Between Heaven and Hell

by AlexandraLyman

Summary

They hide in plain sight, the servants of heaven and hell. Angels and demons, who can help save your soul or damn it. They are the bringers of light and the agents of darkness, they stand on opposite sides and are the enemies in an eternal war. But what happens when an angel and a demon find themselves inexplicably drawn to each other? A Captain Swan angel/demon AU

Notes

So this is a Captain Swan angel/demon AU. Various other OUAT characters will also be worked into this, primarily Will Scarlet. It's certainly Catholic-inspired, but with some liberties taken for the sake of the story. If you like it, reviews would be grand, if you don't, no harm, no foul. It's going to be different from some of the other stuff I've written - but I like the idea and hope some of you will too! Mature content.

This will primarily be set in the present day, but the prologue takes place in the past and there will be flashback scenes throughout the fic as well.
"Remember tonight, for it is the beginning of always"

Dante Alighieri

Rome - May 6, 1527

God has forsaken us.

The thought came unbidden to her panicked mind and the horror of the realization overwhelmed her. It was true, there was no other explanation for how the holy city could have fallen to the Emperor's troops, barbarous men who had scaled the walls and broken down the gates and were now running rampant in the streets, indulging in a violent orgy of mass destruction and deranged debauchery, the likes of which had never been seen in living memory.

They dragged men of the cloth from the pulpits and stripped them naked on the steps of their churches, whipping them to ribbons and staining the stone with rivers of blood. The convents were ransacked, the brides of Christ degraded and violated in their cells and their throats slit, pleas for mercy falling on deaf ears, prayers unanswered. The city was burning, none were spared, from babes in arms to the elderly and infirm, from prostitutes to priests, beggars to nobles. It was wholesale slaughter on an unprecedented scale, as the devil took hold in the form of the bloodthirsty soldiers and the angels fled. Even His Holiness was gone, spirited away under cover of night while his loyal Swiss Guard was massacred under the great stone shadow of St. Peter's dome.

The last defenders of Rome were gone, God had abandoned them as surely as the Medici pope, Clement VII, to meet their fate.

Sister Maria Anna fingered the rosary beads hanging at her waist. There was no comfort now in the familiar ritual of the Pater Noster prayer, God was no longer listening to His children trapped in His city. She let the beads fall back down and huddled closer to her three companions, the only ones left of their order. They had been lucky, managing to find hiding spaces in the abbey when the soldiers broke down the barricaded door and dragged the others off. The four of them had spent agonizing hours in their cramped refuge, expecting the soldiers to return and find them at any moment, before they escaped unseen when the night finally fell. Maria Anna had grown up in the city, unlike most of her sisters, and knew well the back alleys and hidden lanes that wound like a giant maze around the open squares where the worst of the rioting and carnage was taking place. Their dark habits blended into the shadows, the starched white wimples discarded lest they draw any light from the soldiers' torches and lanterns. But the night wouldn't last forever, and just as she despaired of finding any hope of sanctuary in the fallen city, Sister Maria Katherina grasped her arm and pointed with a hissed, "Look!"

A single candle in a fogged window, a beacon, and a woman behind it, beckoning to the frightened nuns with a smile that somehow eased Maria Anna's frantically beating heart.

The woman led them into the silent house, to a room at the rear of the long and narrow abode as far from the street as possible and doused the candle. Before the tiny light winked out Maria Anna had seen a rich gold satin dress, a heavy fall of unbound wheaten hair and green eyes in a white face, with a serenity that was woefully out of place in the depths of the hell to which they had all descended. But somehow, under the woman's guiding hand she felt the tiniest flicker of hope, and her fingers found the jet beads and the silver cross once more. Perhaps her prayer had not gone unheard after all.
Mingled shouts and cries came from outside, carrying through the thin walls. Maria Theresa had her head buried in Maria Anna's shoulder and her whole body shook with fear, the young novitiate was just eleven and had witnessed atrocities no child should see.

There was a rustle of satin and the woman's voice whispered, "You will be safe here, I will see to it."

Her hand found Maria Anna's and gave a reassuring squeeze. There was a brief tingle in her palm at the woman's touch and she felt a warm breeze brush against her cold cheek, reminding her of days when the sun shone through the leaded panes of stained glass in the abbey. The soldiers had broken the windows, the shards of red and blue and yellow scattering across the floor and ground to dust under their boots.

The sound of creaking wood and heavy footfalls from elsewhere in the house, so like a soldier's arrogant stride, made her breath catch in her throat. Maria Theresa cried out and Maria Anna clapped a hand over her mouth but the damage was done. The steps came closer and the door to the small room was pushed open, a light appearing from the other side. It came from a lantern, held aloft by a man dressed all in black, with hair like a raven's wing and eyes as blue as the Virgin's cloak. But there was no warmth in his gaze, his smile was that of a wolf who had spotted weak prey, and Maria Anna pressed back against the wall behind her.

"Well," the man spoke in a voice that was low and laced with amusement, "What a surprise. It seems that not all of the blessed ones have fled."

The soft yellow light swung across the woman and illuminated the serene smile that did not waver in the face of the threatening figure. She responded in an equally low voice, but her conviction rang clear in each word, "You can't touch them. Their souls are innocent."

He looked over the woman's shoulder and his eyes met Maria Anna's. She flinched back, feeling something cold prod against her skin, a sudden sharp chill that swept over her and made her feel like she had been fully stripped bare and every inch examined head to toe in that brief look. Maria Theresa sagged against her, the girl had fainted right away.

Lips curled back over white teeth and his tongue ran across them, "I can't, but there's plenty out there who can. There will be no innocent souls left in Rome when the army is through, they've lost all reason and the depravity is shocking, even by my standards."

God save us, she prayed silently in her head while her knees threatened to give out and only Maria Theresa's weight against her was still keeping her upright.

The woman took a step forward, she was clearly unafraid of the dark haired man even as Maria Anna desperately fought the urge to flee from his dark voice and piercing gaze.

"Is that why you're here?" the woman asked, "Seeking out these few who've managed to escape the spread of evil?"

His eyes found them again briefly and she shuddered while she sought out the rosary beads with her free hand and rolled them in her fingers.

\textit{Deliver us from evil.}

"No," the man answered, looking back at the woman's face again, "It's not them that drew me here, it's you. The city has gone dark tonight but your light still shines. I was curious as to who could have stayed behind."

Silence reigned for a long moment, the light from the lantern flickering over them and throwing
strange shadows on the walls. The man and the woman stared at each other, seemingly locked in an unspoken battle of wills.

He was the one who seemed to concede, stepping back with a shake of his head, "You should leave now, blessed one. Rome has fallen and you know what will be coming to revel in the defilement of the holy. Your light will call out to them as it did to me. Save yourself while you still have the chance."

The woman turned and drew her gaze slowly over Maria Anna and the others. A sad smile lifted her lips, "No. They are innocent and I have sworn to protect them. I can't leave them."

Maria Anna found her voice at last, "If you can escape the city, dear lady, you must go. Worry not for us."

Maria Katherina was reciting a desperate prayer with her eyes closed and her crucifix clutched in her hands, Maria Johanna was frozen in place, her eyes wide and terrified, and Maria Theresa had roused from her faint and was sobbing quietly, face still buried in Maria Anna's shoulder.

"How appallingly noble," the man scoffed, "You have no idea what's coming for you, Sister."

His face was handsome but hard, as if it had been carved from marble. There was something about the man that she couldn't quite place, he didn't have the look of a native Roman, nor that of the Emperor's Germanic troops. He was not garbed as a cleric, was obviously not a peasant, his bearing was proud and noble but he was like no lord she had ever seen. Maria Anna felt both repulsed and intrigued, her mind swirling with sudden images of being laid out naked underneath him and forswearing her vows, giving in to every forbidden carnal urge and fornicating madly until her soul was damned to the eternal fires.

She wrenched her eyes away from his with a gasp, frantically pushing the thoughts away and clutching her silver cross so hard it bit deeply into her palm. Maria Anna heard a dark chuckle and she could feel his gaze still on her.

"Innocence never lasts," he said, "Why risk yourself on a futile endeavour?"

"It's not something I'd expect you to understand," the woman replied tartly, "Come, Sisters, we must find a way out of the city."

"There's only one way out now. You wouldn't last five minutes on the streets at this point. If you insist on this foolishness and refuse to ascend, then you must head down below. Follow me, I will guide you out of Rome."

The woman turned back to him with a swirl of her satin skirts and she sounded as incredulous as Maria Anna felt, "Follow you? You are going to assist my futile endeavour? Why should I possibly believe that?"

