelief, his heart thundering in his chest. Surely she couldn't be . . . dead.

Rumple clutched her to him, half-shaking her in his desperation. "Rhea!" She lay limply in his
embrace, like a doll tossed away by a careless child. Her skin was cold, as if shattering the dagger had stolen what was left of warmth in her body. "Rhea! I . . . won't . . . lose you again!" he snarled, and then he pressed his lips to her forehead, kissing her.

Suddenly a rosy flush tinted her waxen cheeks.

Her chest heaved, she gasped for air.

Then she opened her eyes.

"Rumple . . . I'm back."

"Rhea!" he cried in relief, then he hugged her to him, growling, "You damn stubborn idiot! Don't ever scare me like that again. Or else I'm killing you!"

"I love you too, big brother," she whispered, her lips curving into a faint smile. Then she collapsed against him in a dead faint, mission accomplished.
It's Alina's birthday and several unexpected gifts are given.

Baelfire carried Vasilisa upstairs and he put her in the green guest room again, where she had been sleeping. Belle and Alice came in then and carefully undressed the unconscious Seer and put her in a nightgown and then covered her with a light blanket. They left her sleeping soundly and tiptoed from the room.

Rumple was pacing back and forth in the hallway, looking alarmed and agitated. Even though the dagger was gone, he still felt some of its shadow looming over him, and he was still frightened he might lose his sister, even though he had brought her back from the brink of death with true love's kiss.

Belle put a hand on his arm and whispered, "Rumple, you're going to wear a hole in the carpet."

"So what? We'll get a new one," he half-snapped at her. "I'm just . . . I can't sit still, Belle. What if she's not out of danger? What if she . . . slips away from me? She risked her life for me . . . she nearly died down there today . . . for me." His eyes were haunted.

"Rumple . . . she chose to do what she did. You didn't force her. And I'd wager she knew long before she tried to break the curse that she knew the price she might be asked to pay," Belle said, gently rubbing his shoulder.

"She told me she wouldn't die . . . that she Saw herself alive in the future . . . but if I hadn't kissed her when I did . . . she would have. And it would have been my fault." His hands clenched white-knuckled on his cane.

"Maybe she knew you would save her, Rumple. You said once fate is its own master and cannot always be anticipated. She was right, Rumple. She didn't die then . . . and she won't now. She's just exhausted and sleeping. Pacing up and down like a caged lion isn't helping anyone. Now come downstairs and have a cup of tea, at least. You look like you're about to fall over yourself."

"I'm fine, Belle." Then, as if to give the lie to his words, he staggered as his weak leg suddenly tried to crumple up on him.

"Rumple!" Belle cried in alarm. "Baelfire, get up here!" she yelled down the stairs. "Your father needs you!"

"Belle . . . it's nothing. My leg just gave out . . . sometimes it happens . . ." Rumple protested, struggling to compensate with his cane and cursing the old injury under his breath in three languages.

"Papa? What's the matter?" Bae thundered up the stairs and put an arm about his parent, holding him upright. "What happened?"

"Bae, I'm fine. My stupid leg just gave out," Rumple grumbled.
"Then you need to sit down," his son said, and helped him walk the five steps to his bedroom.

"Quit fussing!" Rumple ordered. "I'm not dead yet."

"I don't want to go on the cart," Bae replied, smirking.

"What?" Belle said, not getting the reference.

Rumple pretended to glare at his son, though his mouth twitched upward in a reluctant grin. "You watch too much TV, Bae."

"Sorry, couldn't resist. Then you've seen *The Holy Grail* too?" his son asked, his eyes glittering with mirth.

"Please. About a dozen times since Alina and Henry discovered Netflix," Rumple groaned.

Bae started laughing. "And you don't think it's funny?" He helped his father sit on the edge of the bed.

"I did . . . the first four times I watched it. After that, it was overkill," Rumple replied, wincing.

"There! Is that a little better?" his son asked, concerned.

"Yes. I'll be fine in a minute. Your mother was just being a worrywart."

Belle snorted. "Your papa was just being a martyr and waiting to collapse on the floor."

"Belle, you're exaggerating," Rumple argued. "Don't listen to her, Bae."

"If you two are going to fight, I'm going back downstairs," his son said. "You should take it easy, Papa. Maybe breaking that curse took more out of you than you thought."

"My thoughts exactly. Thanks, Bae," Belle said, giving her husband a sharp Look.

"Now don't act so smug, dearie," her husband began. "I wasn't the one doing the cursebreaking."

"That doesn't mean it didn't affect you," Belle argued.

"Oh, boy. I'm outta here," Bae said, and promptly left the room.

"Rumple, don't be stubborn. You need to rest," she began.

He gave her a scowl reminiscent of angry child. "I can rest when I'm in my grave, Belle! I'm not the one who broke a centuries old curse today! Rhea's the one who you ought to be worried about, not me."

"I'm worried about *both* of you," Belle said, sitting down next to him. "Rumple, you're the only who's ever had the dagger curse broken and lived through it. How do you know it didn't hurt you a little?"

He sighed. "I don't," he admitted reluctantly. "But whatever I'm feeling isn't even close to what Rhea endured down there. Belle . . . the damned dagger attacked her once she erased my name from it. It stabbed her in the chest. And I couldn't do a damn thing but watch it happen. I hate being helpless! Especially when one of my own risks their life for me."

"Oh, Rumple!" Belle moved then and hugged him. "That must have been so hard for you to see . . .
but she's okay now. It's over. And you're free at last."

"If she had died . . . I would have never forgiven myself."

"But she didn't," Belle reminded him. "She saved you . . . just like you did her when she sought sanctuary from Baba Yaga all those years ago."

"That's different."

"Why? Because you think your life is worth so much less than hers?" his wife demanded shrewdly.

"After what I've been and done, some would say my life isn't worth spit," Rumple murmured.

"Then they're stupid asses!" Belle swore heatedly. "You are worth every sacrifice, Rumplestiltskin! Because we who love you would be lost without you here. And it wasn't Rhea alone who broke the curse . . . it was all of us."

"What? I don't understand."

Belle told him what Rhea had asked of her and his children and grandson. "All of us helped, Rumple. Because we all wanted you to be free of the damned dagger. And we succeeded. Maybe that's why we were successful. Because together we're stronger than individuals, even if they happen to be powerful sorceresses." She cupped his chin in her hands. "Now it's done and you're free. Live the life you've regained, Mr. Gold. Don't waste it regretting the past."

"And you think I deserve a second chance?"

"Yes. Everyone who truly regrets what they've done does," she said sincerely.

"Then you'd forgive your father?"

"If he was sincerely sorry, yes I would," Belle said honestly. "But I don't know if he is . . . I hope he would be . . . but I won't know for sure until I talk to him once he's himself again." Then she pulled him to her and kissed him. "Now quit wallowing in self-pity, Mr. Gold, and kiss me back."

Smiling, he did as she had ordered. Perhaps she was right, his brilliant intuitive wife, and this was a second chance for him to do things right. If so, he'd be a fool to waste it. And he'd never been that.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Vasilisa slept for hours, but then developed a fever and woke during the night delirious and babbling about ghosts and calling out for water. "Please, Mistress! Just one sip . . . just one . . ." she whimpered, clearly reliving some of her horrid captivity in Baba Yaga's ice palace.

"Rhea, dearie, shhh! It's okay," Rumple came limping into the room, carrying a glass of water in his hand and some Tylenol in his pocket. It was past midnight. He set the glass down on the nightstand and went to bathe his sister's face with a cool damp washcloth. "You've got a bad fever, dearie. Probably a side-effect of overspending your power. Do you understand me? You're safe here, in my house, we're not in that witch's palace."

Suddenly, her eyes opened, and they were glassy with fever and bright with tears. "Rumple . . . don't send me back there! Please! Don't send me away!"

"Hey . . . nobody's sending you anywhere," he soothed, sitting on the edge of the bed beside her. "You're going to stay right here. It's just a dream . . . you're safe with me . . . and you're going to
"Stay right here . . ." His fingers stroked her hair, brushing the strands off her forehead, which was hot and dry.

"You'll protect me?" she asked, sounding like the child she had been once.

"Always," he said.

"Rumple, I'm so hot . . . and thirsty . . ."

"Yes, I know. Can you sit up for me? There's my girl," he said, helping her to sit up. "Here's some water." He helped her sip from the glass. "Easy there, drink it slowly, otherwise you'll throw up."

After she had drunk a quarter of the glass, he said, "I need you to take these pills, okay? Just swallow them with the water."

"Are they medicine?"

"Yes. Now open up and let me put them in your mouth," he said, as if talking to a child, since he realized suddenly that she might not have ever taken pills before, as they weren't a commonplace thing in their old world. Thankfully she didn't fight him when he put the pills on her tongue and then gave her a drink of water and told her to swallow them.

Once she had taken the Tylenol he allowed her another drink and then helped her lie down again.

Then he sat beside her, telling her she would get better if she just rested and how grateful he was for her breaking the curse over him.

She blinked at him and said, "Is that why I'm sick?"

"Yes. But you'll get better once you've slept. Just close your eyes, little sister, and don't worry about nightmares. I can banish all of them. You know I can. I did it before, when you were sick a long time ago in my castle. Remember?"

Slowly, she nodded. "I remember . . . you said no nightmares could come for me so long as you were there with your dreamcatcher. Is there a dreamcatcher here?"

"Yes. I can get one for you," Rumple said swiftly, and went to fetch one that hung on the wall of his study, an old elk horn and leather one with feathers from a bald eagle and a golden goshawk, made by the Abenaki who had once roamed this land. He then twirled it in the air above her head, making sure she could see it revolving, then said, "See? No more nightmares. Now I'll hang it above you on the wall."

He carefully hung it on the wall with a thumbtack.

His sister smiled. "Thank you. You have a good heart, Rumple."

"Only you and Belle would say that."

She reached out and caught his hand, her green eyes suddenly intense. "Because I see the truth with mine. The heart never lies, Rumple. It cannot be deceived. Forget what you think and ignore what you hear. The heart always sees clear. Always. You're not the Dark One. I've lived among darkness . . . I know it. I trust what my heart shows . . . and it shows you're a good man, Rumple. You are."

"All right, dearie," he said, trying to placate her.

But she refused to be placated, gripping his hand with fierce strength. "Believe it. Trust what I say."
"Okay, Rhea. I trust you. Now calm down, dearie. Or do you want to crush my hand for some reason?"

She released his hand then and sank back upon the pillows. "Someday . . . you'll believe me . . . you will . . ."

"Shhh. You're tired, you need to rest," he murmured, wiping her face again with the cloth. "Sleep, Rhea. And dream good dreams. You're safe with me."

She gave him a dreamy smile. "Always safe with you, Rumple."

Then she closed her eyes and slept.

He sat there several moments longer, pondering what she had said. The heart always sees clear. The heart never lies. He knew that for a universal truth. It was why true love was so powerful. He thought again of her insistence that his heart was good . . . even after all those centuries of darkness. Was she right? Had he simply forgotten how to see the light after so many years of darkness? He supposed it might be so. She wasn't called Vasilisa the Wise for nothing.

Then he recalled Belle's admonition too, about letting go of past regrets and starting anew. Perhaps it was time he took their advice.

He patted Vasilisa's hand gently before rising and returning to his own room. It was time for bed, for even old dragons needed their sleep.

By the next morning, his sister was much better, her fever had gone down and she was coherent again, though quite weak and content to lie in bed and sleep for much of the day, taking the Tylenol Rumple gave her and eating the light meals Alice prepared for her, which were juice, toast, and oatmeal with fruit in it and later some chicken soup and bread with red clover honey.

Rumple was glad of it, for he had to help Belle prepare for Alina's birthday party in the afternoon. Once they had set up the dining room with colorful mylar balloons and streamers, a sign, and pink and white china plates, Alice and Belle took over, and said they could handle the refreshments and shooed him away.

He went upstairs to see his sister, she was sleeping soundly, and as he came downstairs again, he found Paige and Henry had arrived, along with Bae and Emma.

"How's Rhea?" asked Emma softly, while Henry and Paige wished Alina a happy birthday and Bae took Paige's present along with their own into the den and put it on the table.

"Getting better," Rumple replied. "She's sleeping now."

"I wonder what's in that big box?" Alina said, eyeing Henry thoughtfully.

"I know, but I'm not telling. It's a surprise," her nephew smirked.

"Did you pick it out?" Paige asked. She looked very like Alice, though she didn't know it.

Henry nodded. "Yup. Actually, we all did. Me, my mom, and my dad. It was fun."

"Can't you give me a hint?" Alina asked. "Just a little one?"
"Umm . . . it's something you've always wanted," Henry said.

Alina's forehead crinkled. "Like what? Is it an animal, mineral, or vegetable?"

"Can't tell. But I think you'll really like it."

"I hope you'll like mine too," Paige said shyly. "I made it myself."

"I always like your presents," Alina told her friend. "I still have the suncatcher you made me last year. It's hanging on my bedroom window."

Paige smiled, and her smile reminded both Golds of Jefferson. "I had fun making that. What are we doing for your birthday this year, Alina?"

"Something really fun. Papa's going to take us to Reality Zone and we can play all day there. Any game we want plus Hero's Quest."

"Cool! I love that game!" Henry cheered.

"Me too!" Paige said. "When are we going, Mr. Gold?"

"Now," he said, getting his keys. He had already introduced Paige to Belle and explained that Alice was Saylah's niece, and Saylah was away on vacation. Everyone knew about Belle now that Emma and Neal had custody of Henry, and Paige had been delighted to meet her, and Alice as well.

Gold took Alina, Henry, and Paige out to the arcade, where they could play a virtual reality game called Hero's Quest, which was a fun game where you could pretend to be a hero who fought all kinds of monsters and rescued a friend in trouble. The heroes had to solve puzzles and make it through a maze of different tricks, traps, and dangers, and competed with one another to see who could do it the fastest and rescue their trapped friend.

Alina, Henry, and Paige put on the special helmets, which would allow them to see the 3D holographic landscape they'd be going through and also a flashing plastic disk over their chests which told them how much "life energy" they had while doing tasks. If they ran out of energy, the game was over, so they had to monitor it carefully.

Then they entered the play room, and Gold sat on a padded bench outside it and read *Wizard's First Rule* by Terry Goodkind, a book which Bae had lent him, while the children raced about and fought pretend monsters and scaled fake walls and jumped over raging rivers and rode on flying griffins and battled monsters and evil necromancers.

After two hours they came out, flushed and panting, but happy. He looked up as they walked out of the room and pulled on their sneakers. "Well? Did you rescue whoever was trapped in there?"

"We sure did, Papa!" Alina told him, her eyes shining. "I vaporized a demon knight and won a golden magical staff."

"I killed a dragon!" Henry said. "Whacked his head off with my magic sword."

"And I flew on a griffin over an enchanted wood and killed a chimera with my magic arrows," Paige informed him. "It was so much fun!"

"Glad to hear that, dearie. Now what else do you want to do, Alina? We have another hour before we need to get home so we can eat lunch," Gold said, checking his watch.
"Let's play some more games," the eleven-year-old suggested, and they all ran over to where the video games were along the wall.

Gold watched indulgently and read some more of his book while they all played the different arcade games, though sometimes he was interrupted when one of the other of them came back to him and asked for more quarters to get tokens or drinks from the vending machines.

An hour later, they were all piled into Gold's Cadillac, singing some pop tunes and giggling for the twenty minutes it took to get back the salmon pink Victorian. When they arrived, Alice said that lunch wasn't quite ready yet, so the three children went out in the backyard and played horseshoes and swung on the swingset while the rest of the fried chicken was getting cooked along with Yukon Gold mashed potatoes, gravy, corn fritters, and coleslaw.

Emma watched the three playing, and whispered to Bae, "Look at Paige. Doesn't she look just like her mom?"

"Yeah. I can see it now," Bae said, glancing over at Alice, who was at the stove frying. "Too bad Paige won't know until the curse breaks."

"Yeah, I really have to work on that," Emma murmured. "Will you help me, Bae?"

"Sure, sweetling. I can start teaching you how to do kung fu tomorrow if you like."

"How about something with weapons."

"Well, if you want to use a sword, that'll take a bit more time, but okay."

"How well do you know how to use one?"

"Uh . . . I won the West Coast Martial Arts Tournament in swordfighting three years in a row before I decided to stop competing," her husband answered. "So I'd say I'm pretty good, wild swan."

"Holy crap!" Emma gasped. "Even I know about that and you won it three years in a row?"

Bae just nodded modestly. "Like I said, I can teach you the sword, but it might take longer than you think to learn the maneuvers."

"I don't care. Somehow I think I'm gonna need it," Emma said knowingly.

"Okay. We'll start tomorrow night," her husband agreed.

"I can't wait till Alina sees what we got her," Emma said.

"Me too," Bae agreed. He just hoped his father didn't have a fit once he saw what it was.

Alice finished frying the chicken and corn fritters and Belle helped her put them in platters and set them on the table, then she stared wistfully out the sliding glass door at her daughter playing with Alina and Henry. "I wish . . ."

"I know," Belle said sympathetically, hugging her friend. "But she'll know the truth once the curse breaks, and then you can get to know her as Grace and be a real family."

"You're right," Alice said. Then she turned as the oven timer shrilled and removed a pan of buttermilk biscuits from the oven.
After a wonderful lunch, in which Paige declared she'd never tasted fried chicken like Alice's, which made Alice's heart swell with pride, Alina, Henry, and Paige played hot potato with Bae and Emma was running the music, playing catchy 80's tunes and trying to catch the three kids and her husband with the potato in their hands when the music stopped.

They all started laughing when Henry got too excited as he was passing the potato over to Bae and the martial arts instructor had to snatch the potato out of the air with a lighting quick maneuver before it hit him in the face. "Uh, Henry, we're playing hot potato, not brain your dad in the face," he said.

"Oops! Sorry, Dad," his son apologized, and the girls giggled, but eventually Paige was the winner, and was awarded a gift card to Granny's diner which was good for a free dessert.

"Thanks, Mr. Gold," the fair-haired girl said when he gave her the prize.

"You're quite welcome, Paige," said, and gave Alice's daughter a friendly smile.

Paige tucke her gift card into her small blue purse and wondered why people ever feared this man.

Then they played bookworm trivia, where Belle asked the children about various questions about popular children's books, and Henry won that game, and a gift card to the Storybrooke bookstore.

Then they had to guess how many mini candy bars were in a jar, and whoever was closest won the entire jar. Alina won that, but she generously split the candy between all of them, so they each ended up with a bag of mini Hershey bars.

"All right, kids," Belle called. "It's time for cake and ice cream."

They all clapped when Alice brought in the cake, which was a red velvet one with cream cheese frosting. Then they all sang happy birthday to Alina and she blew out the candles.

Rumple watched as his daughter carefully cut the first slice of cake, and murmured to Belle, "I can't believe that the tiny baby I held in my arms is almost a teenager. I feel like I blinked and she's grown up before my eyes."

Belle smiled. "I think all parents feel that way about their children when they start getting older."

"I'm sorry you missed all those years with her," Rumple said sadly. "But I've got pictures. And I made DVD's you can watch."

"Some night we'll have to do that. Once she's in bed, otherwise she might kill us for embarrassing her," Belle laughed.

"Mmm! Alice, this cake's so good it ought to be illegal," Bae remarked, as he ate a piece.

"Really? Well, you're taking half of it home, Neal," she grinned.

"What?" Emma gasped. "Alice! What do you want us to be, the poster family for Weight Watchers?"

"Nobody said you had to eat it, Mom," her son pointed out.

"Oh, thanks. So I'm supposed to sit there and watch you and your dad stuff your faces?" Emma snorted.
"You don't have to do that," Bae remarked. "You could join us."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Neal, and next thing you know I've gained ten pounds."

"We're still taking some home," Henry told Alice, and winked at her.

"Now it's time for presents!" sang Paige, and ran to get her prettily wrapped silver and pink package from the table and handed it to Alina.

Alina opened it and gasped at the pretty shell encrusted jewelry box with her initials in gold paint on the inside of the lid, which had been lined with pink satin. Lying on the bottom was a golden circle with the letters P and A on opposite sides. "Paige! This is . . . beautiful!" Alina exclaimed. "You really made this?"

"Yeah. Mom and I collected seashells on the beach this summer and then I bought this kit and we made it together," Paige said. "And that necklace . . . it's a friendship necklace," she picked it up and showed Alina how the circle was separated. "One half's for you and one's for me. You get my P and I get your A," she said, and handed Alina the right side of the gold circle and she took the left one.

The girls smiled at each other as they put their necklace halves on, and over their heads so did their mothers, who had exchanged similar tokens when they were that age.

"And this is from your mama and me," Rumple said. "Well, one gift anyway." He handed Alina a square box wrapped in flower paper.

"Neat! The Immortals series by Tamora Pierce. Mama, you remembered!" Alina cried, staring down at the boxed set of fantasy books she had seen in the bookstore a month ago and mentioned she'd like to read.

"I bought them while you were at school," Belle said, hugging her. "Happy birthday, Alina!"

"Your other present is to pick one thing from my shop," Rumple said.

"Really, Papa? You never let me before," his daughter said in amazement.

"Well, now you're old enough to choose wisely," he said, and then he hugged her.

"Thanks!" she cried, and hugged him back.

"And this last one's from us," Henry said, running over to the largest box sitting on the table in the den and picking it up. "Here, Alina!"

The little girl examined the box curiously, noting the lid was rather loose and there were odd slits in the sides. "What is this?"

"Open it and find out, minx!" Bae encouraged.

Alina removed the lid and gasped when she saw what was nestled inside. "Oh! You guys got me a kitten!" She reached into the box, which was lined with a blanket inside, and lifted out a tiny black kitten with gorgeous green eyes. The kitten mewed as she cradled it against her, sticking tiny claws into her sweatshirt. "I've always wanted one. Thanks! Henry, she's so beautiful!"

"Yeah, she was the best one of the litter," Henry said, petting her.

"She's a pedigreed Bombay cat," Bae said, grinning. "They're known for their affection and gentle
personality, and they look like little panthers."

"Oh, Alina! She's adorable!" Belle said, and gently stroked the kitten, who began to purr and rubbed against her hand.

"Want to hold her, Mama?" Alina asked, and she handed Belle the kitten.

Belle carefully held the tiny cat against her, and then said, "Look, Rum, isn't she just precious?"

Rumple eyed the tiny feline resignedly. "Just what we need, Neal. I don't really care for cats. They shed all over and they claw things."

"But you'll get used to her, Papa," Alina said, not at all fazed by her father's lukewarm response. "Just wait and see. Now we have to think of a good name for her."

"I can help!" Paige said.

"Me too," Henry agreed.

"We bought you a book on kitten care and some other stuff too," Emma said. "It's in a bag in my car. Let me go get it."

Belle handed the kitten back to Alina, who held it in her lap, petting her while writing names down on a piece of paper. She knew she had to pick just the right name, for names were important, especially if one was a sorceress.

The kitten purred loudly as she sat in Alina's lap, her green eyes half closed, her small paws tucked beneath her.
Mr. Gold would have told anyone who asked his opinion about pets that they were fine . . . in other people's houses. The one exception to that rule was the pedigreed black Bombay kitten Henry had given his daughter Alina for her eleventh birthday. Since the kitten was a gift, Alina had thought the name Nala—gift in Swahili—appropriate for her. She had assured her father that she would happily take care of the kitten, and Gold was content, or as content as he could be with a whirlwind of black fur now ensconced in his salmon-pink Victorian.

To say he and his new fur-child did not see eye to eye was putting it mildly.

The second morning Nala had come to stay, he had walked into the master bathroom and begun to shave and wash his face, only to discover the kitten had somehow managed to get inside there and totally shred an entire roll of toilet paper . . . all over the floor.

Gold gawped at the mess . . . paper shredded into confetti was scattered all over the bathmat and the tile, as if the cat had first torn it to shreds and then dragged it all over. It looked like a snowstorm had spawned there. He was so shocked he forgot to put down his razor, which was dripping with lather, and some of it fell on his good silk shirt. Snarling imprecations which involved a cat stew, Gold tore off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper.

As he stalked back into the bedroom to get a new shirt, he heard his wife call sleepily from her nest of covers, "Rumple? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing that a quick trip to the vet's or pair of pliers can't fix, Belle," he answered tightly, yanking another shirt out of his closet and putting it on.

"What?" Belle sat up, her dark hair falling over one blue eye. "What was that about a pair of pliers?"

"Nothing, dearie. Go back to sleep. I'll see you around six, as usual." He blew her a kiss before returning to the bathroom to shave, but not before glaring at the kitten crouched under the wingback chair in the corner near the window. "Darn cat! You stay out of my bathroom, or else!" He shook a reproving finger at her. "And don't give me that innocent look! You're about as innocent as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Now you've made me late for work."

It took about seven minutes for him to gather up all the paper and stuff it into a trash bag.

When he came out, he found Nala happily pouncing on his Gucci loafers, biting the soft leather with her sharp teeth.

"Get!" he growled, poking her with his cane.

Only to have her grab his cane with all four feet and try and bite it!

"Hey! Stop that, you crazy kitty!" he scolded, shaking the cane to try and dislodge his fuzzy
passenger, and trying to balance on one foot at the same time.

"Rumple? What's going on?" Belle asked sleepily, sitting up and peering at her husband, who appeared to be hopping up and down. "What are you doing?"

He flashed her a frustrated look. "I'm . . . trying . . . let go . . . to get this . . . creature . . . off my cane!"

Belle started giggling as she saw what the kitten was doing. "Aww, Rumple! She's just playing with you! How sweet!"

"Playing?" he grumbled, glaring at the kitten who was happily gnawing the fine wood cane like some demented woodchuck. "I'll show you playing. Knock it off, before I make you go play in the street, cat."

Nala cocked her head at him, her green eyes gleaming, then abruptly sprang to her feet and dashed under the bed.

Gold shook the cane at her before he put on his shoes and limped from the room, pausing to shut the door behind him, trapping the little menace inside . . . but he hadn't reckoned with a cat's lightning swift reflexes, and didn't see Nala dart out the door just before he shut it.

As he was coming down the stairs, slowly in deference to his lame leg, a black bolt shot inbetween his feet and almost made him trip.

He staggered and had to grab the banister in a most undignified fashion to regain his balance.

That's it! That little menace just tried to kill me. I'm shipping the blasted furball back to Henry . . . as soon as I find a box big enough, he thought angrily. I knew having a pet was a mistake. They're nothing but trouble!

Undaunted, Nala galloped down the hall into the kitchen, and Gold frowned as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Weren't cats supposed to be silent when they ran? This one must be defective, he thought sourly, because it sounded like a herd of gazelles stampeding.

The little kitten hid beneath a chair as Alice came and set a cup of coffee down by Gold's place and said cheerily, "Good morning, Mr. G!"

Gold looked up at his longtime housekeeper and friend and grunted, "Well, it was good . . . until Alina's crazy kitten decided to wreck my bathroom." He limped over to his chair and sat down.

"Oh, dear. What happened?"

Gold told her inbetween sips of coffee. Then he unfolded the paper and began to read it.

Alice began preparing an omelet for him and set out a bowl of honeydew, pineapples, and strawberries in case he was hungry, along with a small plate and a fork.

A fly buzzed around the fruit bowl. Gold waved it away with a hand and continued reading the financial section of the Mirror.

Beneath the table, Nala's ears swiveled around as her supersensitive hearing honed in on the fly buzzing overhead. Her tail began to twitch as she silently crept out from under the table and crouched, waiting for her chance to capture the annoying insect.
The fly suddenly landed on top of Gold's paper, unnoticed by the pawnbroker.

Until something black smashed into the center of the paper.

Nala's paws snatched the fly from the air . . . and sent the corner of The Daily Mirror right into Gold's cup of coffee.

Hot coffee splashed all over the table, and on Gold's hand.

"Oww!" he gasped, shaking his hand. "What in hell?"

Nala sprang right over the rest of the paper, knocking into the bowl of fruit on the other side and sending it careening across the table.

"Mr. G, what on earth?" gasped Alice, as she looked up from putting the omelet onto a plate along with some potatoes and seeing the fruit bowl skidding across the polished oak table, along with the leaping kitten, whose clumsy attempt to grab the fly had merely stunned it, and now it was flying in loops above the table.

Luckily the fruit bowl halted before sliding off the edge, just as Nala made a second try at the buzzing fly . . . only to fall off the table and land on the floor in a furry heap.

"Serves you right!" Gold grumbled, watching sourly as the energetic kitten shook herself and raced away into the den.

Alice sighed and placed her employer's breakfast on the table after mopping up the spilled coffee. "Sorry about your paper. But it's only that piece that's ruined."

"The piece I was reading," he snorted, and set it down so he could eat.

"Sometimes kittens can be clumsy," Alice said.

"That one's not clumsy, Alice. That one's a catastrophe!" he said, rolling his eyes. "It's a good thing my coffee didn't get on my six-hundred dollar Armani suit, or else that cat would be a gift to an exotic restaurant." He stabbed his omelet with his fork, almost wishing he had his powers as the Dark One back. There had been a potion recipe that called for catgut . . . or he thought there had been.

"Alina would never forgive you, sir," Alice said.

"Humph! I'd buy her a replacement . . . a stuffed one," Gold said shortly, while Alice refilled his coffee cup.

Thank goodness he was going to work, where no ebony whirlwinds were allowed to wreak havoc in his shop.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Some days weren't worth getting up in the morning for, Gold thought after he'd come home from a rather trying day at his shop, where mishaps had occurred all day, starting with three rowdy kids chasing a lizard through his shop and knocking over several things while their mother had shouted uselessly at her little brats to stop before they broke something (too late because a crystal vase and a Chinese Ming pottery bowl had shattered). She had offered to pay for the items, practically begging his pardon, and Gold, who couldn't abide sniveling, especially in front of children, said he'd add the price gradually to her rent and waved her away.
As he'd swept up the mess, the green salamander scurried away under a cabinet, so now he had vermin hiding in his shop. Then old Mrs. Armbruster had come in and tried to get him to pay top dollar for an old necklace she insisted was real diamonds dug up from the Black Hills, where the Indians had hid them and her ancestor had found them long ago, before the massacre at the Little Big Horn.

Besides the fact that her ancestors didn't even come from this world, much less traveled outside of Storybrooke, and they'd found gold in the Black Hills, not diamonds, Gold could tell immediately that the necklace was nothing more than cleverly cut glass, good costume jewelry, but nothing else. When he'd told the widow so, she'd become highly indignant, accused him of trying to cheat her out of her "inheritance" and vowed to have him arrested for fraudulent practices! By the time she'd waddled, huffing and puffing, out the door, he'd had a headache.

And that was only the beginning. One of his rent checks had bounced, Granny's had run out of hamburgers, and a grungy customer had left greasy handprints all over his glass case and left without buying anything.

Now all he wanted to do was relax before dinner, maybe have some tea, and spend some time with Belle, but when he went to find her in the den, she was asleep, with a book over her face, and Nala, the obnoxious imp, was sitting in her lap like a Sphinx.

Gold bent to take the book off his wife's face and waved a hand at Nala. "Scat, cat! Go chase mice."

He set the novel on the small table beside Belle and went to sit down on the Chippendale and put his leg up, for now it was throbbing rather uncomfortably.

His eyes had begun to close when he felt something attack his foot.

"What in—hey!" he yelped as needle-sharp teeth nipped his ankle. He jerked his foot and a tiny body landed on his chest.

Opening his eyes, he found himself nose to nose with an emerald-eyed bewhiskered countenance. Nala mewed, and he scowled.

"You've got some nerve, you insolent dust ball. Go play in the street, with the other alley cats," he ordered exasperatedly.

To his everlasting shock, the annoying animal proceeded to turn about three times and curl up on top of him, lying on his chest and purring like muted thunder!

"You're pushing it," he told the little fuzzball. "The only reason I'm not making a trip to the animal shelter right now is because you're Alina's pet. But . . . I could always change my mind."

Nala gazed at him insolently . . . then yawned and began to groom herself . . . getting a blizzard of black hair all over his suit.

Gold vowed to make a sizable donation to the Storybrooke animal shelter this holiday season and include in it a box containing a certain black cat—free to a good home.

He glowered at the kitten purring contentedly atop his chest. "Who do you think you are—Bast herself?" he muttered. "I don't like you, even if your fur is softer than velvet. You shed like a sick sheepdog with mange and your purring could wake the dead."

He closed his eyes, doing his best to ignore the conceited feline perched on him. The blasted cat
had a purr like a rusty motor and he wondered why people found such a thing soothing. He surely didn't... not in a million years... until his eyes shut and he fell asleep.

Nala kneaded her spot a few times to get comfortable, then she too dozed, paws tucked under her slender body.

When Alice came into the den to call them for supper, she saw Nala sleeping atop the reclusive pawnbroker and snapped a picture with her cell. "Doesn't like cats, my left foot!"

Nala opened one eye and winked lazily. Then she went back to sleep, thinking that her human made a comfortable pillow.
Because it was Saturday this morning, Gold decided to do a rare thing—sleep until eight in the morning. He was dreaming happily of walking down the beach with Belle, somewhere it was warm and sundrenched, where he could admire his wife's shapely figure in private, and he moved his foot, cuddling closer to Belle and burying his face in her pillow.

_Mmm . . . the sun, the sand, Belle's coconut shampoo_ . . . he nestled closer, luxuriating in the fact that he didn't need to get up at six thirty . . . when needle-sharp teeth sank into his foot through the covers.

"Ahhh!" he yelped sharply, the lovely dream yanked away as a sudden stabbing pain shot up his leg.

"Rumple! What's wrong?" Belle cried. "Did you have a bad dream? Or is your leg going into spasms?" she raised her head to stare at her husband, her blue eyes still muzzy from sleep.

"Belle, something _bit_ me!" he gasped, yanking his foot back.

An instant later, the something pounced again and tried to gnaw on his other toe.

"Oww!" Gold shoved off half the covers and sat up, ready to beat whatever vermin had invaded his bedroom with his cane . . . only to see a black feline crouched amid the gold silk sheets, green eyes glowing with sadistic mischief as she planned to attack his feet again.

"Aww, look, Rumple!" Belle cooed. "She's playing!"

Her husband scowled. "Playing? That monster almost ate my foot!" He went to rub it through the sheets and the kitten sprang on his hand and attacked it. "Get off, you furry nuisance! Before I start looking for some pliers."

"Rumple! She's just a baby," Belle reproved. She made smooching noises and rustled the covers with her hand, and Nala turned and jumped at this new object, wiggling her tail and grabbing Belle's hand with all four paws. Laughing, Belle scratched the kitten's tummy, and Nala batted her hair with her paw. "You're such a sweet kitty!"

"Sweet kitty, my ass!" Gold growled. "I think she's a piranha with fur."

"Oh, don't be such a grouch," Belle said, and continued to play with the kitten.

"I was having a perfectly wonderful dream, dearie, until that featherduster with jaws interrupted it," Gold said, pointing an accusing finger at the kitten stretched out across Belle's knees. Now that was spoiled, he decided he might as well get up and get dressed.

"Are you going into the shop this morning?" Belle asked curiously, then winced as Nala yanked on her hair. She gently disentangled the kitten's claws and let the excited animal chew the ribbon on
"Maybe later. I need to do some work on my computer with the accounts this morning," he replied.

"That's right. It's the end of the month," Belle recalled. The end of the month was when the rent was due for most of the citizens of Storybrooke.

"Yes, and now I'm going to have some breakfast. Like toast and fruit, since Alice is off today," he said, putting his shoes on and grabbing his cane.

"Right, it's her anniversary. I hope she has a good time with Jeff at the cabin," Belle remarked, since the couple were using Gold's cabin for a romantic getaway for the day.

"I'm sure she will. I made sure it was stocked with wine, chocolate, and strawberries," Gold smirked, and winked at his wife, recalling their own evening of romantic passion a few weeks ago.

He reached for his smoky blue tie at the end of the bed, only to find a black paw atop it, as Nala stared up into his face, her black nose twitching. Gold snatched the tie up. "Put holes in my Ferragamo, and you're going to be the new therapy cat in the pediatric wing at the hospital... where grimy little fingers paw and yank your fur out, poke you in the eye, spit all over you, and hug you to death. Got me?"

Nala meowed.

"Rumple, you're terrible," Belle scolded. "She just wants you to pet her."

"I have a better idea. You pet her. I'm going to eat. And check on Rhea," he said, and limped out the door. His sister was still on bed rest, since the price of breaking the dagger curse had not been paid fully and she was as weak as if she'd had a bout of mono.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

After two hours of entering all the rent checks and cash deposits for the month, as well as printing and sending notices for those who had missed their deadlines, Gold decided to take a break and get a snack before he went crosseyed from staring at the computer screen.

As he limped into the kitchen to grab a handful of Alice's shortbreads from the cookie jar, he heard the familiar strains of the I Love Lucy theme coming from the den and poked his head in to see Alina and Belle watching TV and sharing a bowl of popcorn.

Once he'd finished backing up his Quicken session, he'd join them, he thought. He glanced about, looking for his furry nemesis, but couldn't see Nala anywhere. Hmm. Maybe I got lucky and she jumped out the window, he thought uncharitably as he turned and went back upstairs.

As he entered his study, he almost slipped on a pen that was rolling across the floor.

Frowning he bent and picked it up. Now how'd that get here? Then he saw more pens, and his leather pen holder, on the floor by his desk. "That blasted cat! I'm going to—" he began, then went mute in horror as he came around his desk and saw the furry menace sitting on top of his keyboard, washing a paw, while his computer monitor flashed a message—last session terminated unexpectedly, re-enter data. No! Oh, no!

"Dammit to hell!" he exploded. "You just deleted my rent for the month, you wretched beast! Now I'm calling a taxidermist!"
Nala looked up and saw the frothing, wild-eyed maniac bearing down on her, and fled for her life, just as a pen hit the keyboard where she'd been moments before.

His temper sizzling because now he had to re-do all the work it had taken him hours to input, Gold sat down at his desk again, and felt something crunch as he did so. Too late he remembered his shortbreads, which he had stuck in his pocket. *I wonder if Fed Ex accepts live animals? Because I'm regifting that menace to Henry this afternoon. As soon as I find a box, he's getting an early birthday present,* the pawnbroker thought balefully, and set about retrieving his program.

Things had been so much simpler when he had magic and could banish anything that annoyed him into thin air.

*Page~*~*~*~*~*~Break*

Monday morning found Gold rearranging some lucky Chinese cats on a shelf and thinking how lucky he'd be if Nala were turned into one, when the bell above the door rang and Archie Hopper, resident psychiatrist, entered the shop.

"Dr. Hopper. What can I do for you?" the pawnbroker asked politely, turning around.

"Hello, Mr. Gold. I have a book for you to read. Belle mentioned at her session this morning that you were . . . uh . . . having some problems with a kitten you recently got . . . so I thought you'd like to read this. It's a book on cat behavior." He handed Mr. Gold a slender volume with an orange cat on the cover.

"The Cat Whisperer—getting to the heart of cat behavior problems," Gold read the title aloud. "I don't need a book on behavior, Archie, I need a book on exorcism. The blasted animal's possessed."

Archie chuckled. "I doubt that, Mr. Gold. But I know the first few weeks you have a new pet can be trying. Pongo ate my moosehide slippers and ripped apart my pillow the first week I brought him home. I was sneezing feathers for months."

"That idiot cat deleted my computer file. The only reason it's not in a cardboard box on the street is because Alina begged me to give it another chance . . ."

"And it's really hard to say no when she gives you those puppydog eyes, isn't it?" Archie said knowingly.

Gold snorted. "And Belle promised to trim its nails before I got home," he added, refusing to admit that he couldn't bear to make his daughter unhappy. *You're going soft, old dragon.*

"You know, maybe once you get to know the kitten, you'll . . . umm . . . get along better with her. Cats are good for your blood pressure," Archie told him.

"That a fact? Because this one's probably made mine go through the roof."

"It's said a cat's purr relaxes the blood vessels and makes them wider, there's a fascinating study they did in New York about it—" Archie began.

"Yes, and I'm sure afterwards they gave the subjects to the Museum of Natural History for the Egyptian exhibit," Gold remarked snidely. "Thank you, Archie."

"You're welcome, Mr. Gold. I hope it helps," said the psychiatrist sincerely.

"It'd better. Or else the animal shelter is going to have a new addition for their Adopt-A-Pet day,"
the pawnbroker said, and tuck the book in his pocket to read on his lunch break.

The book offered a few solutions to his furry problem that didn't involve euthanasia, explaining how to redirect a cat's natural curiosity and interest, and also recommended buying a program to cat-proof your computer called Paw Sense. Gold ordered it online on his phone and had it rush shipped to him that very afternoon. He also called the Storybrooke petshop and had them deliver a package with every cat toy they owned plus a scratching post and some Temptations cat treats to his house.

That ought to keep the little devil busy, and out of my hair, he thought, looking forward to finally having some domestic tranquility when he got home.

A woman came in and was examining some woven baskets with merino wool blankets in them when all of a sudden she started screeching as a green salamander ran over her foot.

Hells, I forgot that slimy thing was still running loose in here! Gold thought as he came forward to soothe his hysterical customer. "Miss, it's just a salamander, I'm so sorry. Please, calm down before you hyperventilate . . ." Blast it, there goes another sale unless I can find the pest and get rid of it.

Nala chased a wind-up toy mouse across the rug as Gold finished reading the book Archie had given him that night. The former sorcerer eyed the racing kitten thoughtfully, recalling what he'd just read about redirecting a cat's instincts and then he got a perfect idea.

Cats were predators, born to stalk and hunt.

And there was a certain green intruder that he needed to get rid of and the solution was running about right in front of him.

Okay, cat. Tomorrow you're going to earn all those cat treats I just bought you, and actually serve a purpose other than driving me to drink. Tomorrow you're going to become my shop cat and we'll see if you can redeem yourself. Belle's always saying everything deserves a second chance. So here's yours. Otherwise there's a cage with your name on it waiting for you at Storybrooke Animal Center.
Chapter Summary

Nala hunts down the salamander in Gold's shop and earns her crochety master's regard

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Rumple?" Belle asked him the next morning when he told her his plan. "I mean, your shop has a lot of breakable things in it."

"Yes, I know," he replied, carefully knotting his tie. "But the cat can catch the salamander quicker than I can."

"She could also break things. Maybe you should . . . I don't know . . . put mattresses on the floor or something," Belle suggested, brushing her hair as she sat on the bed.

"I was going to remove the breakables and pack them in crates until she found the lizard," Gold said.

"How long will that take you?" Belle asked.

"Not long with Bae and Archie helping me," Gold answered. "After that I can let her hunt."

"Are you sure she can do it, Rumple? She's just a kitten."

"Belle, she's a cat. And all cats can hunt. This is her chance to show me she's good for something besides being a nuisance that deletes computer files," Rumple said quietly.

"Just remember, Rumple, she's not a full grown cat yet, so it might take her longer than you'd think to find the salamander and catch it," Belle said.

"She's going to have almost a whole day. And if that isn't enough, tomorrow also," Gold replied. "Now . . . where is the little whirlwind of destruction?"

"Last I checked, she was sleeping on Rhea's feet," Belle said. "Let me go get her."

Soon Belle returned cradling Nala in her arms. The kitten purred drowsily as Rumple opened the soft cat carrier he'd bought and Belle put the kitten inside. Then he zipped up the door flap and said, "Okay. We're ready to go."

"I'll help you carry her downstairs," Belle said, taking the carrier from him. "Now don't forget to reward her with some treats once she catches the salamander, Rumple. And don't forget to feed her too, she needs to eat three times a day. Alina fed her this morning, and I've packed a bag with some treats, dry food, a dish, some toys, and some cat milk in the blue bag downstairs."

"All that for a cat? It's almost like we have a baby," Gold sniffed.

"She is a baby, Rumple. Just one with fur," Belle told him firmly. "Now be nice to her."

"Please. It's not like I use her as a punching bag," Gold snorted.

"No, but you ignore her. Pet her every now and then. You won't die if you do."
"I don't like cats, Belle. Especially not ones that delete my rent," her husband grimaced.

"Rumplestiltskin! That was an accident! Did you punish Alina when she was two that time she turned off your computer when you were doing a web search?"

"No, of course not! She didn't know any better. But this is different."

"No, it's not. Nala didn't know what she was doing either when she sat on your keyboard," Belle argued. "Now I want you to promise you'll be nice to her."

"Belle, if the little menace catches that salamander, I'll buy her salmon for dinner and she'll be the most spoiled cat in Storybrooke," Gold pledged, as he walked downstairs.

Once they got to the bottom of the stairs, Belle said, "Hey, did you eat anything?"

"Bae's bringing bagels with cream cheese and butter and coffee. I'll eat at the shop. Let's put her in the car." He picked up the blue bag with all the cat stuff and carried it while Belle carried Nala.

Belle placed the carrier on the front seat of the Cadillac while Gold got in the driver's side and put the cat bag on the floor behind his seat. "Have a good day at work, Rumple. And good luck."

"See you later, dearie," Gold waved.

Nala meowed the entire time he was driving to the shop, until he longed to shove her and the carrier out the window into the woods. By the time he reached his shop, his ears were ringing and he wished he'd brought earplugs. How the hell did one tiny kitten make so much noise? Maybe she was related to a banshee.

He unlocked the door to the pawnshop and then brought the cat bag inside and set up the disposable litter tray in the back room and then brought the cat carrier inside.

Then he called Bae on his cell and told him he had arrived, and Bae said he would stop and get bagels on his way there, and then Gold called Archie as well. After that he went and took most of the breakables down from the shelves nearest the back room and carefully boxed them.

Bae and Archie came soon after that. They all ate some bagels and drank coffee and together they finished removing everything even remotely fragile and boxing it up.

"Okay. Now let's take her out," Gold said, and went in the back and opened the carrier.

The kitten was sitting inside, but shortly after the carrier was opened, Nala crept out, slipping from the carrier and into the main room of the shop, moving like a slinking shadow about the place, sniffing at all the nooks and crannies.

"Shoot! Maybe I ought to have shown her where her litter box is first," Gold sighed. "Kitten, you'd better not pee anywhere over here, otherwise Neal's going to take you home for Henry."

"Papa, relax. Cats usually don't do that, that's puppies," his son soothed.

"And if she's already litter trained, she won't go anywhere else," Archie seconded. He had been told in strictest confidence by Belle that Neal Cassidy was really Baelfire Gold, Mr. Gold's son, who had run away as a teenager, gotten in trouble with a gang, been adopted by the Cassidys, and then was reunited with his father, Emma, and Henry this spring.

The three men watched as the kitten trotted all over, investigating every corner, crawling beneath
all the shelves and even jumping up on a few of them.

Gold scuffed his cane against the floor impatiently.

Nala pricked her ears and trotted over to investigate, batting at his pant leg.

"Hey! Hunt the salamander, not me," Gold ordered.

Nala suddenly sprang up on his shoulder and nuzzled his neck.

Gold froze.

"Aww! She really likes you, Gold," Archie grinned.

"Yeah, she sure does," Bae agreed, then added, "I think she wants you to pet her, Papa."

Gold grimaced. "I'll pet her after she does what I brought her here to do. Catch me that salamander."

Nala nuzzled him relentlessly, pushing her little head against his cheek, and purring like a washing machine gone berserk.

"I don't think she'll leave you alone unless you give her some love, Gold," Archie predicted.

Gold gritted his teeth. "You're an impossible animal," he scowled and brought his hand up and patted her gently. "There! Now go and hunt!"

To his shock, the cat rubbed against his hand and made an odd sound. "Mmrrt!"

Heaving a sigh, Gold stroked her again, marveling in spite of himself at how soft her fur was. Abruptly he recalled he had an audience and coughed slightly. "Okay, Nala. Hunt! Go get that blasted lizard. Or else no cat treats."

Nala rubbed his cheek once more, purring happily.

"How about no dinner?" Gold threatened.

The kitten remained on his shoulder.

"Maybe she wants to make a deal with you, Papa," Bae suggested, his eyes twinkling.

"Oh, real funny, Neal," Gold said sarcastically. When the kitten still didn't move, the pawnbroker reluctantly muttered, "Fine! I'll make a deal with you, cat. If you catch the salamander in my shop, I'll buy you a salmon dinner and let you sit on my lap."

Nala looked at him, her whiskers twitching. She made another odd sound. "Prrrtt!"

Then she sprang down from Gold's shoulder and sauntered across the floor, her tail up.

"Looks like the deal's struck, eh?" Bae chortled.

"You're a riot," Gold rolled his eyes at his son.

The three men watched, as avidly as spectators at a football game, as the small midnight colored kitten stalked to the middle of the floor and hunkered down like a furry sentinel. Her tail twitched once and was still, and she lowered her head and froze into stillness, an ebony bas relief upon the
biscuit-colored tile. Her green eyes seemed to grow even larger in her pointed face as she listened and waited for her quarry to show itself.

Minutes ticked by and still the cat did not move, just sat there, watching and waiting with infinite patience.

No one else moved either.

Suddenly, the kitten's ear flicked towards the right side of the shop, where the wicker baskets with the merino blankets were situated, right beneath the shelf with the two creepy looking dolls sitting on it.

Nala's eyes orientated on the spot and she slowly rose into a crouch, her tail curling slightly over her back, rump elevated as she prepared to spring.

A tiny green head poked out of the baskets.

The three men exhaled slightly, and the tension in the room built.

The anole crept out from behind the baskets and darted up the side of the wall, towards the shelf with the dolls.

Gold's gaze darted to the kitten, who seemed to have become a statue.

Until she exploded into a midnight flash and streaked across the floor to bat the crawling lizard down from the wall.

"Yeah, baby!" Bae cheered. "Get that darn lizard!"

And the chase was on.

Nala chased the salamander all over the shop, leaping over the rest of the objects on the floor, jumping onto the shelves as the salamander scurried along them, searching desperately for a hiding place.

But the kitten stayed right on its tail, and the frantic lizard was forced into racing along the counter.

Nala suddenly ran and jumped in one graceful leap from one end of the glass counter to the other, batting at the startled anole with her paw.

The lizard skidded to a halt and doubled back on its own trail, surprised by the sudden maneuver.

"Go, Nala, go!" Archie cried. "This is better than watching Animal Planet."

"You actually watch that?" Gold commented.

"Yeah. Especially Cesar Milan. It's very educational," the psychiatrist said. "Get 'em, Nala!"

Nala galloped after the running amphibian, batting it with her paws, claws unsheathed, green eyes alight with the joy of the hunt.

All three men were half-crouched at one end of the counter, cheering on the pursuing feline.

"Atta girl, Nala! Who wants a salmon dinner, pretty kitty?" Gold blurted, not even realizing what he was saying.
Bae smirked and chuckled, "Eat 'em up, baby girl!"

"C'mon, you got him, kitty!" Archie hooted.

Nala flicked her ears back at their encouraging babble, then gathered herself as the anole ran down the side of the cabinet and made a mad dash for the baskets against the wall.

"Now, kitten!" Gold encouraged. "Get the slimy little scumsucker!"

Nala leaped, soaring across the shop as if she was some magical beast . . . to land right in the center of the baskets.

The salamander backpeddled frantically when it saw the cat before it.

Too late.

Nala pounced, and caught the offending lizard in her jaws, shaking her head once, sharply.

The salamander went limp and the kitten trotted proudly over to Gold and deposited it at his feet.

Then she sat down, her tail curled neatly about her paws, and looked up at him regally, as if to say, well, I've kept my end of the deal. How about you?

Gold stared down at the cat he supposedly disliked. Then he knelt carefully on one knee and stroked the little feline's head. "Good girl, Nala! There's my good girl!" Then he dug in his pocket and pulled out a handful of cat treats. "Here you go. Have some tuna snacks."

As the kitten crunched the treats out of his hand, Archie and Bae applauded gently.

"Wow! That was better than Monday night football," said Bae. Then he knelt to pet Nala as well. "See? And you said you didn't like cats, Papa."

"I don't," Gold said automatically. Then he stroked the little cat again and amended, "Well, maybe just a little bit."

The kitten finished her treats and nudged Gold's hand, meowing.

"I think she's hungry," Gold said. "And I owe her some salmon. Neal, run over to the grocery store for me and get some, will you?"

"How much?"

"A pound is good, we can eat the rest for dinner tonight. I'll put it in my mini fridge in the back till I go home," his father said, and handed him some money.

"Be right back," his son said, then opened the door to leave, the CLOSED sign jingling as he did so.

Suddenly, a black and white head squeezed its way past his legs and Pongo entered the shop, his tail wagging as he caught sight of Archie.

"Pongo, no, boy!" Archie began and went to grab the dog by the collar before he saw the kitten at Gold's feet.

But the Dalmatian had already spied the furry newcomer and whuffed gently and walked towards Nala, sniffing at the strange black kitten curiously.
"Hopper, my cat!" Gold hissed, trying to block Pongo's view of Nala, but it was too late.

Pongo came and lowered his big head, snuffling the tiny cat.

To Gold and Archie's shock, Nala did not attempt to bolt away from the dog, or arch her back and spit at him. Instead the two touched noses and then Nala reared up and batted Pongo's ears.

Pongo's tail went back and forth like a metronome, and he panted happily as the kitten wound in and around his paws, purring.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!" Archie exclaimed. "How about that? Looks like you've made a new friend, Pongo."

The Dalmatian whimpered and lay down, his tail wagging hard against the floor, and Nala cozied right up to him and rubbed her whole body across his face, twining her tail about Pongo's snout, totally without fear.

"That's . . . amazing!" Gold whispered, watching the cat and dog interact. "They're supposed to be enemies."

"Maybe she can sense he means no harm to her," Archie said, smiling. Then he chuckled. "Will you look at that?"

Nala had jumped up on Pongo's back and now sat there, like some kind of trick rider in a circus, her tail wrapped about her paws, her emerald eyes slitted, looking as serene as a statue of Bast in an Egyptian temple. I am Cat. Hear me roar.

Gold found himself smiling in spite of himself at the proud little feline. "She's like . . . the queen of all she surveys."

"And Pongo's her horse," Archie laughed. "Ah, well, that's a cat for you. They always have to be on top."

"Isn't that the truth," Gold admitted, chuckling slightly. Then he recalled the dead salamander by his foot, and limped into the back of the shop to get a dustpan and a broom and clean it up.

As he was bringing the dead amphibian into the back to dispose of it, the shop bell tinkled warningly and the mayor of Storybrooke entered, giving Archie a cold glance and then staring down at the dog and the cat upon the floor.

"What is this, Hopper? Some kind of stupid animal therapy? Why is your mutt in here? And this mangy alley cat?" she sneered. "Where's Gold?"
"Regina," Gold declared frostily. "To what do I owe this visit? Come to sell off mommy's magic mirror?"

"Gold. I thought this was a no pets zone," Regina stated coldly. "This is supposed to be a pawnshop, not PetCo." Her black heels stopped short of Pongo's paws.

The dog gave a low whine and cringed away from Regina slightly.

Nala suddenly laid back her ears and gave a full-throated hiss of rage, her green eyes blazing, her fur fluffed out like she'd been electrocuted, arching her back in the classic scary Halloween cat pose.

Regina laughed. "Is that supposed to frighten me, you little hairball? Why don't you go get lost?"

Nala growled deep in her chest, and Pongo barked sharply.

"Go away, before you meet with an accident, you hairy beasts!" Regina ordered, waving her hands at the pair.

Nala hissed again, then fled, racing right up Gold's suit and onto his shoulder, where she crouched, her eyes wild, and tail lashing agitatedly.

Gold reached up and petted her automatically. "Don't you have better things to do than frighten my cat, Regina? What do you want?"

Regina's pretty mouth curled into a sharp frown. "Is that any way to greet a potential customer, Gold?" She leveled a finger at him. "I could have you closed down for unsanitary practices, you know."

Gold ignored her threat. "What do you want, Regina?"

"A moment of your time, pawnbroker." She turned to Archie. "We're doing business here, Hopper. Go talk to your doggie, Dr. Dolittle, and give us some privacy."

"Of course, Mayor Mills," Archie said quickly, and snapped his fingers at Pongo. "Come on, Pongo. Let's go, boy."

The Dalmatian went with him, giving a backward glance at Gold as he followed Archie from the shop, leaving Regina alone with the shopkeeper.

Gold arched an eyebrow in query. "Well?"

"I want this appraised," Regina said shortly, and pulled out a gold necklace with an emerald on it. She laid it down on the counter.

"Do I look like a jeweler?" Gold asked sarcastically.

"You know the price of gold," Regina said shortly. "Now tell me what it's worth."

"One moment." Gold bent down to retrieve a jeweler's loupe from a drawer beneath the cabinet, and Nala stepped off his shoulder and sat on the counter as he did so.

"Watch it, cat. Before I send you on a one way trip to the meat factory," Regina said, eyeing the little feline with distaste.

Gold stood, loupe in hand, and moved to block Regina's view of Nala. "Leave the cat alone,
Regina. Or do you get off terrorizing helpless animals the way you do kids?"

Regina stiffened. "What are you implying, you creepy shyster? What tales has Henry been telling you? He's been brainwashed!"

"Guilty conscience, dearie?" Gold taunted, picking up the necklace and examining it with the loupe.

"Just do your job, Gold! How much is it worth?"

"Quite a bit, dearie. But not monetarily," Gold said, laying the necklace down on the counter. "The emerald is flawed. But then, you already knew that. Why are you trying to pawn Snow White's necklace?"

Regina flinched slightly. "That's not her necklace. It belonged to my mother."

"And where'd she get it, dearie? Ever ask yourself that?" Gold hissed, his eyes hard.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying your mommy conned a ten-year-old girl out of a necklace her papa gave her. But instead of asking how, you ought to be asking why," Gold said icily.

"So what? What do I care? All I want to know is . . . how much will you give me for it?"

"Nothing, dearie. I don't deal in stolen goods."

"What? You can't be serious!"

"Oh, I am. I have a reputation to uphold," Gold answered.

"You make deals with everyone, Gold!" cried Regina, incensed.

"Not with thieves, dearie. Professional policy."

"You're going to regret this, pawnbroker!" Regina growled, and swept the necklace back into her purse.

"I doubt that, Regina. But go ahead and think that if you like," Gold said, and gave her a mocking bow.

Regina slammed the door of the shop so hard the sign fell down.

Nala spat and ran to hide behind Gold.

Gold knelt and made soft noises to the frightened cat. "Come now, dearie. It's okay. The Evil Queen's gone. Don't be scared. The nasty lady's run away." He clucked softly to the kitten crouched under the cabinet. "Come on, baby. Come to Papa, I'll protect you."

Slowly, Nala crept out from under the cabinet and he picked her up in his arms.

He stroked the velvet fur and murmured endearments into one pricked ear, as he used to do when Alina was a baby and wouldn't stop crying.

Gradually, the little cat calmed and the fur along her back relaxed and she ceased shivering.
He was so engrossed in soothing Nala that he didn't even hear Bae return with the package of salmon until his son said, "Are you sure you don't like that cat, Papa? Because it looked like you were sweet talking her awfully good."

Gold jerked his head up so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash. "Uh . . . oh, Bae. You're back. Did you get the salmon?"

"Right here," Bae handed him the wrapped package of fish.

"Good. Hold Nala while I go and cut this," he said, handing Bae the kitten. "And be gentle, Bae. Regina scared her."

Bae took the kitten and cuddled her. "You poor thing! I'm not surprised. She'd scare the hair off a grizzly."

Gold hurried into the back room to get a knife, he kept a set of cutlery in there in case he needed it for lunch. After he'd diced up the salmon for Nala and put it in the two-sided dish Belle had given him, and then poured some cat milk into the other side, he carried it back out to where Bae was holding Nala.

"Oh, look at that, baby," Bae crooned, setting the kitten down on the counter. "See, Papa doesn't break deals with you, huh?"

Gold winced. "I'm sorry," he said, and set the dish on the counter.

Nala began eating hungrily.

"Me too," Bae said. "I shouldn't have brought it up. It's done and over with."

"But you'll never forget it. Any more than I will," his father said regretfully.

"Don't," Bae said, and put a hand over his father's. "Sometimes my mouth runs away with me. It's like a disease." He shook his head. "What did the Evil Queen want?"

"To sell me something that didn't belong to her. I told her to take her business elsewhere," Gold replied.

Bae smirked. "Bet she loved that!" He scratched Nala around the ears. "I missed all the good stuff, huh, sweet thing?"

Nala continued devouring the salmon, then began to drink the milk on the other side, her tiny tongue lapping it up like a pink ribbon.

"You want me to help put all this stuff back where it belongs?" his son asked then.

"If you wouldn't mind, yes."

"I don't. Where's Archie?"

"She ordered him away," Gold explained. He gave the kitten a rub before he turned to unpack a crate behind the counter.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Father and son had just finished putting everything back in its place and Gold had taken the empty dish from Nala and brought it in the back to rinse it in the sink and put it back in the blue bag when
the shop door rang and he heard a boy's shrill voice cry, "Look, Mom! A black cat! Black cats are evil. I wonder if it has rabies."

"Ethan, leave that animal alone, it could bite you," the mother ordered.

"Aww, Mom! I just wanna pet it. C'mere, kitty! You look like the cat from Halloween!"

Then he heard Nala let out a sharp meow and Bae say sharply, "Hey, kid! Don't pull her tail! What's wrong with you?"

"Oww! Mom, that evil cat scratched me!" the little boy whined.

"Ethan, I told you not to touch it!"

Gold came out to find a little blond boy holding his hand and whimpering, Nala hiding behind the counter again, and a harried woman in her mid-thirties standing next to her son. Bae was leaning on the corner of the counter, giving the kid a frown.

"What's going on here? Can I help you, Mrs. Bloomberg?"

"Mr. Gold, I . . . I've come to . . . give you this against the rent I owe," Mrs. Bloomberg began, removing a box from her purse.

"Mom! That nasty cat scratched me!" whined her son, showing her his hand, which had a narrow pink line on it. "Look, I'm bleeding!" He gave Gold a mean look. "Your cat's a wicked animal!"

"Ethan! Mr. Gold, I'm so sorry!" his mother looked like she wanted to die.

Gold gave the little brat a sharp Look. "That's what happens to little boys who pull cat's tails."

Ethan gasped and shrank away. "How'd you know?" he whimpered.

"I know everything that goes on in my shop, boy," Gold said, his voice soft but menacing. "Next time keep your hands to yourself."

The boy went to hide behind his mother.

Gold ignored him, and opened the box Mrs. Bloomberg had given him, revealing a pair of antique gold and ruby earrings. "This is sufficient to pay the rest of what you owe," he told the woman.

"Thank you, Mr. Gold," she said, then she turned to her son. "Come on, Ethan, before you get in more trouble. You know better than to hurt an animal that way!"

"Mom, I didn't do nothing! That cat's just mean. It's evil, like a witch's familiar!" her son whined, and then he shoved open the door of the shop. "Let's get outta here, Mom!"

"Hey, close the door before you let the cat out!" Bae snapped.

"Hurry up, Mom!" Ethan shrilled, still holding the door open. "You're so slow!"

As Mrs. Bloomberg hurried towards the door, the wind gusted suddenly and caused an old leather ball with a star on it to fall off a shelf and land on the floor with a thump.

The loud noise startled the already nervous Nala, who darted out from behind the counter and crouched just before the doorway.
"Ahh! The evil cat's after me!" screeched Ethan.

"Close the door, kid!" Bae cried. "No, Nala, c'mere!"

Petrified by all the shouting and noise, Nala bolted, running right out the door.

"Oops! Run, evil kitty!" snickered Ethan.

Bae wanted to strangle the little brat. "Move it, kid!" he ran out the door, trying to see which way Nala ran.

But he was too late. There was no sign of the little cat anywhere.
"Stupid kid!" Bae muttered angrily as he looked up and down the street.

But Nala was gone. His heart sinking, Baelfire started walking along the sidewalk, hoping to catch a glimpse of the little cat somewhere nearby.

Mr. Gold grabbed his keys and limped out of the shop, locking the door as he did so. Mrs. Bloomberg was wringing her hands agitatedly. "Mr. Gold, I'm so sorry. Now look what you did, Ethan! Mr. Gold—"

"No time to chat, dearie," Gold said sharply. "I have a cat to find." He shoved past her rather rudely, longing to take her son and shake him hard for letting his cat run away. He limped up to where Bae was standing on the sidewalk. "Did you see her yet?"

"No. No sign of her. But I'll keep looking. How far could she have gone in two minutes?" his son said agitatedly. "Look, I'll go down here and you go the opposite way and see if you can spot her, okay? We'll meet back here in . . . an hour."

Gold just nodded. He knew without having to hear it that if they couldn't find the kitten in an hour, she was lost and might never come home. He started down the street, towards the town hall, looking in all the doorways of the businesses and occasionally making soft smooching noises and calling Nala's name.

But his heart was heavy within him. Alina would never forgive him if something happened to her pet. Hell, he wouldn't forgive himself, especially because the cat had run away on his watch. Of course, he couldn't have predicted that Bloomberg kid would leave the shop door open, or that Nala would become startled and run, but still . . . he'd promised to look after the kitten and now she was gone.

He felt his stomach clench in fear as he considered all the things out here in Storybrooke that could hurt a cat. Like cars, people, animals. And the kitten was so small and helpless . . . well, she could run like a black streak of lightning, and he claws were ultra sharp, so maybe not so helpless . . . but it was still dangerous out here.

He thought of how, had it only been a few days ago, he had wished the kitten gone and now that she was missing, he felt nothing but anxiety, regret, and fear. I said I don't like cats. But, may God listen, I like this one. She's my cat, and I just want to find her and bring her home.

He limped along, cursing his slow progress. He passed several people, and paused to ask if they'd seen a little black kitten run by. They looked at him as if he were off his rocker and shook their heads. He continued on past Granny's diner, though he looked carefully around there, figuring the
kitten might have been drawn to the smell of food.

_No, she's already eaten, remember? Just before that little brat came in and pulled her tail, she'd finished the salmon and milk._ "Nala! Here, kitty!" he called, fearing he sounded like the world's biggest idiot. But he didn't care.

All that mattered was finding the kitten.

It was starting to get busy now, as people were driving back to work, their lunch breaks over, and the amount of cars on the street concerned Gold greatly. He prayed Nala would stay away from the road.

He came up on the town hall, and saw Regina's Mercedes parked in her usual spot, the one reserved for the mayor. Pausing a moment beside a large oak tree, he heard a loud snarling and barking coming from the back of the building.

Then he heard a soft hiss, and more growling.

"What on earth?" he muttered to himself, and limped about the side of the town hall.

There, by some large trash bins, crouched his missing kitten, her fur on end, being attacked by a rather large mongrel of undetermined heritage.

The dog was about forty pounds, the color of mud, with short bristly fur and a face that had a rather short snout, corkscrewed ears, and tiny yellow eyes. It was one of the ugliest dogs Gold had ever seen, even counting those in the fairy tale realm. And it was snarling at his cat.

It was at times like these that Gold wished he had his magic back. He could have sent this wretched beast howling with a flick of his finger then. But since he didn't, he would have to make do with what he did have. Because otherwise, his cat was about to become some mongrel's lunch.

He stopped and picked up a rock near his cane.

Then he took careful aim, he wasn't a champion horseshoe thrower for nothing, and flung the missile right at the dog's head.

It hit the snarling animal smack in the head, causing it to yelp in shock and then whirl around to face him.

"Get, you mangy disgusting beast!" Gold shouted, waving his cane threateningly.

The dog growled, crouching, streams of drool falling from its open jaws.

"Go, before I smash your ugly face in!" the pawnbroker ordered, moving two steps forward and lifting his cane again. Usually with beasts like this, a show of force was all one needed. The rational part of his mind was shrieking _have you lost your mind? That brute could rip you apart, you need to call Animal Control, not take it on, you idiot! But by the time Animal Control gets here, your cat could be that monster's dinner!_ argued the other part of his brain. _Besides, nobody hurts my cat!_

The dog continued to hold its ground, too stupid perhaps to recognize Gold as a threat.

Suddenly Nala darted in front of it, trying to escape.

The dog, seeing its prey running, lunged after the kitten.
Gold brought his cane down hard on the mangy animal's shoulders and back. "Get, you wretched mongrel! Leave my cat alone! Leave . . . her . . . alone!"

A sudden fury possessed him, born of all the times he'd been a victim of those bigger and stronger than he was, all the times he'd seen bullies pick on those smaller and weaker, and he whacked the vicious brute with his cane several more times, ignoring the fact that the dog could have bitten his hand off.

Yelping in terror, the dog cringed under the onslaught and then bolted, its tail between its legs, running away down the street.

"Ha! Guess I showed that mangy thing, right, Nala?" Gold panted, lowering his cane and looking around for his kitten.

He expected her to be on the steps of the town hall or up the big oak tree.

Instead, to his horror, he saw her crouched beneath the rear wheels of Regina's Mercedes . . . and Regina was inside and had started the car.

Gold felt his heart, thundering in his chest, freeze, and he yelled, "Regina! Don't back up! Regina, wait!"

The mayor of Storybrooke glanced up and saw him. She gave him a hard uncompromising stare, her eyes cold as a witch's heart.

"Regina! Stop!" he cried, starting forward, one hand held out. He felt as if time had suddenly slowed to a crawl.

She turned away, her eyes glittering, and pulled out of the parking spot.

Nala had been preparing to run even as the car roared to life, and had just gotten to her feet when the Mercedes backed out.

Time resumed its course with a vengeance.

The rear tire struck her and she went flying . . . to land motionless in a heap near the curb.

"No! Oh no! No!" Gold whimpered, staring at the limp black body. "Regina! What have you done?!" he screamed, his voice gone hoarse with dread. He fell on his knees beside the still form of the lively black kitten, his hands reaching out uselessly to pick her up. "Nala! This can't be happening!"

The Mercedes halted and Regina stepped out. "Gold, what the hell is wrong with you?" she demanded coldly.

The pawnbroker looked up at her, grief etched all over his face. "You just . . . ran over my kitten!"

Regina raised an eyebrow. "Really? Oh, that's too bad. What was it doing in the road? Is it dead?"

"You stupid . . . I told you to stop, why didn't you listen?" Gold cried, stroking the limp form, a lump in his throat, as grief slowly began replacing the anger he felt.

"I was in a hurry," the mayor replied. "I thought you just wanted talk."

Suddenly Bae jogged up, followed by some other curious people. "Hey! What happened?" he called upon seeing his father kneeling in the gutter, unmindful of the dirt getting all over his six-
hundred dollar Armani suit. "What—oh God, no!" He put a hand comfortingly on his father's shoulder.

"Regina . . . she ran over . . . Nala . . . I told her to stop . . ." Gold whispered, tears stinging his eyes. He felt as if his heart were going to break in pieces.

"These things happen, Gold, when you let your animals play in the street," Regina said icily.

Gold bowed his head, thinking belatedly of how he had told Nala to go play in the street yesterday morning. But I didn't mean it. I didn't. Not really. Tears fell down his cheeks and onto her fur. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart . . ." he murmured, brokenly. He didn't know how he was going to face his daughter and tell her the cat had been run over. He stroked the sleek fur over and over and found himself babbling, "But I kept my promise . . . see . . . I'm holding you . . ." as he held the cat on his lap. Just moments before she had been vibrantly alive, running like a black flame about his shop, not this still limp thing . . . and he realized, too late, that he loved her. "It's okay, baby . . . I've got you . . ."

Bae glared at the mayor. "That's all you've got to say, lady? You just killed his cat and you don't even have the decency to apologize?"

"I said I was sorry, Cassidy."

"Don't you care?" Bae demanded sharply, his own chest aching. "You cold-hearted witch!"

Regina sniffed. "It's just an animal. Happens all the time. You should have kept it locked up." Her eyes swept over them disdainfully. "But . . . now you know how it feels to lose something and never get it back, don't you?"

Then she turned and got back in her car and pulled away from the street, a smug smile curling her lip as she glanced in the rearview mirror at the her broken enemy huddled on his knees cradling a dead kitten in his arms. That's what happens when you cross me, Rumplestiltskin.

"God, I'm so sorry—" Bae murmured sadly. Alina was going to be devastated and so was Henry. "It's almost like the witch did it on purpose. I'd bet everything I own that she did." He felt like running her over with his Harley. Several times.

Gold barely heard his son, all his attention was focused on the tiny animal in his hands. She was still warm, he thought, and he could feel her tiny heart pulsing in her chest, he thought inanely. Then his breath caught.

He could feel her heart beating.

"I think you need to call Belle, tell her what happened. We can have a funeral . . ." Bae squeezed his shoulder.

"A funeral . . . no . . . we don't . . ."

"Yeah, we do . . . she's dead."

"No. She's alive. I can feel her heart beating and she's breathing. We need to get her to the vet's, Neal. Immediately."

"She's not . . . dead yet?"
"No. Now help me up. We can save her . . . if we hurry. I hope."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, now who liked Gold beating up the dog with his cane? And who else cried when they read the part where Gold holds Nala after the accident—me, I was crying while I wrote it because it reminded me of when one of my cats died. Who can't wait for the next chapter?
Gold brings Nala to the vet to see if she can be saved

They rushed Nala to Dr. Doolittle, Storybrooke's vet, which happened to be just across the street, and as it was an emergency, she was seen immediately. The vet told them she was in shock, had some cracked ribs, but her vitals were good and she was lucky to be alive.

"How's that possible?" Bae asked in awe. "I mean, my . . . uh . . . Mr. Gold saw the car hit her."

"It could have just glanced off her. But cats . . . well . . . they're amazingly resilient . . . give them one chance out of ten and they usually make it," the vet said. "I've seen it before . . . you know the old saying, cats have nine lives? Well, this one proves it."

"How soon can she come home, doctor?" asked Gold shakily, still reeling from the fact that the cat he thought died in his arms was still among the living. It was truly a miracle.

"Uh . . . I'd like to keep her overnight for observation, give her some antibiotics and fluids with an IV, just in case . . . but I really think she's going to be fine, Mr. Gold. I'll call you in the morning when she's ready to come home," Dr. Doolittle smiled. "Cats really are amazing creatures . . ."

"Yes. They really are," Gold agreed, and he gave the vet a smile. "I think I need to call my wife and tell her that everything's going to be okay now."

Doolittle nodded. "You know, Gold, since I can speak to Nala directly, I need to tell you something. She told me how you rescued her from that vicious dog that nearly killed her before Regina ran her over. Said it was the bravest thing she'd ever seen, you standing up to that nasty brute. She considers you a hero."

Gold blushed in embarrassment. "She does? Umm . . . well, I had to do something . . . I mean, I couldn't let that mangy thing hurt her . . . so I just . . . drove it off with my cane . . . and I was so angry I didn't really think too much about what it could have done to me, just about saving her . . ."

"And that, my good man, is true courage," Doolittle said. "I'm happy I could save her. She's a most lovely animal, and she says she loves you very much, as well as the rest of her human family."

"And I . . . I love her too," Gold said, coloring further at that admission.

"I'll be sure to tell her you said so. It always helps the recovery process if those who are sick know they are loved and wanted at home," the vet said.

Then Gold added, "But you're not to mention I said that to anyone."

"Of course not. Patient confidentiality, you know. It exists between me and my animal patients and their human companions, so have no fear," Doolittle laughed.

Bae stared at the portly man in the white lab coat. "Hold it. You . . . really can talk to animals? And you . . . know it?"
Doolittle nodded. "I do. Just as I know about the curse over this town . . . and who you all are."

"How do you know that?"

"We have a mutual acquaintance, Jefferson. He brought me here, but it was my idea, I figured I might do some good as vet here, since Regina has no care for animals, and I . . . I've been here before, long ago. Different method of travel though. Jeff and I have been friends for years and he keeps me posted on what's new here since Emma came. So I know that you're Gold's son, Baelfire, and that he's regained his memories. That doesn't surprise me, since he's the most powerful sorcerer in the realms, or was once. And well . . . truth like love, is always difficult to keep locked away. Someone always finds out." Doolittle's eyes twinkled. "Surely you didn't think I told all my patients I could talk to animals, did you?"

"Uh, no . . . but they've got a book on you here. I've read it," Bae told him.

"Wonderful! I wrote that," Doolittle smiled. "Under a pseudonym, of course. I published it as a children's story, because children believe in things better than adults, who doubt everything and have forgotten how to look with their heart and not with their eyes."

"Please excuse me, I need to call my wife," Gold said, and walked over to the other side of the office.

As he dialed Belle on his cell, Doolittle turned to Bae and said, "Y'know, I never would have figured Gold for a cat person."