He moved in the blink of an eye, standing toe to toe with the woman and staring down at her. Maria Anna's heart beat painfully in her chest, she was chilled to the bone with fear and she wanted to snatch the woman back and pull her away from the man who loomed over her, a dark spectre who seemed to fill the room and somehow terrified her more than the thought of the Emperor's entire army surrounding the house. But she couldn't move, she was rooted right to the spot.

"You really shouldn't, but what do you have to lose, blessed one?" he asked with a grin.
The old catacombs that wormed their way under the city like veins of quartz in rock were silent save for the footsteps of the strange group. The man led the way, the light from his lantern flickering on the soft brown bones of ancient martyrs and saints, the empty dark hollows that had once been eyes watching from the niches in the walls that were their final resting place. She said a prayer for their immortal souls and begged their forgiveness for disturbing their eternal rest. The four nuns had all joined hands lest one falter, shuffling forward on the uneven jumble of stone and earth under their feet.

The woman walked just behind the man with unerring steps, her back straight and her head high. Whenever Maria Anna's despair threatened to overwhelm her, fearing that they would never find their way out of the underground tombs, the woman seemed to sense her fear and would turn her head and smile reassuringly,

"Just a little farther," she whispered.

Maria Anna didn't even know the woman's name, there had been no time to ask, but she gave a prayer of thanks in her head for her assistance and steady, calming presence.

She couldn't bring herself to add the man to her prayer, even as he found tiny passageways that were nearly hidden in the gloom and connected the various chambers. Some were so narrow they had to be traversed sideways, creeping through one by one with the stale air burning their lungs and leaving a rancid taste in the back of their throats. Every time it seemed they could go no farther, the man would find a way to press on, his long ringed fingers probing the walls and pointing the way. Maria Anna had no idea why he was helping them or why the woman had accepted his assistance, or even why she and her sisters were following them both.

"He is leading us straight into infernum," Maria Johanna muttered at one point, "Right to the gates to deliver is to the devil himself."

The man must have heard her, he laughed and the lantern swung around, "Welcome to infernum, Sister."

Maria Johanna flinched, her mouth set in a thin line when his eyes landed on her and the nuns all froze as one.

"Shall I lead you there? Are you perhaps curious as to whether or not the descriptions in your holy scriptures are true? Do you wish to touch the eternal fire and see if really burns? All you have to do is say the word."

The images flashed behind Maria Anna's lids, of writhing with ecstasy in the flames with his hands on her flesh, tearing it right from her bones and devouring her whole.

"This one is considering it."

She opened her eyes and he was looking right at her with a cold and devious smile. Her fingers groped for her rosary and found only empty air.

"Stop. It."

The woman stepped in front of Maria Anna and blocked her view of the man.

He sounded amused, "Do you still think they're worth the risk?"

"If I didn't, would I still be here?"
Where could she go? Maria Anna wondered. There was no turning back now, nowhere to go except to follow the man, wherever he was leading them. Salvation or damnation, the light from the woman's candle or the darkness in the man's eyes. He reached out as if to touch the woman's face, but paused and only flicked a strand of her hair back over her shoulder.

"What about you, blessed one? Do you think I'm leading you all astray, my little lambs to the slaughter?"

The woman shook her head, "No. You could, but I don't think you are, infernal one."

He sucked in a whistling breath between his teeth, "Interesting. One of your kind trusting me. On what basis did I manage to earn your trust?"

"You didn't. I don't trust you, but I have faith."

The man laughed, "An unshakable faith, I see. Well, come along then, we're almost there. I am not taking you to hell, dear Sisters, I shall guide you back to the path to caelo, though you will excuse me if I go no farther than that."

He pressed on, kicking aside the bones that were scattered across the floor with careless disregard. Maria Anna couldn't move, she could scarcely think, there was nothing in her head except that terrible graven image that he had put there. Would the flames burn her? She almost wanted to know.

"Sister."

The woman's white face loomed in front of her out of the dark, she grasped Maria Anna's hands and the rosary, pressing the cross into her palm. As it had before, the woman's touch seemed to impart a strength, a sense of calm and peace even in the tiny cavern of crumbling bones deep underneath the earth.

"You do not wish to go down that path, Sister. Follow him, but do not look into his eyes."

"What is he?" Maria Anna whispered, "What are you?"

The woman didn't answer directly, she just smiled and said, "Someone who heard a prayer."

When they finally emerged into the faint dawning light of the sunrise, outside the city walls, the four nuns all took in great gasping breaths, eager to rid their lungs of the dust and decay from their long trek through the hidden realm of the dead. They had come up through the undercroft of an old chapel that was now a near ruin, only two stone walls still standing. Green shoots rose from between the broken stone slabs that had once made up the floor, the man hefted back the one he had shoved aside with the woman's assistance, covering up the narrow steps they had just climbed.

"Come, we can't tarry here. We must get as far away from Rome as possible," the woman urged, pulling the exhausted nuns back to their feet.

"Head south," the man advised. Maria Anna was careful to keep her gaze lowered and avoided looking at his face. She saw the woman's skirt move, the heavy folds of gold satin sweeping across the weathered stones where the worshippers had once knelt to pray.

"Why?" she asked, "A veritable feast for you in the city last night and you turned it away and brought four innocents to safety. A strange action to say the least, infernal one."

His voice was low but Maria Anna could still hear each word, "Oh, I didn't do it for them, blessed one. Now, in return for my generous assistance, I have one simple request. Tell me your name."
She chanced a glance up and saw surprise on the woman's face, the first time her serenity had faltered and faded.

"I shall tell you mine," he encouraged when she remained silent.

"Emma."

She said it with some reluctance, taking a step back from him.

"Emma," the man repeated, and something in his voice made Maria Anna shiver. He spoke the name as a caress, a whisper, a promise and gave a courtly bow, bending low at the waist with a sweep of his short cloak.

"My name is Killian. Remember that, for I think we shall meet again one day. But I will take my leave of you now. The delights of Rome still await, I may have missed out on some of the fun but there is plenty of amusement left. The army won't be satisfied with one night, it shall continue for weeks if not months and they may wind up burning the holy city right to the ground."

"And you will be there to stoke the flames."

"We all serve our purpose. Farewell, Emma. The light that did not flee the darkness. It was truly a pleasure."

He drew the word "pleasure" out obscenely, and then he was gone.

The other three started towards the road that led away from the city, but Maria Anna stayed behind and grabbed Emma's sleeve.

"What was he?" she asked again, fearing the answer.

Emma's voice was clipped, "A corrupter. One who can take your soul and twist it into something very dark, if you let him. Do not think of him after this day and never ever speak his name."

Maria Anna blinked, "What are you?"

The gentle smile returned, "Dear Isabella, you know what I am."

The use of her long disused birth name stunned Maria Anna into silence.

They left Rome behind. The pillage continued for months on end as the Emperor's troops occupied the city and thousands upon thousands died. The Pope was humiliated and forced to grovel for mercy under the Emperor's boot, paying ransom and ceding lands and territories to the Hapsburg king.

And for the rest of her life Maria Anna lit a candle every day and said a prayer of thanks for the angel who had appeared when the city fell and saved her and her three sisters, for she knew now that was what the woman was.

"Gratia, tibi beata angela, Emma." "Thank you, blessed angel, Emma."

As for the dark haired demon who had also appeared and helped lead them from the city that night, she heeded the angel's warning. He had tempted her soul once but she would not give him the chance to lead her into sin and damnation again.

Maria Anna could not truly forget him, but she never spoke his name.
Chapter 2

Present Day

He strode down the hall with what he hoped was a confident stride, his shoulders back and his head high.

This was everything he had been waiting for.

Will raised his hand and rapped quickly on the door. While he waited nervously for a response he straightened the knot in his tie and fiddled with his cuffs, hoping that he would pass muster with the boss. He wasn't used to wearing a suit and the jacket felt too tight in the shoulders while the blasted tie kept threatening to strangle him. But the boss had high standards for his employees and the wardrobe upgrade was mandatory if Will wanted to impress him. No more jeans and motorcycle boots, at least while he was on the clock. Now it was buttoned-up waistcoats and proper Windsor knots, far from the most comfortable thing to be wearing considering it was nearly ten at night, but he knew going in that this gig was not going to be a nine to five life.

"Enter."

His palms were sweating and he wiped his hand quickly on his trouser leg before opening the door and taking one cautious step inside. The boss was sitting behind his desk with his dark head bent down to his laptop. It was the closest Will had ever been to the man and the first time he had ever been alone with him. It had taken him nearly four years of hard work and hustle to make his way up in the organization to a coveted place in the inner circle that surrounded Mr. Jones. But he had done it, he received his well earned promotion and had been welcomed into the boss's own home, a posh two-level penthouse condo smack dab in the best area of town.

Will looked around the office with interest. The desk was large, made of dark hardwood topped with a slab of gleaming black marble and completely bare save for the sleek Macbook. There was a deep leather sofa and two leather-backed chairs, all also black. Behind the desk was a wall of glass, a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the lights of the city below, the city the boss ruled with an iron fist from the shadows.

"Will Scarlet, isn't it?"

He nearly jumped at the question and his eyes flew back to where Mr. Jones was now standing up from behind the desk, looking at him with one eyebrow raised.

"Yes, sir," he answered quickly.

It was almost impossible to look right at him. The times Will had watched him from a distance had not prepared him for what it would feel like to have the boss watch him. The blue eyes were unsettling, as cold as glacier ice and they seemed to hold Will in place and see straight into him. It was as if the boss knew everything about him, all his darkest secrets, everything he had done to get here, scratching, clawing his way up, all the people he had stepped on (figuratively and literally) on the way.

"So?" Mr. Jones asked archly when the silence stretched on too long.

Come on Will, get it together. He's not a bloody mind reader, stop acting like the village idiot.

"There's a woman here to see you," he managed to explain.
Woman wasn't the right word, she was a vision. But Mr. Jones appeared indifferent, looking back down at the laptop and tapping something on the keyboard.

"The auditions are tomorrow morning at eleven. I'm not making any exceptions. Tell her to go to the club and to bring her own music."

For some reason Will didn't think the woman downstairs had come to wrangle a private "tryout" with the owner of the city's most high end gentleman's club.

"I don't think she's here for that. She said to tell you, uh, salve de cabo? No, sorry, salve de-"

"Caelo?" the boss supplied, his head jerking back up as he leaned forward with his knuckles on the desk and his tone sharpening with interest, "Was it perchance salve de caelo?"

"That's it!" Will exclaimed, "Er, is that Spanish?"

The laptop was snapped shut and he ran a hand down the sleeve of his jacket, flicking off a non-existent piece of lint. The boss's suit was impeccable, perfectly tailored, dark charcoal with a matching dress shirt and a royal blue silk pocket square. Will's suit hadn't been cheap, but the boss's probably cost more money than most people made in a month.

"Salve is Latin. It means "greetings" and it's her way of saying hello. Send her in."

Latin? Will wondered as he padded back down the hall and descended the staircase that led to the condo's main level. Who on earth used Latin to say hello? The Pope probably did, but a gorgeous blonde who had come to visit the boss himself, Mr. Jones?

She was waiting patiently in the vestibule where he had left her and her skyscraper heels clicked on the tiled floor when Will beckoned her forward and tried his best to sound official, "Mr. Jones will see you."

"I told you he would," she replied with a smile that Will couldn't help returning. She was stunningly beautiful, her hair hanging in loose waves halfway down her back and dressed in a short strapless column of pristine white that clung to a spectacular body. She carried no purse or bag and he supposed he should frisk her and make sure she didn't have a gun or other weapon under her dress, but where would she even put it? He didn't think there was any room under the dress for knickers, let alone anything else, and the thought suddenly made his trousers very tight.

"I'm not armed," she said as if she knew what he was thinking. She walked past him, throwing him a wink and brushing her manicured hand lightly over his chest. Will inhaled deep and frowned, whatever perfume she was wearing, it was oddly familiar. She smelt like sweet incense and heavy beeswax and dark wine, he vaguely remembered that combination of scents from the Sundays he had spent at church with his gran, all those Masses he had sat through at her side before she passed and the streets had beckoned him away from home.

He blinked and scrambled ahead of her, leading the way to the boss's office even though she obviously knew where she was going. Will opened the door again and cleared his throat, "Mr. Jones, your visitor, uh-" damn, he hadn't even asked the woman her name to announce her properly.

The blonde stepped into the office with another dazzling smile, "Hello, Killian."

Will felt the blood drain right out of his face. The boss was a stickler for protocol and no one ever called him by his first name. Of course everyone knew it, but on the streets and in the bars and the clubs and the casinos he was always, "boss", "sir", or "Mr. Jones", to his face, and even behind his back no one was brave enough to call him Killian.
No one dared.

He was certain that something very bad was going to happen, the boss was going to flip his lid at the woman's audacity, but when Will mustered the courage to look at him he felt like he was witnessing a miracle.

Mr. Jones was smiling. And it wasn't one of those smiles that wasn't really a smile, where the lips tilted up but there was no warmth or emotion behind it. No, this was a real smile, a genuine expression of pleasure at the blonde's greeting and he spoke in a voice that was unlike anything Will had ever heard from him before, it was low and familiar and intimate.

"Hello love. Salve de inferno."

The woman walked forward and the boss came around the desk to meet her, taking her gently by the upper arms and brushing a kiss on each cheek. He looked up over her shoulder and the blue eyes narrowed at Will.

"That will be all. Leave us."

He flicked his wrist dismissively and Will nodded at the order, backing out of the office and pulling the door shut as he went.

He had seen the boss with women before, from his booth in the club they had been summoned with a crook of his finger and he frequently disappeared with them into the private back room. All were the very definition of sexy, long-legged, large-breasted knockouts that Will would give his right arm for the chance to fuck. But even when they were draped all over the boss, practically sucking him off right in the booth, his face had always been impassive and cold. Will had certainly never seen Mr. Jones smile at any of the dancers the way he smiled at her when she walked in.

Will hovered outside the door. It's not what you know, it's who you know. The blonde and the boss obviously knew each other and whoever she was, she was clearly someone important. Knowledge was always power and he should find out whatever he could about her and how exactly she was connected to the cold and ruthless Mr. Killian Jones.

"Emma. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She sat down in the chair he indicated and crossed her legs, watching Killian's eyes trail up her thigh as her dress rode up and exposed a generous swath of bare skin. She didn't bother pulling it back down, she simply folded her hands in her lap and stated the reason for her visit, "I came to ask a favour."

He perched against the desk and spread his hands open, "I'm all ears."

She held up a finger and tilted her head, "Your man is listening at the door."

His eyes narrowed and he stared hard at the wood. They both heard the startled yelp of pain from the other side.

"Scarlet! You're dismissed for the night!"

There was the sound of footsteps beating a hasty retreat and Killian shrugged, "He's new."

Emma rested her shoulders back in the chair, feeling the whisper of butter soft leather slide like a caress against her skin. Killian looked down at her and she held out her hand, a photograph
appearing in her palm. He picked it up, letting his thumb brush the inside of her wrist. The image was that of a rosy-cheeked teenage girl, with soft brown eyes and a hesitant smile.

Young.

_Innocent._

"She's fifteen," Emma began, "Comes from a small town, she loves her parents and her little sister, but it's quiet and kind of boring. So she goes online and meets this older guy. He says all the right things, that he loves her, that he's her Prince Charming and knight in shining armour and he'll take care of her forever and convinces her to run away from home."

"Reeled her in with that old fairy tale?" Killian said, "But somehow I think she didn't find happily ever after or you wouldn't be here."

She continued on, "Everything's great for the first month. But then he starts to get a little mean, a little aggressive, starts talking about how she owes him for the food she eats, the roof over her head. He took all her money for "safekeeping" when she got to town, and she's too scared and ashamed to call her parents, who are worried sick about her, by the way. Anyway to make a long story short the asshole is forcing her to audition for your club tomorrow."

He tilted his head and smiled, "And this is where the favour comes in?"

Emma met his eye, "Can you have someone take her to the train station and buy her a ticket to go back home? There's a train at 12:30 and her parents will be there to pick her up at the other end. She wants to go, she just thinks it's too late."

He held up the photo by the edges, looking not at the pretty face or the coltish body hinted at under the oversized hoodie, but at the little wayward soul that was about to cross his path. The girl had already had a taste of darkness, he could claim her easily for his side and mould her however he wished. It was a tempting prospect, but he never refused Emma a favour.

"What about the asshole boyfriend?" he asked, lowering the photo.

Emma uncrossed her legs and crossed them back the other way, baring her other thigh, "He's all yours. He's taking her to the audition to make sure she doesn't back out. Take him and do whatever you want."

"What it is I do best, you mean," Killian said. The edges of the photo curled in and began to blacken and smoulder. The paper caught and the flames burned away the girl's face, the smell of smoke filling the air until the picture was completely gone and he flicked away the small pile of ash off his hand and into nothingness, "For you? Consider it done."

She dipped her head in a grateful nod, "Thank you."

He gave a brilliant smile, "Well, since that's settled, do you fancy a drink?" and pushed off the desk, heading over to the large built in wall unit that ran the length of the office on one side. He opened a cabinet and retrieved two heavy old-fashioned lead crystal glasses and a bottle of rare fifty year old Scotch.