"I don't think he would have either. But Henry bought that cat as gift for Alina and well . . . I guess she kind of chose him," Bae told him.

Doolittle chuckled. "That's the funny thing about cats, they can take you or leave you, but once they decide they like you . . . they own you, not the other way around. You know how they say dogs are man's best friend? Well, man's a cat's best friend . . . if the cat chooses to be one. Nice talking with you, but I must get back to my patients."

Bae wondered if his father would agree with that philosophy. As he eyed the older man, now looking much more relieved and happy as he talked to Belle, he thought how ironic that the former Dark One's heart had been captured by a tiny black kitten. Cats really were magical animals, he smirked.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Gold was at the vet's bright and early the next morning to pick up Nala. He listened carefully to the instructions the vet tech gave him on Nala's care and made a follow up appointment in two weeks than he placed a rather groggy kitten in his car and drove home.

Belle and Alina were there to meet him as he got out of the car.

"Where do you want to put her, Papa?" asked his daughter, carrying the carrier. "Mama and I set up her cat bed and toys in the den near the fireplace."

"No. Not there. I want her to be where I can keep an eye on her," Gold disagreed. "Bring her upstairs, Alina."

As they walked down the hallway past the green guest room, they heard Rhea call, "So how's the patient, Rumple?"
"On the road to recovery, thank God," he called back.

"Good. But I already knew that," the Seer laughed.

"Then why'd you ask me?" he called back.

"To confirm it," she replied.


Alina's eyebrows rose. "In your room? But . . . I thought she wasn't allowed in there."

"I changed my mind," her father answered.

So Alina opened the door of the carrier and Nala walked out, still a little woozy from the pain med they'd given her. "Poor baby," Alina crooned, petting her. "Do you feel sick?"

"Probably. They shot you full of all those nasty drugs, didn't they?" Belle said sympathetically.

Nala blinked, then walked slowly over to Gold and meowed softly.

And Storybrooke's pawnbroker got down on one knee and picked up the little black kitten and crooned, "Okay, baby. Don't get excited. Your papa's here."

Mother and daughter watched in shock as Gold cradled the kitten to him and limped over to the bed and sat down, placing the kitten in his lap. "No broken deals for you, sweetheart." Then he stroked the kitten gently, moving his fingers lightly over the bandage wrapped about her torso, down her back to her tail.

Nala purred loudly, her green eyes at half mast. Then she curled up on his knee, tucked her nose into a paw, and fell asleep, safe and sound where she belonged, in the lap of her human.

"Thought you didn't like cats, Papa?" Alina queried.

"I didn't . . . but I changed my mind," her father answered, and ran his hand lightly across Nala's fur, happy beyond words that his fuzzy miracle was home to stay.

And when he happened to wake up the next morning to a black tail curled about his face and tiny paws patting his cheek, all he said was, "Okay, Nala, I'm up, give me a minute and I'll get you breakfast," to the sleek kitten curled up next to his head on the pillow, where all well-trained human pets let their cats sleep.

It wasn't long before word got out that if you wanted to see the most spoiled cat in Storybrooke, all you had to do was knock on the door of Gold's salmon-pink Victorian, which bore a sign on the entrance—*A Spoiled Rotten Cat and Her Pedigreed Human Family Live Here.*
Unwelcome Overture

Chapter Summary

Henry runs into Gold's shop to avoid an unwelcome overture and Regina confronts Mr. Gold

A week after Alina's birthday, a few days after Mr. Gold had brought her kitten, Nala, home from the vet's after nearly being killed by Regina, Henry started to notice someone watching him whenever he walked home from school or from the police station to Granny's diner with Emma. At first he just shrugged it off, but one day he caught a glimpse of Regina's Mercedes in a shop window he passed as he walked beside Alina, heading over to Gold's house, where he would stay and do homework and hang out with Alina until Emma or Bae came to pick him up.

"Alina, I think Regina's following us," he told the little girl as they passed the hardware store.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. I think . . . she wants to talk to me or something. But I don't even want to see her," Henry said, sounding a little breathless.

"Is she still following us?"

"Yeah. Her car just turned the corner," Henry said, and began to run down the street.

"Henry! Where are you going?"

"The only place safe. Your papa's pawnshop," he called, and then raced over to Gold's shop and yanked open the door, making the bell on the top jingle like crazy.

Mr. Gold looked up from rearranging a shelf and frowned. "Hey, there's no need to pull the door off, dearie. Now what can I—Henry? What's the matter?"

"I . . . I'm sorry . . . Rum . . . I just . . . she's after me . . ." Henry gasped, trying to get back the breath he'd lost in his mad dash down the street.

"Papa!" Alina yelled, also bursting into the shop like a miniature whirlwind.

"Just what is going on?" Gold demanded, alarmed. He walked over to where Henry was leaning on the end of the counter. "Who's after you, Henry?"

"Regina," he managed to say.

"Papa, she's following Henry, and she won't leave him alone," Alina reported.

Gold frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know. But I don't want to see her," Henry said. His face was flushed from his run.

"All right. You two, go in the back room and stay there. I'll keep Regina busy if she happens to come in here," Gold said. "Henry, there's some water or iced tea in the fridge back there if you
want a drink. I also have peanut butter cheese crackers and Nutella with bagel thins."

"Okay!" Henry said, and together he and Alina made a beeline for the back room, where Gold's office was and also some of his rarest items—the ones that were magical.

"Papa, can I pick something from back there?" his daughter called. "I never picked out something for my birthday present yet."

"Fine, dearie. But be sure to show it to me before you bring it home, so I can see what it is and tell you about it," Gold said.

The two children shut the door and dropped their backpacks in a heap beside Gold's desk, then Henry grabbed a small cloth hanging beside the fridge and wiped his face. "Let's get something to drink and then we can look around."

"Okay," Alina opened the small mini fridge in the corner, and took out two cans of Arizona. "Here," she tossed one to her nephew.

Henry opened the can and guzzled half of it down before he stopped and took a package of crackers from the shelf beside Gold's desk. As he ate them, he began to look about at the items that lined the walls and floor.

Alina did so too. There were slender wands carved of all kinds of wood, glass bottles of potions, a sparkling silvery dreamcatcher with blue feathers, some oddly shaped rocks colored an emerald green, parchment scrolls and maps, even a bow was hung on the wall.

Henry was examining a cloak made of some soft gray material, murmuring, "I wonder what this does?" when they heard the shop bell tinkle.

"Uh oh," Alina whispered, and she moved next to Henry and they put their ears to the door, listening.

Regina's Gucci heels tapped out a staccato rhythm as she walked into the pawnshop. "Gold, where's my son?"

Mr. Gold looked up at her from dusting a portrait. "Excuse me?" he said pointedly, turning around and giving Regina an icy glance. "You talking to me, Mayor?"

Regina stiffened. "Don't play games with me, Gold. I saw Henry come this way. Now where is he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Regina."

"He's here. I know he is," Regina snapped, glancing around.

"Really, dearie? I don't see him anywhere, do you?"

She bared her teeth in a forced smile and hissed, "Remember last time you played your little games with me, Gold? You ended up on your knees with a dead cat! Now where's my son?"

Gold leaned over the counter and gave her an equally grim stare. "As you can see, he's not here, Regina. See for yourself. Of course if you want to do a more thorough search, you'd have to get a warrant, and I doubt Sheriff Cassidy will give you one unless you have probable cause."

"You damn imp, where are you keeping him?" she spat. "I'm warning you, Gold . . ."
"Oh you are, are you?" suddenly Gold's voice lost its rather playful air and became hard as tempered steel. "Well, I'm warning you too, Regina. Stay away from my family. Or else."

Regina sneered at him. "Empty threats, old monster. You're helpless without your magic, *Dark One*. You're nothing without the power the dark magic gives you. Nothing but a crippled old man. You couldn't even save your stupid pet . . . all you could do was cry over it! Pathetic!"

"And what would you know about it?" hissed Gold angrily.

"You forget, I saw you crying your eyes out over that mangy alley cat," Regina laughed mockingly. "The great Dark One, sniveling like a child over a mere animal."

Gold stiffened, then said quietly, "Yes, I did shed a tear or two, but that's because I have a heart, unlike you, Regina. That's a strength, not a weakness. Tell me, how long did you spend crying over Henry before you started plotting your revenge, dearie? Five minutes?"

"Shut up!" Regina snarled. "Before I do more than just run over your cat!"

Gold clucked at her, like a schoolmaster at a misbehaving student. "Temper, dearie. You really should get all the facts before you start attacking someone."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that you *didn't* kill my cat, Regina Mills. She's alive . . . no thanks to you."

"Too bad," the mayor growled. "I want to talk to Henry."

"Like you just said . . . too bad," Gold returned. "Because he doesn't want to talk to you. He wants you to leave him alone."

"You've turned him against me!" Regina cried, thrusting out a hand.

Several items on the shelves trembled and nearly toppled over.

"Careful, dearie. You break it, you buy it," Gold warned, his eyes narrowed. "As for turning Henry against you . . . you did such a good job of that yourself, why would anyone ever try and match it?"

"I have the right to see my own son!" Regina stormed.

"No, you don't," Gold answered, his voice maddeningly calm and even. "You lost that right after that custody hearing."

"Another thing you engineered. What's your stake in all this, Rumple? What price did they pay to have you turn against me?"

"They didn't need to pay anything, Regina. Not after what you did to Belle," Gold growled, his eyes suddenly turning amber in fury. "And while you're standing there throwing threats at my head, here's one for you . . . start running once the curse gets broken. Because nobody hurts my wife and gets away with it!"

Regina shrank away slightly. Then she glared at him and said, "*If* the curse gets broken. I doubt your little savior has what it takes. And even if it does, you'll be back to your old self afterwards—as blackhearted and cruel as ever! And what will your little Belle say then, Rumple? Will she still love her precious Beast? Or will she run away in fear like she did before?"
"That's not going to happen, dearie. I'm not what I was. I've changed."

Regina laughed. "Have you? You can try all you want, Rumple, but I know better. The darkness has you fast and you'll never be free of it! You're like me . . . black to the core and you'll never change . . . no matter how many Belles you have to love you!"

"Try me, dearie," Gold said, his eyes glittering.

"I know you, Rumple. The dark magic is your strength. Without it, what are you?"

"More than you know, Regina Mills," Gold answered. "Much more. There's more than one kind of power in the world. You don't need dark magic to defeat an enemy. Not always. So start running, Regina."

"You lie—Dark One!"

"Sometimes, dearie," he sneered. "But only sometimes. Now, if you aren't going to make a deal, Mayor Mills, please leave my establishment."

"I'll leave when I'm damn good and ready, Gold!"

"Ah ah, dearie. Children who throw temper tantrums in public get sent to bed without supper when they get home," Gold said mockingly. "Or didn't your mommy ever tell you that?"

"I . . . am . . . not . . . a . . . child!"

"Could have fooled me, dearie." Gold crossed his arms over his chest. "Any minute now I expect you to start screaming and throwing things. Come on now . . . don't disappoint me."

"I'm going to kill you, Gold!"


"You're dead, Gold!" Regina shouted. Then she whirled on her heel and stalked out of the shop, reminding Gold sharply of a spoiled toddler denied a toy she wanted.

"Oh, Regina?" his voice floated after her. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

The shop door slammed so hard the bell fell down.

Gold sighed and went to pick it up. Then he locked the door and called, "You can come out now."

Henry and Alina burst through the connecting door of the back room.

"Papa, you were so awesome!" his daughter crowed.

"Yeah, you like totally kicked her butt," Henry added, grinning from ear to ear.

Rumple smiled. "I just won the first battle in an old old war, dearies. But, I have to admit . . . that was fun."

"As good as playing Hero Quest, Grandpa," his grandson stated.

"Papa, I think I want this," Alina said suddenly, going into the back room and picking up something from a shelf. She returned holding a slender wand in her hand. The wand was white with a deep blue stone in the handle. "What's this do?"
Rumple took the wand gently in his hand. "Ah. The wand of Tyndariel. Are you sure you want this, Alina?"

"Yes. When I touched it . . . it felt warm. And it . . . called to me," his daughter said quietly.

Gold sighed. "So. It's found its mistress then, after all these years. All right, dearie. It's yours." He handed the wand back to her.

"What's it do?"

"Many things. Tyndariel was a great mage, the last of the great elven enchantresses, before they retreated back into their forests and left the realms to humankind. And her wand . . . it's said it can perform miracles that no magician now living can. But one of the things it's known for is the power to heal. It can heal all wounds, even those made magically, even those from poison. As long as the person to be healed is three breaths away from death. But once the last breath leaves the body . . . that's it. You can't bring back the dead."

"And what's the price to use it?" Alina asked shrewdly.

"The wand can only be used three times in a week. And when performing a great spell . . . it draws on the magical energy of the wielder . . . without regard for anything . . . so be careful . . . it can kill you if it draws too much."

"What's it made out of?" she asked then.

"A magical wood called ashillion, it used to grow in our land, but the last tree died before I was born. And the stone is a pure star sapphire, drawn from the earth with magic. Sapphires are one of the best stones for storing magic. Use it wisely, Alina."

"I will. How'd you get it, Papa?"

"That, dearie, is a tale I must tell another time. You'd best be getting home to your mother, she'll be wondering where you two are," the pawnbroker said.

"Okay, Papa," Alina said, then she tucked the wand into her jacket pocket.

They gathered their bookbags and left the shop, and Henry waved and called, "See you at home, Mr. Gold."

Gold watched them leave, and he felt his heart grow heavy within him. He had told Alina that the wand was a powerful magical item, and that much was true, but he hadn't told her everything. Legend said that when Tyndariel's wand chose a new master or mistress, it would herald a time of great turmoil and danger.

Rumple could only hope that part of the legend was wrong.
Chapter Summary

Bae and Regina have quite a discussion

When Bae arrived at the Gold residence to pick Henry up after school that day, and Henry told him what had gone on with Regina and his grandfather, the normally calm and collected martial arts instructor had a fit. "I told her once before that if she bothered you, Henry, I'd slap her with a restraining order, and now she's gone and pushed me into it. Papa, how long will it take you to get one, or do I need to speak to Emma?"

"No, I just need to apply for one with Judge Moore," Rumple assured him. "We'll have to show probable cause, which we can do because Regina's been stalking Henry. I can probably obtain one in a few days to a week, but I'll get it for you, Bae."

"Good. Because I won't have Henry being bothered by her this way," Bae stated firmly.

Storybrooke sheriff's station

That same afternoon:

Emma Cassidy was no stranger to hard work, but the amount of disputes and new orders from the city council to increase the amount of patrols around Storybrooke smacked of a conspiracy, and she knew just who was responsible.

She had just finished speaking to her deputy, Marcus Green, and assigning him and his junior deputy the new patrol schedule, when the door to the station opened and Regina walked in.

Emma hadn't spoken with the mayor since the custody hearing, and from the look on the other's face, the blonde sheriff wasn't going to like what Regina was about to say. Then again, she rarely did. "Mayor Mills, what can I do for you?"

Regina came and stood in front of her, glowering at Emma as if she were a runaway teenager caught shoplifting. "When you were elected sheriff, Cassidy, I expected more than just some half-hearted effort to clean up this town. I expected you to make sure the citizens were safe and happy and instead I find there's been some more domestic disturbances and there was a dispute down at the Rabbit Hole last night that required police intervention. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Emma sighed. Clearly Regina was in a snit, and determined to take it out on her. "Leroy got intoxicated and shot his mouth off and the other patron reacted . . . well . . . a bit violently. But I took Leroy in for disorderly conduct and he didn't want to press charges, so I let it go. It happens. And sometimes there are domestic troubles that flare up, even in a town like this one, Regina. I'm doing the best I can, but my patrolmen and deputies are spread kind of thin. Maybe if I could get the council to extend my budget, I could hire more people . . ."

Regina's mouth thinned. "You don't need more money, Cassidy, you need more backbone. If you
couldn't do the job right, why bother running for it?"

Emma glared at her. "I'm doing the best job I can, and you know it. This isn't about me at all . . . it's about Henry. You're pissed off that I have him and you don't, so you're trying to make me look bad."

"Is that what you think?" Regina sneered. "Cassidy, I don't have to do anything except watch you fall on your face. And when you do, I can say, well, that's what you get for electing a former ex-con to be a lawman."

"If you think that's going to make Henry love you, think again," Emma said, her blue eyes hard. "Hurting me is only going to make him despise you."

"Or maybe it'll prove to him who's really the better mother here!" Regina snapped.

"No, it won't. All it'll prove, Regina, is how you're willing to go to any length for your revenge," Emma said. "And that won't win any points with Henry."

"I know my son better than you do, sheriff!"

"Do you? I don't think so, sister. Otherwise, he'd still be with you," Emma shot back.

Regina looked like she was about to explode. "Watch yourself, Cassidy. Because this isn't over! One way or the other, I'm taking back what's mine!"

"What's yours?" Emma demanded. "Regina, we're talking about a kid here, not a chess piece. If you truly wanted what's best for Henry, you'd leave him be."

"You're not what's best for him, Cassidy! And one way or another, I'll prove it!" Regina swore. "Even if I have to bury you to do it!" Then she reached inside her leather carryall and tossed an document onto Emma's desk. "New orders from the council, Cassidy. Better get cracking."

Then she strode from the room, leaving Emma staring at the new document and gritting her teeth.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Bae, Emma, Rumple, and Belle decided that for the time being, someone would always be available to pick Henry and Alina up from school, to prevent anymore scenes like the one that had happened that afternoon. Belle made a schedule, and wrote down different days Bae, Emma, or Rumple would be available to pick up the children.

After school they would be dropped off at Gold's house, where Alice, Belle, and Rhea would be home with them. Henry could do homework and play with Alina until his parents came and either they ate dinner with the rest of the family or went home and had dinner at their apartment.

Henry felt rather guilty at making the family go through all this trouble, and happened to mention it to Emma that night as they drove home. "I'm really sorry I'm causing all this trouble, Mom."

"Trouble? Henry, what are you talking about?"

"I mean, you having to come and get me from school because Regina keeps following me around," Henry said, looking down at his sneakers.

"Henry, this isn't anything you have to feel guilty for, kid. It's not your fault Regina won't keep her distance . . . or thinks she can just ignore a court ruling. Your father made it clear to her that she
"needs to leave you alone, since that's how you want it."

"What if . . . I change my mind?"

"Kid, you can talk to her if you want . . . but not without one of us there with you," Emma said. "But that's up to you. I thought you didn't want to see her."

"I sort of don't . . . because I know she's gonna try and convince me to come back with her . . . and I don't want to, Mom. I want to stay with you and Dad."

"Then you don't have to worry, Henry. Because you belong here with us and that's where you'll stay. Regina can see you—if you want her to, but it has to be your choice, and she shouldn't try and force you into it," Emma said firmly. "Not for any reason." Her blood boiled at the way Regina had made her poor son feel responsible for the mayor's actions. She reached out and ruffled his hair. "Now, what do you want to eat for dinner tonight?"

"Umm . . . how about . . . pizza?"

"Okay," Emma agreed, and when they all reached the apartment above Fire Mountain, she told Bae that's what they were eating for dinner. "We can go to that pizza place in Apple Ridge, what's it called again—Jerry's or something?"

"Yeah and we can get the super pepperoni special!" Henry stated.

"Oh, boy," Bae sighed. "Okay, tiger, it's your choice, but you know, nothing's as good as New York pizza."

Emma rolled her eyes at her husband. "You and your New York pizza, Baelfire."

"What? Emma, you just don't know what real pizza's like since you've never had it," Bae protested. "Please. Pizza's pizza."


"But you have?" Henry asked.

"Uh huh. I went to Manhattan for a tournament and I had some," Bae told him. "And it was like . . . incredible. And you know, tiger, once you've had New York pizza, you'll never settle for second rate pizza again."

"Spare me," Emma groaned. "How about we order Chinese instead?"

"Aww! But I really wanted pepperoni pizza," Henry said.

"Then we'll have pizza," Bae said. "And once this curse is broken, I'm taking you, your mom, your grandparents, and Alina to New York and we're all going to eat in Little Italy, and then you'll see what I'm talking about."

"Cool! I can't wait!" his son grinned.

"Bae, that's crazy," Emma protested. "We're going to hop a plane to New York just so we can eat pizza?"

"So what, wild swan? Papa has money to burn, he won't care. It'll be like a mini vacation. We can see the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, and go to the Met and Ferrara's and the

"It'll be awesome, Mom!" her son declared. "Can we eat now? I'm starving!"

"Okay, get in the car," Emma said. As Henry went to get in the back seat of the Bug, the sheriff said to Bae, "You'll never believe what happened today at work . . ."

Bae's face darkened as she told him about Regina's visit and the new orders from the town council. "Emma, she's pushing everyone's buttons. But one day, she's going to go too far and I'm going to give her a piece of my mind."

"Relax, Bae. I can handle it. I just have to keep learning magic with Rum and kung fu with you, and once I think I have a good enough grasp, I can break this curse."

"I know you can, Mrs. Cassidy," Bae said, pulling her to him and kissing her. "You can do anything you set your mind to."

Emma smiled, thinking her husband always made her feel as if she was something special. She would have returned the kiss, but Henry stuck his head out the window and cried, "Guys? Please do that some other time . . . I'm wasting away here!"

Laughing, Bae and Emma separated and went to get into the Bug. Bae winked at her before getting in the car. "Later, Emma."

"That a promise, Gold?"

"You bet, babe."

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In the week that followed, however, Emma was kept working around the clock, trying to meet all the new codes and patrols, and she was barely home. Bae and Henry saw her briefly in the morning before work, when they ate at Granny's, but she sometimes didn't come home until late at night, and Henry was usually asleep then. Bae was awake, doing katas in the dojo, but Emma was often so exhausted she barely spent ten minutes with him before she fell into bed, asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The two men took to eating over Rumple and Belle's, rather than resorting to sandwiches, Chinese, TV dinners, a box of pasta or hamburgers at Granny's every night. Rhea was recovering finally from her magical drain, and was able to join the family again for dinner, as well as speaking to Jack with her pendant.

"How is your husband? He catch Hook yet?" asked Rumple.

"Not yet. Jack says Hook's got a magic worker aboard, and whoever it is, is using magic to cloak his ship, which makes it hard for the Pearl to track her. But my daughter Jess is working on a spell to break the cloak, and once she does, they can engage," Vasilisa reported.

"Do they need you to go back and help?" asked Belle.

"Not yet," the Seer said. "It's not that I don't want to either, but . . . I'm not quite up to fighting a rival mage in a spell duel just yet. My magic's still a little . . . shaky yet. I'll need another week before I'm back to full strength. Jack told me to take my time, that they're just cruising around right
now, biding their time."

"I wish I could see that battle," Henry said wistfully.

"Maybe I'll write it down for you, Henry," his aunt said. "It's safer for you to read about it than to see it. Sea battles are usually messy and dangerous, especially when we start shooting ballista bolts at an enemy ship or throwing fireballs across the decks."

"Have you fought in a lot of them?" was his next question.

"Enough," the Seer nodded. "And they're not as glamorous as you think, boy. I lost some of my good friends to Hook and his crew," Vasilisa said darkly.

"Couldn't you . . . uh . . . predict the best way to win?" Alina asked.

"The Sight doesn't work that way, Alina," Vasilisa told her. "The future . . . it's always in motion, as possibilities go in and out of existence based on the choices people make from one moment to the next. I can See some possibilities, but nothing's ever written in stone. And sometimes what you See isn't always what you think."

"I don't understand," Bae said, puzzled.

"The future is like the branches of an oak tree," Vasilisa explained. "Branching all over, as possibilities are made and ended. And it's never straightforward. Let me give you an example. Suppose you Saw a Vision that your friend was going to walk across a meadow one day and fall in a hole and break his leg. That's not a good thing, right? So you decide to warn your friend, and then he won't break his leg."

"Okay. Is that wrong?"

"Well, let's say you do that and your friend walks across the meadow and avoids the hole he'd have broken his leg in. But then an ogre comes and attacks him and he runs away trying to escape it and falls off a cliff. A much worse fate, yes? Do you see what I mean?"

Bae stared at her. "Then how do you ever predict anything?"

"Very carefully, Bae," she answered. "It's why it takes years for a true Seer to learn how to use her Gift," Vasilisa said. "And anybody who tries to tell you otherwise is lying through their teeth."

"Then all those fortune tellers are full of it?" Bae asked.

"Well, not all of them. Some of them probably do catch glimpses of the future now and again, but a true Seer will always tell a patron that what they See may come true, not that it will, and it's never an absolute. Most people want absolutes and that's not possible most times. Because our choices now affect what you See in the future. It's why we don't make our living telling fortunes," Vasilisa told him. "And most of those who do are con artists."

"It sounds awfully . . . complicated," said Belle.

"It is, dearie," Vasilisa said. "Always has been and always will be. That's the curse of True Sight."

"Then I guess I'm glad I don't have it," Henry said.

"Oh, you have some," Vasilisa said then. "All magicians have a little. Only you call it intuition. And those who are related to a Seer . . . have more than most."
"So then your daughter has it?" Alina asked.

"Yes . . . but not a full Gift. Jess can use her Sight to See present events and past events, but can only catch glimpses of the future. And for that I thank all the gods," Vasilisa said fervently.

"All magic comes with a price," Rumple quoted softly, gazing at his sister sadly.

"Yes. No one knows that better than a Seer," Vasilisa said.

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Rumple's court order, however, pushed Regina into ever more rash decisions, as she struggled to gain the upper hand against the Gold family. Furious that they could use the legal system against her in this world, and worse succeed in doing so, made her even more determined to use all of her political power to attack both Emma and Neal, forcing Emma to spend more and more time away from her family, and even making Bae forced to comply with ever more unreasonable ordinances, causing him to cancel classes in order to meet them, which infuriated him.

But what really made him angry was how these strictures were affecting his son, causing him to lose time bonding with his new family because one or both of his parents were often away. Having missed out on so much of his son's life, Bae didn't want to miss a minute more unless he absolutely had to, and Regina's unreasonable petty demands were quickly wearing on him.

Things came to a head one night, when Emma was supposed to meet the family for a night out at the Enchanted Rose, and Bae called her cell when she wasn't there at half past five to see what was going on, and she told him she couldn't make it because she had some kind of meeting to go to that had been called at the last minute by the town council.

"Can't you just . . . I don't know . . . call out sick or something?" he asked her.

"I wish, Bae. I'm so sorry, I really wanted to be there . . . but they made it clear that this damn thing is mandatory and if I don't show . . . I could lose my job," Emma groaned.

"Okay, hon. I'll bring you home something," Bae said, disappointed.

"Don't bother, love. By the time I get out of here, I'll be too tired to even eat," his wife said, then she hung up.

"What happened?" asked Henry, concerned.

"She's not coming," Bae said through gritted teeth. "Thanks to you-know-who she's got a meeting to go to and she can't miss it."

"Aww! That sucks!" his son cried. Then he glanced at his father and said knowingly, "This is because of Regina, isn't it?"

Bae nodded tightly. "Yeah. She's been throwing her weight around ever since your mom served her with that restraining order. But I've just about had it with Her Majesty thinking she can keep us apart with these strong arm tactics of hers."

"What can we do though?" asked Henry.

"I'm going to see her tomorrow. It's time we had a little talk," Baelfire replied, and in his eyes was a resolute dark fury. In that moment, he looked every inch the deadly warrior he was, and Henry thought Regina had better look out, because even if he didn't have magic, Baelfire wasn't
Rumplestiltskin's son for nothing.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Regina's office

The next morning:

"Madam Mayor, there's a Neal Cassidy here to see you," her secretary paged her over the phone.

"Send him in," Regina replied, then set the phone down and waited for him to arrive.

Her office was done in stark black and white, set up to imply an image of power and affluence. It usually intimidated people, and that was what she was counting on when Cassidy came into the office.

But Baelfire was not going to let some opulent surroundings intimidate him, and he strode into the office with a panther-like glide that made Regina look at him appreciatively, something she'd done since he arrived here, ignoring the fact that he was married to Emma.

Bae was wearing more formal attire than was his wont, gray slacks and a black long-sleeved collared Brooks Brothers shirt with a leather jacket and Armani half-boots, borrowed from Rumple. The clothes lent him an air of respectability and danger, merging the businessman with the former street thief in an arresting combination.

"Mr. Cassidy," Regina said, unable to keep from giving him a thorough going over with her dark eyes. There was something undeniably magnetic about the martial arts instructor, a raw appeal that made her heart race and her palms sweat.

"Madam Mayor," Bae replied, politely correct.

"To what do I owe this unexpected visit?" she queried.

"I'm here to discuss your sudden attempt to overload my wife with unnecessary work and demands in order to keep her away from her family," Bae said, coming straight to the point.

"I'm sure you misunderstand, Mr. Cassidy. Emma's position as sheriff is one that has always carried a great responsibility, and I've only given her what she can handle ... unless you think she's unable to do her job."

"I don't think anything of the kind," Bae said sharply. "That's not the issue here, Mayor Mills. I know Emma's more than capable of doing anything she sets her mind to, but you're manipulating things so she looks incompetent. You want her to fail, so you can show Henry that choosing her over you was a mistake."

"In my opinion, it was a mistake," Regina said hotly. "As my son, he had everything he could possibly desire."

"Everything money could buy doesn't equal true love and affection, and you know it," Bae replied. "I do love Henry!" Regina objected. "I was the one who raised him. He was mine before he ever was yours, Cassidy!"

"That may be so, but if you truly loved him you'd do what was best for him and quit persecuting his mother."
Regina's eyes hardened. "Why should I? She deserves to suffer as I've suffered."

Bae scowled. "Lady, you've got a serious problem. Everything's not always about you. Why don't you ask yourself this . . . if you had this perfect life with Henry like you claim, then why did he move heaven and earth to get his birth mother here from Boston? Why did he contact me and ask me to come here too if the life you gave him was so damn perfect?"

"Because he's an impressionable little boy. Little boys always want what's not good for them," Regina replied smoothly.

"Yeah? And why would you assume knowing his real father isn't good for him? Maybe because you don't want anybody else in his life? Because then Henry would have something to compare you to . . . and you don't want him to find out the truth."

"What truth is that, Cassidy?"

"The truth that you value control more than his happiness. And your revenge on those you believe wronged you above all," Bae said coldly.

"What do you know about it?" Regina snarled.

"I know . . . . everything," Bae declared fiercely. "I know about the curse, Emma being the savior, even about you, Mayor Mills. Once known as the Evil Queen of the Enchanted Forest."

"The Evil Queen? Like the fairy tales? I think you've been listening too much to Henry's overblown imagination," Regina sneered.

"I've read his Book."

"A book of fantasy stories? And you actually believe it?" she sneered.

Bae crossed his arms over his chest. "Lady, I learned a long time ago how to tell truth from lies. And that things are never what they seem. And this whole town isn't what it seems. It's all based on lies . . . and my son is one of the few here who's telling the truth."

"Then you believe a little boy who thinks we're all fairy tale characters from another world?"

Regina laughed.

"I believe that other worlds beside this one exist, yes. And that there's more in heaven and earth that we'll ever know. I've also done some research of my own . . . and I learned that no town called Storybrooke ever existed in Maine until twenty-eight years ago. When you cast the curse. It all fits . . . and I'm not a little kid, mayor. I know it's not my imagination."

"Perhaps you and Henry are more alike than you think. You're both delusional."

"Like hell. We both know I'm not. But at least I don't think having a crappy childhood entitles me to make everyone else miserable," Bae stated pointedly.

"What would you know about it?" Regina hissed, her eyes suddenly gone dark with rage.

"A lot more than you think. I know about your lost love, Daniel, who worked in the stables on your father's estate. That your mother found out by cozening your stepdaughter into revealing your affair, and that she killed him because she wanted you to marry a king, Snow's father, Leopold."

"Yes! My stupid stepdaughter cost me everything!"
"No. Your mother did, but instead of putting the blame where it belongs, you chose to victimize a helpless little girl. Because you were too much of a coward to deal with your bitch of a mother."

"It was Snow's fault!" Regina growled. "If she'd kept her mouth shut Daniel would still be alive."

"No. It was the fault of a jealous power-hungry woman. Even so, that still doesn't give you the right to destroy somebody else's life because you felt it was owed to you."

"Doesn't it? I lost everything due to that brat! Why shouldn't she be made to pay?"

"Why should she?"

"Because if I can't have my happy ending, then no one else shall!" growled Regina. "You can't even begin to comprehend what I suffered all those years ago, Neal Cassidy."

"Cry me a river, lady. You don't hold the monopoly on pain and suffering and you aren't the only one to ever have a crappy childhood or a horrible mother either. There's millions out there just like you. Emma's one. I'm another. But you know what the difference is between us? Nobody died because my mama was a ho who ran off with another man and abandoned me. Because the truth is —sometimes life plain sucks and there's not a damn thing you can do but suck it up and deal with it. And if you're not going to do that, if you're going to wallow in self-pity and blame everybody for your screwed up life you might as well just throw yourself off a bridge and put an end to your sorry ass. At least then you might get a nice eulogy."

"How dare you?"

"How dare you think you have the right to tear apart my family just because you hate yourself and your damn life?" Bae demanded angrily. "You claim you want what's best for Henry? But all I've heard out of your mouth, lady, is me, me, me. You want to have your cake and eat it too. Well, guess what? You can't always get what you want and the world doesn't freaking revolve around you. Stop acting like a spoiled brat and grow the hell up. Because if you hurt my family again with your revenge bullshit, I'm going to come and kick your ass."

"Is that a threat, Cassidy?" Regina snarled.

"Nope. It's a promise. Remember it."

"Get out!"

"Nice talking with you, Madam Mayor," Bae said, and sketched her a mocking bow before turning on his heel and walking out of the office.

Behind him, Regina seethed and contemplated the best way to rid herself of Emma Cassidy. Besides Snow White and Rumplestiltskin, there was no one she hated more. And once she was gone, Henry would come back to her, and she would even bring that wayward rogue Cassidy to heel. Just like she had Graham. But she would have to plan carefully. For Emma had an ally in Mr. Gold. Perhaps she ought to think first about harming him and his precious family. Yes, once the imp and his blood were dealt with she could get Emma out of the way. Without the savior, the curse could never be broken, and she would have her revenge and her son. Neal Cassidy was wrong. She could have everything she wanted . . . after all, she was the Evil Queen.
Chapter Summary

Rumple and his family meet Jack Sparrow

After Bae's rather pointed dressing down of Regina, Emma found her workload slackened slightly, enough so she could sometimes get a night off here and there to spend with her family. Though she worried that Bae's lecture might have pushed Regina over the edge, but so far the mayor hadn't done anything in retaliation to her family. But that didn't mean she wasn't biding her time, and Emma hadn't gotten where she was by being stupid and hoping to appeal to a person's better nature, which, since this was Regina, even assumed she had one.

In her concern she approached Vasilisa, who had now recovered from her magical drain, and asked her for a favor. "Would you mind putting some . . . err . . . protections over my husband's dojo and the apartment? Just in case?"

The Seer had not hesitated. "Of course not. It's always wise to be cautious, especially when dealing with one like Regina."

She accompanied Emma back to Fire Mountain, where she calmly showed the younger magician how to layer protection spells, one on top of the other, in a descending fan, where they overlapped and created a firm bubble of magic that could ward any but the strongest curses.

"There! That ought to keep off any but the worst black curse, which might not even function here due to the difference in the magical web," Vasilisa said, lowering her hands. "Now . . . did you see how I did this?"

Emma, who had been watching in the astral with her magical sight, nodded. "Yeah. It doesn't look too hard. I think I can renew them if I need to."

"Good. But always make certain you make the shield have some sort of give in it, since a static shield can only absorb so much before it shatters, and when it does . . . well . . . it's not pretty," the sorceress cautioned.

"How come you can't make the protections proof against all dark curses?" Emma wanted to know.

"Because, dearie, not everything can be blocked, and some curses would require a counter of a life price," Vasilisa answered evenly.

"Oh."

"But I've placed protections over your home similar to the ones aboard my husband's vessel," Vasilisa went on. "They'll need to be renewed though . . . every year."

"I can do that," Emma assured her.

"I'd figured as much," Vasilisa said, then they went inside the apartment for a cup of tea.

While they were there, Bae came in and asked Vasilisa if she knew how to enchant weapons as
well as buildings. "Because, for some reason, I think it would be a good idea if you enchanted my katana and my shuriken."

The Seer did not seem surprised at the request. "Yes. It would be."

"Have you Seen something, Rhea?" Emma queried.

"No. But . . . as I said before, those with Seer blood often have . . . intuition. So it's best to follow those impulses." She went down to the dojo, where Bae had hung his weapons on the wall, and spent several minutes muttering charms over his sword and shuriken, making the weapons glow with an eerie purplish blue light.

When she had finished, Emma noted that the weapons bore a faint sheen, like sparkles of light, and Vasilisa said all things enchanted magically did to her magical sight. "Rumple's taught you to see auras, yes? This is what you're seeing." She gestured to the weapons. "I've enchanted them to be ever sharp and to always find their target. Also to penetrate any kind of magical barrier or a beast with magical hide. The standard enchantments."

"What do I owe you for this?" asked Bae.

"Nothing. Family doesn't owe family," she replied, her eyes twinkling. "Your father would have cast them if he could have."

"Thanks, Aunt Rhea," her nephew said sincerely.

"You are quite welcome, Bae. Shall we have some lunch then?"

"Sure. How about a burger and fries at Granny's?" he suggested, so that was what they did, and afterwards Emma had to go back to work and Bae also, so Vasilisa returned to the Victorian on the wings of magic and kept Belle company for the rest of the day, until she received a call from her husband upon her pendant.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Mr. Gold arrived back at his Victorian slightly weary, the day had dragged at his shop, with hardly any customers and he'd spent most of it tagging old merchandise and taking inventory, not the most scintillating of occupations. But some days were like that, and at least he hadn't had to deal with screaming toddlers, sticky-fingered children, or Regina.

It had turned cool, and Gold gave his bad leg a token rub before getting out of his Cadillac. It was probably going to rain later, the old injury always acted up before it stormed. The day of the hurricane, it had hurt like blazes, he recalled, wincing slightly.

He opened the door and silently closed it behind him, sniffing the air, which was fragrant with the aroma of roast beef, gravy, and mashed potatoes. Such a nice smell to come home to, he thought, leaning slightly on his cane.