Handing one of the drinks to Emma, he sat down on the sofa. He crossed his leg over his knee and raised his glass to her, his gaze going to her thigh again, "But you hardly needed to come all the way here to ask me that in person, love. A little favour like that? You could have just called."

Emma set her tumbler down on his desk and stood up, moving to stand in front of him with a slow,
deliberate sway of her hips. They both knew why she hadn't simply called.

"Well, maybe I wanted to see you in person."

Their eyes locked and she lifted the drink from his hand, setting it aside. Emma trailed a finger against his neck, scoring a faint red line into his skin with her pink nail. She leaned over him with her other hand braced on the back of the sofa, dipping into the open collar of his shirt and pressing against the hollow of his throat. He made a low noise and slid his hands over the softly flared hips, cupping her ass and pulling her into his lap.

"Oh, I've missed you, blessed one," he said.

Their lips met in a soft slide, gentle, light brushes that could almost be called chaste, in sharp contrast to the grind of her open thighs over where he was starting to strain against his cashmere trousers. Killian grabbed the front of her dress and drew her down against his chest, leaving sooty black fingerprints on her breasts that faded instantly into her skin without a trace.

Emma cupped his face, her fingers tracing over the dark stubble on his cheeks and chin. His mouth opened and her tongue met his, the sweet ambrosia of her taste sliding down his throat. It was like honey and champagne and the freshest, ripest fruit and was more intoxicating than any other substance he had ever known.

There was a great tearing sound and her pretty white dress was ripped open from neckline to hem.

"You are so impatient, infernal one," she said against his mouth, swatting his shoulder.

"You love it," he shot back, "And look who's talking. You didn't even let me finish my drink first, and do you know how much that stuff costs?"

He slid his hands over her thighs and wrapped his arms around her back, standing up. The drink was left behind, he didn't really care about the wasted Scotch any more than she cared about the ruined dress on the floor.

His office was connected to the master bedroom by a pocket door hidden behind a panel that blended in with the wall. It slid open as he approached it with Emma held easily in his arms. While he'd had plenty of women in his office, screwing them on his sofa, against his desk, and on the floor, his bedroom was off-limits to all save her.

As profane as he normally was, he did hold some things sacred.

The door slid back into place noiselessly, encasing them in the room. Like the rest of his condo, it was dominated by dark tones. The walls were painted a slate grey and the hardwood floor was stained almost black. He paused to kick off his shoes, and Emma also let her heels slip to the floor. The king sized bed featured an elaborate wrought-iron headboard that ran all the way up the wall to the ceiling and was centuries old, once part of a gate from the grounds of a French chateau. They fell to the mattress, Emma's lithe body like a spill of rich cream against the deep plum of the silk comforter. He laced their fingers together over her head and rutted his hips against her, knowing from long experience that the friction would torment her in the best of ways.

"Did you miss me?" he whispered in her ear, nipping at the lobe with his sharp teeth.

Her foot slid up his calf and she hooked her leg over his hip, using it to flip him onto his back. Her hair fell forward and spread a golden halo around his head.

"More than you know," she whispered back and he shuddered.
"You know there's an easy solution to that-" he started to say, only to be cut off by her hand covering his mouth.

"Don't," she warned.

Killian closed his eyes and nodded, falling silent. The hand left his lips and started trailing down. He tilted his head back, baring his neck to her and her fingers traced his throat. He could feel the golden fingerprints she was leaving behind, the little marks that should disfigure him like acid but never did. They simply sank into him and made him feel like he was being caressed by her both inside and out.

His clothing vanished as her hand went down his body, he was fully nude in an instant and he opened his eyes again and watched Emma settle herself between his spread legs. She looked up and gave him a smile that was the personification of purity and grace. It was a beatific smile, and it was that smile that had first drawn him to her instead of repelling him back the way it should have.

Then her pink tongue darted out and she licked a slow stripe up his cock, from base to tip, and his hips left the bed and his eyes slammed shut again.

"Fuck!" he hissed, "Bloody fucking hell, Emma!"

She took him in her mouth, sucking hard the way she knew he liked best. Her nails dug into his thighs, leaving more red marks and one of his hands clawed at the comforter while the other settled onto the top of her head, pushing her down on his cock while he thrust up. She hummed around him, tasting that dark rich essence that seeped from his skin and whispered of sin and unimaginable decadence. It was like the aged Scotch and rare steak and the bitterest chocolate. She shouldn't love the taste, it shouldn't make desire pool between her own legs, heady and slick, but it did.

He swelled that last little bit under her tongue, fully erect, and she let him slip from her mouth. Her hands skimmed over his hips and she crawled up his body, breasts brushing his chest and her fingers dancing over his ribs, which made him laugh.

"Just imagine if your new man knew that the big scary boss himself was ticklish," Emma murmured. His hand shot to her wrist and he rolled them, putting himself back on top and spreading her legs open with his knee.

"Well, it'll be our secret," Killian said, looking down at her and pushing her hair back from her face, "Just like this."

Emma felt him shift his hips and he thrust forward sharply, making her back arch and her mouth fall open in a silent scream. She was more than wet enough for him but it was always a shock when he first buried himself inside of her. He burned between her legs and she could feel the flames licking her, threatening to consume her whole and turn her right to ash underneath him. But instead of his fire blackening her skin and setting it alight, there was no pain. He gave her nothing but warming pleasure, it spread out over her entire body from where they were joined together.

"Fuck," Killian muttered again, pressing his face into her neck, "It's been too fucking long without this, Emma."

She poked him in his side, "It's not like you've been celibate."

His head lifted and he stared down at her. He snapped his hips against her, making her moan while he spoke through gritted teeth, "It is not the same. It's not even close and you know that perfectly well."
She opened her legs wider and pulled him down, kissing him hard to shut him up. Killian gave in for a moment but then he lifted up on one arm, their lips breaking apart while he touched his thumb to her cheek. He looked straight into her eyes with an unblinking stare.

"My angel."

Emma looked away. Killian drew his hand over her face, cupping her chin and turning her head back to face him. He moved gently, the rise and fall of his body above her making her close her eyes and give in to the bliss that was slowly building under her skin. She felt his breath on her face, his large hands sweeping down the sides of her body, pulling her knee up so he could slide in deeper. She grasped his ass and pulled him in closer, squeezing him inside her and making a rough groan tear from his throat.

"Bloody vixen," he muttered.

"You love it," she replied with a lift of her hips that drew him right in to the hilt. He paused, throbbing inside her with his hips angled perfectly so that the slightest movement would send them both racing right to the edge.

"I do...I love your gorgeous body, every last inch of it. I love fucking you, I love it when you bite my neck and rip your nails down my back and make me bleed. I love having your luscious taste on my tongue and the feel of your beautiful wet cunt gripping my cock. I fucking love every second of it, Emma."

His voice was like silk despite the coarse words and it slithered right over her. Something curled deep inside her and tugged, urging her to give into the temptation he offered, to say yes to anything he asked and finally give him what she knew he wanted. Seductive bastard, he knew what he could do with that voice, it was one of his best weapons.

Killian moved in slow deep rolls, bringing them right to the brink while he whispered into her ear. He could feel the indecision in her and he put everything he could into his plea, "Fall, my beautiful angel. It's so easy, just let go and fall right into my arms. I'll be there to catch you, you know I will. Be with me, Emma."

But she fought back against his attempt to seduce her that way and shook her head, slipping out of the net he cast and he knew he had lost, "I can only give you this, Killian."

He growled in frustration and seized her hands, pinning them above her head. Emma's eyes flew open and then narrowed at him.

"Then you will give me all of it. All night," he demanded with a heavy thrust into her body. She normally didn't spend the whole night with him, it was dangerous for the both of them, but he didn't care.

Indecision crossed her face.

"Emma," he implored with a twist of his hips that made her gasp, "Give me that, at least. I did grant your favour after all."

Her eyes fluttered shut and she gave a small nod, "I'll stay the night."

Killian smiled in triumph, but it quickly turned to a look of surprise when Emma bucked her hips suddenly and rolled and he found himself on his back with her sitting astride him and pinning his wrists to the bed.
"But do you think you can last all night?" she murmured, leaning forward with her teeth scraping his neck and biting down gently on his shoulder.

He bent his knees for leverage and thrust up, "Is that a challenge?"

Emma circled her hips teasingly against him, "You bet your ass it is. If I'm going to give you all night you better make it worth my while, infernal one."

He felt her release his wrists and trail her fingers along his arms to his shoulders, where she braced her hands and sat up, taking him all the way back inside. He watched the gentle sway of her breasts as she moved, wanting to take them in his hands but not wanting to cover them from his gaze. He settled his hands on her hips instead.

"Challenge accepted, blessed one. I shall more than make it worth your while."

If she wouldn't fall the way he wanted, he would make her fall in other ways, and as many times as he could. He had all night, and he always relished a challenge. Killian planted his feet and winked at her. He lifted Emma up and slammed her back down onto him, gratified by the sharp cry she made. She reached up and gripped the bars of the headboard, riding him in earnest and he urged her on with filthy whispered praise.

He could feel her getting close, she was squeezing him painfully tight, clamped down hard on his cock. All of his nerve endings were firing, he was on the knife edge of pleasure and pain and he loved it, both sides of the blade. It hurt so good and Emma was flushed and panting above him, her head thrown back and the cries tumbling from her lips, curses and endearments that he matched in a hoarse voice. His fingers found her most sensitive spot and she went over the edge and brought him with her, waves of golden bliss rolling over him. As the pleasure crested his eyes slammed shut and from behind his closed lids he caught the briefest glimpse of a place that those like him were barred from. It was beautiful, filled with a light that attracted him but would destroy him if he ever actually touched it.

Emma collapsed against his chest and her hair spread over his shoulders. The light faded away and he opened his eyes again.

"Well?" he asked, feeling very pleased with himself, "Was it worth it so far?"

She lifted her head and looked down at him, "You're a smug bastard, you know that, right?"

"Aye, but I'm your smug bastard."

She leaned forward and brushed her lips over his. He was still buried inside of her and hadn't fully softened. She fluttered around him and he was hard as a rock again instantly.

"Show me what else you've got," she challenged with her own smug smile.

Wicked angel.

"If the lady insists," he said, "But this time I'll stay on top."

She let out a laugh when he rolled them again.

"So who's the new guy?"

Emma turned onto her side and propped her head up on her hand. Killian lay on his back with the
silk sheet pulled down low on his hips.

"Scarlet? He's a petty thief, a former gang member, and he's spent the last few years trying very hard to get my attention."

"What does he want?" she asked.

"What they all want...money...power...sex."

His hand slid along the curve of her waist.

"Men," she said dismissively.

He snorted, "Hypocrite."

She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. His hand fell away but she could sense it lying on the mattress just the barest inch away from her.

"Who's the girl?" he asked.

"Just someone who said a prayer."

Her eyes closed. She had promised to stay the night but she should leave and she should leave now. As enticing as he always was, they were both playing with fire.

"Emma."

Turning her head on the pillow she saw Killian watching her. His eyes were dark in the dimly lit bedroom, his handsome face shadowed.

"Don't leave," the demon murmured, shifting closer. The sheet rippled and he settled above her, the long leg sliding against hers and his chest pressed against her breasts, "Please."

Lips found her neck and his hands joined with hers, fingers interlaced and holding her tight. She could easily slip from his arms if she wanted to and disappear where he couldn't follow her, but her legs were wrapping around his waist and her back was arching off the bed and into the scorching heat of his body.

One day she just might give in to him completely and walk straight into the flames.
Chapter 3

Will looked up into the rearview mirror for what had to be the twentieth time in as many minutes. Mr. Jones was ensconced in the backseat and was still glued to his phone. From the moment he had left his bedroom he had been texting away, not throwing Will one glance during the whole ride down the elevator and into the parking garage. The boss had tossed him the keys to the SUV without looking up from the phone, giving a curt instruction to drive to the club.

Will's fingers drummed quietly on the steering wheel as he maneuvered through the choking nightmare that was rush hour traffic. The SUV was a sweet ride - handled like a dream despite it's size, and he wished he could gun it and see just how fast it could go from zero to sixty, but they were stuck in a bumper-to-bumper jam and he spent more time with his foot on the brake than the gas. As they inched along painfully slow and all of the four hundred and twenty horses under the hood hobbled by the press of cars around them, he kept thinking about the blonde from the night before. He had caught a glimpse of her shoes tossed carelessly aside on the floor when the bedroom door had opened, before Mr. Jones emerged and pulled it firmly shut behind him. While it was no great shock that he had fucked her, Will was surprised that she had apparently stayed the night and wished the door had opened wide enough to give him a look at the bed.

He had managed to catch that her name was Emma, he had hovered outside the office the night before and overheard the start of their conversation. She had come for a favour, which made Will's eyebrows raise - people generally did things for the boss, not the other way around. His curiosity had been even more piqued and he was dying to know what she was going to ask, but then he'd had that strange muscle cramp. The sudden, shocking pain made him see stars and he couldn't suppress the groan that Mr. Jones must have heard, he'd yelled through the door for Will to leave and he'd slunked away with his tail between his legs.

"Scarlet, I've got a job for you today."

Will sat up a little straighter in the driver's seat and looked in the rearview mirror again. The boss was still staring down at his phone, thumbs flying over the screen. He was dressed in another one of his fine bespoke suits, perfectly pressed and with not a hair on his head out of place, nothing about him indicating that he'd just spent a night in the sack with a woman who Will could only dream about having.

*Lucky bastard.*

"Yes, sir?" Will asked.

Mr. Jones spoke without lifting his head, still texting away, "There will be a girl at the audition today who I have a personal interest in. When I point her out to you, I want you to take her out the back way and drive her straight to the train station. There's a train at 12:30 that she needs to be on, you're going to buy her a ticket and make sure she catches it. You stick with her and put her on the train and you don't leave until the train has left the station with her on it, understood?"

"Yes sir." Will said again, even as disappointment flooded through him. He had to miss the auditions to run this errand? The girls who danced at the club pulled down six figures easily and he had heard what they did in order to secure such a lucrative job. It was supposed to be one of the perks of his new position.

"Do you have a problem with that?"
Mr. Jones's voice was soft, but Will glanced in the mirror again and saw that he was looking up and their eyes met in the mirror. Will felt sweat trickle down his back at the piercing stare and suppressed a nervous cough.

"No boss, of course not."

"Good."

The boss went back to his phone and Will looked straight ahead. He'd do what the man ordered, no questions asked. He'd take this girl (whoever she was - a personal interest? What the hell did that mean?) to the train station and make sure she got on the right train if it bloody killed him. The wannabe dancers would have to wait, the open auditions were held once a month and he'd have plenty of opportunities in the future to sample the goods as long as he didn't cock this up.

He mentally mapped out the route from the club to the station and recalled the church that he would have to pass along the way. A large stone edifice, all Gothic spires and grinning gargoyles that loomed over it's modern neighbours and seemed woefully out of place in this day and age. Will's churchgoing days were long behind him, the trilling of the bells, the dipped fingers into the font of holy water, the whispered prayers and the black clad priests droning on and on about sin and salvation while he squirmed on the pew and tried to look like he was paying attention, lest his gran cuff him on the ear afterwards for daydreaming.

The light in the intersection they were approaching turned from yellow to red and he hit the brakes just in time. Christ Will, get your head straight! He forced his attention back to the road lest he crash the boss's car. If he totaled the Escalade then there wouldn't be a prayer in the world that would save him.

Why was he even thinking about all those boring hours spent on uncomfortable wood seats listening to dessicated old men anyway? He'd never once missed it, he missed his gran, the tough old bird who had raised him, but he had no great urge to kneel down before a priest and confess his many sins. He was probably going straight to hell anyway, "thou shalt not steal" was not a commandment he'd kept to very well, or at all.

Will thought of the blonde again, Emma, and her strange message for the boss. Latin, Mr. Jones had said, and he had answered her with his own odd reply. He had looked up the words when he had left the two of them behind closed doors and gone back to his own small flat on the other side of town. He thought he remembered them correctly, but what came up only baffled him even more.

"Salve de caelo"

Greetings from heaven.

"Salve de inferno"

Greetings from hell.

Who talked like that? It was bizarre, but he supposed it must be some sort of inside joke between the two of them. He still wanted to know who exactly Emma was - a call girl? A booty call? A mistress, a girlfriend, the boss's regular Sunday night fuck?

He was still musing on in when he pulled the SUV into the parking lot behind the club and killed the engine.

"Scarlet."
The boss’s voice made his hand freeze on the door handle.

"Two things to remember. First, the lady who came by last night. That was a private visit, you understand? As in, not to be discussed with anyone. Second, don't eavesdrop on my personal conversations ever again."

Mr. Jones slid his phone into his jacket pocket and exited the car in one smooth motion. It took several moments for Will's heart rate to slow back down enough to so he could follow.

Killian surveyed the hopefuls from behind the tinted glass at the front of the club. He could see out, but no one could see in.