A black streak suddenly bounded into the foyer and gave a questioning sort of meow before coming over to twine herself about his feet.

"Hey, baby," he greeted Nala, supposedly Alina's kitten, but the little Bombay had chosen him as her personal human. He knelt and stroked the velvet soft fur, and Nala arched into his caress, purring fit to wake the dead. He scratched beneath her chin, in the good spot, and was rewarded with the kitten standing upon his knee and rubbing her face alongside his.
Gold smiled at the effusive greeting, murmuring, "Yes, pretty kitty, your papa's home." Anyone who claimed all cats were aloof had never met Nala, who loved people, and could be extremely affectionate to her chosen family. Gold dug in a pocket and retrieved some cat treats, he'd taken to carrying some on him ever since Nala's recovery, and he fed the palmful to the purring feline, who gobbled them down as if she hadn't been fed in weeks.

"So, you're a cat person too," remarked a strange voice, low and mellifluous. "Nothing better than a good ship's cat. Keeps down the vermin and keeps you company on cold nights when your wife's gone."

Gold straightened, and peered up to see who this newcomer was, one hand still resting on Nala's back.

He saw a man of about average height, dressed in the loose-fitting trousers and shirt of a seafarer, complete with a brown coat with gold facings and long dark hair braided and tied in typical seadog fashion. Sunbrowned from constant exposure to the wind and salty air, the other had a goatee divided into two strands and sparkling dark eyes. He bore a blue bag at his waist and a cutlass, carrying a floppy hat in one hand. He wore a rakish grin and held out a hand to the sorcerer. "Jack Sparrow, Captain of the Black Pearl."

Rumple rose, trying not to lean so much on his cane, and grasped the proffered hand. "Rumplestiltskin Gold. You must be Rhea's husband."

"Aye, I am that. Since she deigned to have me some eighteen years past. And you're her long-lost sorcerer brother. Pleased to meet you."

Rumple gave him a hard stare, as if trying to see into his soul, but Jack never flinched, and Rumple knew that his stare could be very unnerving, especially if you had something to hide. But his brief glimpse using his sorcerer's sight told him that the man was just what he appeared to be—a pirate captain, but unlike Hook, one with a conscience and a heart. And now he was family.

Finally, the sorcerer gave a nod and said, his tone much warmer, "Likewise." He bent to stroke Nala again, who was rubbing his ankles, then said, "Shall we go into the kitchen? It's not usually good to keep Alice waiting supper for too long."

"Aye, that blonde lass can cook in my galley anytime," Jack said, grinning. "Never tasted anything like those peanut things she gave me."

"You mean her chocolate peanut butter cookies?" Rumple clarified. "Yes, those are incredible. Alice has always been a magician with food."

In the kitchen, most of his family had gathered, including Bae and Henry, along with Belle, Alina, and Vasilisa, who flashed her husband a glance that was utterly besotted. And Jack returned the look.

"Emma's not here again?" he asked his son.

Bae shook his head. "Not yet. She said to tell you she'd be late, but at least she'll be here."

"Regina's keeping her chained to her desk, Grandpa," Henry asserted.

"Somebody ought to chain Regina to a desk," Belle snorted. "Or a wall in a dungeon. Then she'd know how it feels."

"She's been lucky," Rumple said, limping over to kiss his wife hello. "Even when Snow and
"All the amenities," Alice said shortly as she set a plate with sausage and arugula bites down for them to munch on. "It disgusted me, since they treated that wretched hag better than they did you when they put you in a cell, Mr. G. And she was the Evil Queen!"

"My reputation proceeded me, dearie," Rumple said, though his time in that hellhole of a cell was not one he cared to recall, even if it had only been for a month before he'd made a deal to gain his release.

Alice rolled her eyes. "Hah. Sure it did, and I'm fifth cousin to a viper. You came there to help, with a baby in tow, and they locked you up like you were some kind of monster!"

"Back then, I sort of was, dearie."

"Not enough for what they did," Alice said hotly. "Maggoty food, some hole in the ground, no blankets, no water to wash in, you didn't even have space to lie down in! Stupid idiots! And without your magic you weren't a threat."

"Sounds kind of like some prisons I was in," Jack said sympathetically. "How'd you get out? She break you out of there?"

Rumple shook his head. "No, I made a deal with them to help them against Regina. Then they let me go."

"But not before I belted a few of the guards for their obscene nasty behavior and snuck food and a blanket down to him," Alice said. "And kicked one right in the family jewels for calling me the Dark One's . . . err . . . tramp when I brought Alina down to visit him once."

Jack roared with laughter. "Ah, a lass after my own heart, you are, Alice!" He winked at her.

Alice smirked. "Oh, if I wasn't happily married, Sparrow . . ."

"Jack!" his wife kicked him under the table, giving him a warning Look.

The pirate put a hand over hers and said, "Rhea, love, don't skewer me with those eyes. It's all in fun. I know better than to do anything but look, even if I wanted to. You'd skin me and hang me out to dry for certain."

"Damn straight, darling," Rhea drawled, squeezing his hand back.

"And that's nothing compared to what I'd do to you, dearie," Rumple warned.

"No need to worry, Rumple. I know better than to cross a sorcerer . . . or my wife. I'd be cursed worse than my ship was once upon a time."

"Your ship was cursed, Captain Sparrow?" gasped Henry.

"Jack, lad. We're family," the pirate said, as he ate one of the appetizers. "Did my wife not tell ye the tale of the curse o' the Black Pearl yet? 'Twas she that broke it."

Henry shook his head. "No."

"I saved it for you to tell, love," Vasilisa said. "Because you love that story."
"Aye, well, it's the story of how we met, sweetheart," her husband said. "But 'tis a long tale and one that's best saved till after supper, lad. We don't want to insult Alice's fine cooking, now do we?"

"And there's a man after my own heart," Alice replied saucily.

"I hope you're talking about me, honey bunch," Jeff drawled as he came into the kitchen.

"Well, that all depends . . ." his wife smirked. "On how you say hello, Jefferson."

Jefferson reached out and pulled her into his arms, giving her a smacking kiss then saying, "Hello, Alice!"

She chuckled and kissed him back. "You'll do, Mr. Carstairs."

The rest of the family laughed and then Jack introduced himself to Jefferson and they all ate appetizers and drank Gold's excellent red wine while Alice and Belle finished preparing the dinner and Alina and Henry set the table.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

After the delicious dinner of roast beef, gravy, mashed potatoes, peas and onions, freshly baked rosemary rolls and some kind of bread pudding with caramel sauce that Jack said was good enough to commit mutiny for, they all sat down in the den to listen to Jack's story of the Black Pearl, though before he told it, Vasilisa murmured something in his ear, and he nodded and reached into his blue pouch at his waist, which was actually a magical bag that could hold tons of things, and withdrew a brass spyglass in a finely tooled leather case with a design of falcons etched on it.

"Alina, lass, yer aunt tells me ye've recently celebrated a birthday," Jack said, coming over to her and handing her the spyglass. "So this's a little something to celebrate it."

"Thanks, Uncle Jack," Alina said, taking the spyglass.

"That's more than just a looking glass, lass. It's an enchanted spyglass, you can see things near and far and through things as well, like walls and such. And when you wish, other places and people, just by turning the dial here," Jack said, showing her the dial on the end of the glass. "Turn it a quarter turn to the right and look through it to see what's happening somewhere nearby."

"Awesome!" Alina cried.

"We can use it for Operation Cobra," Henry said, examining it.

"Oh, great!" Bae groaned. Then he frowned over at his son. "No using that to spy on Regina, Henry."

"Aww, but Dad . . ."

"No using its magic period unless we give you permission, Alina Rose," Rumple added sternly.

The little girl sighed. "Yes, Papa." She carefully tucked her present away in her pocket, for it could fold up small enough to fit inside it.

Jack sat back down, saying, "And now, ladies and gents, hark to the tale of the Curse of the Black Pearl . . . or How I Met My Lovely Wife . . ."

He was about halfway through it when Emma arrived and was greeted by her family and Jack, who bowed over her hand and kissed it.
Emma laughed at the scoundrel and called over to Bae, "Hey, Gold, you taking notes?"

"Don't need 'em, babe," Bae said, and came over and kissed her. "We saved you a plate, Em."

"Good, because I'm starving," his wife said, and went into the kitchen to heat it up in the microwave. "So that's Jack Sparrow, huh?" she said to Bae, who'd followed her.

"Yeah, a charming rogue, but Aunt Rhea keeps him on the straight and narrow," Bae laughed.

"I like him," Emma smirked.

"Oh, you do, huh?" Bae pretended to be insulted.

"But I love you, Baelfire Gold, so don't get your boxers in a twist," Emma said, and kissed him again.

They were still kissing when the microwave beeped. "Damn! We'll finish this some other time," she said regretfully, and went to get her food.

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They returned to the den to hear the conclusion of Jack's tale, and then Jeff asked the captain about his attempts to capture Hook. Jack's countenance lost its friendly air and he said darkly, "That one's more trouble than a handful of the king's tax collectors. Always has been. Him and his family's been bedeviling mine since my old man, Teague, won the Pearl in a hand o'cards, and before that there was a dispute over the treasure found in Brigantale Bay during my grandfather's time. 'Twas Davy Jones, Killian's grandpa, that put the curse on us Sparrows and our ships, trafficking in dark magic and necromancy."

"Which I had nothing to do with," said Gold, accepting a cup of coffee from Belle and petting Nala, who was lying across his knees.

"Y'might have been the Dark One, Rumple, but there's allus been dark practitioners about," Jack said. "And lots o' them gather in the islands and coves where pirates sail and stow their goods. Whatever dark magician Jones made a deal with set a curse on our family . . . and we've been battling it and them ever since."

"But I thought Aunt Rhea broke the curse over the Pearl," Henry reminded, eating a cookie.

"I did. But that didn't end the feud between the Joneses and the Sparrows," Vasilisa explained. "It continued, because Killian kidnapped me, and until he stops raiding us and our friends, it'll keep going. He's even gotten my kids involved in it . . . and his own son as well."

"Hook has a son?" Rumple almost choked on his coffee.

"Aye. His and Milah's lad. Called James, goes by Jimmy," Jack informed him. "He's about eighteen, a bit older than my lass Jess. And a wicked scoundrel like his dad too."

"I never knew that," Rumple said. "Although I guess it makes sense . . . she must have had him before she died . . ."

"Died? Rumple, she ain't dead," Jack exclaimed. "She's alive, only she ain't the looker she used t' be, not after being burnt by magical fire like that. She keeps to herself on an island in Neverland Hook lays claim to."
"Milah's alive?" Rumple gasped. "But . . . I thought I'd killed her when Hook and I fought last time . . . she got in the way of my fireball when I threw it . . ."

"She nearly did. But like I said, Killian's family has always trafficked in dark magic. He got one o' them to fix her up . . . as near as can be fixed that is . . . though she refused to show her face on board his ship again. She raised her lad there on the island, and when he was old enough, Killian took him on the Jolly Roger to begin the family tradition. But Hook's always vowed revenge on ye, Rumple, for his hand and his wife . . . claims you owe him and all, same as he does for us Sparrows."

"He started it, by fooling around with my wife and taking her off with him," objected Gold.

"But we were better off without her, Papa," Bae said then. "I don't remember much, but I do remember her never being home and always down at the tavern playing dice. I think she even left me alone once or twice while you were down at the market, and I was . . . what . . . four at the most?"

Rumple nodded. "Yes. I remember coming home and finding you alone and having to fetch her ass back home."

"So we were well rid of her," Bae said softly. "I didn't need a tramp like her for a mother." But the news that he had a half-brother he'd never known about surprised him.

"Aye, Hook and Milah were always a pair of rogues, even before her pretty face was damaged," Jack said. "She used to set up poor blokes for Killian to loot and rob, pretending to be a damsel in distress or running from her husband who beat her, that kind of thing."

"Humph!" Rumple snorted. "I never raised a hand to her . . . the lying snip."

"That whole family's nothing more than a pack of backstabbing, oathbreaking, lying cheats," Jack declared coldly. "They follow no code save their own poxy ambition, and even the Brethren knows to be wary of making deals with them. Now I've lifted my share of cargo and played the excise men for fools, but I've never stolen a man's wife, nor broke a deal I made, or stabbed my partner in the back neither. Or dealt in necromancy or made war on kids. The Hooks have done that and more. Why that little snot Jimmy boasted to some lubber in a tavern once that he was going to snatch my Jess and make a real woman of her! Teach that Sparrow wench her place, he says! Over my dead body."

"More likely over his, if he tries anything," Vasilisa said darkly. "And if I don't kill him first, you will, Jack."

"I'd see him feeding the sharks before he ever touched so much as a hair on her head, the miserable little gutter snipe," Jack swore.

"I'd turn him into a mouse and let Nala play with him," Rumple said.

Jack sighed. "Right now I just pray that magic worker they got aboard the Jolly Roger's more concerned about keeping that ship cloaked than attacking the Pearl. I left my best mate and kids on the Pearl so I could come here and meet all of you and see my wife." He put an arm about Vasilisa and hugged her.

"We can leave anytime you give the word, Jack," his wife said, her green eyes suddenly unfocused.

"Rhea?" he turned to her, alarmed by the sudden vacant expression in her face. "Gods above, what
do you See?"

"Water . . . a storm tossed sea . . . wind shredding the sails . . . throwing the ship about like a cork . . . all hands lost . . . to the black-spawned typhoon . . . mage-conjured . . . everything destroyed . . ." Abruptly she came back to herself, her face ghost pale, her green eyes blazing. "Jack! We need to leave. Now! That Vision . . . it's shifting probabilities . . . it'll occur unless I'm on board the Pearl to counter that dark working. Jess and William, Will Turner, they'll all be caught in that whirlpool . . . ."

"Then you'd best get going, dearie," Rumple said, gently handing Nala to Belle and getting to his feet.

"Rumple, I'm so sorry to leave like this . . ." Vasilisa began, hugging him.

"Time and tide wait for no man, love," Jack said, also rising, his face grave.

"Go, Rhea. We'll see each other again, if the fates are kind," the sorcerer whispered in her ear. "Go kick the crap out of that necromancer and Hook for me, okay?"

"Okay, Rumple. Until we meet again. I love you, old dragon."

"I love you too, little sister. Good luck." He kissed her cheek then let her go. "Sparrow, take care of her."

"Always, Gold. Sorry to eat and run, but . . ." he pulled a glowing blue bean from his pocket.

Vasilisa bid farewell to the rest of the family before she and Jack went out into the backyard, right in the middle of the lawn, and tossed down the magic bean.

A portal spawned, linked right back to Jack's ship, and with a final wave, the two sprang into it and were gone.

Belle stood with her arm about Rumple as the portal vanished and said softly, "Heaven help them all."

"They'll be all right, dearie," Rumple said, though he could only hope so. "Let's go back inside, it's nippy out here and I think it's going to rain soon."

"How ironic," was all Belle said before they went back inside. She couldn't help worrying, though she feared soon enough they'd have more to concern them than a war between pirates a world away.
Slaying Dragons

Emma still doesn't believe she's really the savior, so Gold sets up a test for her--to slay a dragon in the library basement and retrieve a certain potion, and Bae has to help her. Meanwhile Regina plots his downfall.

It was often the fate of heroes to slay dragons. In almost all the period fantasy novels and fairy tales there was always a dragon that had to be slain, either with magical means or with a sword or with guile and trickery. It was almost a requirement if one was supposed to be a true hero, according to Henry, who had read all of Tolkien and Beowulf and St. George and the Dragon as well as the Once Upon a Time Book.

"I think in order to break the curse, Mom, you're gonna have to slay a dragon," her son told her one afternoon, as she was preparing to spar with Bae.

"Really? What makes you think that?" Emma asked, amused.

"Because all the great heroes do," her son replied. "It's practically a requirement. In Sleeping Beauty, Prince Phillip had to slay a dragon, and so did Beowulf, and Bilbo, and St. George. It's like the gold standard for heroes."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Henry, those are just stories. Besides, where on earth would Regina find a dragon for me to slay?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't know . . . but if she could . . . she'd find one."

"Look, kid, why don't you concentrate on learning the state capitals and geography for that test next week and let me worry about dragons or whatever, okay?" Emma said, and she gave her son a smile.

"Okay, but I can do research for you on how to slay a dragon," Henry said. "Grandpa's got lots of books in his library I can use."

"Geography first, Henry," Emma said, trying to be firm.

"Yeah, sure, Mom," Henry sighed, and went to get out his geography book. There were times he could get away with skipping homework and other times when he knew it was useless to try anything. Emma might not be as strict as Regina, but she was a firm believer in getting good grades in school, as was Baelfire.

As her son went back upstairs to get started on his homework, Emma walked out onto the main floor of the dojo, dressed in her uniform, and waited for her husband to arrive.

Bae walked out of the back room, dressed in his uniform as well, and wearing large blue mitts on his hands with round foam target circles on them. "Ready, Emma?" he called as he stepped onto the mat.

She nodded, then assumed the Horse Stance, concentrating on centering herself while Bae stood in
front of her, waiting calmly.

When she was centered enough, she lunged at her husband, punching at the target he presented with a hand.

As she struck the center of the mitt, Bae gave ground slightly. "Good! Now let's see a roundhouse kick."

Emma swiveled her right foot and struck Bae's other hand, driving him backwards.

"Nice one! Keep it up, Emma," Bae praised.

Emma attacked him again and again, striking the center of the target with both hands and feet, using the maneuvers Baelfire had taught her. Once she had gotten warmed up from that exercise, Bae discarded the gloves and sparred with her himself.

He showed her new blocks and how to throw an opponent larger than herself down and keep them that way. He showed her the Flying Fist maneuver designed to break an enemy's nose, and the Springing Tiger, which would allow her to knock out an enemy with a single kick.

Panting, Emma drew back and said, "Do you know what Henry said to me today?"

"Tell me," Bae said, circling her with his hands up.

"He said I need to learn how to slay dragons. That all the great heroes were required to."

Bae grinned, his dark eyes sparkling. "Dragons, huh?"

"Isn't that ridiculous? I think he's been reading too many fantasy novels," Emma chuckled.

"Maybe. But maybe he's got something there too, wild swan."

"Oh, come on, Bae!"

"No, I'm serious. There really were dragons in our old world. So who can say that you might not be called on to fight one, savior?"

"And where would Regina get a dragon?"

"Lots of places... anyway, it can't hurt for me to teach you some sword forms designed to deal with monsters."

"You've fought monsters?"

"No. But I know how to fight them," the martial arts instructor said.

"How?"

"By studying up on their weaknesses," Bae replied. "I have a few diagrams of common monsters upstairs that I can show you. And yes... one of them's a dragon."

"Where did you get them?"

"My father, of course. Okay, let's finish this bout and then we can go take a look at them," Bae said.
"All right, Obi Wan," Emma said, then she sprang at him, aiming a kick at his head.

But he somehow managed to dodge it, and catch her ankle and throw her over his head.

She landed on the ground, and before she could get to her feet, he was on her, pinning her to the mat and tapping his hand against her throat. "Match point," he said evenly, then he stepped away, letting her up.

"Damn! I nearly had you," she swore.

"Close, but no cigar, babe. But it was a good try."

"Not good enough."

"You'll get it. But you have to remember, I can read you like a book, because I know you really well, Emma. Another opponent won't be able to do that," Bae told her. "Now let's go upstairs and I'll show you what I was talking about."

"Diagrams of monsters. I feel like I'm in mythology class," Emma said, rolling her eyes.

"Only these mythological beasts are alive in Fairy Tale Land," Bae said, and he went to put the gloves back before going upstairs.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

It was Mr. Gold's turn to pick up Henry and Alina from school the next day, and while they were in the car driving back to his house, Henry said, "Umm . . . Grandpa, can I ask you something?"

"You may," Gold said. "What is it?"

"Do you have any books on . . . dragons or dragon slaying?"

Gold eyed his grandson sharply. "I may have. Why?"

"Because I need to do some research for my mom," Henry answered.

"Is your mother thinking about slaying a dragon?" Alina asked.

"No, but I think she might have to," Henry said. "That's why I wanted to do some research."

"That's very sharp of you, Henry," Gold said approvingly. "And I think I have a few books in my study that you can read, and let Emma read also. It never hurts to be prepared."

"Great!" Henry sounded as if Gold had just given him a million dollars. He could hardly wait to get started. This was way more fun than studying geography.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Emma took to reading the books Henry had borrowed from Rumple on her lunch break for the next few days. She had also studied the diagrams and anatomy drawings Bae had gotten from his father as well, finding them a great help in visualizing just what a magical creature looked like and where its vulnerable points were. A chimera, for instance, had its liver where another animal's heart would be, and its heart down in its stomach. And only a direct hit on the heart would truly slay a dragon . . . which was why it was so difficult to kill one, since a dragon's heart was the best protected place on its body, with triple overlapping scales on its chest, and dragonscale was the hardest substance known to man in the fairy tale realm, as hard as adamantine was on Earth.
Emma learned that a dragon was also vulnerable beneath its wings and armpit, and the eyes as well. Those were its soft spots, and if a weapon could penetrate there, it might give a warrior an advantage. She also learned of a special herb called dragonbane, difficult to find, but once obtained it could be rendered into a liquid and weapons coated with it.

It was a poison to dragonkind, and rendered it paralyzed if enough of it were introduced into the beast's bloodstream at one time. The book recommended using arrows to deliver the poison most efficiently, but a sword was able to be used as well.

When she asked Rumple about it, he told her he had a single vial of dragonbane left from a batch brewed long ago, and gave it to her, though he cautioned her not to use it until she had to, since it would lose its potency the longer it was exposed to the air.

"So, I'd suggest you apply it to your weapons just before you're ready to fight a dragon, dearie, and not before."

Emma took the vial and thanked him.

On the nights she didn't work late, she practiced with Bae using wood swords, and her husband taught her how to fence, as well as throw a shuriken and a sword right through the heart of a practice dummy.

When she asked Bae why she needed to learn that, all he said was, "You never know."

"More of your . . . intuition?" she guessed.

"Something like that."

He kept her practice sessions short but very intense, trying to teach her the most important things in the shortest amount of time, since she had work to deal with, and Regina was trying to bury her with paperwork.

But he found she was good student, willing to work hard and remembered what he taught on the first or second repetition.

In addition to his sessions with Emma, Bae also had class with the children two days a week, and self-defense class for the women twice a week as well. Alice, Mary Margaret, and Belle particularly shone as his best students there, seeming to take to the lessons as if they'd known such things before. And while that might have been true of Mary Margaret, Belle and Alice both said that they'd never been trained in self-defense until now.

"Well, you both have an instinct for it," Bae said. "Which is a good thing, as it seems both your husbands have a lot of nasty enemies."

His star pupils in the children's class were Paige, Henry, and Eva Zimmerman, with Alina a close second.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

In their magical lessons, Gold began teaching them how to deflect spells cast at them with different types of magical shields and also how to fireproof themselves. But he told them that the spell to fireproof someone or something was a short lived one, lasting about fifteen minutes at the most, and so it could be cast just before going into a duel, but not much before.

He also taught them a basic healing charm, which could be used to close minor wounds and halt
bleeding on major ones. "Healing requires a degree of visualization that most magicians have difficulty with. You have to see a wound healed, visualizing the blood vessels whole and the muscle and skin also, before the magic will make it happen. It's a precise thing, and not many magicians can do it, which is why healing charms are few and far between, as are the great Healers."

"Can you do it, Rum?" Emma wanted to know.

"Yes. I could back in the Enchanted Forest. I could here also, once the curse is broken."

"Could Regina do it?" Alina asked.

"I don't know. You have to be able to empathize with someone's suffering in order to heal them, dearie, and that's never been Regina's strong suit. She might be able to heal herself, but usually it's easier to just carry a potion around with you, which is what a lot of magic workers do."

"Or a wand like mine," his daughter said.

"Yes, if you're lucky enough to have one," the older sorcerer agreed. "All right, that's enough magic for today. Let's go upstairs and you can get something to eat."

Alina and Henry made their way upstairs, arguing good-naturedly about who was going to eat the last package of cinnamon sugar Pop Tarts in the pantry. Emma turned, about to follow, when Gold said, "Just a minute, Emma. There's something I need to tell you."

She turned, alarmed at the gravity in his tone. "What is it?"

"It's about the Dark Curse. I didn't want to say this in front of the children, but you need to know something. When I created it, I left myself a loophole, just in case. It's why you're the one who can break it."

"Like any good attorney," Emma said, nodding. "Go on."

"Yes, well, as you know, True Love breaks all curses, and with that in mind, I set up a specific parameter that involved you . . . and I bottled some of it for a rainy day."

"How in hell do you do that?"

"It's not easy, but since I knew True Love before, I used part of my own magical essence, and well, you really don't need the details," Gold shrugged. "The important thing is that I made the potion . . . and then I got your father, Prince Charming, to help me hide it from Regina, just in case. And now, dearie, it's time for you to retrieve it."

"Okay. So where is it and what do I have to do to get it?"

"The answer's one and the same. First, you'll need your father's sword, which I have back at my shop."

"Let me guess, it's enchanted."

"Right on the money, dearie."

"And what am I going to have to slay with it?" Emma asked cautiously.

"A dragon. Well, that's one of her forms."
"You're kidding, right? Rum, tell me you're not serious!"

He shook his head. "Deadly serious. Why do you think I've been teaching you spells on fireproofing and having you study diagrams and books on how to slay monsters? Because I knew someday it would come down to this."

"And there's no other way I can break the curse?"

"Let me ask you something. Do you truly believe you can break the curse? That you're the savior?"

"What? You've all told me I am. What kind of question is that?"

Gold just looked at her gravely. Her answer was the whole reason he needed the bottle of True Love. "Just a question, dearie. Come with me. We need to go over to my shop and get the sword. . . when Regina cast the curse, she brought over another practitioner of dark magic besides me. Her name is Mal—short for Maleficent. And that's where the bottle of True Love is. Hidden inside an egg."

"Wait. Isn't she some kind of . . . evil fairy or something? That cursed Sleeping Beauty?"

"Yes. Part fairy and part demon and all trouble. Like I said, your father hid the potion with a dragon. That's one of her forms."

"So it's . . . in her . . . horde, right?" Emma guessed.

"Not exactly. It's in her."

"What? You're telling me the damn potion's inside her?"

"Yes. Don't look at me like that. It was the safest place for it . . . and the only way I could make sure it came with us once the curse was cast."

"That's insane! In a clever kind of way," Emma admitted grudgingly. "So Henry was right. I do need to slay a dragon."

"He's very intuitive, your son."

"Why a dragon, Rumple?"

"Because, dearie, that's how heroes are made."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"So . . . as it turns out, Henry was right and now I have to slay Maleficent," Emma told Bae that night after Henry was asleep. "I'm going to do that tomorrow. Just another day at the office," she laughed shakily.

"Holy hells, wild swan!" her husband cried.

"Yeah, that's what I said. She's in the basement of the library, beneath the clock tower. Apparently, that's why Regina's kept it boarded up all those years. Rumple said he has a copy of the key and you use the elevator to get inside."

"Oh good. Then I won't have to pick the lock."

"Pick the lock? Balefire, what are you talking about?"
"I'm coming with you."

"You're what? Oh, no, you're not."

"Oh, yes I am. If you think I'm going to let you face a dragon by yourself, Emma Gold, you're nuts."

"Baelfire, I'm supposed to be the savior. It's my task."

"Fine. But that doesn't mean you can't have somebody along to help you. Frodo had Sam."

"This isn't Lord of the Rings, Bae."

"No. It's Emma Cassidy Cursebreaker. Who is going to get some much needed support from her warrior husband," Bae said firmly.

"No! I don't want you to risk your life too!"

"My whole life has been a risk, Emma. Remember what Rhea said about intuition? Well, this is the whole reason I got my weapons enchanted. So I can have your back. Together, wild swan. You and me. The way it's supposed to be."

"If we die down there, Bae, we'll leave Henry alone."

"But that's not gonna happen. Because one of us is going to make it back, Emma. Or both of us. Either way, you're not going unless I'm with you."

"Like hell. How you going to stop me? Cuff me to the bed?"

"Gee, Emma, didn't know you were into that stuff."

"Shut up, Gold! Don't make me beat you," she growled, cuffing him on the ear.

He cupped her face in his hand. "We're partners, Emma. That means we share in everything. Even this. Maybe especially this."

She shook her head. "You can't, Bae. You could die."

"And so could you. That's exactly why I need to go with you."

"Because you're a damn idiot," she snapped, tears trickling down her face.

"No. Because I love you," he replied, and then he kissed her tears away.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

**Mills mansion:**

Regina had spent most of that week poring through her mother's spellbooks, trying to find an enchantment to cast upon the Golds. There were many dark spells, but she needed something specific, something that would affect more than one member of the family. She wanted to curse not just Rumplestiltskin, but his precious daughter, and Belle also. She wanted his heart to shatter, to realize that all his talk of True Love was a lie, and before he finally succumbed to her spell, to know that she was the strongest magician in the realms, and he was utterly defeated.

She had endured humiliation after humiliation at the hands of his blasted family, from himself to
his wife, and now it was time to settle the score. Once the old man was out of the way, then she
could take apart Emma Cassidy. *You are weak, old man. Vulnerable. No magic and a family who
loves you. Love has always been your weakness, Dark One. And now . . . now it will be your
undoing.*

Smiling, Regina perused a final spellbook, and found what she had been searching for. How ironic,
that the spell that would prove to be his undoing had been one that he had given to her mother long
ago. Smirking, Regina began to gather the ingredients she would need, one of them being the hair
of the Dark One, something her mother had managed to get from him, the gods only knew how,
and kept hidden all these years.

The hair of the Beast, Regina thought slyly. Only this time his Beauty wouldn't be able to save him.

An hour later, the poison was ready, and Regina set about making something to be a conductor.
Her usual vehicle was apples, but this time . . . this time she was going a different route. She pulled
a box of self-rising pretzel dough and cinnamon sugar from the cabinet.

Everyone liked cinnamon sugar pretzels. Especially ones baked by an innocent friend. Like Mary
Margaret. Regina's smile grew more pronounced. She would have her final revenge this way too,
using Mary Margaret Blanchard, formerly her stepdaughter Snow White, as her unwitting catspaw.

Humming, Regina began to mix together the dough and set it to rise. She would bake the pretzels
tomorrow, including a special ingredient in the cinnamon sugar topping, then bring it over to
Storybrooke Elementary and use the last bit of compulsion magic she possessed to get Miss
Blanchard to deliver it to Alina Gold. *Goodbye, Dark One. Didn't I say I was going to kill you?
And I always keep my promises, old man. Just like you taught me.*
Bae and Emma battle Maleficent and Regina's plan to poison Gold goes awry, poisoning Henry and Alina instead! Can true love save them?

Bae and Emma unlocked the door to the library and went inside. The place was full of dust and smelled rather mildewed, and an ancient card catalog was standing against the wall. Making their way past it, they found the elevator and using the combination Rumple had taught them, got it to work.

As the double doors opened, Emma said, "Are you ready, Bae?"

"As I'll ever be. Lead the way, savior." He was wearing jeans and a black Fire Mountain T-shirt and his black Keds. Belted around his waist was his katana, and in a bandolier across his chest were ten shuriken, throwing stars, which had all been enchanted by Vasilisa. His hair was held back by a gold colored headband.

Emma was wearing her usual outfit, except besides the holster on her hip, she also had Charming's sword around her waist and an identical bandoleer with ten shuriken of her own in it. In a pocket was the dragonbane potion. She turned to Bae. "Okay. Let's do this. But wait, let me fireproof us first."

She concentrated, then cast the spell, watching as green light settled first over her husband and then herself. But she didn't have time to congratulate herself on her first spell cast without her master's supervision, because now it was time to go down into the basement.

As they stepped into the elevator and the doors closed behind them, Emma gave a nervous laugh and said, "I feel like there should have been a sign on this damn elevator. You know *Here Be Dragons* or *Stay Out of the Basement*. Ever watch that show *Goosebumps* when you were a kid? August and I used to get scared silly by it."

"Nope, but I read the books," Bae said, putting an arm about her.

"Is there any book you haven't read, Gold?"

"Lots," he smirked. "Don't sweat it, wild swan. Just take a deep breath and focus."

"Yes, Master Kenobi. I'm feeling the Force flow through me," Emma said sarcastically, then she closed her eyes and began to do her meditative breathing exercises. They helped alleviate the terrified butterflies in her stomach a little. When she opened her eyes, she said, "Bae? Are you . . . umm . . . scared?"

He didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, "Yup. Scared as hell."

"But you're not going back."

"Nope. And it's normal to be scared, Emma. Fear's what keeps you alive. Trust me on that, babe. Just don't let it control you and you'll be fine. Now, let's go over the vulnerable parts of a dragon's
anatomy again . . ."

It took a moment for her to recall her lessons, but as she began to recite the vulnerabilities of the
monster she was about to face, she felt her fear begin to recede into the background. And she
thanked God for having such a clever husband.

"Look what Miss Blanchard gave us, Papa," Alina said as they drove back to Gold's Victorian that
afternoon after school. She showed her father the white box and inside it were three homemade big
cinnamon sugar pretzels.

"They look delicious, dearie," Gold said as he glanced at the pretzels inside the box as the kids got
in the car. "I'll have to have one with some coffee when we get home. How was school?"

"It was pretty good," Henry answered.

They told Gold about their upcoming projects and a book report until they arrived home.

When they entered the kitchen, they found a note from Alice and Belle, saying they had gone
grocery shopping and would be back soon.

Rumple fed a begging Nala some cat treats and put the coffee pot on to perk, then said he was
going upstairs to get changed and the kids could start on their homework.

"Now? I think I want to have a snack first," Henry moaned. He was eyeing the box with the
pretzels avidly.

"All right. Eat a pretzel and then do your homework," Gold ordered, and went upstairs, Nala
scampering after him.

"There's three pretzels," Henry said. "But if I eat one and you eat one, that only leaves one for
Grandpa and none for Grammy."

"So we'll share one," Alina said, and took one from the box and broke it in half. She handed one
half to Henry and then got out the carton of coconut milk and poured them both a glass.

The two kids sat down at the table, nearly salivating at the aroma of cinnamon sugar coming off
the pretzel half in their hands.

"This smells so good!" Henry said, inhaling the aroma. "Miss Blanchard sure was nice to make us
these."

"Well, she is your other grandmother," Alina pointed out.

Henry took a big bite of the pretzel. "Mmm!"

Alina did as well, then drank some coconut milk.

Suddenly, Henry started gasping and wheezing. "Alina . . . can't breathe . . . call . . . 911 . . ."

He toppled over onto the floor and lay still.

"Papa!" Alina managed to shout before she too succumbed to the poisoned pretzel, falling out of
her chair a moment later.
"Rumple, we're home!" Belle announced cheerily as she walked through the door, her arms filled with brown paper bags full of groceries. She saw the box with the two pretzels on the counter and said, "Alice, did you bake these?"

"No," said her friend, setting her bags down on the counter. "Rumple, who gave you these?"

"Miss Blanchard gave them to Alina and Henry," he called back. "Be right down."

"Where are the kids?" Belle muttered. "Hey, Alina! Henry!" She walked around the counter. Then she screamed as she saw the two children toppled over on the floor. "Oh my God! Rumple! Get down here!" She ran over to Henry and knelt on the floor, feeling for a pulse.

There was one, but it was very weak.

Alice came around the counter and gasped. "Jesus H. Christ, Belle!" She ran over to Alina and cried, "What the hell happened to them? She's barely breathing! We need to call an ambulance!"

Rumple heard the commotion and ran as quickly as he could downstairs. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Belle looked up from where she was bent over Henry, tears in her eyes. "Rumple . . . we found them . . . like this . . . I don't know how . . ."

"I've called 9-1-1. An ambulance is on its way," Alice said, putting her cell away. She stood up and saw the remains of the pretzel on the floor beside Alina. "What's this? They were eating these?"

"It's the pretzel Miss Blanchard gave them," Rumple said softly, horrified that his daughter and grandson were stricken like this. Then his quick mind put two and two together and he gritted out, "I think those pretzels were poisoned or something. We'll need to take a sample so they can analyze it at the hospital."

"Poisoned!" Belle wailed. "Then, they could die, Rumple!"

"Not if we get help in time, dearie."

"You know, I heard about some kind of bad wheat sprout or something going around . . . like in flour and that could be what happened," Alice surmised. "Lots of people were getting sick and maybe . . . maybe it's some kind of allergic reaction."

"But . . . I didn't think Alina was allergic to anything," Belle wrung her hands. "Though I don't know about Henry."

He limped over to bag up a pretzel, cursing the fact that he no longer had his magic. Maybe if he tried . . . he knelt down beside Alina and tried to call up his power, willing the magic to respond with every fiber of his being.

_I need you. I need you. Come to me. Come!_

He held his hands out above his daughter, trembling with effort.

Nothing.

The magic was lost to him.

Frustrated tears welled in his eyes.
"Mr. G?" Alice asked, alarmed. "You're shaking. What are you doing, trying to give yourself a heart attack?"

"It's no good. I'm no good," he said despairingly. "I'm nothing except a crippled attorney. I can't even save my own daughter and grandson. I'm useless!" The bitter taste of failure surged into the back of his throat, and he prayed that Emma and Bae succeeded in breaking the curse, otherwise they had only modern medicine to depend on, since he had failed to save the children.

And in his head, Regina's voice mocked him.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

As the ambulance drew up, sirens wailing, Rumple turned to Alice and said, "Alice, please stay here. Wait for Emma and Bae to return, and then tell them what's happened. Belle and I will go to the hospital with the kids."

"Where are they? Shouldn't you be calling them?" Alice asked.

"I can't. They're trying to break the curse . . . and they're in a place without phone service. So please . . . stay here and wait for them. I'll keep you posted on the children." Then he went and sat in the ambulance with Belle, watching as the paramedics hooked up the two unresponsive children to IV's and oxygen and gave them shots of Benadryl and attached them to portable heart monitors and blood pressure cuffs.