"Any catch your eye, sir?"

Peter sidled up silently next to him and nodded at the assembled group. Killian ignored him.

The girls were all dolled up with teetering heels, short skirts, bare midriffs and heavy makeup. Ready to audition for a spot on his stage, ready to do whatever it took to land the gig. It was Monday, the only day of the week the club was closed, the day for deep cleaning after another weekend of round-the-clock Bacchanalian partying, the day the supplies were restocked for another week and today was also the one Monday a month when any girl who was willing to try her luck could show up and try to snag a spot on his constantly rotating roster of dancers.

None of them seemed particularly promising. The Jolly Roger was not a run of the mill strip club, it was an upscale establishment that catered to wealthy men, or those who were willing to spend the necessary cash to pretend that they could afford a night in his domain. There was no drink on the menu that cost less than a twenty and for everything that was offered off the menu, the sky was the limit. The girls' talents extended to far more than dancing, of course, and if none of them caught a patron's interest, the male waiters were also available for a turn in the private rooms - at a price. Nothing in his club was free.

He found the girl from the photograph, standing in line next to a man who had his hand wrapped firmly around her elbow. It was no wonder, she looked ready to bolt at any second. Her skintight dress, cherry red lipstick and raccoon eyeliner did nothing to hide the fact that she was clearly underage, not that it mattered. The police knew better than to raid his place and there were plenty of customers who would eagerly pay a premium for such obvious youth.

The real cost of the delights he offered - well, no one ever realized what that was until it was too late.

"That one," he said, pointing to her, "Peter, go bring her in first."

While Peter went outside to fetch her he pulled out his wallet and thumbed out a wad of bills, handing them to Will Scarlet.

"For the ticket, and get her something to eat. Buy her a magazine, gum, whatever. And you don't leave-"

"Until she's on the train and it's left the station. I got this, boss."

The girl was brought before him, walking awkwardly in her high heels and looking at him with sheer terror on her face. He regarded her with his hands in his trouser pockets and a hard expression. Up close she looked even younger, the big brown eyes filled with unshed tears and her thin frame trying to fold in on itself as she visibly shrank under his inspection.
"What's your name?" he asked, more a demand than a question.

"Destiny." she answered in barely more than a whisper. He refrained from rolling his eyes at the obvious lie.

"No," he said, taking a step closer and looking down at her as he turned up the heat in his gaze just a tad, "Your real name, sweetheart."

The girl was trembling, trying in vain to tug down her short dress over her thighs and stinking of fear, her eyes locked on the floor. Killian put his fingers under her chin and lifted it, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"Katie." she admitted.

It would take very little to corrupt her, she was too young and too scared to resist him, poised to fall with only the lightest push. Leading people into vice and immorality, exploiting every weakness and exposing their many frailties was his sole purpose in the world, the sum of his existence. The darkness inside him beckoned, but he had already agreed to relinquish her back to the light.

He leaned down with his hand still under her chin and breathed into her ear, "Katie. Your prayers have been answered."

Taking a step back he nodded at Will, who took the girl by the arm and steered her to the door that would lead through the empty club and out the rear exit to where the car was parked. She shot a confused glance over her shoulder that he met with a blank look. Peter watched her go and turned to him with one eyebrow cocked.

"Boss?"

"Start the auditions. Let me know if you find any suitable prospects, I'll be in my office."

"You're not going to watch?" Peter asked, clearly confused.

An hour or so ago he had been in his shower with Emma, pressing her up against the slippery tiles and driving into her one last time while the water streamed over them and steam filled the bathroom. He thought of their wet, soapy bodies sliding together under the spray and his hand going under her knee, pulling her leg up over his thigh so he could plunge inside. Her nails had dug into his shoulders and his hips had rolled against her over and over again until he shook with his release and she was limp and boneless in his arms. He could still taste her in his mouth, could still feel her on his cock and under his fingers and hear her needy, breathless whimpers in his ear. It might be awhile before he got the chance to fuck his beautiful, wanton angel again and he was going to savour the feeling as long as it lasted.

Peter, the club's general manager, could handle the auditions on his own. He was a slight man with a baby face and rather prominent ears, looking for all the world like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. He seemed the last person suited to oversee what went on behind the club's closed doors, but he was actually a rather devious and sadistic prick, the innocent countenance was only a skin-deep facade.

He left the waiting hopefuls to his manager's less-than-tender mercies and went up to the second floor and his office, a near twin to the one in his condo. Like the condo, the liquor cabinet was fully stocked and he poured himself the scotch he didn't get to drink the night before. As he had with Emma, he sat down on the sofa and raised his glass.

"Favour granted, blessed one." he said to the empty room, and sipped his drink.
As the scotch ran smoothly down his throat with nary a burn and settled in his stomach, he pulled his phone from inside his jacket and turned it over in his hand. He had the urge to call her, but he made no move to dial her number.

She would be long gone from his bedroom by now and back to her own work. A saviour of the innocent, helping girls like young Katie find their way back home. In all the long years he had known her Emma had never wavered from her divine purpose. She might get a bit distracted at times and spend a few hours enjoying more earthy pleasures, but he had been unable to get her to succumb to him completely. His continued failure drove him mad with frustration, but he would never stop trying. He did have all the time in the world to fully seduce her away from paradise, after all.

His phone beeped and he looked down, swiping his thumb over the screen to read the text.

*Thank you - E*

He smiled and slipped the phone back into his pocket, taking another swallow from his glass. A pile of papers were set on his desk, the weekend numbers had to be reviewed, purchase orders needed to be signed, the employee shifts had to be scheduled - all the neverending work involved in actually running the club awaited. He couldn't ignore it, but he could set it aside for a moment. The gift from his lovely blessed one, his *beata*, his angel, was downstairs and he was ready to go play with it. The asshole boyfriend, unaware that his young conquest was gone and he was about to come face to face with his own damnation.

Back down in the lounge the music was blasting, the heavy bass making the floor vibrate under his feet and on the main stage two girls were putting on their best show while Peter watched without a flicker of interest, the picture of bored indifference. He spotted Killian and stood up while the girls froze mid-writhe, staring at him with wide glassy eyes.

"Going to take over, boss?" Peter asked, using the remote he held to turn the music down.

Killian glanced over at the girls. One was completely naked, the other was clad only in red lace panties and both had rather obvious breast implants on display, their skin stretched tight and shiny over the silicone. The nude one squeezed the other girl's nipple and started to slide her other hand into the red lace while her tongue came out and licked her gloss-covered lips.

He looked back and saw Peter smirking. His manager would know that neither of them was up to Killian's standards, but the little shit would undoubtedly let them continue on and see just how far they were willing to go.

Loud, fake moans came from the stage, trying to draw his attention back and this time he didn't hold back on the eye roll.

"Auditions are over." Killian declared without sparing them another glance. He strode through the room, past the small round tables clustered around the stage and the long gleaming bar, and went through the heavy door to the lobby.

The girls who were still waiting all looked up hopefully at his appearance, but he zeroed in on the man who had accompanied Emma's favour and pointed to him.

"You. Come with me. Everyone else, feel free to try again next month, but we're done now for the day."

He ignored the disappointed faces and the pleas from the girls, uninterested in their whispered promises of what they would do if he'd just reconsider. The man followed him back into the lounge,
now empty and silent, the music was switched off and Peter and the two girls had disappeared.

"Do you know who I am?" Killian asked, turning and fixing the man in place with a look. He was at least twice the girl's age, if not more. He was of average height with an average build and wasn't bad looking, certainly there would be plenty of girls who would find the man attractive enough. Most likely possessed of some charm and powers of persuasion, since he had been able to lure young Katie away from home like a semi-pedeophilic Pied Piper.

Oh, there was plenty of darkness in his soul, Killian could feel it, smell it, taste it. He reeked of his sins.

"Yeah," the man said, trying to sound casual and failing miserably, "You're Killian Jones, right? The owner?"

He was going to relish this, "I am Mr. Jones, yes."

"Where's Destiny? Did she get the job? I know she's a bit skinny and her tits aren't that big, but trust me, she can do amazing things with her mouth."

"Destiny," Killian repeated, "Who came up with that ridiculously cliched name? Her, or you? If it was her, well, she's fifteen. If it was you, what's your excuse?"

He went behind the bar and retrieved a wide-mouthed martini glass from the overhead rack, a clean white dish towel, and a small sharp knife, normally used for slicing lemons or limes to garnish the drinks.

The man was standing where he had left him, shifting side to side and looking around nervously, "Hey man, where's my girlfriend? Fuck, she didn't chicken out, did she? Is she puking in the bathroom or something? Look, I'll just grab her and get out of your hair-"

"Quiet!" Killian snapped, and he fell silent immediately, swallowing hard.