He put his arm around Belle and thought of how mere moments before, the two children had been laughing and smiling, and it had been an ordinary day. Now it was a nightmare he could not wake from, and fear congealed in his stomach like putrid slime. He felt like he had when the soldiers had come for Bae, only worse, because at least then there had been a tangible enemy to face. Here, the enemy was faceless and insidious, and he gripped his cane in white-knuckled fists and prayed to gods he hardly believed existed to save his precious children. I shall make any deal you wish, pay any price, give up my life, if only you will save them. Please, I beg of you, with all I am . . . save them.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

The library basement:

The elevator doors creaked open and Emma and Bae crept out into a subterranean world of crumbled concrete and rock and dripping water. It was dimly lit, and Emma felt shadows hovering at the edge of her vision. She gripped the pommel of her sword and wished she'd brought a flashlight. An instant later she chided herself and thought, you're a magician, now make some light, idiot! She cupped her hand and then summoned a small ball of light, enough to see by in the twilight realm she now found herself in.

Acting on instinct, she blew on the tiny globe, and it floated into the air and hovered.

"Nice trick, Emma," Bae whispered, his hand resting coolly upon the hilt of his katana.

She smiled at him through the gloom. "See, I learned a few things from your dad." Then she reached into her pocket and took out the vial of dragonbane. "We'd better coat our weapons now, while we're still . . . able to." She pulled out a small chamois cloth and gently soaked it with the potion.

"Ugh! Smells nasty! Like something died," she said wrinkling her nose. Then she unsheathed her
sword and rubbed the blade with it, coating it with the viscid green stuff. She did the same to the points of her throwing stars before she handed the vial to Bae. There was about half the potion left.

Bae took the cloth and began to coat his weapons also. Then he tossed the empty potion bottle into a hole in the floor. "Okay, Emma. You set?"

She nodded, and they began to pick their way across the floor, careful to watch their steps, lest they trip over a piece of rock or catch their foot in a crevice and sprain an ankle.

"Where do you think it is?" Emma asked softly, looking all about her. It appeared she was in a large cavern. She couldn't believe such a thing was actually in the basement of the library.

"No idea. But do you smell that?" Bae asked. "Sulpher. From its breath."

Emma coughed slightly. Now that her husband mentioned it, she could smell the faint smell of rotten eggs, and something burnt as well. Hand on her sword, she continued down a winding passage that opened into a large cavern.

But still there was no sign of the dragon that was supposedly captured and held here.

Bae felt all his senses go on alert, even though he saw nothing to rouse his instincts like that. But some sixth sense—the intuition Vasilisa had said came with his Seer's blood—warned him that not all was as it seemed. He drew his katana silently, feeling the blade warm beneath his grip, as the magic cast upon it began to react to . . . something.

Emma's ball of light danced and flickered ahead of them like a will-o-wisp, giving just enough light to make sure they didn't trip and fall.

Suddenly, the little ball of light flitted into the center of the cavern . . . and vanished, as if swallowed by the darkness that slithered and hissed within it.

"Emma . . . where the hell's the light?"

"I don't know," she answered, and tried to call it back, but the light didn't come back.

She walked cautiously into the cavern, listening, but all she could hear was . . . something that sounded rather like the harsh pants of an animal . . . but the darkness was so deep it was almost as if she was blind. She felt like a sitting duck. She paused, resting her hand upon a rocky outcropping.

"Where are you, you damned beast?" she hissed, her nerves stretched to breaking. "Show yourself."

Then the outcropping grew an eye—a malevolent yellow iris as big as her head.

"Emma! Look out!" Bae yelled, and threw himself at her, knocking her down as the dragon reared, screaming in challenge, and fire exploded from its open maw.

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**Storybrooke General hospital:**

Belle sat with Mr. Gold in the hospital waiting room, clutching his hand in her own, trying not to break down in tears as the team of emergency technicians, Dr. Whale, and nurses swarmed over the two children. She was scared to death, her breath coming in harsh pants as she struggled to calm down and not trigger a bout of claustrophobia. Sometimes, Dr. Hopper had told her, she could
make herself have an attack even though she wasn't in a small space, because most of her condition was related to anxiety.

I can't afford that, she told herself firmly, forcing herself to take deep breaths. I can't fall apart. Otherwise Rumple will. She could tell from her husband's pale face and brooding countenance that he was fighting with everything in him not to fly to pieces. Like her, this was their worst nightmare, having something terrible happen to Alina and they were unable to do anything about it. And then Henry was added into the mix and that made it ten times worse. Belle knew that both she and Rumple cared deeply for the young boy, who zest for life and endless optimism made them hope for a future filled with light and love. The mere thought of losing him—or Alina—nearly brought her to her knees.

The minutes ticked by endlessly, until Dr. Whale appeared, looking stymied. "Mr. Gold, I've done everything I know how, but they're not responsive. It's almost like they're in some type of . . . coma."

"How is that possible, doctor? Is it like a seizure? Or a . . . a stroke?" Gold asked, groping for answers.

"No. They don't register any kind of brain trauma on our scans. And it's not a heart attack either."

"They were perfectly fine when I brought them home from school. Until the time Belle walked into the kitchen and found them lying on the floor. Healthy children just don't . . . collapse like that," Gold protested.

"Could it be something in the pretzel they ate?" Belle asked, her blue eyes wide. "Alice mentioned some kind of wheat . . . sickness . . . like an allergy?"

"We've tested them for anaphylactic shock and they show none of the signs. We've had the bits of pretzel you brought analyzed by the lab . . . the toxicology came back negative," Whale shook his head.

"How can that be? They were fine until they ate it," Gold cried, his voice rising in frustration.

"All I can tell you is that whatever's wrong with them isn't because of a food allergy, since there's nothing in there to be allergic to. Even celiac disease wouldn't cause this . . . extreme of a reaction."

"Then . . . what you're saying is . . . you don't know what's wrong with them?" Belle clarified.

"Uh . . . well . . . yes . . . I'm sorry. We'll keep on trying to wake them and to figure out what's wrong. Right now they're in stable condition," Whale said. "When we find out anything new, we'll let you know. Have you tried contacting the person who gave them the pretzels?"

Gold shook his head. "No . . . but I'll . . . do so now." He pulled out his cell and dialed Mary Margaret's apartment, Emma had given him the number. The phone rang and rang. Finally, she picked up. "Hello, Miss Blanchard? This is Mr. Gold. I . . . I'm calling to . . . ask you . . . was there anything . . . did you happen to notice a date on the box of pretzel mix you used when you made those pretzels? No . . . I didn't have one, but Alina and Henry did . . . and now they're in the hospital . . ."

"Oh no! I swear, Mr. Gold, I didn't do anything but give them the pretzels. I . . . I don't even know where the box is. I . . . I must have thrown it away and the garbage came today . . . I'm so sorry . . . are they going to be all right?"

"We . . . don't know. They're in . . . comas . . . the doctors don't know what's wrong with them," Gold said heavily, barely able to talk past the lump in his throat.
"That's terrible! I'm so sorry! If there's anything I can do, please let me know . . ." Mary Margaret said regretfully.

"Yes, of course. Goodbye," he hung up his cell. "She doesn't know anything. Like everyone else around here," Gold said, longing to suddenly break and smash things.

"Maybe we ought to . . . call Regina," Belle suggested. "She was Henry's parent for ten years, maybe she knows something we don't . . . like something he might react to . . . I don't know . . ."

"You're grasping at straws, dearie. But . . . if you want to talk to her . . . here's my cell." Rumple handed Belle his phone. "Press the number five, I've got the mayor's office on speed dial."

Belle took the phone and called the number. "Hello? Mayor Mills? This is Belle Gold . . . I'm calling about something that happened this afternoon . . . it concerns Henry . . ."

"What about him?" Regina demanded.

"He . . . well, it's complicated, but . . . I found him collapsed on my kitchen floor along with my daughter . . . right after he ate a cinnamon sugar pretzel . . . I know that sounds crazy but . . ."

"Wait! Wait a minute!" Regina cried in alarm. "What do you mean—a cinnamon sugar pretzel?"

"Well, we don't know for sure but . . . we think he collapsed after he ate it . . . although Dr. Whale doesn't agree with that theory. I was hoping you'd be able to shed some light on it. Did Henry ever have any allergies?"

"Allergies? No . . . no . . . look, I'll be right over."

"Okay. We're in room 104," Belle said. The phone clicked and Regina was gone.

"What'd she say?" Gold asked wearily.

"She . . . she sounded . . . panicked and shocked. She didn't really say much, except that Henry didn't have any allergies and she'd be right over."

"Great! Another dead end," Gold growled. "The last thing I want is to be in the same room as Regina."

Belle patted his shoulder. "Rumple, it'll be all right. She won't . . . start anything while Henry's . . . like this. I'm sure she's as concerned as we are."

"Like hell," her husband snorted, then he lapsed back into an uneasy silence. He shifted in the hard plastic chair, trying to ease his leg, which was throbbing.

"Why don't you get up and walk a bit?" Belle suggested.

Gold huffed and bit back a sarcastic reply. Then he rose and began to limp up and down the sterile waiting room, past the nurses' desk and over to some vending machines in the corner. He studied them without really seeing them, then fed some money into a slot and grabbed up a bottle of water.

He twisted off the cap and drank some, his throat was parched. His hand clenched on his cane and he half lifted it off the floor, tempted to smash it into the glowing blue and white machine. But he reined in that impulse. Hitting the vending machine would solve nothing and only make Belle upset and probably get him thrown out of the hospital.

He limped back to where his wife was sitting, looking pale and grief-stricken and sat down,
holding out the bottle of water. "Want some?"

"Umm . . . no, I'm fine." Belle declined.

Rumple sat there, the bottle of water in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees, depressed and anxious, his stomach churning. He glanced towards the room where Alina and Henry were and asked, "I wonder if we can go in there yet?"

"Why don't you ask a nurse?" Belle suggested.

"All right," Gold placed the bottle of water beside her on a small table and then got to his feet again.

After a hurried conversation, he came back and said, "They told me it's okay if we go in, but don't disturb any of the monitors."

The two parents crept into the room, quiet as mice, despite the fact that the occupants were asleep . . . or whatever you called the state they were in.

Rumple's heart broke when he saw how still Alina was lying, like a wax effigy upon the blue pillow, eyes closed, hooked up to all manner of things, like a test subject. He recalled the way she had looked before in the hospital, after Tommy Mason had beaten her unconscious, and thought this time was ten times worse, because there was no good news from the medical staff.

His eyes darted to Henry, also lying still as death, and he felt tears come to his eyes. His grandson was rarely still, always in motion, his quicksilver mind questioning and bright. But now it was as if someone had snuffed out a candle.

He came to stand inbetween the two beds, reaching out to take both children's hands. "Wake up, dearies. Can you hear me? Wake up. Please."

But neither of them stirred, wandering a realm where he could not reach them.

Belle came and stroked Alina's hair, but the little girl didn't move, even in response to her mother's touch. "Baby girl, Mama's here. Right here," she said, her throat clogged with emotion, tears misting her vision.

Gold turned to Henry, one hand carding his grandson's hair. "Hey, Henry. You're missing all the excitement, boy. C'mon, open your eyes." He blinked hard, wanting to hug the boy, but not daring to disturb all the machines attached to him.

The two remained like that for several minutes before Gold finally went to sit down on a padded chair in the corner near Henry's bed.

Belle sat on the edge of the bed beside her daughter, holding her small hand. She stared at her daughter's sweet face and whispered, "Alina Rose, don't you leave me. Don't!"

Her frantic heartfelt plea caused Rumple to cover his face with his hands and weep quietly into them, despair sweeping through him like a tidal wave.

Suddenly, they heard the tapping of high heels coming down the hall, and a familiar icy voice saying, "Out of my way! Where's my son? I want to see him."

Regina.
Gold immediately straightened and wiped his eyes with his hands, composed once more. He'd be drawn and quartered before he ever let her see him cry. Belle too quickly dashed away her tears and looked up as the mayor entered the room.

Regina was wearing her usual two piece black and white suit, her hair neatly combed, her make-up flawless.

She made Belle feel like a country cousin with hay in her hair.

Regina glanced about, her eyes sweeping the room, looking past Alina and then alighting upon Henry. "How did this happen?" she demanded, walking over to stare down at the stricken boy.

"We . . . don't know," Belle made herself say. "I came home and found them like this . . . and pieces of a pretzel Mary Margaret had given them were on the floor."

Regina paled upon hearing that. "No . . . no . . . that's not possible . . ." She cast a pleading glance at Henry. "That can't be right . . ."

Gold looked at her then and saw a guilty look upon her face . . . it was the same look she had worn as his apprentice when she had been caught doing something forbidden, like taking a look in his spellbook and casting a dark spell without his supervision. "What did you do, Regina?" he demanded, his voice hard. "What the hell did you do?"

She looked at him then, a sly look of hatred coming over her features. "Why aren't you laying there, Gold? It should be you in that bed. I meant for you to eat the pretzel . . . I don't understand . . ."

Belle gasped softly. "What do you mean, you meant it for him? Then . . . the pretzel was poisoned? But . . . Mary Margaret gave it to Alina, she would never harm a child . . ."

"She didn't know, the fool!" Regina chuckled. "But it wasn't supposed to affect anyone but those of your bloodline, Gold! The curse was only supposed to harm you and your family . . . so how come Henry is . . ."

Rumple felt his heart skip a beat. Then he snarled in fury, "You stupid bitch! You cast a generational curse upon those pretzels? Hoping to kill me and mine?" One finger stabbed towards the boy in the bed. "That's my grandson lying there!"


"My son!" Gold cried, his brown eyes shimmering with wrath.

"No! His father's Neal Cassidy," Regina cried. "Some martial arts instructor from Phoenix, not the son you lost."

"Shows how much you know! Neal Cassidy is Baelfire Gold, Regina!" Gold raged.

Regina put a hand to her mouth, only now realizing that her grand diabolical scheme had backfired on her terribly. "No . . . if Baelfire's his father . . . then that means . . ."

"He's my blood too! And you just cursed him!"

Regina shook her head mutely.
"You . . . cursed my little girl?" Belle demanded, her temper flaring. "You're the reason they're like this?"

"I . . . I didn't know . . . I wanted to kill Gold . . . not hurt Henry . . ."

"You did this, you jealous rotten witch?" Belle growled, standing up, her fists clenched. "You caused this! You and your sick need for revenge!"

"It's your own fault, you lousy bookworm!" Regina defended. "If you hadn't taken my son away from me, none of this would have happened!"

"None of this would have happened if you hadn't used dark magic on innocent children!" Belle shouted. "I warned you once about hurting my family, Regina Mills! I guess you didn't hear me. Now undo whatever you did!"

Regina laughed mockingly. "I can't, you dumb cow! This realm has barely any magic and I used the last of mine to cast that curse and get Mary Margaret to comply with my directives and give the pretzels to your brat. I can't undo anything now! I have no more magic."

"You mean . . . they're stuck like this?" Belle cried.

"It's not my fault. If your damn husband had eaten the pretzel instead of Henry—"

Belle stalked towards the other woman, her face hard. "I'm sick and tired of you making excuses for your horrible behavior. You're nothing but a jealous spoiled brat who uses your magic to hurt anyone you please, with no thought of the consequences."

"So what? I'm the queen, while you're nothing but the Dark One's serving wench!" Regina sneered. "You have no right to lecture me."

"I have every right! You've made my life hell and you've just cursed my daughter and grandson and tell me you intended to murder my husband and you just expect me to stand here and take it? Well, not in this lifetime, Regina! Everytime you get in a snit, you think you can take out your bad temper on other people. Only this time you've gone too far!"

"Ooh, now I'm scared! What are you going to do, read me the riot act?"

"You're baiting a sleeping dragon, dearie," Rumple warned, smirking.

"Like I'm afraid of you, you crippled conjurer! Or your mealy-mouthed wench!"

Gold looked at his wife, who appeared about to breathe fire, and said, "You know, dearie, you two have some issues you need to work out . . . so I'll just leave you alone and let you get on with that. But remember, sweetheart, what Dr. Hopper said about controlling your anger issues . . . so don't kill her, okay?"

"Kill me?" Regina sneered. "Don't be ridiculous, old man! Your little Belle couldn't harm a fly!"

"You mean, I wouldn't harm a fly," Belle gritted out. "But I can certainly harm you!"

She lunged at Regina, and Gold calmly stepped away, sensing that Belle needed to deal with Regina on her own terms, and left the room, though he waited in the hall to make sure no nurses came by.

Regina turned to face Belle, her lips twisted in a mocking smile. "Sure you will, you pretty
Then Belle slammed her against the wall, one hand tangling in her hair. "You know what your problem is, Regina? You think your position entitles you do whatever you want. You're a spoiled selfish child who thinks if she screams and throws a fit that everyone will fall in line and do what she wants. Well, I learned a long time ago how to handle spoiled brats like you."

Regina jerked her head back and lifted a hand and smacked Belle across the face.

Or tried to.

But she forgot that Belle had learned how to defend herself from Bae, and Belle saw that coming a mile away.

She ducked, and thrust her shoulder into Regina's midsection, lifting her off her feet and tossing her over a shoulder like a sack of meal.

"What are you doing?" Regina screeched, pounding on Belle's shoulder. "Let me go, you bloody twit!"

Belle ignored her protests, holding her easily despite her attempts to get away. She thought about banging the selfish woman's head into the floor, or kicking her into next week, but didn't want anyone coming to investigate, or risking breaking one of the delicate machines hooked up to the children.

She thought angrily of everything Regina had done to her family, all the petty crap she had pulled, and then she recalled Baelfire saying once during a lesson that sometimes the best revenge upon an opponent wasn't pounding the snot out of them, but humiliating them and using it as a tool to make them see the error of their ways.

And if anyone deserved to be humiliated and put in her place, it was the Evil Queen.

"Put me down! Right now!" ordered Regina, twisting and struggling in Belle's grasp. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Teaching you a long overdue lesson," Belle replied, sitting down in the chair Rumple had vacated moments before and dragging Regina across her lap. "It's about time, young lady, that you learned to take responsibility for your own actions, instead of blaming everyone else for your own poor choices." She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small hardcover book called *Thrashing Out Anger Issues*.

"Go to hell!" Regina snapped, trying to get off of Belle's lap.

Belle brought the book down on the captive queen's backside. "Don't you swear at me! Just because you're queen doesn't give you the right to walk all over other people. Or treat them like dirt. Or lock them up in an asylum because you want to play your little power games." As she lectured, Belle smacked Regina's bottom with the book.

"Oww! You wretched little tramp!" Regina yelped. "Stop! I command it!"

"Command all you want. You need . . . to start treating people with respect and courtesy, and stop thinking you have the right . . . to use dark magic on anyone you don't like!" Belle snapped, pinning the struggling Regina over her lap and walloping her bottom repeatedly.

Regina kicked and howled but couldn't get away from the richly deserved chastisement.
Upon hearing the commotion, Rumple poked his head in the doorway. His eyes widened to the size of saucers when he saw what was going on.

"Oww! Let . . . me . . . go! Oww! Rumple! Call off your bloody wench!" Regina wailed.

"What for, dearie?" he asked gleefully. "Seems to me she's giving you exactly what you deserve . . . and then some!"

"If you act like a spoiled brat, you ought to be treated like one," Belle resumed her lecture. "You can't get everything you want . . . that's not how it works . . . and it's high time you stopped thinking of yourself and started thinking about becoming someone other people want to be around! Your petty need for vengeance is why Henry's lying there in that bed right now. It's your fault, Regina Mills, and no one else's. And this is what such behavior earns you, Miss Mills!" She brought the book down sharply a few more times, eliciting a few more sobs and yells before ending the spanking.

Humiliated and hurting, Regina lay over Belle's lap and sobbed for a few moments, acting just like the little child Belle had compared her to. She had never been treated that way by anyone, even her own mother, before. She had also never thought Belle had it in her to do such a thing. Sniffling, she put a hand to her sore bottom and rolled off Belle's lap, backing away before saying petulantly, "How dare you . . . spank me?"

Belle just looked at her coldly. "Take a look at who's lying in that bed . . . and then see if you can ask me that question again."

Regina did, and when her gaze met Henry's face, she cringed and huddled in a corner, sobbing. "I hate you, Belle Gold!"

"Do you? Or do you hate what you've done?" Belle asked quietly. "Learn your lesson, Regina . . . before it's too late."

"Some would say it's too late already," Rumple said, coming back into the room.

"Be quiet, Rumple!" Regina snapped, her face heating as she realized that he had witnessed the whole thing. "You could have stopped her."

"Like I said before, what for? You got exactly what you deserved . . . and you're lucky it wasn't me tanning your hide, because I'd have used this," he shook his cane pointedly.

"You were the one who summoned me and requested to learn dark magic, dearie. Or don't you remember the deal we made?" Gold said, shaking a finger at her. "And I never told you what to do after you left me. It was all your idea to kill Snow White and cast the Dark Curse. I warned you, all magic comes with a price. Now reap what you've sown, dearie."

Regina started sniffling again, realizing for the first time that revenge wasn't as satisfying as it was cracked up to be . . . and Henry might well pay the price for it. She rubbed her sore backside and glared at Belle, not wanting to admit the other woman was right . . . and it was all her fault . . . and she regretted her actions for the first time in a long time . . .

Rumple limped over to Alina and whispered, "True Love breaks all curses." Then he called, "Belle. Help me."

Belle rose and came to stand opposite him, on Alina's left while he was on the right. "Will it
work?"

"All we can do is try," Rumple said.

Then they bent and kissed their daughter, one on each cheek.

A sudden flush spread through the little girl's face.

The two parents waited with baited breath.

Slowly, Alina's dark lashes fluttered . . . then she opened her eyes.

"Mama? Papa? Where . . . am I?"

Belle and Rumple hugged her, tears of joy streaming down their faces, too overwhelmed to reply.

Regina started to go over to Henry, then hesitated.

Suddenly, one of the machines he was hooked up to started to beep wildly, and then a team of nurses and Dr. Whale rushed into the room.

"What's happening?" Regina shouted. "Why is it doing that?"

"Move! You're in the way! Get out!" Whale ordered. He began to do CPR, just as two orderlies dragged Regina from the room.
Chapter Summary

Emma and Bae's fight with Mal might prove more than thy can handle, but only the savior's magic will be Henry's salvation--if they can make it there in time!

Fire scorched the ground where Emma had been moments before, eating a hole in the rock. She could feel the heat of it from several feet away, even through the spell she had cast. Her elbow and side ached where they had met the ground, as Bae had covered her when he'd knocked her out of the way.

"You okay?" he asked, rolling off her and getting to his feet, his sword in one hand, a shuriken in the other.

"Yeah. Thanks," she said shakily, and got to her feet, picking up her sword as she did so.

"Told you I had your back," he replied, then winced as more fire spewed down at them as the dragon, black as pitch, reared above them.

Her scales gleamed in the glow cast by the fire, blacker than ebony, glistening with a reddish tint, as if all the fires of hell were trapped within their depths. Claws the size of their swords slashed down, trying to impale the puny humans that threatened her, as billows of smoke rose up from the superheated ground.

Bae and Emma were forced to dodge and move quickly back and around the large outcropping of rock. "Damn, but that bitch's ugly as hell!" Emma panted, coughing at the stench of sulfur.

"Yeah, she sure won't win any beauty contests, unless she's matched with a Gorgon," Bae agreed.

Mal screeched again, and the raucous sound grated on their eardrums. The earth shook as she slammed her forefeet down and raked large furrows in the stone, frustrated because she couldn't get to the two who had invaded her lair. Her wings, large and leathery like a bat's, flapped uselessly, for she could not get the height required to use them in such close quarters, and her teeth shone a stark yellowish white against her reddish maw, dripping with rot from her latest meal, which was a luckless deer Regina had thrown down to her.

Bae suddenly sprang up from behind the outcropping and yelled, "Yo, Medusa! Time to kick your ugly ass self!"

Mal swung her huge head around, and lunged at him.

As she did so, Bae tossed the shuriken at her.

It flew end over end in a brief flicker of metal . . . and impaled her left eye.

The dragon howled and shook her head, trying to dislodge the throwing star, and while Mal was distracted, Emma leaped up on top of the rocks and kicked her hard in the snout, aiming for the vulnerable nostrils. She winced as her boot sank into the fleshy slimy cavity and then she chucked a shuriken into the other nostril for good measure.
Mal snorted and trickles of fire exploded from her nostrils, and Emma wasn't sure if the shuriken had done much damage before it was vaporized. She flipped off the outcropping just as shards of stone fell from the ceiling and almost impaled her.

"Hell, that was close!" she gasped as she crouched next to Bae, who had another shuriken out and ready.

"Yeah. Time to move. Even with the fireproofing, it's getting hot in here," he said, smears of ash coating the left side of his face.

Together they ran further into the cavern, seeking new cover.

Mal surged after them, her tail lashing and cracking the rock as she stomped across the cavern, keening a deadly wail. Fire streamed from her jaws as she breathed again, one eye leaking blood and fluid down her face.

Bae dragged Emma into an alcove just as the fire shot at them, and then winced and said lightly, "Even with the spells, wild swan, my clothes can't take this kind of abuse." He indicated the tatters his shirt was now in from being scratched against rock and singed by dragonfire.

Emma sighed ruefully, she wasn't much better, with a hole in one knee and one jacket sleeve burnt away. "It's a good thing then your papa's a tailor," she joked. "Cover me."

Then she sprang out and sliced at a clawed foot coming at her.

As the enchanted metal bit through the scales and carved a gaping slice in Mal's toe, Bae sent three shuriken at the dragon, aiming for the vulnerable wings and the other eye.

Two hit their marks, but Mal shook her head and the one aimed at her face bounced off her scales and fell on the floor.

"Damn!" Bae swore, and jumped back as fire scored the ground before his boots. "Babe, I thought dragonbane was deadly to her kind! Why isn't it working?"

"How the hell should I know?" Emma called back, rolling to avoid a second claw swipe. "Do I look like a compendium on dragon lore?"

She tried to recall everything she'd studied and the things Gold had told her about fighting dragons . . . and using dragonbane . . . but her thoughts scattered and she feared the potion had lost its potency after being exposed to the air for several minutes, as Gold had warned might happen.

Perhaps her gun might have better effect, she thought, pulling it out and firing several shots into the behemoth's hide.

The dragon absorbed the bullets as if they were bee stings, barely flinching as the slugs embedded themselves in her hide.

"Emma! Bullets don't work on her!" Bae called. "Her hide's too tough!"

He jumped out in front of the beast, waving his sword and taunting, "C'mon, you reject from an ogre's ass! Come and get it! Or do you like it when your food kicks your scaly ass?"

Mal's head shot towards him, lightning quick, and he avoided her teeth by the barest centimeter, launching himself in a somersault over her snout and landing on top of her head, just behind her pointed ears.
It had been years since he'd ridden a horse, but he instinctively dug his heels in as the dragon bucked and threw her head about like a crazed bronco.

"Baelfire!" Emma yelled as she saw him perched upon his vicious steed.

He gripped the edge of one scale with his free hand and slammed a shuriken down with his other. Hot blood spurted up and scored his face.

He bit back a yelp and then hung on as the dragon went nuts beneath him, slamming her neck and shoulders into the cavern walls, trying to crush her unwanted passenger.

Emma gasped as she saw the peril her husband was in, and ducked under one clawed foot and sprang up, stabbing Mal with her sword, right at the spot where the leg met her torso, the vulnerable point where the scales were but a thin soft layer.

Her sword penetrated the scales, thrusting home hard.

"Got you, you evil thing!" Emma shouted in triumph.

Mal thrashed violently, as she felt the wicked sting of the sword in her vulnerable spot.

Chips of stone shattered all across the cavern, striking the clinging Baelfire, hitting his shoulders and head hard.

Dizzy, he shook his head, and tried to hang on, but he felt his grip loosening. No! I can't pass out . . . not now . . . I can't . . . if I fall . . . she'll crush me . . . or I'll break every bone in my body from this height . . .

Fighting the waves of nausea and vertigo, he managed to free his katana and stabbed it through Mal's neck, providing an anchor point to cling to. Unfortunately, it was not a killing blow.

"Baelfire!" screamed his wife, even as the world started to go gray.

Emma saw her husband sway atop the beast, and knew he was in danger of falling off . . . and if he did, he would die or become crippled for life . . . Terror swamped her and she yanked out her sword and struck again and again at the dragon, screaming, "Just die already, you miserable piece of shit!"

Her sword bounced off Mal's scales . . . once, twice, thrice . . . and she cursed the fact that the dragonbane seemed to slow to affect the mighty beast. Wasn't it supposed to be a poison? And shouldn't it work quicker?

Bae felt his hand slip, and he threw himself forward against the dragon's neck, blood soaking through his shirt as he struggled to remain conscious. Don't fall . . . don't fall . . . don't fall . . . hang on . . . one minute longer . . . one minute . . . just one . . .

Emma dodged a clawed forefoot as Mal swiped at her, making her roll away from the thrashing dragon, away from her stricken husband.

No! I won't leave him!

She recalled saying he might die and how he had whispered reassurances in her ear . . . at least one of them might make it home . . .

You and me, wild swan. The way it's supposed to be. I've got your back.
She rolled to her feet, hatred surging through her for the deadly monster that sought to steal her husband away.

And . . . I . . . have . . . yours!

The dragon arched above her, wounded but still full of fight.

But . . . were her movements starting to slow down or was it only Emma's imagination?

Gold's words echoed in her head. *Dragonbane is a powerful poison . . . it paralyzes a dragon . . .*

Mal's head dipped, but without the former striking speed she had shown before.

*Always be prepared, Emma. Watch an opponent for vulnerabilities, then strike.*

Bae's advice from one of their spars came back to her, and she crouched, waiting for the right moment, praying he could hang on . . . just a moment more . . .

The dragon's head was starting droop, she landed on the ground and staggered, and then Emma saw it . . . the single patch upon her breast . . . where the scales did not quite overlap . . . some had fallen off . . . leaving a small hole . . .

Up above, Balefire clung to the dragon by the slimmest of margins, slipping in and out of reality, his head bleeding from being struck against rock, blood trickling into his ear and down his neck.

He could feel his fingers relaxing, losing their grip, just like had happened long ago, when he fell through the portal to Wonderland . . .

*Emma . . . I love you . . .*

Emma threw Charming's sword with all her strength, sending it soaring like a silver missile through the air.

It struck the vulnerable gap in Mal's scales, slipping between them and burying itself up to the hilt in the dragon's chest, right through the left chamber of her great heart.

It was one shot in a million. Yet Emma had done it.

Maleficent howled and crashed down upon the ground, the cavern reverberating as her body smashed into the floor.

Emma stared in shock at the dead dragon by her feet.

*That's how heroes are made, dearie.*

She, Emma Swan Gold, had slain a dragon.

And for the first time ever, she truly believed in herself. She was the blood of kings, of heroes, born to magic, and born to break the Dark Curse.

She was the Savior of Storybrooke.

Then Baelfire toppled off the dragon, losing the battle at last, and succumbing to unconsciousness.

"Bae!" Emma screamed as her husband's limp form came to rest by the toe of her boot.
Storybrooke General:

The monitor's harsh wailing rang through the room as Whale and his team of emergency personnel sought to save the life of Henry Cassidy, known to his family as Henry Gold.

"He's crashing! Dammit, give him two CC's of . . ." Whale's orders were lost in the frantic bustle around him.

"Doctor, his blood pressure's dropping!"

In the bed beside him, Alina clung to Rumple and Belle, and whimpered in terror. "Papa, what's happening? What's wrong with Henry?"

"He . . . I . . . don't know . . ." Rumple stammered. "There was a curse on the pretzels . . . it put you both under a sleeping curse . . . at least that was what it was supposed to do . . . but magic here . . . is different . . ."

"But you woke me . . . now wake up Henry . . ." Alina cried, tears starting in her expressive brown eyes.

"Sweetheart, I can't . . . I can't even get near him and . . . this close to the end . . . he needs a love stronger than mine . . . and that's . . ."

"Emma and Bae," Belle finished. "Dearest God, Rumple! If they don't get here in time . . ."

Their eyes met over Alina's head, and both of them read the terrible truth in the other's gaze.

Henry would die.

Emma held her hands over her unconscious husband, recalling the most recent of Rumple's lessons. In order to heal someone, you had to visualize them whole, it was a precise art, requiring the caster to empathize with the victim and see the recipient well again.

She choked back the fear that Bae might be so severely injured he could die and lowered her head and concentrated hard.

The intimate connection she shared with the man she loved with her whole being flared to life, and her magic shot through her like a spring flood.

Glowing green light encased Bae's head, healing his wound and fixing the concussion he'd developed, restoring him and renewing him, waking him from his unwilling nap in an instant.

As the magic faded, her husband opened his eyes and grinned up at her. "Hey, Emma. What the hell am I doing on the floor?"

"Oh, Bae! I thought you were dead."

"Nah, didn't I tell you us Golds are damn hard to kill?" he said, then he sat up and kissed her hard. "Where's tall, ugly, and scaly?"

"Dead. I killed her with that overhand cast you taught me," Emma said proudly.
"Way to go, babe. Now let's get the egg and get the hell out of here," Bae said, and he climbed to his feet and went over to the dead dragon. "It's a good thing I haven't forgotten how to skin a deer. . . ."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Regina tried to get inside the room where Henry was lying to no avail. The staff kept her at arm's length and all she could tell was that something bad was happening to her boy. Guilt ate her from the inside out as she realized this was all her doing. Her son, whom she had tried to love as best as she could, was the price the magic had extracted for casting a curse of such magnitude. All magic comes with a price, her former master's words hissed through her mind as the machines beeped and wailed in her ears. She had always thought the price worth it, to have her revenge upon those she felt had wronged her, like Snow White, Charming, Rumplestiltskin, and the rest. Revenge had been worth any price.

Until now, when vengeance's price bore the name of Henry Mills . . . who was also Gold's grandson.

Now she drank from the cup of bitter regret to the dregs and she finally understood the truth Rumplestiltskin had learned long before—that sometimes the price was not up to the caster, but at the magic's own choosing, and sometimes the magic chose without regard for what the caster wanted.

She had tried to steal away the lives of Gold and his family.

And such a curse always carried a high price . . . a price she had forgotten about in her eagerness to destroy her rival.

But the magic had not.

All magic comes with a price.

The heart monitor suddenly flatlined.

"No . . . no . . . no!" Regina sobbed, knowing her regret came too late to save her son . . . and she proved to be, at last, the Evil Queen of fairytale fame, in this world and the world she had been born in.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Clutching the jeweled egg in her hands, Emma and Bae made their way back up to the library, with Emma using her newfound magic to make the elevator rise to the top floor. As soon as the doors opened, she sprang out. She had been having uneasy feelings since she'd stepped onto the lift, and they were increasing.

"Bae, something's wrong," she murmured as she ran out of the elevator.

"Like what?" he asked, following her, and attempting to wipe off some of the blood that covered him. He was sure he'd scare any sane person to death with the way he looked, soaked in dragon blood and wearing a tattered T-shirt, looking like a zombie extra from The Walking Dead.

"I don't know. I just . . . feel it," Emma said. They ran out to her Bug and hopped in, and instead of driving back to Gold's Victorian, Emma felt something pulling her elsewhere.

"Hon, the house is that way," Bae reminded her, jerking a thumb back to the opposite side of the
"I know! I know! But I'm telling you there's something wrong and I need to go this way." Emma said, driving down towards the hospital.

"Where?"

"The hospital," she replied, her destination suddenly coming to her in a flash of insight.

"What? Why?"

"You know how I have this... superpower that lets me tell if somebody's lying?" she said, driving as quickly as she could. "Well, it looks like I have Spidey Sense too or whatever the hell you call it, because all I know is I need to get to the hospital right now."

Bae frowned. "Does it feel like... something's pulling you over there?"

"Yeah. So what?" she asked, then she felt her heart accelerate. "Oh my God! It's Henry! He's calling me!"

She stepped on the gas and ran right through a red light.

Then she dodged a car coming the opposite way. Horns honked and tires screeched as she just missed getting into an accident.

"Hells bells, sheriff!" Bae cried. "We're not in your police car!"

"Damn! Forgot about that!" Emma swore. "Oh well, I can write myself a ticket later."

They reached the hospital in record time and Emma threw the Bug into park at the entrance and tossed the keys at Bae. "Here! Park the car!"

Then she jumped out, the sense of urgency screaming a siren call through her entire being.

She raced through the hospital, ignoring the well-meaning staff who tried to ask her who she was here to see and if they could help her.

Finally she came to a room where a bunch of nurses were milling about and Regina stood outside the door, her eyes red from crying.

Emma pushed past her and entered the room.

First she saw Rumple, Belle, and Alina, all holding each other and crying.

"Where's Henry?" Emma yelled, looking around for her son. The sense of urgency had started to die down.

Then she saw him, lying still in the bed, and the nurses were shaking their heads and Whale looked as if his best friend had died. "Henry! What the hell happened?"

Whale looked up. "Sheriff Cassidy, I'm so sorry..."

"Sorry for what? What's wrong with him? Whatever it is, fix it!"

"I'm afraid I can't," Whale began regretfully.
"What do you mean you can't? You're the one with the medical degree!" she yelled, rushing over and putting her hands on Henry's head. "He's sleeping, right? Come on, kid, wake up! Rise and shine!"

Henry remained still and she shook him again, her mind screaming what her heart already knew.

Bae appeared in the doorway and felt his heart plummet down to his boots. "Emma, did you find Henry? Hey, why do you all look like somebody died?"

Rumple raised his head, his eyes glistening with tears, and he said haltingly, "Oh, Bae! I'm so sorry, son . . ."

Bae shook his head, glancing towards the bed where his son lay. "No . . . no . . . Papa, don't say it! Don't you dare say it!" He stared at his grief-stricken parent, whom he had seen cry a bare handful of times in his life, knowing just what Rumple couldn't vocalize, and turned and ran over to where Emma was sitting by Henry. "Emma . . . what's wrong with him?"

"Bae . . . it's . . . he's . . ." she choked.

"He's under a curse, Bae!" Alina cried. "And you can break it!"

"By True Love's kiss!" Emma finished.

"Dearie, you can't bring back the dead," Rumple began sadly.

"I'm the savior! And he's not dead yet!" Emma argued. Belief was the strongest magic of all. And she would not, could not fail her son, who had always believed in her. It was time now to return the favor. Then she bent and kissed her son on the forehead. "I love you, Henry."

Bae also kissed him, on the cheek. "Me too, tiger."

As their lips met Henry's flesh, a green glow spread throughout the room, radiating from Emma like a star gone nova. A clap of thunder without sound shook the room as the curse that had stood for twenty-eight years was shattered, broken by True Love and savior's true belief in her own destiny.