He set the knife down on a table and held up the glass, polishing out a spot with the towel, "Katie has gone home. A rather generous move on my part, as she would have brought in a great deal of profit, but alas, she had a guardian angel looking out for her, that one. Do you believe in angels, Mr - what the hell is your name, anyway?"

"Ben," the man said, eyes fixed on the stainless steel blade, "Ben Kriesel."

Killian flicked his finger against the glass and set it next to the knife, "Well, Mr. Kriesel, answer the question."

"What?"

He tossed the towel over his shoulder and repeated it, "Do you believe in angels?"

Kriesel blinked at him, "What, like with the halos and the wings? Are you fucking serious? No."

Killian inclined his head and smiled, "And what about demons?"

Without waiting for a response, he struck. Quick as lightning, he grabbed Kriesel's left hand and made a cut across his palm with the knife. Bright red blood welled up immediately and he held the hand over the martini glass, letting the blood flow into it. When enough had collected in the tumbler, he pulled the towel from his shoulder and pressed it against the wound.
"What the hell?" Kriesel screamed, yanking his injured hand back and cradling it against his chest.

"Funny you should say that." Killian smirked at the man's ironic choice of words.

He started to take a step back and Killian glared at him.

"Don't move."

He slipped a hand into the inner pocket of his jacket and produced a folded up sheet of paper and a silver fountain pen. The pen was dipped into the blood in the glass and the liquid was siphoned up into the empty ink reservoir inside. He unfolded the paper, revealing the dense black printing that took up almost the entire sheet, and laid the pen on the blank line at the bottom.

"Sign your name." Killian ordered.

Kriesel's eyes darted side to side, seeking out an escape route or looking for someone to help. Killian watched, wondering if the man would try to run. Not that it would do any good. The doors were locked and the room was soundproof. If he expected aid to magically appear from the shadowed stage or the deep leather banquettes that ringed the room, he was sorely mistaken. He was in Killian's domain, entirely at his mercy, the club was exclusive in more ways than one.

The man muttered a prayer under his breath, barely coherent but Killian heard him clearly.

"I thought you didn't believe? Anyway, after what you've done, do you really think anyone up there is listening to you? They made an exchange, Mr. Kriesel, you for the girl and their backs are turned to you and they're deaf to your prayers. Now sign."

Ben Kriesel moved as if in a trance, the towel wrapped around his bleeding left hand and reaching for the pen with his right. He scratched out his signature on the paper, the letters formed in his own blood. Killian grinned with satisfaction and as the pen fell limply to the table he held his hand over the paper and a bright yellow flame ignited over the words, drying the blood instantly and searing it into the paper.

The trance broken, he leapt back, almost falling to the floor. Killian folded the paper up and slipped it and the pen back into his interior pocket. He ran his fingers down the lapels of his suit jacket and fussed with his rings.

"What are you?" the man asked, his voice cracking on the words.

Sometimes he missed the old days, when the beliefs were fed to the populace along with their mother's milk and he was recognized and feared for what he was and the power he wielded. The many words for his kind, demon, devil, fiend, incubus, the ones that were now long forgotten, asmodeus, hecataea, planoi.

Damnate. Infernal one, although that particular moniker had become something of an endearment now.

He distilled it down to it's simplest terms, "I am the one who now owns your soul. Signed and sealed. I own you, and you are now in my service. Any order, any command I give, you will obey. I make the demands now and you follow them."

Kriesel opened his mouth and Killian made a slashing gesture with his hand, silencing him immediately.

"You do not speak unless spoken to. For now you will return home. You will make no attempt to
contact the girl again, or any other girl, online or in person. You don't get to fuck anyone, you don't even get to jerk off anymore. Come back tomorrow before the club opens, something will be found for you to do. Understood?"

The man nodded once and Killian bared his teeth, running his tongue over them and giving a dark chuckle. He took a step forward and patted his new acquisition on the cheek, ignoring the hiss of pain when his palm burned the asshole's skin. When he pulled away there was a livid red mark left behind.

As much as he enjoyed the slow descent of a soul, the gradual slide of giving into temptation and sin until it was beyond redemption and eternally damned, it was satisfying at times to simply snatch one that was already rotten and give it a good squeeze.

He dismissed Ben Kriesel and tossed the blood stained glass and knife into the trash. The club was silent around him, empty and still. But tomorrow they would come again, the men with money to burn and he would be there to light the fire. The dancers would take the stage, their firm young flesh on display, willing and eager. Each night they all went a little farther, dug a little deeper, and lost a little bit more of themselves.

It was what he did, and he did it very well. All it took were three things, money, power, and sex. As he'd said to Emma, it was what they all wanted in some combination and he was happy to provide it. Some things never changed, he'd spent eternity watching what people would do for a little gold, some measure of importance and physical pleasure.

He slid his hands into his pockets. The modern world was a marvel, and the old beliefs were increasingly cast aside as superstitious nonsense. They may have mostly forgotten what he was, but that suited him fine.

It only made it easier to lure them in.
Chapter 4

She juggled the cardboard tray of styrofoam cups in one hand and pulled the door open with the other. "Shared Blessings" was stencilled on the glass in neat letters, the name of the small charity that operated out of an old and slightly rundown building in the heart of the city. The sun was bright but there was a cool nip in the air and Emma was dressed casually. Jeans and boots with a slim cream-coloured sweater under a tan leather jacket, hair pulled back in a braided bun at the nape of her neck.

"Where have you been this morning?"

Mary Margaret Nolan tuck her dark bangs behind her ears and looked up as Emma set the tray down on her desk and handed her a peace offering in the form of a large green tea latte.

"Sorry," Emma apologized, "Overslept a bit, I had a late night."

David, Mary Margaret's husband and a co-director at Shared Blessings, stuck his head into the room with a wink, "Was it a hot date, Emma?"

She passed him a coffee with cream and two sugars from the tray and gave a flat, firm, "No."

"You sure about that?" Mary Margaret asked, sipping her tea and smiling at David like a cat that got the canary.

Her own cup in hand she went down the hall to her office with both of them following and could practically see the knowing looks they were trading behind her back. When she opened the door the first thing she saw was the large bouquet of flowers sitting in a vase on her small desk.

"That was delivered for you this morning." David explained, leaning against the jam and bringing his drink to his lips.

Emma set down her coffee next to the vase and shrugged off her jacket, "No date, just catching up with an old friend I hadn't seen in a while."

The office phone rang and Mary Margaret went to answer it while David grinned, clearly not buying her story. He strolled back to his own office with a comment about late nights with old friends that was heavy with insinuation. She ignored him and surveyed the floral arrangement. White gardenias, a great bunch of them tied neatly with a black velvet ribbon.

A small envelope was nestled in with the blooms, the card inside inscribed with only a few words and signed with a single initial.

Beata, I miss you already.

K

She thumbed over the gilt edging with her eyes closed. I miss you too, damnate.

Pulling out out her phone she typed him a quick text, Thank you - E, and tucked the card away where no one could find it.

With the flowers perched on her desk and filling the office with their rich scent, she sat down and booted up her computer. The new emails loaded and she scanned down the subject lines, deciding what to address first. There was a dozen different things that clamoured for her attention, the
homeless outreach project, the soup kitchen and food pantry, the assistance they offered to runaways and street youth, job training and work placements in local businesses. Anything and everything they could do to help the people who needed it.

It was hard work, but it was her eternal mission to answer the prayers of lost souls seeking their way to a better path. She helped them find it, guiding them away from the darkness and into the light. The methods had changed as the world did, but the underlying purpose was still the same.

*Salvation.*

*Redemption.*

After forwarding a few messages on to David and answering several others, Emma glanced at the time and saw that it was a little after one. By now Katie would be on the train and on her way back home. Her parents were supposed to call and confirm once they'd picked her up, but she had no doubts that the girl would make it. Killian would see to it. She had faith in his promise, and she trusted him.

She could still feel him, waking up underneath him on his ridiculously comfortable bed with his clever mouth teasing at her breasts, his hot breath, *(he was always hot)*, against the sensitive peaks. She recalled the way he traced the curve underneath with his tongue, his hands spread flat on her ribcage and his heavy erection pressed against her thigh. It had been sinfully good, as it always was.

But it could only be that, the few stolen hours snatched here and there, the favours traded back and forth. They could not attract too much attention from any of the others, from her side or his.

Last night would have to sustain them for a while, they couldn't see each other again anytime soon. The memory of being under him, running her fingers through his soft hair and pulling his head down to capture his lips with hers as she took him into her body again and held him there as they lay cocooned in silk and each other with the rest of the world held briefly at bay, it had to be enough.