And Henry opened his eyes.

"Mom? Dad? Why're you crying?"

Emma just pulled him into her arms and hugged him, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Bae grabbed them both in his arms and clutched them to him.

"Henry! Are you okay?" Alina cried, trying to see her nephew and best friend from her bed, craning her head around Rumple's shoulder

"M'fine! Except I feel like a teddy bear getting squashed," Henry called from where he was sandwiched inbetween his parents. "How are you?"

"I'm good," Alina answered, smiling as the treatment Henry was receiving, which was the same as she had gotten just minutes before.

Regina burst into the room and nearly passed out when she saw Henry sitting up, very much alive. "Oh! Henry! You're alive! But how?"
"Emma saved him," Rumple informed her, his tone dark and forbidding. "And if I were you, dearie, I'd start running. Somewhere far far away."

Regina froze. "The curse . . . it's been broken . . ." She could feel the difference now, the shift in the balance of Power, it glistened in the air, like golden sparkles.

Rumplestiltskin nodded. "To bits and pieces, Regina Mills." Then he gestured and purple fire bloomed in his hand. "Which means . . . I have my magic back. And everyone else has their memories back. Like I said, Your Majesty," he spat the title at her like rotten fruit. "Start running."

"Wait," Regina held out her hand, as if asking for mercy. "Please, let me say goodbye to Henry," she turned to her son. "Henry, I never meant to hurt you . . . I just wanted to . . ."

The boy's eyes suddenly fixed on her, and in them was an eerie silver cast. "But you wanted to hurt my family, didn't you?" he asked, his voice throbbing with uncanny knowledge. "You tried to hurt my grandpa and Alina."

Regina winced. "Yes, but . . . I didn't know you were related, I didn't know you were one of them . . ."

"A Gold. That's who I am," Henry declared. "Don't you ever learn, Regina? Or is the only thing you really care about your own revenge?"

"I . . . used to. But I do care about you, Henry! I love you. You're my son."

"No. I was your son. But I left because . . . I couldn't take the way you hurt everyone any more. You ruined everybody's lives! And you didn't care. You just kept on going. I tried to get you to change, but you just . . . wouldn't listen!"

"That's not true . . . I did listen . . . sometimes . . . I let Emma into this town, after all . . . and your father . . ."

"Yeah, and how were you gonna stop them? Were you gonna kill them?" Henry snapped. "You had no choice." He paused, then sucked in a breath. "But you know what really bothers me? Not your . . . fight with my grandpa, that's been going on since before I was born probably, and while that's bad, and so's what you did to Belle, there's something you did that's even worse. You tried to hurt Alina. She's never done anything to you, Regina! And you tried to kill her . . . for nothing! Just 'cause she's Rum's daughter! How sick's that, huh?"

"I . . . that's the nature of a curse of generations," Regina tried to explain. "It affects all members of a bloodline."

"Then you never should have cast it," Henry said accusingly. "But you did, and I nearly lost my best friend and my aunt. What do you have to say that?"

"I . . . I . . . was wrong. I'm sorry."

"Sometimes sorry's not enough," Henry said, still using that eerie adult tone. "You need to do something to atone for what you've done."

"Like what?"

"Figure it out. But in the meantime, I'd take Rum's advice and start running. Really fast."

The Evil Queen swayed, going paler than a ghost. Then she turned and bolted from the room.
An awakened Storybrooke brings lots of reunions and problems

There was a bit of a commotion when the hospital staff realized that Henry had made a most miraculous recovery, but most of the citizens were too busy trying to reconcile their old memories and lives with their new ones to dwell too much on the little boy coming back from the dead, especially when his grandfather was the most powerful sorcerer in most of Fairy Tale Land.

In the hospital room, Henry found himself squished between his parents again as they hugged him repeatedly, until he wriggled free and said, "Hey, guys! I'm not a Care Bear! My name's Henry, not Huggable."

Bae chuckled. "Sorry, tiger. But after the day I've had I just need to . . . uh . . . squeeze something."

"Your wife's right there," the boy pointed out sassily.

Emma drew back when Bae went to hug her. "Eeww, Bae! You're all over blood and . . . stuff."

Bae looked down at himself ruefully. "Yeah, well, slaying dragons is a rather messy business. As you ought to know."

"Here, Bae," Rumple extended a hand and gestured, and suddenly swirls of purple light danced over Baelfire for a second.

When it receded, Bae found his clothes were neatly mended and cleaned. He grinned. "Thanks, Papa. I always liked that spell."

Then he hugged Emma, right after Rumple cast the same spell on her.

Alina smiled up at her father. "It feels good, doesn't it?"

"To have my magic back?" he queried affectionately. "Dearie, it feels . . . wonderful!"

He received a hug from Belle then. "You're finally whole again, Rumple!" she said, smiling and kissing him.

"Yes," he agreed, kissing her back.

Henry was thirsty, so he summoned Rumple's water bottle from the table to him. As he drank some, Bae looked at his son and said, "Should you be doing magic this soon after that curse?"

"I feel fine," Henry said.

Rumple broke off his smooching Belle to say, "You'll find it rather difficult to keep a magician from using magic, Bae. It's not in our nature. We need it, the way a bird needs to fly or a fish to swim. If we don't use magic, even a little every day we get—"

"Very grouchy," Belle teased.
Rumple cocked an eyebrow at her. "Look who's talking. I wasn't the one who pulled Regina across my knee and spanked her."

Emma gasped. "Really? He's not kidding, is he?"

Bae started laughing. "Seriously? You spanked Regina? Damn, I miss all the best things while I'm off getting roasted by dragons and whatever."

"No way!" Henry stared at Belle.

"Papa, did she really?" Alina asked, her eyes wide.

"She did, sure as my name's Rumplestiltskin, lass," her father said, smirking. "With a book! I saw the whole thing."

"This one," Belle said, showing them the book in her pocket. "I finally lost my temper and wanted to teach her a good lesson, after all the things she's done to me and to all of you, and it was the quickest way I could get my point across without being accused of brutality or killing her. I wish I could say she learned her lesson . . . but I don't know for sure."

"I'd have loved to see that!" Emma said. "Probably just what she needed."

Rumple nodded. "That's just what I told her."

Emma cleared her throat. "So . . . now that Mal's dead and we've got the egg with the potion in it, what are you going to do with it, Rum? I thought you needed it to break the curse but guess not."

The master magician shook his head. "No, I never needed it for that. But you needed to retrieve it for a different reason, Emma."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What for, Master Yoda?"

"I asked you a question before you went off to get the egg. Do you remember what it was?"

"Yeah. You asked if I believed I was the savior."

"Right. And your answer was why I sent you after Mal. You said you believed because everyone said so. Which wasn't the answer I wanted to hear. You still didn't believe in yourself, Emma. And belief was paramount to you breaking the curse. So I had to do something to prove to you that you really were capable of breaking curses."

"So you had me slay a dragon?"

"Exactly. Because that's how heroes are made. And I did need that potion back. Because you never know when it'll come in handy."

"You gambled a hell of a lot on my being able to defeat her, Rum."

"Yes, well, I had faith in you, Emma. You come from good stock, and I knew you had it in you, you simply needed a reason to bring it out," Rumple said calmly.

Emma found herself turning faintly pink. "You're too damn clever for your own good!"

Her father-in-law shrugged. "I try, dearie."

"Um . . . the egg's in my car," Emma began. "I can go and get it."
"No need," Rumple said, and snapped a finger. The jeweled egg appeared in his lap.

"Whoa!" Henry said enviously. "You have to teach me that spell, Grandpa!"

"No, I don't. As a conjurer, you can do it as easily as I just did," Rumple corrected.

"Really?"

"Yes. But right now you ought to rest. Coming back from a sleeping curse takes its toll on your magical reserves."

"But I'm not tired," his grandson objected.

"I said rest, not go to sleep. There's a difference," the elder magician reminded him.

"Can we watch cartoons?" Alina said, lying back on the pillows.

"You can, if I can find the stupid remote," Belle said, hunting for it.

Rumple gestured at the TV set in the wall, and it turned on to Cartoon Network. "There! How's that, sweetie?"

"Great, Papa. But I hope the food's better than last time I was stuck in here."

"Oh, I think I can persuade Alice to cook you something special," Rumple said, patting her knee.

"How long do we have to be in here?" Henry asked. "There's nothing wrong with us anymore."

"Maybe overnight," Emma said. "Just to make sure."

"Aww, Mom!" groaned her son. He rolled his eyes. "I don't even have any good books to read."

"So summon one," Bae encouraged.

"Okay!" Henry said, and then he made a beckoning motion with his hand. And the Once Upon a Time Book appeared in his lap. "Yes! I did it!"

Alina gave him a thumbs up. "Watch what I can do," she said, and she took a straw off her bedside table and frowned at it.

It morphed into a single long-stemmed pink rose.

"Very good, Alina," Rumple praised. "But that's enough magic for now. You don't want to exhaust yourself."

The little girl sighed. "But you can do a bunch of spells and not exhaust yourself, Papa."

"That's one of the advantages of being older, dearie," he ruffled her hair. "I'm going to call Alice and tell her that everything's okay and the curse has broken."

"What's gonna happen now that everyone's got their memories back?" Henry wanted to know.

"There's going to be a lot of confused people," Belle predicted.

"I bet," Emma said, thinking that some of them would be her own parents. 'But right now all I want is a bath and some food and a nap.'"
"I'll second that," her husband agreed.

Henry looked over at Alina. "What is it with adults and sleep?"

"I dunno. It's like a disease or something," she said, smirking. "Papa, can you summon my Nook?"

"Sure, dearie." Rumple said, and hung up his cell and beckoned and Alina's tablet appeared in his hands. "Here."

"Thanks! Now I can see if I can beat Candy Crush level eighty-six," his daughter said, taking it from him. As she put it down on her tray table, she said, "Papa, the magic feels . . . different now than it did before. It flows easier . . . how come?"

"Is it because the curse is broken?" surmised Henry.

"Yes, that's part of it. But it's also because the balance of Power has shifted. The Universal Spiral has come around again and magic is active in this realm once more. To those who can wield it. Though the magic works a little differently here than it does in our old world. It's a bit harder for us to manipulate, even for masters like me. Though you and Henry might not find it so difficult, since you've grown up with it."

"What about established practitioners, like Regina?" Emma asked.

"She might not have as an easy a time of it. It takes some getting used to," Rumple replied.

"You don't seem to have a problem," Emma noted.

"I've only cast elementary spells today, dearie. Nothing that taxes me. But I can feel the difference in the way the magic responds to my will. And so will Regina, or any practitioner from our old world."

"But what about magic's price?" Emma asked.

"That, dearie, is the same in whatever realm you travel. So watch what you cast," Rumple cautioned.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Mary Margaret was walking down the street after speaking with David for the last time. Apparently he was willing to leave Kathryn, but felt it would smooth things over if he moved to an apartment in Boston for awhile. Mary Margaret didn't know what to say anymore. She wasn't sure if David truly loved her, or loved the idea of her. She wasn't sure herself just how involved she wanted to be with a man who seemed to have a problem committing to her. And now he was leaving.

She was musing on lost prospects when something swept over her in a wave. And suddenly she remembered.

She was not only Mary Margaret Blanchard, schoolteacher. She was Snow White, princess of the Enchanted Forest, wife of Prince Charming, and stepdaughter to Regina, the Evil Queen. She recalled everything about the curse and what Regina had done in the name of her hatred and revenge. But most of all she recalled how she and Charming had become separated in this new land.
David was Charming, she realized with a gasp. And he wasn't married to Kathryn, but to her.

She froze, right in the middle of the street, the memories sweeping through her with a vengeance. But that was all right, because everything and everyone else had come to a halt too as their memories were restored, and they now had to reconcile what they used to be with their Storybrooke selves.

Suddenly, David pulled up in his blue pickup and hopped out of the truck.

"Snow!" he called, his eyes bright with an unstoppable fire—the fire of a love long denied, long lost, but now remembered.

She turned at the sound of her name—her true name—and they met in the middle of the street, clasping each other in their arms. "Charming! My prince!"

"I've finally found you!" he cried, now understanding the reason why he had never felt complete with Kathryn, and yet somehow he'd always felt an undeniable attraction to Mary Margaret.

"And I've found you!" she cried, tears coming into her eyes. "Just like always."

Their mouths met, and passion's sweet flame claimed them, as they kissed as if there was no tomorrow. But there was one thing both of them knew, like they knew their true selves, and that was that nothing would separate them ever again.

Jefferson knew the instant the curse broke, he could feel the restored magic, the rightness of things, rush over him like a breath of pure fresh air. He stood on the corner near the bus stop where Grace—Paige—got off, as he usually did at this time of day. She never noticed the tall figure leaning against a street lamp whose dark eyes followed her with such loving tenderness, he took great care that wouldn't happen, but he was always there. Always watching, always waiting, always wanting to take her in his arms like he used to.

The bus pulled up, and the kids got out, and they were startled and shocked, looking about for parents and siblings they had been separated from for twenty-eight long years, rushing to and fro calling out names they hadn't recalled in over twenty years.

Jefferson felt his heart skip a beat as he saw Grace come off the bus, her blue eyes wide and a little frightened. He could tell she was recalling her real memories. He stepped out from behind the lamp post, wondering if he should wait, wondering if she would even want to see him, the father whom she must think abandoned her. He stood there, struck dumb, unable to make himself move forward, unable to even call out her name.

Grace rubbed her head, trying to make sense of all the memories swirling through her head. But one thing stood out in her mind. She had to find her papa. To warn him that the queen's men were looking for him, that the Evil Queen was after him, and he was in danger. Except . . . this wasn't the Enchanted Forest. This was Storybrooke. But she still needed her papa.

Then she looked up . . . some sixth sense urging her to do so . . . and there he was. As if he had known to wait there at that exact spot.

She stared at him for one moment, in disbelief, as if at a stranger. Then she ran forward, her arms outstretched. "Papa! Papa!"

"Grace! Oh, God!" He grabbed his daughter in a bear hug that lifted her right off her feet. "My
baby girl! I never meant to leave you!"

She hugged him back, thinking at how good it felt to be hugged by him again. "I know, Papa. But the queen's guards were looking for you, and I tried to find you, but you were gone. Did you use your hat to escape?"

He nodded, his face pressed against her silky golden hair. "Grace, I missed you so much. And I've so much to tell you."

"Me too, Papa. Is it true we've been cursed for over twenty-years?"

"Yes. Only I was never under it. Only you."

Grace nodded as he set her down. "I still remember my Storybrooke family, Papa. They were good to me."

"I . . . know. I'd like to meet them, to thank them for taking care of you," Jefferson said awkwardly. "But there's something else I have to tell you first." He knelt and took her gently by the shoulders. "You remember how I always told you that your mama died when you were born?"

"Uh huh. You said she was gone but she was still with me, as a guardian angel," Grace said softly. "And that you really missed her and that I reminded you of her."

"You do, sweetheart. But . . . I was wrong too. You see, your mama didn't die. The . . . person who told me that lied. Your mama is alive. In fact, you've seen her several times."

"She's here . . . in Storybrooke?"

"Yes. She used to be known as Saylah, Mr. Gold's housekeeper. But then she regained her memories and knew she was really Alice Carstairs, my wife."

"Alice? Alice that's Alina's housekeeper is my mama?" Grace cried.

"Yes, love! I found out a few months ago myself and I couldn't wait to tell you, Grace. Your mama is alive and always has been, and she's been living with Mr. Gold, who's really Rumplestiltskin, all this time."

Grace smiled in delight. "But what happened to her? Why didn't she ever come back to us?"

"It's a long story, baby. Why don't we go and fetch your mama and we can discuss it over milkshakes at Granny's?"

"Okay! And maybe we can ask Alina and Henry too," Grace said, then she took Jefferson's hand and they walked down the street together.

**Page~*~*~*~*~Break**

Emma was reluctant to leave Henry, but Bae convinced her after much debate that they needed to go home and get some sleep and they'd return later to have supper with him and Alina. So they drove back to the dojo and slept for the rest of the afternoon, only waking up when Emma's cell rang and she was forced to pick it up.

"Lo?" she yawned.

"Emma? Sorry to wake you, it's Belle. We were wondering if you wanted us to bring you and Bae some supper? Alice made fried chicken, mashed potatoes, biscuits, and corn. Rumple and I were
going to bring it over to the hospital for the kids and we'll bring enough for you and Bae too, unless you've already eaten?"

"No. That sounds great. Let me just wake up Bae and jump in the shower and I'll be over," Emma said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Oh, and Jeff's here with Grace too."

"He found Grace? That's wonderful. Did she meet Alice yet?"

"Oh, yeah. You should have seen them. Hugs, kisses, and tears. I think Alice is still in shock. But she's cooking like a crazy person," Belle laughed. "And telling Grace all about her life in the Dark Castle and Avonlea when she was a girl. Grace loves it. She's been asking questions nonstop and when she isn't hugging Alice, she's hugging Jeff, and she's even hugged Rumple a bunch of times and me too. She's like a little firefly, fluttering everywhere with this big grin on her face."

"I can imagine," Emma smiled. "I wish I could say the same for my own parents."

Belle sighed. "They haven't come by yet?"

"No. And that's okay, I understand. I mean, they didn't have the same kind of relationship with me that you'd normally have."

"Emma, I'm sure they'll come by as soon as they're ready," Belle said. "But I can understand your reluctance to meet them. It's sort of the same thing with me and my father."

"Right," Emma said quickly, recalling that Belle would have an even tougher time meeting her parent after what she had learned about him than Emma would have meeting her own. At least her parents had been justified in what they had done. But what sort of justification did Maurice have?

"I'll see you soon, Belle," Emma said, then she hung up the phone and went to wake her husband.

The Golds all met at the hospital, with Alice bringing all the food over in plastic Tupperware containers, kept warm by Rumple's magic. Grace and Jefferson were the first ones to enter Alina and Henry's room, Grace had two stuffed animals in her hands, and Jeff had a vase with flowers.

Henry looked up and saw them first. "Jeff! And Paige! I mean, Grace!"

"Hiya, Henry!" Grace greeted. "Papa told me you were . . . recovering from some kind of curse Regina put on you so I got you a get well dog." She handed Henry a blue dog with a shirt on it that said Get Well Soon.

"Hey, Grace!" Alina called, waving from her bed, she had been playing on her Nook.

"Alina! Here's a get well cat for you, look, it's black like Nala!" Grace said, rushing over to her and hugging her.

"Thanks! So . . . have you . . . uh . . . met your mother yet?" Alina asked.

Grace grinned. "Yeah! And it's so cool! That my mama and yours are best friends like us and she's been working for your papa all this time."

"Yeah, she's been working for him for like forever!" Alina laughed. "Ever since I was a baby." She hugged the cat to her, it had a pink shirt on with Get Well Soon on it.
"How are you feeling, Henry?" asked Jeff.

"Bored," he answered.

"Well, I think your folks are coming over soon and your grandparents have brought dinner," Jeff said, sitting on the bed next to the boy.

"Did Alice cook it?" Henry asked.

"Of course I did, you silly boy!" Alice laughed, coming in with two bags in her hands. "I know what hospital food tastes like and it's not fit for a dog."

"What'd you make?"

Alice began unpacking the Tupperware, putting the food on the tray tables and frowning. "Damn! I need a bigger table. How are we all going to fit over here?"

"Oh, don't fret, dearie," Rumple said, coming into the room. He gestured two times and the tables expanded to accommodate all of his very large family. "That good, or do you need them larger?"

"No, that's fine, Mr. G," Alice said. "Thank God you've got your magic back."

"That's what I said, dearie," the sorcerer chuckled, and went to hug both his daughter and grandson hello.

Belle came in after him with the drinks and paper products, and soon after Bae and Emma arrived too.

The family was happily sprawled all over the room, in chairs dragged in from the waiting room, eating the food Alice had made and telling each other stories when Dr. Whale poked his head in and said, "Hey, what's this? A family reunion?"

"Hello, Victor," Rumple said cordially.

"Hello, Rumple," the doctor said. Then he sniffed and said, "You've got fried chicken here? Mind if I have a piece? I've been on call for the last forty-eight hours and I haven't eaten anything."

"Come in and sit down," Rumple invited. "You ought to know everyone here, except have you met Jefferson and his daughter Grace? They're Alice's family."

Victor, whose real name was Frankenstein, greeted Jeff and Grace cordially, then took a plate and filled it with some chicken, mashed potatoes, corn and a biscuit with gravy. Belle handed him a plastic red cup with soda and he sat down in the one remaining chair and started eating.

After about ten bites he looked up at Alice and said, "Do you cater? Because I'd pay top dollar for you to cook for the hospital holiday banquet. How much would you charge to come cook for me, Mrs. Carstairs?"

Alice blushed prettily. "I'd be happy to cater your banquet, Dr. Whale, but I'm afraid my contract with Mr. G's exclusive."

"Oh, you mean he made a deal with you?"

"No, actually, I made him a deal, a long time ago," Alice said. "To come and care for his daughter back in our old realm when he thought Belle died. And even though Belle's back now, I'm still there because they're like family to me."
"I understand," Victor said, and ate another biscuit. "You're an amazing cook though."

"Thank you," Alice said.

"She's an even better cook than my other mom," Grace said proudly, and they all laughed.

Victor said that Alina and Henry could go home tomorrow, as they seemed to have no side effects from the curse they'd been under, and their family stayed with them until around nine o'clock before heading back home, Rumple and Belle to their Victorian, Bae and Emma to their apartment, and Jeff, Alice, and Grace to Jeff's house.

It had been decided that Alice would now move in with her husband and daughter, but would still continue to cook for the Golds on the weekends and eat together with them as a family. She even told Emma she would give her cooking lessons, which Emma laughed and said she hoped Alice had the patience of a saint, because she couldn't boil water without ruining it.

Once the family had all gone home, Alina and Henry lay on their beds, playing Candy Crush on their Nooks and watching cartoons until the nurse came by and said it was almost lights out.

Henry eyed Alina and muttered, "What do they think this is—sleepaway camp?"

"They probably want us all asleep so they can just hang out together," Alina shrugged. "Besides, we can still read on our tablets when they do turn the lights out."

"But it's stupid! I mean, we're not even sick, so who cares what time we go to bed?" Henry groused. "We don't even have school tomorrow."

"Let them think we're sleeping, then we'll just stay up all night," Alina told him.

So that was what they did, pretending to go to sleep, but actually staying up and reading and playing Candy Crush until they got bored. Then Henry started shooting a beam of light from his finger, and challenging Alina to a race, and soon they were both shooting beams of light around the room and giggling.

Until a night shift nurse came in and said, "What are you two doing still awake?"

"Uh, we couldn't sleep," Henry said, and quickly made his finger light flicker out.

"Where's that light coming from?" she asked, frowning.

"A laser pointer," he answered.

The nurse sighed. "You ought to try and get some sleep."

"Would you leave a night light on, please?" Alina asked. "I don't like the dark."

So the nurse left the light on in the bathroom, then left.

"Quick thinking, saying that was a laser pointer," Alina whispered to her nephew after the nurse was gone.

"It was all I could think of," Henry said. "It's good thing she didn't look too closely at me. Because the only other thing I could think of was that I was related to ET."

"ET phone home," Alina quoted, then burst out laughing.
"We should watch that again when we get home," Henry said, also laughing. Then abruptly he sobered and said, "I hope now that the curse is broken that Regina doesn't cause any more trouble for our family."

"I know. But I think she won't dare now that my papa has his magic back. He can kick her butt all over Storybrooke if she tries anything now. She might think he's a crippled coward but he's never been anything like what she thinks," Alina said hotly.

"I know," Henry sighed. "I wonder if she's sorry for what she did?"

"You mean to us, or to the other people in Storybrooke?"

"Both, I guess. If she was sorry—I mean really sorry—and she wanted to change . . . I guess I could forgive her," Henry said quietly. "But . . . right now . . . I'm still really mad at her for hurting you, Alina."

"I am too . . . for hurting you and trying to hurt Papa. She didn't even say she was sorry for trying to kill him," Alina said indignantly.

"Yeah . . . that's why I'm having such a hard time forgiving her. Because what she did isn't just about me this time. Actually, it's never been about me. It's always been about her and the way she treats other people. I just wish she'd stop lying and decide one way or the other the kind of person she wants to be—the Evil Queen or just Regina Mills."

"Maybe now the curse is broken, she'll be forced to finally make a choice," Alina said softly. "Because you can't have it both ways. And there's bound to be people in this town that want her to pay for what she's done."

"Yeah. That's probably almost everybody," Henry sighed. "I'd feel sorry for her, but she brought all this on herself. And she's the only one who can fix her mistakes."

"If she wants to," Alina pointed out. "My mama always says that anybody can change . . . if they truly want to. Like my papa did for her, even when he was the Dark One. And for me, when he thought she died. But Regina has to want to, Henry. Nobody can make her."

"I know. I just don't know if she will," Henry sighed. "And if she doesn't . . . I just hope she leaves us all alone."

"So do I. We all need a little peace after what we all went through," Alina said wisely.

"Yeah. And I want to get to know Snow and Charming, my other grandparents," Henry said.

"You're lucky," Alina said. "At least your other grandparents are good people. My mama's papa hates me and thinks I'm some kind of . . . monster."

"That's because he's a gigantic asshole," Henry said heatedly.

"Henry!" Alina gasped. "You're lucky none of our parents heard you say that. You'd be eating soap."

"That's why I said it when they're not around," her nephew said cheekily. "But that doesn't make it less true. He's never even met you and he thinks that about his own grandchild. What a jackass."

"He doesn't like my papa either," Alina said. "I don't think he ever did. I hope he stays away from us too. I feel sorry for my mama, stuck with him for a father. Ugh!"
Henry nodded, thinking that they both had problem relatives they wished would leave them alone. "Guess that means you're not inviting him for Thanksgiving, right?"

"No way! Not unless he wants to become a wall decoration. Because if Papa doesn't turn him into something, like a garden gnome, Alice will bash his head in with her skillet for taking Grace away from her," Alina said, shuddering. "So I'm going to be thankful this year that I don't ever have to see him."

"I kinda know how you feel. Because I don't want to see Regina either until I know she's not going to curse anybody in my family, for whatever reason. And that she truly wants to change and isn't just pretending so she can have her revenge."

"Right. You know, we might have a really strange family, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Me neither. I like being a Gold," her nephew said, and they both shared a smile. "There's nothing better."

"You can say that again," Alina grinned.

After the two children had been released from the hospital, Alice and Jeff decided to throw a Welcome Home party for Grace. The whole family was invited, including Snow and Charming, as well as Grace's former Storybrooke parents, who had met with Alice and Jeff. They were a childless couple called Jack and Jill back in the Enchanted Forest, and said they were really glad to have had Grace be their daughter, even if it was due to the curse, and that they would miss her now that she was with her real family.

Since Grace had honestly loved them, and they had given her a good home and a family, Alice and Jeff decided that it wouldn't be right to completely abandon them now that they had Grace back. So they came to an arrangement to have Grace spend three days of the week over their house, and two weekends out of the month she could sleep over there. Jill was very grateful that Alice was willing to share her daughter, and the two women and Belle planned the party together.

It was held two days after the curse had broken, at the Gold residence, and Alice made all of Grace's favorite foods, like chicken nuggets and fries, cocktail hotdogs, mini meatballs, broccoli with cheese, chicken parm, and Rumple made his Gold special grilled cheeses. There was ginger ale, Coke, and strawberry punch. Jill made dessert—brownies, peanut butter cookies, and chocolate lollipops.

Bae was in charge of the music and played all the popular teen tunes—as long as they didn't have any kind of foul language in them—and Jefferson bought Grace a white dwarf bunny as a welcome home gift, explaining that he'd promised to get her a pet before he left her that last time. Grace called him Fluffy, and she and her friends took turns holding him out on the lawn.

Jack talked with Jeff and Mr. Gold while the kids played with the rabbit, he had been a forester back in their old world and was the owner of the Storybrooke lumber mill in this one. Unlike some of the citizens of Storybrooke, he had not had any dealings with the Dark One, and so had no reason to fear or dislike Rumple, and he was an astute businessman who respected Mr. Gold, so he got along well with him.

Emma hovered in the background after the other ladies had finished preparing the food, waiting for the arrival of Snow and Charming, who were supposed to come at two o'clock. When they finally arrived, with Snow bringing a fruit salad and baked ziti, Emma suddenly found herself reluctant to
face them and went outside to sit on the patio, biting her lip nervously.

She could hear her parents greeting Belle, Alice, and Jill and felt like the biggest coward because she couldn't bring herself to go inside and introduce herself. She looked across the lawn and thought about going to hide in the gazebo, where Bae was with the Boze. She twirled a red plastic cup filled with punch in one hand and wished there was alcohol in it. She felt like she needed a shot of vodka.

"Nervous, dearie?"

She jerked up at Rumple's soft voice, almost spilling her punch down her blouse. "Oh, Rumple! I didn't hear you come over."

"Because you were too busy fretting to hear an old man with a cane," he remarked, sitting beside her.

"Umm . . . well . . . Mary Margaret and David are here . . . I mean Snow and Charming . . . you know . . . my parents . . ." Emma stammered. "But I just . . . don't know . . . how I feel about them . . ."

Rumple steepled his hands on the table and just listened calmly. He sensed that Emma needed to talk more than she did get advice right then.

"I mean . . . I'm really grateful that they . . . saved me from being cursed . . . but . . . I was alone for all my life until I met Bae . . . I never had a real family, just a bunch of foster homes, and some of them . . . well, they didn't really want me around . . ."

Rumple nodded. "No wonder you and my son are so close. You had very similar childhoods."

"Yeah, we did, except Bae knew you loved him before he used that bean. And after he came here, he had the Cassidys to love him too. Me . . . all I had was a blanket . . ." Emma shook her head. "Hell, I don't know why I'm telling you this, it's done and over with. No sense crying over spilt milk, huh? I mean, I survived to become the Savior of Storybrooke. I married my one true love. I made my own happy ending. So why should I be nervous about meeting my parents?"

"Perhaps because all your life you wanted someone to look up to and you never had anyone?" Rumple suggested. "But suddenly now you do and it scares you. And you wonder if you're good enough? And a part of you wants to impress them, to gain their approval, since you never had it growing up."

Emma gaped at him. "What in hell? How do you know that? You read minds too?"

Rumple shook his head. "No, dearie. But you forget how old I am. And also I didn't have the greatest childhood either, I lost my parents at an early age and had to rely on strangers, similar to you. And if I was in your shoes, dearie, I'd be just like you. They're your blood, but also strangers. Of course you're scared. You don't know what to expect."

Emma chuckled mirthlessly. "You know, I feel more comfortable talking to you than I do to anybody except Bae."

"That's because you know me, dearie. And I'm not your father, to cause any resentment on your part."

"Resentment? Who said I had any resentment?"
He lofted an eyebrow. "Don't you? I'd say you resented them as much as Bae did me for breaking that deal with him. After all, they made the decision to let you go, and no matter how you rationalize it, that decision still cost you. You both won and lost."

"Yeah. Okay . . . I do resent them. Even if they are these great heroes."

"Again, a normal reaction. But can I tell you something, Emma? That decision was not made lightly. It was very difficult. It was made out of love, that and the desire to protect a child, and I know what's that like. But, as they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And nobody knows that better than me."

"Yeah, I guess you would. But . . . things worked out okay for you."

"Because my son is more forgiving than most. And for that I thank God."

"Then . . . you think I should forgive them?"

Rumple spread his hands. "That's up to you, Emma. I think you might need a little time to sort through your feelings. I think Snow and Charming know that. If it's any consolation, they're probably as nervous about meeting you as you are them."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I really do. Not only do they have to meet a daughter who's an adult, but she's married into my family. I'm sure that's not exactly what they intended either. I wasn't really an enemy . . . more of a neutral ally . . . but they were never comfortable around me."

Emma scowled. "Too damn bad. I married who my heart told me, and to hell if he's not a prince! So I've got a sorcerer for a father-in-law. Who gives a damn? I'm one too, and if they've got a problem with that, they can go whistle Dixie. I was left stranded in a world without family, and I made my own here. I didn't need anybody's approval and I still don't. I'm a Gold, and if they don't like it, they can go jump off the toll bridge."

Rumple put a hand on her arm. "Emma, dearie, there's no need to go to war over me. Not over something that hasn't happened. And may never happen. But I'm touched that you feel so . . . strongly about me."

"Well . . . you've done more for me than anyone ever has, Rumple. You and your family. And I'll be damned if I'll let anybody judge me for standing up for you."

"Your honor me, Emma."

"No. You honor me, by believing in me when I didn't even believe in myself. You, Bae, and Henry. You gave a skeptic disbeliever hope and faith. And you gave me something nobody ever has in this world. You gave me a family. And that means . . . everything."

"Heavens, girl, you trying to make me cry?" he teased. "My reputation as a nasty beast will be torn to shreds."

"I think it was since you fell in love with Belle."

"Never tell me you don't have intuition, dearie," Rumple laughed. "And thank you very much."

Emma squeezed his hand. "Well, you've got it too. It must run in the family . . . Papa."
The pawnbroker nearly did cry then. For he knew, none better, what it had cost for her to admit to a vulnerability that way, and to trust him enough to give him that particular title, which she had never done before. "Come, dearie. Let's go say hello . . . together."

They entered the house and Snow looked up and saw Emma standing there next to Rumple. Her eyes brightened and then she rushed forward and cried, "Emma! We finally found you!"

Emma found herself caught up in a hug, and murmured awkwardly, "Yeah . . . twenty-eight years later."

Snow said, wincing, "Yeah, but we're together now. We need to talk, okay. I mean really talk."

"Uh . . . sure. But not here," Emma said.

Next to them David was eyeing Rumple and saying, "Rumplestiltskin."

"Charming," Gold replied evenly.

Charming stared at Emma and Snow embracing and said, "My daughter . . . married your son. I . . . danced with her at her wedding. Here in your house."

"You did indeed. It was a rather nice celebration, wasn't it?"

"Umm . . . but she married your son," Charming said, still overwhelmed.

"Is that a problem?" Emma demanded, drawing away from Snow. She had to admit, it felt good to be hugged . . . by her mother. She turned to face her father—a prince in their old realm.

"It's just . . . he's the Dark One," David began, pointing at Rumple.

Emma's eyes narrowed. "Not anymore. The dagger curse has been broken. He's my father-in-law."

"But he still has magic. He's still a sorcerer."

"So? I have magic too. I'm a sorceress. That's how I broke the curse. And he helped me do it. Even before I married Baeifire, Rumple helped me and Henry. And I think he even helped you before you shoved me through that wardrobe. Or am I missing something?" Emma asked sharply.

"No . . . he did make a deal with us to help us against Regina," David said. "But I never really trusted him."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure he didn't trust you either after you locked him up," Emma said shortly.

"Excuse me," Alice said suddenly from behind them. "If we're discussing the past, there's something I'd like to remind you of, Prince Charming."

David turned about to face the petite blond woman. "Like what, Alice?"

"That I owe you this," she said, then she decked him.

Charming staggered, putting a hand to his lip. "Oww! What was that for?"

"That was for how you treated Mr. Gold," Alice said heatedly. "You treated him worse than a dead dog, my lord! Or don't you remember?"

"Alice!" Jefferson gasped. He looked apologetically at Charming. "Sorry, she has a really good
right hook. And a long memory."

"Yeah, I can see that," said David ruefully, rubbing his jaw. "She sure knows how to kick a guy's ass."

"All the women in this family do," Jeff said, and shrugged. "So try not to make 'em mad."

"Look . . . it happened a long time ago . . . and we thought . . . he was a monster," Charming began.

"That doesn't give you the right to treat him inhumanely!" Alice snapped. "The Evil Queen was a monster worse than him and you treated her like a bloody guest compared to Rumple! She was the real enemy, not him! But he was the one you shoved in a damn hole!"

"She's right," Snow said. "We were wrong to do that." She looked at Rumple. "Would you accept our apology? We . . . misjudged you."

"You can't change the past, dearie," he said. "All right. Alice, please. Can you let bygones be bygones?"

Alice sighed. "Okay. Because you asked me. I'll forgive . . . but I ain't forgetting. And you're lucky his sister's not here, because she'd have turned you into a pretzel." She held out a hand to Charming. "Welcome to the family."

He took it. "Thanks. Who taught you how to throw a punch?"

"That would be my husband," Emma said.

"He's . . . a martial arts instructor, right?" David said.

"Yes. You know him as Neal Cassidy, but his real name is Baelfire. Baelfire Gold," Emma stated. "We're both Golds, and all family."

"And that's how it should be," Snow said brightly.

Belle came in then, wiping her hands on her pink apron. "Okay, everything's ready. Rumple, would you call the kids and Bae inside?"

"Certainly, dearie," the sorcerer replied, and then he limped out of the sliding glass doors.

Everyone ate heartily of all the dishes there, and after dessert, Henry said they should play a trivia game, and they all divided up into teams to play Disney trivia, with the kids on one team, Bae, Emma, and Rumple on another, Alice, Jeff, and Belle, and Jill, Snow, and Charming. Jack said he'd mediate, because he was terrible at stuff like that and read the cards to each team.

"Okay, here's one for your team, Rumple," Jack said, picking a card. He blinked at the question, then said, "Uh . . . I'm not . . . err . . . making fun of you or anything . . . but this . . . well, it says . . . ."

"Jack, just read the question," Rumple interjected. "I know about Beauty and the Beast."

"Uh . . . okay. How long did the . . . uh . . . Beast have to fall in love before he was cursed forever?"

Emma, Bae, and Rumple looked at each other.
"Wait! I know this!" Emma said. "I remember watching this movie with one of my foster moms once. And there was some kind of sorceress in the beginning . . . she looked kinda like Rhea, now that I think about it . . ."

Rumple chuckled. "My little sister probably served as the basis for half those stories about wise enchantresses and she could travel between worlds . . . so . . ."

"C'mon, babe. I never saw the movie, I only know the Grimm's fairytale version," Bae encouraged.

"Dad, you never saw Beauty and the Beast?" Henry cried.

"I was fifteen when I came here, tiger. That's not the kind of thing you watch at that age. I was more into Bruce Lee in Enter the Dragon."

"I've seen it," Rumple admitted. "With Alina. And there's no resemblance."

Charming started laughing.

"Then you ought to know the answer, Papa," Bae reminded. "You never forget something you've seen."

"Photographic memory," Belle murmured.

"Come on, help me out here," Emma said. "Otherwise Belle's gonna beat us."

"I'm thinking," Rumple held up a hand. Then he said, "Got it! He had until the last petal fell on the enchanted rose."

"But how long's that?" protested Charming. "It's like a trick question."

"But that's the answer," Jack confirmed. "So you got another piece of the pie there." He put a yellow piece in Rumple's team's plastic circle.

"Hon, they're killing us!" David groaned.

"See, I told you we should have rented Cinderella that night, but you wanted to watch The Fast and the Furious," Snow recalled.

"It's a guy thing," Charming declared. "You know, race cars, hot girls . . ."

Before he could say anything else, there came a knock at the door.

"Want me to get it?" asked Alice.

"No, I will," said Belle, rising from the sofa.

She went to the front door, with its stained glass mosaic of a sun shining on roses, and pulled it open. "Gold residence, how may I help you?"

Her father stood there on the porch, looking all scruffy in a blue shirt and gray jacket with jeans and work boots. "Belle? Then you are here, like Regina said. Get your things, you're coming home with me."

Belle gaped at him. "Father! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you home. Where you belong."
**Fiery Vengeance**

Chapter Summary

Belle and family have it out with Maurice. Then the bitter florist tries some vengeance of his own!

Belle shut the door behind her quickly, not wanting anyone to see who was there. Especially Rumple. "What do you mean, Father, where I belong? I belong here, with my husband."

"What are you talking about? That beast isn't your husband! Even if you did bear him an abominable child that doesn't make him your lord and master!" Maurice spat, his face growing red.

Belle felt her own face heat in fury. "Rumple was never my master, and he's not a monster! He was under a curse. And Alina is not an abomination! She's your granddaughter! Furthermore, Rumple and I are married, he's my husband. We were married in this world." She thrust out her left hand, which had her wedding band on it.

Maurice paled. "No! How . . . could you?"

"How could you?" she snapped. "How could you do all those terrible things to me and to my best friend? How could you stand here and demand I go with you, like I'm some sort of little girl? I'm not a child. Nobody decides my fate but me!"

"I'm your father! I know what's best for you. That creature in there's enchanted you . . ."

"Oh, please, Father! Not this old song again. I am not enchanted, I am not bewitched, I'm with Rumple of my own free will and I love him, Father! I love him and I love our daughter. We're a family. Now get out of here, because the last thing I need right now is blood spilled in my home," she ordered.

"No! You can't do this! Belle!" Maurice cried, and reached out to grab her arm.

Belle yanked it free and snapped, "Go home, Father! We'll discuss this some other time. I have company and I won't let you ruin it. And you might want to think about a suitable reason why you went and paid Regina to lock me away in a crazy ward for twenty-eight years! Not that there is a suitable one!"

"You were under a spell! And you still are!" he went to grab her again.

Belle dodged and snarled, "If you don't want to be under a spell, get off my porch! You're despicable! You're not welcome here! Now, leave me be before I forget my manners and kick your ass!" Then she pulled open the door and shut it firmly behind her in Maurice's face. Shaking slightly, she locked it.

Maurice pounded on it. "Belle! Belle! Let me in!"

Belle ignored him and walked back into the den, feeling slightly ill. Please, please send him away. I don't want my husband to murder my father in cold blood. Or my best friends to either. Even if he does deserve it.
"Who was it, dearie?" asked her husband.

"Nobody you'd want to talk to right now," Belle answered. "I told him to leave."

There came a pounding on the door again.

"Looks like he didn't take the hint," Bae said, standing up. "Want me to get rid of him?"

"I can do that, Bae," Rumple said, grabbing his cane and rising.

"No! Rumple, sit down!" Belle said. "Just let Bae handle it, okay?"

Her husband stared at her in astonishment. "Belle, I'm perfectly capable of telling some idiot to get off my property."

"Yes, I know, but . . . feelings are rather confused in this town right now and I'd rather you didn't . . . get into an argument . . . " Belle said quickly.

Rumple frowned. "Dearie, there isn't going to be an argument. I'm just going to tell the rude lout to quit bashing on my door and leave."

"Otherwise I'm going to arrest his ass," Emma stated, then she got up too. "Bae, let's give this joker a proper welcome for his stupid behavior."

"Right with you, Em," Bae said, and together they went and opened the front door.

"Hey, buddy!" the sheriff yelled as she saw a figure going down the walk. "This is private property, and you were told to leave, so do it, before I arrest you for disturbing the peace!"

Suddenly, the figure turned and shook his fist at the house. "I'll be back! You tell her that! I'll be back!"

"Yo! If I were you, I'd stay the hell away from here," Bae yelled. "Otherwise you're going to have a serious discussion . . . with my fist. Now get!"

The man remained glaring at them and suddenly Emma recognized him. "Hey! You're Moe French! What do you think you're doing here?"

"I've come for my daughter! If you have any sense of decency you'll convince her to come home with me."

Bae stared at him, incredulous. "Buddy, you for real? That's my father's wife you're talking about. She might be your daughter, but she's a person, not a commodity to be bought and sold. And this ain't the Dark Ages."

Moe seemed to be taken aback. "You . . . you're the Dark One's son?"

"And if I am? What's it to you?"

"Then you're a filthy abomination too! Just like all that creature's offspring."

"Hey! Listen, asshole! You keep your mouth off my husband . . . and Gold too!" Emma snapped.

"Gold is a filthy cowardly creature that deserves to be burnt at a stake. He stole away my daughter and enspelled her!"
"That's not the way I heard it," Emma said, her hands on her hips. "The way the story goes is you made a deal with him to save your kingdom and he asked for your daughter to come be his chatelaine and you agreed. There was no stealing involved . . . of anybody!"

"I agreed because it was the only thing to do. My daughter was coerced!"

"What? You saying my father threw over his shoulder and carried her kicking and screaming out of your castle?" Bae scowled. "You're a damn liar! Now, my papa might have done a lot of shit under the dagger curse, but he never took a woman against her will. And if you say that again about him, I'm going to break a few teeth."

"Yeah, and in case you don't know, Belle loves him—" Emma began.

"What's the trouble out here, dearies?" Rumple said, coming to stand in the doorway.

"Give me back my daughter, you beast!"

Rumple's eyes went flat. "You! How dare you come here and make demands of me after what you've done!"

"Papa, he's cracked! He thinks you assaulted Belle or some crap!" Bae said angrily.

"That I what?"

"You did, you filthy lecher! You used your dark magic to make her fall in love with you . . . and forced her to bear your unnatural child." Moe raged.

"You're insane! First off, you can't make someone fall in love with you. And second of all, I never forced a woman in my life, cursed or not. And don't you dare speak of my daughter as an unnatural anything when you're the unnatural creature who tried to have her exposed when she was born!"

"That's what you do to vermin!"

"Father, get the hell out of here!" Belle said, coming to stand beside Rumple. "Go spew your poison somewhere else."

"No, Belle. He came here and wanted to start with me, and I'm going to finish it," Rumple said coldly. He beckoned and suddenly Moe was floated over to him and then Rumple stepped back and drew the hapless florist inside the house.

Belle, Bae, and Emma soon followed.

"Put me down, you craven beast!" Moe blustered.

Rumple gestured and Moe was dumped onto the floor. "Okay, French. You wanted to talk . . . so talk."

Before Moe could say anything, Alice came out of the kitchen with a skillet. "Mr. G. I can drive off whoever the hell showed up—" she froze when she saw Moe. "You dirty rotten son-of-a-bitch! You lying sack of dung! You took my baby away from me, didn't you?"

Moe stared at her. "Who are you? Oh yes, I remember now. You're the kitchen wench my daughter befriended. The one who flouted a royal command and helped her hide her unnatural issue."

"The name's Alice, you scumbag, and anybody who can give a command like that deserves to be deposed! Is it true you gave orders for Malinda to lie and tell me my baby was stillborn?"
"And if I did? You weren't a fit mother after you hid Belle's abominable child—"

Jeff leaped to his feet. "Don't you call her that, you twisted bastard!" He pulled a short stick from a pocket and it expanded to become a fighting staff. "You cost me my family!"

As he lunged at Moe, Charming grabbed him. "Whoa, Jeff! Don't kill him!"

"Let me go, dammit! I'm going to finish the job Rum started!" Jeff panted, trying to pull away from David's grip.

"And I'm going to help him," Alice snarled, and she swung her skillet at Moe's head.

Only to find it deflected off a glowing shield.

"Rumple, what the hell?" Alice cried.

"He didn't do that, Alice. I did," came a small voice. Alina came off the couch and stood in front of Moe. She glared at the florist, once a king, and said, "You don't know me, but my name's Alina Rose. I'm the kid you tried to kill as a baby. And I just saved your nasty hide." She lifted a hand, which glowing with eldritch power.

"Your granddaughter," Henry added, coming to stand beside Alina. "And I'm Rumple's grandson."

"And I'm Alice's baby," Grace stated, standing beside Henry.

"These are the children your dictates hurt, Father," Belle said softly, her blue eyes hard. "Not monsters . . . innocent children."

"You . . . have magic . . . like your beast of a father . . ." Moe sputtered, staring at Alina.

"My papa's not a beast! He never killed anybody for being born, like you tried to!" Alina stated.

"And just because you've got magic doesn't make you evil," Henry pointed out. "Magic simply is, it's how you use it that determines good and evil. My grandfather taught me that." He pointed to Rumple.

"Don't you know anything, mister?" Grace demanded. "People that make war on babies are the real monsters! They ought to be locked up where the sun don't shine!"

"You tell him, Gracie!" Alice said. "There's mud in your eye, French!"

Moe sputtered, as he realized the moral ground he'd claimed to have was quickly dissolving under his feet. "You're all enchanted! He's enchanted you!"

"Oh, gimme a break, you stupid bastard!" Jeff snarled, still trying to get free of Charming's grip. "The only magic I see being used around here is from that beautiful little girl, keeping you from getting your head bashed in! And you wanna know who taught her that? The guy you call a beast over there! Yeah, he's got more honor and decency than you do, who calls yourself a king!"

"He's lost the right to give himself the title with his actions," Snow declared coldly. "Because any man who harms a baby isn't fit to call himself king!"

"You're delusional, Snow White!"

"You calling my wife crazy?" Charming snarled. "Watch it, buddy, before I let Jeff break your head! And I'll help him."
"Father, you've caused enough turmoil here tonight," Belle said then. "I've told you before, I make my own decisions. And I chose to stay with Rumple because he's a good man, not the beast of the dagger curse. Get that through your stubborn head! You made a deal with him long ago, now face up to it."

"He turned you into his tramp!"

The next thing he knew, he was sitting on the floor, holding his nose, which was spurting blood.

"Nobody calls my wife a tramp!" Rumple said, glaring at his father-in-law.

Moe whimpered and stared up at him. "You wretched monster!" He looked Belle. "Look what he did! And still you defend him?"

"Father, quit whining! You're lucky that's all he did. And if he hadn't, I would have! I have more honor than that, and I'm proud to be Rumple's wife. Proud! But I'm ashamed to call you kin!"

"Belle . . . you don't mean that . . ." Moe stuttered, climbing to his feet.

"Yes, I do! Now get out of my house! You asked for this. I warned you to just go home, but no, you have to do everything your own way. Now you reap what you sowed, old man!"

"And you wonder why I locked you away!" Moe stormed. "You're not in your right mind."

"Wrong! I'm perfectly sane . . . and you have some nerve pointing fingers at me after selling your own daughter to the Evil Queen. If that isn't insane, I don't know what is." Belle said accusingly.

"She . . . she told me she could take the curse off you! But that it took time!"

"And you believed her?" Emma sneered. "God, what are you, stupid? Even I know better than that. You know, people like you make me glad I had no parents growing up, because I was better off than with a fanatic like you. You sold your daughter up the river and you've sought to justify yourself ever since. But you're the one who has to live with your poor decisions. And in the end, you've got nobody to blame but yourself, and you can't take it, so you try and blame everyone around you for doing what you did. Just like Regina! You two ought to be a cell together. Now get out of here, before I arrest you for causing a domestic disturbance."

Moe paled and then turned and ran out of the house.

Jeff broke free of Charming's grip. "Dammit! I really wanted to bash him upside the head."

"It's not as satisfying as you'd think," Rumple said. Then he moved to hug his wife. "I'm sorry he put you through that, dearie."

She hugged him back. "No, Rumple. I'm sorry he put you through that. All of you."

"It's not your fault, Belle. Every family has at least one rotten apple," Snow said sincerely. "And I ought to know."

Belle smiled at her. "Thanks, Snow. Now why don't we all have a cup of tea and finish our game?"

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Once the game was over (Rumple's team had won), and Snow had said she and David would like to meet with Emma at Granny's tomorrow afternoon if she was free, Emma said she was, everyone said goodbye and left for their respective domiciles.
As the house quieted, Rumple looked at Alina and said, "Almost nine thirty, my lovely girl. Time to go to bed. You've got school tomorrow."

Alina half-groaned. Then she said, "I wonder if school will be different now that everybody remembers? I'll have to learn everyone's names all over again."

"You'll be fine, Alina. You've got your papa's head for names," Belle said.

"Go get your pajamas on and we'll be up to tuck you in," her father said, then watched as his daughter raced upstairs. "Such energy! I wish I had some."

"Me too!" his wife laughed.

Rumple cocked an eyebrow at her. "You want to go to bed, dearie?"

"Not just yet," Belle chuckled. "Let's make sure Alina's asleep first."

"Of course," he grinned wickedly at her. Then he eyed his wife in concern. "Something bothering you, dearie?"

Belle paled. "Umm... I'm just... thinking about my father..."

"Sweetheart, he's gone. But if you're that worried, let me go and cast those wards now."

"Rumple, you don't have to do it right away. It can wait!"

"Nonsense. If you're going to worry over it, then I can do it now. Wait here. I'll only be a moment."

Then he limped outside and drew a diagram upon the patio table with some magical chalk in his pocket. He touched it with a hand and whispered, "Protect all here, from all evil and those with evil intent, avert such from my home, till I release thee! So mote it be!"

The diagram suddenly glowed stridently with purple light, then it expanded and surrounded the whole property with a glowing purple shield. Soon it died, but Rumple could still see part of it with his magical sight. And feel it as well.

"There! That should make Belle happy," he said to himself, and went inside and locked the door.

"All set," he told Belle.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Then she said, "Let's go and tuck in Alina. Then maybe you can... give me a massage."

"Sounds like a plan," her husband said, then he put an arm about her and blinked them both up the stairs. "Ha! Take that, Rhett Butler."

Belle started giggling. "Rumple! You silly thing!"

"What? You don't think that's better than Gone With the Wind?"

"Well... it beats you killing yourself hauling me around," Belle grinned.

"You're light as a feather, sweetheart."

"Yeah. A roc feather," Belle teased, then she kissed his nose. "Come on, darling. Alina's waiting."
Snickering, they ran down the hall to their daughter's room.

Alina looked up from brushing her hair when her parents entered, silly grins on their faces. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, dearie," her father said, his eyes twinkling.

His daughter eyed him sharply, setting her brush down. "Is it one of those things grown-ups think are hilarious and kids think are totally stupid?"

"Something like that," Belle said, smothering another giggle.

"And I'll get it when I'm older, right?" Alina asked, rolling her eyes. "Heaven help me."

"Hey, don't sass your mama, Miss Gold," her father ordered with mock-sternness. He gave her a gentle tap on the bottom and pointed towards her bed. "Come on, you little minx, in bed with you."

Grinning, Alina lay down and let Rumple draw the covers to her chin. Some people might say she was too old for this ritual, but Alina disagreed. She loved having both her parents there just before she slept, it made her feel so safe and loved. "Goodnight, Papa. Goodnight, Mama."

Belle sat down on the edge of the bed next to Rumple and said, "Goodnight, my sweet girl. Now remember—"

"Good night, sleep tight, and—" Rumple began the familiar litany.

"—don't let the bad fairies bite!" they all finished.

Then both parents kissed their daughter and left, leaving a small night light burning in the corner of her room to keep away the dark.

A black shape suddenly trotted into the room and Nala jumped up on the bed and curled into Alina's side, purring. Alina smiled and said, "Hey, Nala. You're such a sweet baby. Now let's go to sleep." Then she snuggled down next to the cat and slept, eager to do so now that she was back in her own house.

---Break---

Rumple's fingers teased their way down Belle's shoulders, gently massaging all the stiffness out of her muscles as she lay on their bed. He had coated his hands with a mixture of rosewood and honey oil, heating it in his hands with a tiny application of magic. Then he gently smoothed it down his wife's flawless ivory skin, inhaling the sweet scent as he rubbed it in.

"How's that, sweetheart?" he queried, inflecting his words with a sort of purr at the end of it.

"That feels . . . wonderful, Rumple!" Belle said, then she arched up against him, rather like a happy cat, leaning into his caress. "Can you rub my back some more? My lower back . . . it aches . . ."

"Maybe you pulled something," he said, concerned. "Lie down and let me see," he gave her bottom a playful swat.

Belle obeyed, though she felt that some of the tension within her was because of Maurice's unexpected visit. She bit her lip as his fingers gently probed her back. Then she gasped as he found a rather sensitive spot. "Oh!"

"Sorry, did I hurt you?" he asked, alarmed. He cupped a hand over the spot and concentrated,
calling up his healing magic. It responded this time, and purple light flickered over Belle's back before fading. "Better?"

"Rumple . . . did you heal me?" she asked softly.

"Yes. You know I can't stand it when you're in pain," he replied.

"And I can't stand it when you are." She turned over and reached for him. "I love you, Rumplestiltskin Gold. Today, tomorrow, and always."

He kissed her fiercely. "My brave wife. I know how difficult it was for you to stand up to him like that."

"Oh, Rumple! I'd slay dragons for you, don't you know that? And you'd do the same for me."

"You know I would. Now let's forget about him. He can't hurt us anymore. And right now I want to show you something."

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

"How much I love you," he replied, and then he did so, until they were both exhausted and fell asleep in each other's arms.

Page~*~*~*~*~*~Break

Emma met Snow, whom her mind still insisted on calling Mary Margaret, and David at Granny's just after the first lunch crowd had come and gone. The diner seemed pretty much the same as always, with Ruby in her uniform serving and Granny behind the counter cooking. The atmosphere was still congenial and the food just as good as always.

Emma placed an order for a lemonade and a BLT with fries. David ordered a cheddar and bacon burger with onion rings and Snow had a tuna melt with fries. Both of them had coffee along with their lunch.

"So . . . how are things going down at the station?" asked David.

"Pretty good. Though I have a lot of calls from people searching for their missing family members or significant others. Ruby's helped me organize a Missing Person's booth with pictures and stuff. We're hoping it helps people find each other," Emma said. "Bae's got flyers posted at Fire Mountain too and he'll make an announcement at each class to see if anybody has anything to add."

"I'll do what I can to help," David said.

"Me too. I can put flyers around the school," Snow said. "We know it's hard . . . not everybody was as lucky as we were to find their family right away."

"Henry said it's like a family trait—that you always find each other," Emma said diffidently.

"Yeah, it is," David said. "Like the Golds have magic, the Charmings have . . . uh . . . a way to find each other. I guess that's our magic."

Emma bit her lip and took a drink of her lemonade before she said, "Then you always knew you'd find me . . . here on the other side of that wardrobe?"

"Uh . . . yes . . . we always did," Snow confirmed. "There was this prophecy that someday a savior would come break the curse . . . Rumplestiltskin told us about it."
"That's what his sister Vasilisa—she goes by Rhea to her family—Saw and told him about," Emma said. "So it was sort of like . . . destiny."

"In a way. But Visions aren't absolute," David said. "Any good Seer will tell you that. But we . . . had to do something to protect you. Snow would have gone with you through the wardrobe, but . . . it could only carry one. So I put you in it and well . . . the rest you know."

"But we always had faith we'd see you again, Emma," said Snow softly. "And we always loved you. You have to believe that."

Emma put down her sandwich. "Look, I know you . . . meant well . . . but . . . it's hard for me to . . . just forget everything I went through as a kid and a young adult. You always wonder . . . always ask yourself why . . . and you never have answers . . ."

"But now you do," Snow said. "Now we're a family again. We didn't come over right away because we wanted to give ourselves time to recover from the curse before we approached you. And we knew it would be awkward at first . . . because of what happened. We'd like to . . . be part of your life, Emma. Even if you are married now and have Henry."

"You can be a Charming and a Gold, Emma," David added.

"Okay. But let's get one thing straight. No more family feuds. You just agree to disagree about stuff with Rumple and whatever. I'm tired of fighting, especially with family. Whatever happened in the past between you I want to just . . . drop it. He was cursed then and you were cursed until a few days ago, but now everything's back to square one, and I want it kept that way. I don't want Henry to grow up with family members at each other's throats. God knows he's had enough of that with Regina. And last night too."

"Agreed," David nodded. "I made my peace with Rumple. And I rather like the guy, especially after last night."

"Speaking of Regina, where is she?" Snow asked. "I haven't seen her since the curse was broken."

"I have no idea. Maybe she's off plotting or something, or hiding. After she failed to kill Alina, Henry, and Rumple with those poisoned pretzels . . . and Belle beat her ass with a book, I'd say she's keeping her head down," Emma said.

"God, I really owe them an apology for that!" Snow said, looking guilty.


"But I was still involved," Snow said.

"Belle . . . beat Regina with a book?" Charming repeated, his mouth curled up into a smirk. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Just ask her. Or Rumple. I wish I'd seen it, but Bae and I were busy slaying a dragon."

"I wish I'd seen it!" David said longingly.

"Charming!" Snow frowned.

"What? I'm serious. That was probably funny as hell. It's too bad they didn't video tape it," the prince chuckled.
"So we could post it on Facebook," Emma sniggered.

"The two of you are terrible!" Snow scolded.

"Oh, come on, Snow! Even you have to admit that part of you is a tiny bit . . . happy after you heard that," David pointed out.

Snow looked away. Then she slowly nodded. "Okay. A little bit. But you're your father's daughter, Emma."

"Yup. Got my daring and your beauty," David smiled.

"And my own magic," Emma answered, smiling. For the first since they had met, she felt comfortable around them . . . almost like they were friends.

Snow nodded. "Has Gold been teaching you then?"

"Yes. He's a good teacher. I've learned a lot from him. So has Henry."

"Henry?" Charming almost choked on an onion ring. "Henry's got magic?"

"Yup. Rumple says it's inherited. He's a conjurer. He summoned Bae all the way from Phoenix. And then he and Alina cast a tracking spell on Regina's scarf and found Kathryn when she was missing."

David's mouth hung open. "Hells bells! You're going to have your hands full with him, Emma."

"Tell me about it. Bae and I have talked a lot with Rumple."

"He's a good father," Snow acknowledged. "Especially since he's got a magical child too."

Charming whistled. "How many of you have magic in this family?"

"Uh, there's me and Henry, Alina, Rumple, and Rumple's little sister, Rhea, whom you haven't met yet. She's also known as Vasilisa the Wise, she wrote the Once Upon a Time book, and she's married to Jack Sparrow and she has two kids, and her daughter Jess is another magician. So that makes . . . six of us."

"Six of you! That's like a conclave," Charming whispered.

"With that kind of firepower, you won't ever have to worry about enemies attacking you," Snow predicted.

"Unless the enemy's Regina or her friends," Emma pointed out.

Suddenly, sirens were heard down the street and Emma's cell began to ring. She grabbed it from her pocket. "Hello, Sheriff Gold here."

"Emma, it's me. I'm calling to report an arson attempt. Someone tried to burn down my shop . . . with me inside it," Rumple said tightly.

"What? Are you okay?" Emma gasped. "Is your shop?"

"I'm fine, dearie. Well, except for bit of smoke," he replied, coughing slightly. "It's rather hard to kill an Elemental Master that way. The shop's sustained quite a bit of damage and I lost some inventory, but nothing of great importance."
"How do you know the fire was set?"

"Because I found a tiny stream of gasoline outside the back door. It was deliberate."

"Okay. I'm on my way. Hang on. You want me to call Bae?"

"If you wouldn't mind. I haven't told Belle yet. I don't want her to worry."

"Okay. Give me a few minutes and I'll be right there. And we'll discuss motives and suspects," Emma said, then she hung up.

"What's happening?" asked Snow.

"Somebody set Gold's shop on fire," Emma said grimly.

"Oh no! Is it okay? Is he okay?" asked Snow.

"He says he's fine. And the shop's still operational. But I need to go over there right away."

Charming shook his head. "Whoever did that's three kinds of an idiot."

"But who would be stupid enough to try and kill Rumple?" asked Snow. "Besides Regina, I mean?"

"There's Moe," Emma said darkly. And if she was right . . . her suspect better find a shovel and start digging his own grave.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Regina looked up as a visitor tapped on her back door. She opened it a crack and hissed, "What are you doing here? I told you never to come here!"

"I had to. The bastard's still alive. Even with the accelerant and all, he's still alive!"

"You idiot! Didn't I tell you it's almost impossible to kill a sorcerer with fire . . . unless it's dragonfire?" Regina snarled. "I told you your stupid plan wouldn't work. Now get out!"

"Afraid to be seen with me, Your Highness?"

"Hardly. But I don't want people thinking I had anything to do with this. So far they've stayed away from me and that's how I want to keep it."

"They'll come for you soon," snorted the visitor. "Wait and see. And why do you care what happens to the old monster?"

"Because he's Henry's blood, that's why."

"If that kid's got his blood in his veins, you might as well forget him. He's tainted . . . evil . . ."

"Get out, you bloody fanatic! And if you try to harm Henry, I'll string you up and skin you!" Regina spat.

"You just don't want to see it because you're evil too, like all witches."

"That's right, you crazy fool! Now get out, before I change my mind and decide I need a new wall decoration for Halloween!" Regina growled. "You have until the count of three. One . . . two . . . three . . ."
When she opened the door and looked out, the visitor had vanished and her back yard was empty.
Chapter Summary

The arsonist is caught, with some surprise help

"Someone set your shop on fire?" Belle gasped as Rumple told her what had happened over the phone. "How... how do you know it was deliberate and not just... some faulty wiring or something?"

"Because, dearie, gasoline doesn't usually leak onto concrete spontaneously," Rumple replied. "Are you okay, Rumple? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"No, I'm fine. I just breathed in a little smoke before I put the fire out, that's all."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, love. I've healed myself of whatever damage the smoke had done. Right now I'm talking with Emma down at the station and filling out some reports and forms of the inventory I've lost."

"Did... you lose a lot?"

"No. Nothing truly rare or irreplaceable. Just some knickknacks and odds and ends. I was lucky. If I hadn't seen it when I did, the whole shop might have gone up. That's the other reason I know it was set. Fire doesn't burn that quickly or at that temperature unless there's an accelerant."

"Being a magician, you'd know, huh?" she asked a bit nervously.

"Yes. But it's also common sense. And I've been many things, dearie, but stupid's not one of them. I'm going to be a bit late for supper tonight, so you and Alina just eat without me."

"No, we can wait," Belle insisted.

"What for? Don't do that. I don't know when I'm going to be home."

"Okay. I'm making macaroni and cheese and coconut chicken."

"I'll see you later, dearie. Love you, bye."

"Bye, Rumple," she whispered and then put her cell back in her pocket.

She knew they would be hunting for suspects and the first one that came to mind was Regina. But no, Regina would know such methods didn't work. Not on a master mage, not unless he was very ill, deathly injured, or knocked out. No, this was done by someone with a grudge... someone who knew nothing about sorcery or those who practiced it.

Belle put her hand over her mouth and wept.

For she knew who it must be. And she cursed him to the tenth hell for trying to destroy the fragile peace she had made.
She quickly telephoned Alice, for she needed to talk to someone before Alina came home and she had to make supper and tell her what had happened.

"Hey, Alice. It's Belle. I just needed to call and tell you something . . ."

Belle paced nervously in the foyer, she was so upset she couldn't even eat anything, telling Alina to eat and she was going to eat with her papa when he got home. She had told her daughter and Alice about the fire and she had also told Alice who it was she suspected of setting it. Alice had told her she should tell Rumple what she suspected. Belle knew she was right. It was important. But surely, Rumple would have figured it out by now. He knew Maurice hated him.

She twisted her hands together.

"Mama, Bae says he's coming to pick me up so Henry and I can work on a project together for school," Alina said, coming into the foyer. "He said I can sleep over, if that's okay with you?"

"It's fine, sweetie. Go and pack an overnight bag and hopefully you'll still be here when your papa gets home so you can say goodbye to him," Belle said.

Rumple came home at seven o'clock, just as Bae rode up on his bike to pick up Alina. He carried a child-sized helmet under his arm for Alina to use, it was actually Henry's, Bae had bought it for him the other day.

"You be careful with my baby girl on that bike, Baelfire," Rumple warned. "Because if anything happens to her, I'll tan your hide."

"Don't worry, Papa. I'm a good driver, especially with passengers," Bae assured him. "But if anything ever happened to her, I'd cut a switch and let you beat me."

"Humph! You mind what I said, boy."

"Sure I will. Don't I always?"

"Mostly," Rumple said. "You want some supper before you leave?"

"No, thanks. Henry and I ordered Chinese," his son replied. "You eat yet?"

"Not yet. But I will," his father answered. Not that he had much of an appetite after what had gone on that afternoon.

After Bae and Alina had left, Rumple sat down to eat dinner along with his wife. He couldn't help but notice that Belle was barely picking at her food, and asked, "You upset about what happened today, Belle?" Then he shook his head. "That's a dumb question, of course you are."

"You could have died today, Rumple," she said softly, her blue eyes misty with unshed tears.

"Not really. Somebody with a grudge to settle set that fire. I'd say it was Regina, but Emma, Bae, and I all agree it's not her style. She'd summon a dark creature and send it after me before she'd resort to something like fire, especially since she knows as an Elemental Master I'm pretty much immune to it unless it's dragonfire. No, this was done by someone who doesn't know a magician's strengths and weaknesses. Good thing too. Because strong as I am, I'm not immortal any longer now that the dagger's curse has been broken."
"It was probably my father," she blurted, as if trying to get the accusation out as quickly as possible. "After what happened that night, he'd be out to get revenge."

"Aye, I know it. This would be his style, he'd sooner see me roasted alive than with you."

Belle shuddered. "He's irrational. He has to be to do what he did . . . to me, to Alice and Jeff."

"And people say I'm crazy," Rumple snorted. "He's nuttier than a fruitcake."

Belle moistened her lips. "Rumple?"

"Yes, dearie? Don't worry about him. If he tries anything, I'll settle his ass good," her husband said, his voice sharp with the promise of retribution.

"That's what I'm afraid of," she whispered miserably. "I don't want you to use your magic for vengeance and risk your soul. Not over him."

"I won't. I'm finally free of the dagger curse and I mean to stay that way. But Emma's begun an investigation and she's already fingered him as a suspect. He has plenty of motive, and if she finds anything to connect him to the fire, she'll arrest him."

"Could you . . . maybe, use magic to see who it was?"

"Dearie, you can't go back in time. If Rhea were here, she could use her Sight to past view, but since she isn't, we'll have to do this the old fashioned way. By detective work."

"I have a feeling he was behind it," Belle said, her tone soft with bitterness.

"Yes, I agree. I'm sure he thinks with me dead, you'd just fall into line like an obedient daughter again," Rumple sighed.

Belle snorted. "Only in his dreams! If he harmed you, even indirectly, I'd never forgive him! Ever! I wish he'd just . . . leave us alone."

"So do I," Rumple said, then he bent to stroke Nala, who was rubbing his ankles under the table. "Hey, Nala."

The kitten came and stood on her hind legs, putting her paws on his knee and meowing.

"What's wrong, baby? You hungry?" he crooned, scratching her ears.

Nala meowed again, more forcefully.

"All right. Don't be so impatient," he told her, and took a piece of chicken from the platter on the table and began to cut it up. He put it in the kitten's dish, and Nala purred happily, rubbed his hand in thanks, then ran to gobble it up.

Belle smiled as she watched her husband and their pet. "She's sure got you trained, sweetheart."

"What? She's starving. That cat food might be nutritious but it probably tastes like sawdust," Rumple defended. "No wonder she wants more food."

Belle chuckled. "And better food."

"Everyone loves your coconut chicken," Rumple said.
"My macaroni and cheese isn't bad either."

"That's the Vermont cheddar," Rumple remarked, then he clapped his hands and the dishes floated themselves into the sink and washed themselves, while he and Belle put away the leftovers for tomorrow. Though he could afford to buy half the grocery store, Gold never wasted food, a legacy of a childhood spent going hungry most times, especially during the winter.

The next day, Emma began questioning several people in the vicinity of the pawnshop, asking them what they'd seen before the shop caught fire. Most of them hadn't noticed much, until they saw the smoke, but there was one who had.

It was Tommy Mason, now known as Hans, the son of the Hans who rescued the golden goose. The boy had been playing hookey from school, and hanging out nearby. He had actually noticed someone lurking about the back of the pawnshop. He approached Emma diffidently, and said quietly, "Sheriff Gold, I mebbe got something to tell ya."

Emma looked at the boy in surprise. "You saw something?"

"Umm . . . well . . . am I gonna get in trouble for it?" Hans asked, looking at the ground.

"No. If you have information on who might have set Mr. Gold's shop on fire, you're doing your duty as a citizen of Storybrooke by helping me out," Emma told him. "Even if you were supposed to be in school."

Hans sighed. "School sucks!" Then he said, "I'd rather go to work again for Mr. Gold."

Emma blinked. "You'd what? But that was like community service. You . . . liked working there?"

"Err . . . not at first. At first I thought it sucked too. But after awhile . . . I dunno . . . it wasn't bad. Gold wasn't nasty to me . . . sometimes he even gave me an extra dollar or two to get candy or a milkshake or fries down at the diner if I did extra work for him . . . so lots of times I did. And the work wasn't too hard . . . and there's things in that shop that are pretty neat, I'd look at 'em when I was sweeping or dusting. And sometimes . . . sometimes Mr. Gold would tell me tales about some of 'em . . . like I said, it sure as hell beat goin' to school."

"And now you want to help Mr. Gold out?" Emma questioned.

Hans nodded. "Yeah. Gold's not so bad, even if he is a sorcerer. He coulda changed me into a mouse or something for what I did to his little girl, but he didn't. So I figger I can do him a good turn now."

"So what did you see, kid?"

Hans went quiet, then he said, "Well, I was standing over there, by the corner, and I saw this guy . . . he was wearing a red cap and a blue sweater and jeans that were dirty."

"What did he look like, Hans?"

"Umm . . . he was kinda scruffy. Had a beard, a small one, dark hair, 'bout as old as my dad. Dad's thirty-seven. I don't know who he was, but he was walking towards the back of the shop. I didn't see him come back this way, but soon after that the fire started."

"If I showed you a picture, could you recognize him?" Emma asked.
"Uh . . . yeah, I think so," the boy said.

"All right. Hop in my police car and we'll take a ride down to the station and I'll have you look at a line up," Emma said.

"For real? Like in the cop shows?"

"You got it. C'mon, kid."

Emma took Hans to the station and had him look at recent mug shots of any people in Storybrooke she'd arrested or who'd been in trouble recently. It was a short list. "Look closely, kid. Do you see anybody that looks like the man you saw?"

Hans studied the pictures carefully. Finally after about ten minutes he said, "This guy. He looks like the one I saw. 'Cept he ain't got the hat on here."

Emma looked at the picture. "George Boonton," she read. "AKA, William Smee. Procurer of rare commodities and a con man. Huh. Good job, Hans! Now, you're sure it was him?"

"Yup. I might be stupid with book learnin', sheriff, but I'm good with faces. It was him."

"Thanks, kid. I owe you a sundae at Granny's," Emma said, and smiled at him.

"Can I watch you arrest him?" Hans asked eagerly. "Please?"

"Kid, this isn't like TV . . . but . . . all right. You stay in the car though, understand?" Emma said sternly.

"Sure, sheriff. Wow, I get to go on a stakeout!"

Emma groaned. This kid reminded her of Henry. Then again, maybe he'd make a good law enforcement officer when he grew up.

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Emma drove down to the docks, where Smee was known to rent a room sometimes, and questioned him. After five minutes she pegged him for a liar, her magical Talent telling her unerringly he was lying through his teeth. He had no alibi either, so she arrested him.

Hans was practically jumping up and down when she cuffed Smee and shoved him in the squad car. "You got him!"

"Shut up, kid! I didn't do nothing!"

"I'm taking you in for questioning, Smee. And you'd better quit lying and come clean with me," Emma growled.

"Yeah, don't you know better than to lie to Sheriff Gold?" Hans asked Smee. "She always knows! And then she puts you on ice in the slammer!"

"Who the bloody hell are you, kid? Her cheering section?" Smee demanded.

"He's doing a project for school on making a citizen's arrest," Emma said smoothly. "Now leave him alone, Smee!"

After she'd booked him, she called Gold and told him what had occurred. He arrived at the station
and encountered Hans just as the boy was leaving. "Just a minute, young man. Sheriff Gold here says you were the one who helped her catch this suspect."

Hans nodded eagerly. "That's right, Mr. Gold. That wharf rat tried to burn down all the cool things in your shop. You gonna turn him into one?"

"I should. But that's for the law to decide. However, I do owe you something, lad. How's half a year's worth of dessert at Granny's sound?"

"For real?" Hans grinned. "That would be super. Umm . . . Mr. Gold? Umm . . . would you maybe need some help at your shop again?"

Gold stared at him. "You want me to give you a job? But you have school."

"Aww, I hate school!" Hans muttered. "If we were back in the Enchanted Forest, I'd be old enough to work now. I'm almost thirteen."

"But we're not, lad, and here in Storybrooke, you have to go to school till you're sixteen at least."

Hans groaned.

"However, I could use a hand for three hours or so after school, say three days a week?"

"You got a deal, sir," Hans said, and they shook on it.

Gold looked at him and said, "Now, shouldn't you be in school?"

"Aww, but Mr. Gold!"

"I can't hire you if you're not able to do stock counts and things like that," he pointed out. "That's basic math, Hans, and you learn that in school."

"You mean, that stuff Miss Blanchard teaches is actually good for something?"

"Yes, lad, it is. So, I'd get my backside in that classroom, Mr. Mason."

"Okay, sir! I'm going." Hans turned as he left the police station. "When can I start?"

"Come by on Tuesday next week," Gold told him.

As Hans raced down the street towards Storybrooke Elementary, Emma said, "Well, I'll be, Rumple! That kid used to be a troublemaker bar none."

"See, Emma? People can change, given the right motivation," Gold said. "In his case, I think I scared him straight."

"Do tell. Now, let's see what Mr. Smee has to say."

Emma's plan was to question Smee about the fire herself and have Gold in the background as a silent observer.

But, oddly enough, Smee went all to pieces when he saw who was there with Emma. "Please, sheriff! Don't let him turn me into anything . . . unnatural! I tell ye everything! Just keep him away!"

"Then you admit you were there the day of the fire?" Emma demanded.
"Aye! I was there!" Smee said, shaking in his boots as he stared at Gold.

"Okay. And what were you doing in the back of Gold's shop?"

"I . . . I was puttin' the gas down like he tol' me," Smee babbled.

"Like who told you?" Emma frowned.

"French. The bloke what runs Game of Thorns. The florist. Only he weren't always a florist, sheriff. Once he was a king and he hates the Dark One with a passion."

"Yeah, we know. So Moe told you to set the fire?" Emma queried.

Smee nodded. "Yup. He gave me stuff and tol' me to go do it and he paid me six hundred dollars. That'll buy lots of beer down at the Rabbit Hole. I still gots most of the money. And you can check the back of his shop for the gloves and the can of gasoline we had left over. So I says, why not? As long as nobody'll know. So I did it."

"And you didn't think you'd get caught?" Emma scowled.

"No. There weren't anybody about."

"But there was, Smee. You were seen," Emma said. "And arson is a crime in Maine, as it is in all the states. You're looking at the inside of a cell for twenty years to life. . . you and Moe French. Plus the damages Gold sustained. How much did it cost you, Gold?"

"Around ten grand, all told," Gold replied.

"That and the fine for deliberately setting a fire with a human being inside with intent to harm, and that's first degree arson," Emma said.

"You're gonna lock me up for twenty years? But it was French what did it!"

"And you helped him!" Emma snapped. "The sentence is up to a judge though." She took him and locked him back in the cell. "Now I'm going to arrest your accomplice, Smee. Hope you like wearing orange."

"Wait! Can't we make a deal, Gold?"

Rumple turned and looked at him coldly. "And what deal would that be, wharf rat? The one where you get to choose between a rat, a fish, or a bug? Which would you like? It's either that or prison. Well?"

"Okay. I'd rather do me time!" Smee shrank away from Rumple, pressing himself against the wall.

"Good. Let's go get Moe, Rumple," Emma said, and she grabbed her second pair of cuffs and her revolver.

They found French behind the counter of his shop, counting out a drawer.

He looked up as Emma entered. "What are you doing here, sheriff?"

"You're under arrest, French. For the willful destruction and attempted murder by arson of Mr. Gold and his pawnshop," Emma said, taking out her cuffs.

"W-What?" Moe looked around. "You can't prove I had anything to do with that!"
"Can't I? I have a signed confession from one Mr. Smee that says you were the mastermind behind this crime. Here's a warrant to search the premises."

"You're crazy! That beast has bought you off!"

"Wrong. Gold, check the back room."

A vein bulged in Moe's forehead. "You—you can't do this!"

"Actually, she can," Rumple said, walking into the shop. "She's your elected law enforcement official."

"Get out of my shop, you evil creature!"

"It's no longer your shop. Now it's forfeit to pay the debt you owe for setting mine on fire."

"Pity you didn't burn up with it. Go to hell! It's where you belong!"

Rumple just looked at him. "One word, Maurice. No." Then he went and looked in the back room. "Now, what have we here?" he said, and then levitated a canister of gasoline and a pair of leather gardening gloves out to where Emma was. "Funny, they were right where Smee said they'd be."

"Hey! Put those back! That's my property."


"You like playing with fire, French?" Rumple snarled, shaking the can of gasoline.

"I . . . I use that for my lawn mower!" Moe blustered.

"Sure you do. And I'm the Pink Panther," Emma sneered. "The jig's up, French. You should have left well enough alone. Like I tell my son—you play with fire, you're gonna get burned." Emma moved to cuff him and snarled, "Hands behind your back, French! Now! Or are you resisting arrest?"

Moe looked about to protest, when Rumple broke in with, "By all means, resist her. That'll give her a reason to throw you on the ground and kick your sorry ass. And I'll get to watch. Ah, life's little pleasures."

"Or he can kick your ass," Emma said. "Might be a bit painful though. I'm told transformation into a garden statue usually is. Or slug crawling through salt. Might be an improvement though. What's it going to be?"

"Come on, dearie! Make my day," Rumple taunted.

Moe glared at them, finally realizing he was between a rock and a hard place. "Fine!"

As Emma cuffed him, she said, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you . . ."

Emma led him out to the police car. As she was shoving him inside, Rumple called, "Hope you like small spaces, French! And I hear prison food is lovely."

Emma shook her head. "Gold, really!"

"Sorry. Couldn't resist that, dearie," he smirked.
"Thanks for the assist. And . . . I'll see you tomorrow for dinner," she grinned, then got in the car to drive back to the station and book Moe.

Gold watched her drive off, then said, "Well, that's one headache I won't have any more."

Then he went back to his shop, whistling happily.

He was almost to the door when he saw the mob heading down the street, led by Whale and some other rowdy citizens, all of them looking like they wanted to tear someone limb from limb. And they were heading towards 108 Mifflin Street.

*Well, well. Looks like the Evil Queen's hour has come round at last.*
Chapter Summary

A mob comes for Regina and then the council of Storybrooke must decide what to do with her--except Henry and co suggest an alternative punishment that will change everything!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whale led about sixty-five of Storybrooke's citizens down the street towards Regina's house. He had been stewing over doing so since he had gotten his memories back a few days ago, and it had taken him this long to gather enough people willing to brave the wicked witch in her lair, as he reminded them just who it was who had persecuted them for so long back in the Enchanted Forest, burning their homes, killing anyone suspected of treason, her soldiers coming and beating up their husbands and sons, and having their wicked way with their daughters. All in the name of the Queen. And then she had cast the Dark Curse, and caused them to lose their homes, their memories, any sense of self for twenty-eight years, they had lived a lie. And it was all so she could have company in her misery, and finally win against Snow White and Prince Charming.

But now the curse was broken, thanks to Emma Swan Gold, and her family. She had been the magic against the magic, and finally the curse was over with. Yet still they were trapped here, in this distant land, and they had only one person to blame for it all, one person who was responsible for the destruction of everything they held dear.

Mayor Regina Mills. The Evil Queen.

Emma and the Golds had proven she could beaten at her own game. That she was vulnerable without her guards and her palace full of torture implements. Here she was an ordinary citizen, without even her powers, for Whale had heard from Rumplestiltskin himself that magic in this world was difficult to master, and it took some doing to call upon it. He could do so, as could Emma, but Regina might not be able to yet.

That was why Whale had hurried to gather together all those who were willing to rise up against the wicked queen, because without her magic she was just a woman. A woman who had terrorized and degraded them long enough. And now they could make her pay for her crimes.

They'd have old fashioned mob justice, and string the queen up in her own apple tree.

As the mob moved down the street, Archie Hopper raced over to the station, where Emma had just finished processing the paperwork for Mr. Smee and Moe French and gasped out that there was a mob led by Whale heading over to the mayor's house to string up Regina.

"You have to stop them, Emma!" Archie panted. "Yes, she deserves to be punished, but not like that. And if the mob succeeds, we'll be ruled by them. You can't let that happen. You stand for law and order in this town."

Emma knew the psychiatrist was right, much as she hated to admit it. She knew what came of
allowing mob rule to run rampant. The riots in California and New York long ago proved that. And the last thing they needed was the National Guard coming here to restore the peace.

Emma contacted all her officers and put out an APB for them to all head on over to the mayor's residence. But she doubted that would be enough to deter a mob bent on rough justice. She would need more firepower. She called Bae, finding he was just picking up Alina, Grace, and Henry from school. "On my way, babe," he said, his voice calming her racing heart.

She hesitated over the next number to call, then dialed it. "David, I need you and Mary Margaret to get over to 108 Mifflin Street immediately," she told her father. "There's a mob headed that way, and we need to do damage control."

"Not a problem, Emma. Snow and I will be there. We used to rule these people once, hopefully they'll listen to us and calm down."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. I just have to call one more person. See you soon!"

"Will do, Emma."

Emma pressed number 2 on her cell. There was one other person in this town who could talk these people out of their frenzy with simply his presence. And she knew she would need him. If she could persuade him to act on her behalf.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

"Off with her head!"

"String her up by the sour apple tree!"

"Down with the Evil Queen!"

The crowd chanted various things as they marched behind Whale down the street, carrying hoe, rakes, even a coil of rope. They gathered on the lawn of 108 Mifflin and Whale bounded up the stairs and knocked hard on the door. "Mayor Mills! Come out and face those you've ruined! Come and face the citizens of Storybrooke, you wretched witch!"

He pounded the door again and again, while on the lawn people yelled and shook their homemade weapons.

Regina heard the mob long before they had arrived, and she sneered as they finally reached her house. Were they so stupid as to forget she had ruled over them? That they had lived and died on her command? That with a flick of her finger she could burn them to ash?

Obviously so.

She supposed she would have remind them of just who they were dealing with.

Starting with that idiot Whale.

She yanked open her front door, and snarled, "What seems to be the problem, Whale? Not enough dead people to keep you experimenting?"

Whale gave ground slightly before her, an instinctive reaction.

Regina marched out on the porch, jabbing him in the chest with a finger.
"We're here to make you pay for your crimes, you wicked bitch!" Whale shouted, his face twisted with hate.

"Yeah! You're the reason we're all trapped here!" chorused the mob.

"Really? And you're going to put me on trial?" Regina sneered.

"No! We're going to string you up on your own apple tree!"

"Yeah!"

"Like you did my brother!"

"And my wife!"

Regina eyed the frenzied gathering. A small frisson of fear crawled down her spine. She had never faced such opposition back in the Enchanted Forest. People cowered at the mere mention of her name and the sight of her black guards. Then she snorted. None of these here could harm her. After all, she had the power.

"All right, people! You wanted to stage a rally! You've done so! Now get the hell off my property. Or else!"

"You don't give the orders around here anymore, Regina!" Whale yelled. "We're not your subjects any longer."

"Aren't you?" Regina cackled. She pushed Whale almost off the stairs and raised her hands, calling on her magic. "You want to string up your rightful queen? Depose your reigning monarch?" She laughed softly. "You forget who you're dealing with!" She glared at Whale and pointed an index finger at him. "How about a few new patients in your burn ward, doctor?"

Whale lifted a hand, backing away down the steps.

Half the bold people behind him cringed, expecting a fiery ball of death to come flying at them.

Regina summoned her magic.

Only to find that it wouldn't respond to her call.

Her hand glowed with eldritch light, and fire blossomed in her palm for an instant.

But then it was as if someone had doused her with water or turned off a light switch.

The fireball fizzled and died.

She gasped and tried to call it back, to call on any magic at all. She could feel it in the earth and the air, it was all around her, but it ignored her summons. It was if she were a new apprentice all over again, learning to concentrate and touch the arcane web.

Quick as a blink, Whale realized what had happened. "She's powerless! Get her!"

The mob suddenly surged to life, and moved towards her, a hungry beast intent upon devouring her.

For the first time in a long time, she knew fear from her supposed inferior subjects. "Leave me alone!" she shouted, trying desperately to reconnect with the arcane web. What had happened to
her magic? She should have been able to use it now that the curse was broken.

Sirens blared and three police cars pulled up. Emma and her three officers got out, holding tranquilizer guns at the ready. "Stand down, people! There's not going to be any lynching here today," Emma ordered, coming to stand in front of the cowering Regina on the porch. Her officers spread out to cover her.

"Sheriff, why are you defending her? She deserves to die!"

"I'm not defending her, I'm defending the way things are done here in America. We stand for justice, and as satisfying as it would be to kill Mayor Mills, that's not how things are done in this country."

The crowd pressed up against the porch, still yelling threats.

The yellow Bug pulled up at the curb, and Bae turned to his three passengers and said, "Kids, stay in the car. I mean it—do not get out. Stay here while I help Sheriff Gold." He gave them all a Look.

Henry, Alina, and Grace nodded, then they pressed their noses up against the Bug's windshield and watched what was going on.

Then he grabbed his bo-staff out of the backseat, he'd used it as a demonstration at the school for Martial Arts Awareness Day today, and jumped out of the car.

He ran around the mob and vaulted over the railing to land next to his wife in a cat-like maneuver that left some of those watching breathless. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he twirled his staff lazily, eyeing the crowd with a sharp glance. "Anybody who tries to mess with my wife will go through me first."

"Hey, Gold! Why're you helping the Evil Queen, huh? She hurt your little sister!"

A huge man about seven feet tall pushed his way through to the forefront. "Let us at the Queen! Before I rip your head off, missy!"

Bae bared his teeth at the man, who looked like he was part giant or something. "Bring it!" he growled, spinning his staff faster. "Nobody threatens my wife!"

"Better think about this, people!" Emma yelled. "You really don't want to do this. He fought a dragon and killed it three days ago, you sure you want to tangle with him?" She jerked a thumb back at Bae.

That gave some of them pause, as most of them knew Bae's reputation as a martial arts instructor and were reluctant to push the issue.

"I'll fight him!" snarled the half-giant, smashing a fist into his other hand. "Then I'll rip apart the queen!"

Bae half-crouched. "Bring it, Gigantor!"

"Stop! This isn't the way to settle this!" Snow yelled, rushing up with David.

"Who says? She took everything from us!" Whale cried.

"Yeah! She has to suffer for what she's done!"
"But Regina's death won't solve anything!" Snow protested.

"Guys, listen! We all have a lot of issues to work out, but murdering people isn't going to get it done!"

"You're not my prince! And we're not from this world," Whale challenged.

"Well, you're here now and stringing up Regina isn't a solution for what she's done," Charming argued.

"Like hell it isn't!" several members of the crowd continued pushing forward, not minded to listen to reason.

"Get out of the way! Before I crush you all!" bellowed the half-giant, lunging at Bae.

Suddenly a purple streak of light slammed into the half-giant, picking him up and suddenly the huge humanoid was shrunk down to the size of a small child.

"Huh?" the former giant stared down at his now child-sized body in confusion.

Rumple appeared upon the stairs, and a purple shield flared into life and surrounded Emma, Bae, himself, and the Charmings. "**Enough!** Calm down, because if any of you harms my family, you deal with **me.**"

The crowd froze and started to back away. No one wanted to go one on one, or even twenty to one, with the Enchanted Forest's most powerful sorcerer.

Whale turned and snapped, "Rumple, how can you defend this witch?"

"Victor, I'm not defending her, I'm defending my family. Now back off! Or else someone's going to get hurt."

"All right," Victor sighed and went down the stairs.

"About time you showed up," Emma said, somewhat reprovingly, then she came up to the shield and called, "Okay, people! Here's how this works. I'm going to lock up Regina, for the safety of all concerned. And then we'll decide what to do with her . . . in a civilized fashion. We all understand how you feel, but the mob doesn't rule in Storybrooke."

"Now you all can go home and wait for updates on the hearing," Bae ordered.

"What hearing?" Whale demanded.

"The one we're going to hold once you all get your asses home!" Emma snapped. "We'll pick several influential people from among you and have a hearing to decide Regina's fate."

"Will execution be among the options?" someone asked.

"It could," Emma nodded. "Right now, though, she's coming downtown with me. Now everybody move along! And don't try anything."

"I'd listen to her if I were you," Rumple warned. "Because anyone who attacks my daughter-in-law attacks **me.** And that's not a good thing . . . for you, dearies."

Emma turned and walked over to Regina. "Okay. Hands behind your back, Mills."
"You're not serious? You're really going to cuff me?"

"Yup. Do it."

"I'm the mayor! I run this town!"

"Not anymore, dearie. Now do what she says. Or I have some cuffs you can wear, and they're not as nice as those the sheriff has," Rumple drawled. His eyes hardened. "Don't test me, Regina. You won't like the consequences. Right now, we're the only thing standing between you and a noose. So decide which you'd rather have. It shouldn't be too hard."

"Damn you, Gold! And your whole family!" Regina swore, then she let Emma cuff her.

"Now there's gratitude for you," Charming muttered.

"We could always change our minds," Bae declared icily.

"Come on," Emma said, and shoved Regina before her down the stairs.

Her officers, Charming, Bae, and Snow moved to surround her and the captive queen, while Rumple brought up the rear, his hands still glowing with magical power.

The crowd gave ground before them, shooting fearful glances at Rumple.

Emma got Regina into the back of the squad car and shut the door. Then she realized she had another problem and muttered, "Great! I've got French and Smee already in my holding cells. Now where the hell do I put her?"

"I've got it covered, Emma," Rumple said softly.

"You do?"

"Yes. Just go down to the station. I'll meet you there."

"Okay, whatever," the sheriff said, then watched as he vanished in purple smoke.

She got into the car and prepared to drive off, when Regina snarled, "How come he has magic and I don't?"

"Maybe because he's better than you at it," Emma shot back. "How the hell should I know?"

"Oh, just shut up and drive!"

"In a hurry to get into a jail cell?" Emma asked. Then she pulled away from 108 Mifflin Street and headed down to the police station.

The crowd started to disperse now that they no longer had Regina to entertain them, and soon the lawn was empty of all visitors.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

When Emma got Regina to the station, and she walked into the small building, she discovered Bae, her parents, and Rumple standing there waiting for her.

"Welcoming committee, sheriff?" Regina sneered.
"Yeah, it's a housewarming party, lady. Hope you like your new apartment," Bae snapped, and then gestured to the glowing cell behind him.

It just fit into the opposite corner of the room, and had a pullout bed and all the bars glowed with a blue light.


Emma put Regina inside and removed the cuffs, then shut the door.

"And look, you've got company," Charming said, and gestured to where Moe and Smee were locked up in the other cells.

"It's like villain's old home week," Bae said. "Now you can all discuss the best way to set someone on fire or whatever."

"Shut your trap, abomination!" Moe yelled.

Bae turned and sneered, "Up yours, old man!"

"How dare you even speak to me?" French growled.

"You want somebody to kiss your ass, French, ask him," Bae growled, and pointed at Smee. "Because where you're going, you're going to be the lowest scum in the pond. Criminals who hurt children always are."

Regina sniffed. "I haven't been convicted of anything yet."

"That won't take long," Charming said. "Where are we holding this meeting or whatever?"

"Down at the courthouse," Emma replied. "Rumple, can you get a hold of Judge Moore?"

"Give me a minute, dearie," Rumple said, and pulled out his cell and punched in some numbers.

Then he muttered, "He's not there, but I'll leave a message."

He did so, telling the judge to call him back ASAP. Then he looked at Emma, "There's no need why we can't start discussing this matter right away, even without Moore there. I assume all of us here are going to be on this panel. I'm calling Belle, she ought to be on it also."

"How about Granny?" Snow suggested.

"And Grumpy," Charming added.

"Call 'em," Emma said. "We'll figure out the others later. Let's go."

As they were heading out the door, Bae said, "Shoot! I still have the kids in the car. Maybe I should drop them off at your house, Papa—no, Belle won't be home. Now what should I do?"

"Just take them with you, Bae. They can do their homework in one of the offices while we have the meeting in another room," Emma said.

"I'll tell Belle to call Alice and let her know where Grace is," Rumple said and called his wife.
After settling the kids in another room in the courthouse, Emma, the Charmings, Bae, and Rumple found a large conference room and commandeered it. As they sat around a long table in comfy chairs covered in brown faux suede, Emma said, "Okay. I think we should . . . umm . . . take notes . . . you know, write down what we know are Regina's crimes and what sort of punishment she deserves because of it. Anybody got a pen and a piece of paper?"

Rumple waved a hand and a pad and a pen appeared on the table. "Here you go, dearie. Since you called this meeting, you go first. Write away." He pushed the paper and the pen at her.

Emma began to write, saying as she did so, "Okay. So, number one thing Regina did wrong—she cast the Dark Curse over everybody here, except for me, my husband, my son, Alina, and August. Umm . . . Rumple, Belle wasn't really cursed either, right?"

"No, not in the sense you mean, thanks to Rhea's rose necklace," he replied. He expected Belle any minute, and Alice also.

"Yeah, but she was locked away in an asylum for twenty-eight years and however long before that in Regina's castle," Emma recalled, scribbling rapidly.

The door opened and Belle came in, along with Alice, Jefferson, Marco, Archie, Grumpy, Granny, and Blue.

"Oh, good! We're all here!" Snow said, smiling at her friends.

Rumple stiffened when he caught sight of Blue, but Belle came and hugged him and then sat next to him with her hand on his arm, easing the tension somewhat between the two old adversaries.

"Rumplestiltskin," the Blue Fairy said evenly.

"Blue," Rumple replied. He gave her a sharp glance, but otherwise said nothing.

Emma handed the pad to Snow, who began writing along with Charming.

After a few minutes, Snow passed the tablet to Rumple, who handed it to Belle and said, "Just to clarify why we're all here, Emma called this meeting to decide what we ought to do about Regina. Because of her numerous crimes against us, Emma thought it best if we all wrote our grievances down and then decided based upon them a course of action."

"But does this . . . course of action include voting to . . . execute her?" asked Archie.

"It may," Rumple said gravely. "And while I'll admit that I wouldn't mourn her if that came to pass, I'll allow that an alternative might be sought. But this is something that all of us must agree upon."

He took the pen and added something to the list begun by Emma.

Then he passed the paper to Bae, who took it and wrote down a single thing and handed the pad to Marco.

When the pad had made its way around the table and back to Emma, she began to read aloud all the grievances against the Evil Queen. Most of them were related to the curse, but some were more personal, like Rumple's and Bae's which pointed out that Regina had cursed both Henry and Alina, nearly killing them, and Rumple had also pointed out that she had given Belle claustrophobia and ran over his cat. Bae also wrote down the times she had left Henry alone and unsupervised, causing the boy to seek sanctuary over Gold's house. Snow and Charming had written of several atrocities she had committed while trying to hunt Snow down, like massacring an entire village and shooting
people who had hidden Snow, and of course Charming stated that she had tried to kill both Snow and himself on numerous occasions. Blue had stated that she had killed numerous fairies and Grumpy had said she had tried to kill his dwarf brothers various times in addition to casting the Dark Curse.

"Okay. So now we have everything out in the open," Emma said. "That being so . . . let's discuss punishment options. I want each of you to think about what you would do if you had the option of sentencing Regina, and write it down. Then we'll take the two options that seem to be the most agreed upon and present them to Judge Moore. He'll review all the evidence here and help us decide a verdict."

"But Emma, shouldn't Regina be allowed to tell her side of the story?" asked Archie.

"Well . . . I suppose yes, but what can she say in her own defense? That she hated Snow and Charming so much she wanted to get revenge on them anyway she could? That she couldn't stand me for breaking the curse and taking Henry from her? That she stole Belle for revenge on Rumple, and did her damndest to hurt him too by cursing his bloodline and all?"

"I think that's a waste of breath," Grumpy put in. "I don't believe there is any justification for what she did to any of us, except her own black hatred. So we should skip that part."

"All in favor, raise your right hand," Emma said.

Grumpy, Granny, Alice, Jeff, Rumple, Charming, and Bae raised their hands. Snow, Blue, Marco, Archie, Belle, and Emma kept theirs down.

"All right. Now let's write down our solutions to this problem. I'll go first," Emma said.

She tore off a piece of paper and wrote—life imprisonment in a magical cell.

Bae took the paper next and wrote—stripped of powers and imprisoned for twenty-eight years.

He handed the paper to Jeff, who wrote, the only sure solution is execution.

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Meanwhile, Alina, Henry, and Grace were inside a smaller conference room, supposedly doing their homework and waiting for the meeting to be over. But after trying to do history and English for almost half an hour, they decided to put their homework aside for now and have a conclave of their own.

"You know what they're talking about in there, right?" Henry said.

Alina and Grace nodded. "They're talking about what to do with Regina, since your mom arrested her," Grace said solemnly.

"And she's done some pretty awful things, not even counting the curse," Alina said calmly.

"I know. And I don't think she's really sorry about any of them," Henry sighed. "But . . . I don't think killing her's a good solution."

"Hmmm . . . you may be right. If she's dead, she can't do anything to fix her mistakes," Alina mused.

"She tried to kill you and Henry!" Grace exclaimed. "And you don't hate her for that?"
"Umm . . . kind of . . . but . . . it's complicated," Henry said. "See, I think she should be made to pay for her crimes, but it has to be in a way that she can . . ."

"Redeem herself," said Alina. "My mama believes that everyone deserves a second chance, but the problem is that I don't think Regina can have a good second chance the way she is now."

"Or that she even wants one the way she is now," Henry added. "But . . . what if we gave her a second chance that was different from all the others."

"Like what, Henry?" asked Grace.

"Umm . . . how about . . ."

Page~*~*~*~*~Break

Judge Moore had finally received Rumple's message on his cell and come over, and they gave him the paper with all the grievances upon it as well as the paper with the possible sentencing.

Moore studied the papers, noting that *life imprisonment in a magical cell* and *stripped of her powers and imprisoned for twenty-eight years* seemed to be the top choices.

As the judge considered carefully the two choices and the list of crimes, there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," Emma called.

The door opened and there stood Henry, Alina, and Grace.

"Something wrong, tiger?" asked Bae.

"Uh, not really, Dad. Except . . . we were discussing the same thing you guys were—what should be done with Regina—and we came up with something you might not have thought of."

"Oh? And what would that be?" asked Snow.

"Snow, they're children," Charming protested.

"What could they come up with?" Grumpy asked. "No dessert for a year? A spanking with a hairbrush?"

Alina rolled her eyes. "That's already been tried. Mama did that with a book."

"And while it sort of worked, it wasn't enough," Henry added.

"We know that, lad," Rumple said softly. "That's why we called this meeting."

"We think a good solution would be to imprison her forever in Rumple's cell," Snow said.

"Or strip her of her powers and then imprison her," Emma said.

"What if there was a third solution?" Henry said. "One that wasn't so . . . final? Well, it was, but . . . it also allowed for her to be redeemed?"

"And what way would that be, Henry?" asked Archie.

"Well . . . Grace and Alina and I got to thinking . . . isn't the whole point of punishing somebody to
get them to see what they did was wrong and to try and do better next time?"

All the adults nodded.

"So, we decided that the best way for Regina to do that wasn't to lock her up forever, but to give her a second chance to redeem herself . . . to live her life over and learn how to love and to respect people . . . " Henry said.

"We think a lot of her problem was because she was raised a royal, with royal parents who gave her the idea that she was better than everybody else, that she had rights over people, and that their feelings and wants didn't matter," Alina said.

"Yeah, and she shouldn't consider anything but her own desire and power," Grace said.

"So, in order to give her a second chance to become a good person, without killing her, we decided she should be made to forget who she was and be turned into a toddler again," Henry finished.
"That way she could be raised by somebody who'd teach her right from wrong and she would grow up to be a different person . . . and yet she'd pay for her crimes too. Because it would be like she died, only she was just changed into a little kid again, without her old memories. And that way it would be like she was under the same curse you all were for twenty-eight years, only this would be forever."

"And she could make different choices and be just Regina, and not the Evil Queen," Alina added.
"I learned right and wrong from my parents, but I don't think Regina did from hers. But this time it would be different."

"What do you think?"

"I think that it's crazy," Grumpy said.

"But it might work," mused Blue.

"It's certainly more . . . challenging than just locking her up." Archie said.

"Who would take the responsibility of raising a toddler Regina?" queried Marco.

Rumple shook his head. "Don't look at me. I already have a child to raise, and if I'm lucky, maybe a few more coming along at a later date. And besides, I don't know if I could truly be objective if I had the raising of her."

"I don't think I could do it either," Bae said.

"No way," Emma shook her head. "I don't need to be raising a toddler right now."

"Count us out too," Jefferson said.

Snow was giving David a speculative glance. "Charming . . . would you be willing to do that, instead of putting her in a cell to rot?"

"Snow, I . . . well . . . I need to think about it," David began.

"I think that it would be the best solution, all things considered," Snow said eagerly. "I mean, Henry's right. It would give her a chance at redemption and a way to punish her for her crimes without killing her or being inhumane. And we're not the kind of people to hold a grudge—sorry Rumple—and it would be like I got a second chance with her myself, with our roles reversed."
Charming thought about it for a while, then said, "Snow, if you really think this is a good solution . . . you're the one who's been hurt the most by her actions . . . you and Henry . . ."

"Uh, Gramps, I'm only ten, that's too young to be a dad," Henry protested.

That got a laugh from most of the adults at the table.

"I didn't mean it that way, Henry," Charming said, fighting not to start grinning like a fool when he heard Henry refer to him as his grandfather. "I just meant . . . if you two are willing to do this then the rest of shouldn't have an objection."

"Charming . . . do you want to do this?" his wife queried. "Because we do this together or not at all. Can you be a good father to Regina?"

"Considering she'll be a baby with no memories of her past . . . then yes," Charming agreed. Then he looked at Rumple. "Rumple, can you do this thing? Can you . . . er . . . take her memories away and uh . . . de-age her?"

Rumple nodded slowly. "Yes. The enchantment to spin the clock back automatically regresses the person to the mind of a child . . . and I can modify her memories while casting it so she forgets totally who she was and recalls only that she's your daughter."

"Okay. And what about her magic? I don't think she ought to have it. It'd be like giving drugs to a crack baby," Charming said.

"That too would regress and I could . . . make sure it stayed latent. But . . . any kids she might have . . . would have the power," Rumple stated.

"Okay. So we'll have magical grandkids," Snow said. "It's not like we don't already," she smiled at Henry.

"All in favor, say aye," Judge Moore said.

"Aye!"

It was unanimous around the table.

"Rumple, how long will it take you to prepare the spell and cast it?" asked Charming.

"I can do it whenever you wish," replied the sorcerer. "It's not difficult."

"For you, maybe," Emma said. "You're the master."

"Are we gonna tell Regina?" asked Henry then.

"I think we should," Snow said.

"What if she refuses?" asked Belle.

"She won't have a choice, dearie," Rumple said bluntly. "It's this or being thrown into a hole for the rest of her life. And since she's a magician, that could be a very long time."

"Who's going to tell her?" asked Grumpy.

"I will," said Snow immediately.
"Then let's get it done, dearie," Gold said, and rose to his feet. He looked at Snow. "Will you allow me to transport us there? It's quicker than walking."

Snow nodded. "Okay. Will it hurt?"

"Not a bit. Come stand next to me, Snow. And I'm going to put my arm around you," Gold warned.

Snow came and stood next to the former Dark One.

Gold put an arm about her waist and drew her next to him. "Ready? It might help if you closed your eyes."

Snow did.

Then Gold concentrated, and a purple mist swirled about him and Snow White.

When it cleared, Snow and Rumple were gone.

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Regina sat on the bed inside the glowing blue cell, glaring at the glowing bars and the other two men inside their own cells. Smee had fallen asleep and was snoring loud enough to cut wood. Regina longed to smother him with his pillow. Moe was sitting on his bunk, muttering something that sounded like curse words, probably dreaming about cursing Rumple. Regina could sympathize, for she had dreamed the same thing many times, but she also thought Moe was ten kinds of an idiot, for she had warned him that vengeance against the Dark One was never what it seemed. As she knew only too well.

She wondered idly when they would come and tell her their sentence. She fully expected to die. She knew quite well there were many in Storybrooke who couldn't wait to throw grenades at her funeral or light her coffin on fire. She didn't regret what she had done, for she had done what she thought was best, except for one thing.

She regretted Henry thinking she didn't love him, when she had loved him as much as she was capable of.

She knew that there was something . . . twisted inside of her . . . something that prevented her from showing or even giving love to someone . . . that it had started long before, when her mother had killed Daniel in front of her, and that twisted seed had taken root and grown within her, fed by her hatred, her revenge, and her need for dark magic.

Until now it had raged out of control and what little feeling she was capable of was tainted and dark.

Perhaps, when they came for her, she could make a last request, and say goodbye to her son.

Suddenly there came a purple flare of magic and then Snow and Rumple were standing inside the station.

"Evil beast!" Moe snarled as he caught sight of Rumple.

"Shut up!" ordered Snow.

"Make me, you filthy whore!"

Rumple snapped his fingers and Moe went silent, unable to talk because there was an invisible gag
in his mouth. "That's better. If I had to listen to any more of his mouth I was going to be sick."

"Or I was going to punch him out," Snow said. Then she walked over to Regina. "Regina."

"Snow. Come to gloat that the end is near?" she gave her stepdaughter a cold look.

"No. Actually I came to tell you that we . . . decided your sentence, and it's not what you think at all."

"You mean you don't have the guts to kill me?"

"We decided against execution in favor of . . . another solution. Actually this was a solution Henry came up with."

Regina stared at her. "You actually . . . listened to Henry?"

"Yes. My grandson actually has some very good ideas."

"Very innovative ones," Rumple acknowledged.

"So . . . what is it?"

"We decided to . . . give you a second chance to live your life over," Snow said. She explained what Henry had come up with. "Once Rumple casts the spell, you'll be spun back to say . . . three years old, Rumple?"

"If that's the age you wish, Snow."

"Yes. That would be a good age. Not quite an infant and not yet a child. So once you were a toddler again, with no memory of your past, you could have a second chance . . . as my child and grow up differently . . ."

Regina was silent for several minutes. Then she said, "I don't suppose I really have a choice?"

"You could choose to live out the rest of your days in the cell they held me in," Rumple said.

"No way. A prisoner for the rest of my life? I'd rather die. The other way . . . at least I have a chance to . . . do things over. And if you have me . . . at least I know you won't treat me horribly . . . like my mother did."

"No. I'd never do that," Snow said softly.

"Then you're willing to accept this solution, Regina Mills?" queried Rumple.

Regina looked at him. "I am. One question. Will it hurt?"

Rumple crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Like taking a heart, the spell only hurts as much as the caster wills it to. I can make it painless."

"But . . . will you?"

"Once . . . I would have said no. I would have said you deserve every moment of agony I could conjure," Rumple began.

Snow gasped. "Rumplestiltskin!"
He held up a hand. "I said . . . once I would have. When I was the Dark One. But I'm not the Dark One any longer. The dagger curse has been shattered and now I'm myself once again. And though I'm still angry at you for what you've done to my family, Regina, I have no desire to make you suffer any longer."

"You have changed," Snow murmured.

"I said so, didn't I?" Rumple said calmly. "So, Regina, to answer your question, it won't hurt at all. And afterwards all you'll remember is that Snow here is your mommy and Charming is daddy. And you have a big sister Emma and a very large extended family."

"And you? What would you be to me?"

"He'll be your uncle, of course," Snow replied. "And Belle your aunt, as we are related by marriage."

"Fine. When were you planning to do this?" Regina asked.

"Now," answered Gold. He indicated she should stand up.

Regina rose to her feet. "Wait. Before you do it, I want you to tell Henry something. Tell him . . . I loved him as best I could. And I'm . . . sorry I wasn't a better mother to him and I'm glad Emma and Neal have this chance with him." Then she folded her hands in front of her. "All right. I'm ready, Rumple."

Rumplestiltskin twirled his hand around in a counterclockwise gesture and chanted softly, "Time in its course, I bid thee unravel, turn back the clock, through years travel, round and round, in an enchanted spiral," as he spoke purple smoke began to swirl about Regina, and spun her about in a circle, faster and faster, like a top. "Innocence lost, now regained, to carefree days of youth I return thee, be thou as thy was long ago, by my will and power, I bid thee change!"

That last word echoed in the station, filled with power, and Snow felt herself tremble as it washed over her.

Then the purple smoke cleared, and a small girl dressed in a white frilly dress wearing pink shoes and lacy socks stood in the glowing cell. She was dark haired and rosy cheeked, with big dark eyes that stared up at Snow from a cherubic face.

"Mommy?" she called to Snow.

Rumple gestured and the glowing cell opened and Regina walked out.

The little girl looked at him and said, "I got locked inside, Unca Rumple."

Rumple cleared his throat and said, in a much softer voice than he normally used, "That's because little girls shouldn't play in jail cells, Regina Nolan."

She gave him an impish grin. "I'll 'member next time."

"You do that, little imp," he told her.

Then she ran over to Snow and hugged her about the knees. "Mommy, I'm hungry."

Snow knelt and picked her up. "Okay. Let's get some . . . uh . . ." she floundered, trying to remember what children this age liked to eat.
"Peanut butter and jelly," Rumple supplied.

"Yes! An' milk an' cookies," the toddler crowed. Then she reached out to Rumple and said, rather imperiously, "'Mere! I's gonna give you a kiss!"

For a instant, Rumple looked horrified. Then he recalled that this was a little child, and no longer his nemesis, and heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Regina . . ."

"'Mere! Kiss you, Unca Rumple!"

"I don't believe this!" the old sorcerer groaned. But then he held out his arms and the intrepid child wound her arms about his neck and planted a smacking kiss on his cheek.

"Aww! How cute!" Snow giggled.

Rumple raised his eyes heavenward. "Why me?"

He made as if to hand the little girl back to Snow, but Regina clung stubbornly to him and cried, "No! Carry me!"

"Your mommy can carry you much better," Rumple persuaded.

Regina shook her head. "No! Don' want Mommy! Want you, Unca Rumple!"

Rumple rolled his eyes. "Why me?" he muttered again.

Snow was nearly convulsed with laughter. "That's Regina all right." Then she said to her new daughter. "Let's go to Granny's diner and get something to eat, okay? We'll find Daddy along the way."

"Cause you always find each other!" Regina sang, one arm clinging to Rumple's neck as he carried her out the door into the bright light of a sunny afternoon.

Snow beamed. "That's my girl!"

"And may God help us all," Rumple said.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of this fic, dearies. Maybe it didn't end like you figured, but there is a sequel I am posting soon! Hope you all liked and please let me know what you thought of this!

End Notes

This version of my Gold Standard chronicles contains ALL of the various stories in the series originally published separately on ff.net. Will be divided into several parts. Only three stories, one of which is already on here will not be included in this large work, the
other two are bonus stories, including a "what if" story and another which is a "tie-in" to the sequel I plan to write. Enjoy dearies!
Reviews are always welcome!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!