Her demon's dark, silky voice whispered in her ear, *"It's not enough, Emma."*

When Mary Margaret appeared in the door and called her to a meeting she welcomed the distraction from the direction her thoughts kept pulling to.

It was the first Monday of the month and they always met around this time to review the previous month and plan out the upcoming weeks. David had his laptop open on the conference table and Mary Margaret held a sheaf of papers. The young couple shared a loving look that made Emma smile, and then David's eyes went back to the screen and Mary Margaret passed out the photocopied notes as they got down to the business at hand.

Two new restaurants had signed up to donate their day old leftovers to the soup kitchen. Mary Margaret had a meeting with a law firm the following week that might turn into some pro bono work for the charity's clients who had legal issues they needed to resolve. The good news first, and then the bad.

"We ran another deficit last month," David said, turning the laptop around and pointing to a spreadsheet filled with numbers, donations against expenses, "Second month in a row."

"How much?" Emma asked. They operated on a shoestring budget and didn't have much in reserve to cover any shortfalls in their expenses.

"Almost twelve percent. Month before it was eighteen, so things perked up a bit, but if this continues we'll have to make cuts."
"I hate the idea of cutting anything." Mary Margaret added, cupping her hands around the remains of her green tea latte with a worried look on her face.

Emma reached over and squeezed her wrist in reassurance, "The mayor's gala is coming up soon and we always get a big boost in donations from that. In the meantime, I'm sure I can get the shortfall covered for now so we don't have to make any cuts."

"You're going to talk to the anonymous benefactor?" David asked.

She nodded.

Mary Margaret looked at her husband and then at Emma, "I wish you could tell us who he or she is. I really want to thank them for all the support they've given."

"You know the rules, Mary Margaret. Our mystery donor has only one condition - they must remain anonymous and we will respect that. Even you guys have to stay in the dark, just to be safe. We don't want to risk losing their contribution."

"I know," Mary Margaret sighed heavily, "But, you'll tell them how much we appreciate their generosity?"

"And that I've got all the tax receipts ready if they ever want to stop being anonymous." David piped in.

"Yes," she said, standing up, "I will, but I can tell you one hundred percent that our benefactor does not care about tax receipts. We're done for the day, right?"

Mary Margaret gathered up her notes, "Yes. Oh! Emma, Katie's parents called me just before the meeting. She made it home safe."

David closed his computer and spoke in voice that was laced with anger, "That guy should be arrested. I know she doesn't want to press charges, but he shouldn't get off scot free after what he did to her. He knew she was fifteen, the son of a bitch."

Emma paused in the doorway and met his furious gaze, "David, I'm sure he'll get what he deserves at some point."

She knew he would. Killian would see to that.

...

A block over from their office building the large looming bulk of the Cathedral of Saint Raphael stood silent guard as it had done for over a hundred and fifty years. Not a long period of time in the grand scheme of things, but in a city that regularly tore things down to make way for what was considered more modern and updated and therefore better, it was practically ancient.

Her boots crunched on the brown leaves that had blown across the wide stone staircase as she made her way up and went through the heavy oak door. She slipped noiselessly into the back pew so as not to disturb the service already underway. The early evening Mass was sparsely populated with only a few devout souls in attendance. From the pulpit Father Hopper was reading from the Gospels, shoving his glasses back up his nose every time they slid down too far, which was a frequent occurrence.

The church worked closely with the charity on many projects and she knew Father Hopper well. He worked two shifts a week at the soup kitchen and helped counsel many of their clients. While he had
a somewhat nervous demeanor, the middle-aged priest was a good man and cared deeply about both the spiritual and earthly welfare of his flock.

She leaned back against the solid wood of the pew and listened to him speak, reciting the familiar passages and verse that spoke of solace, faith, and love.

"Peace be with you," she intoned at the end along with the rest of the worshippers.

As the service concluded most of them left, heading back to their homes and waiting families. But a few lingered with bent heads and clasped hands, seeking something inside the thick and sturdy stone walls.

She watched and listened.

After a moment she stood up and crossed the echoing nave, sitting back down next to one of the stragglers. A young man in his early twenties, dressed in grubby looking jeans and battered boots with a backpack on the floor at his feet and the yellow remains of a bruise on his cheek.

Her voice was soft and carried only to his ears, "Do you have a safe place to sleep tonight?"

Their eyes met and the answer she already knew was written on his face. She pulled out a business card from inside her jacket and handed it to him. His hands were cold as his fingers brushed hers and the nails were bitten down to the quick. Hair fell over his forehead as he looked down at the address he was cradling in his palm.

"Go there and tell them Emma Swan sent you. They'll feed you and give you a bed."

The young man looked at her and back down at the card, "Thank you," he said, sounding both relieved and confused, "But how did you know?"

She didn't answer directly but she gave his shoulder a squeeze when she stood up, "Call it an educated guess, of sorts."

Father Hopper was being monopolized by an elderly couple at the door, shoving his glasses back up his nose as he listened to their litany of minor complaints and perceived slights. Emma touched his elbow when she stepped over the threshold and gave a sympathetic smile to the beleaguered looking priest before heading back down the steps and making for home. He had to deal with the parishioners who had too much time on their hands but her work was done for the night.

The tree-lined street was filled with large, rambling Victorian houses that had once been single family dwellings but were now mostly converted into multiple apartments. She lived in a second floor walk-up that was small but filled with original features, wide baseboards and high ceilings with elaborate plaster mouldings. Over the years she'd stayed in everything from the grandest palaces to the most spartan lodgings, but she had a special fondness for this place.

Her phone rang just as she finished her late dinner of takeout Chinese. She stuck the chopsticks into the carton and swiped over the screen to answer, not bothering to check the display to see who was calling. She knew who was on the other end.

"Killian."

"Evening, love. Did you get the flowers?"

She stood up from the sofa and went to the large bay window in her living room, drawing the curtains shut for the night with the phone held between her head and shoulder, "Yes. And I also got
a message from some very relieved parents that their daughter made it home safe. Again, thank you."

"You're welcome, but I didn't do it for them, you know."

The window seat was covered with cushions and she sank down, drawing her legs up under her. The words came out in a rush, "I have another favour to ask."

Amusement filled his voice, "Another deal with the devil, blessed one? You're making quite the habit of it. What do you need?"

She explained about the budget shortfall and he answered her immediately, "I'll have the money transferred first thing in the morning."

"Thank you."

They were silent for a moment. She could hear him moving around and she wondered if he was at home or at his club.

"My sheets smell like you," he whispered and her eyes closed. He was at home. The whisper of the rustling silk was audible even over the phone, "Come over tonight."

"I can't."

"Yes you can."

"Killian...you know I can't."

A long resigned sigh came down the line, "What if I ask for quid pro quo?"

She smiled into the darkness, "You won't."

"Oh, the things I do for you and I get so little in return."

He couldn't see her, but she raised a brow at that, "I wasn't aware that last night was so unsatisfying for you."

Killian's voice dropped low and dripped with lust, "Well darling, I was dreadfully unsatisfied with the amount of time I got to spend with my head between your creamy thighs and my tongue buried inside you. You taste so delicious, I need an entire night simply to savour you properly."

She'd damn him, but he was already. Heat pooled low in her stomach as his voice continued to whisper and caress in her ear, "I want to bind you to my headboard, put your legs over my shoulders and fuck you while you scream my name and beg me for mercy. And then I want to lay on my back under you and watch you ride me again like you did last night, taking every drop of pleasure you can wring from my cock."

"Killian, stop," she protested, pinching the bridge of her nose and trying not to rub her thighs together, "This only makes it harder."

"Oh, it's definitely hard right now. And my hand is a poor bloody substitute for you, Emma."

Temptation beckoned and her fingers were curled so tight around her phone that her knuckles were probably stark white. She let out an exasperated puff of air,

"I should have let them burn you at the stake when I had the chance."
That got a laugh out of him, "What, in, where was that again...Barcelona? No, Valencia. Ah yes, I remember. The most beautiful angel in the heavens came to me that day and practically wrested me right from the fire."

"Never say I don't do anything for you, infernal one."

"I seem to recall you insisting that particular rescue was not actually for my benefit."

She shifted back, stretching her legs out in front of her and picking at a thread on her sweater, "Yeah, well. Maybe it was."

He chuckled, "And the truth comes out at last. Just as you should come over here and join me in this very large bed."

Her resolve had strengthened, "No. Now stop asking or I'll hang up on you."

"Fine. I'll stop asking, at least for tonight."

Silence fell. She could picture him lying in the bed they had shared, dark hair against the pillow and blue eyes staring up at the ceiling. He didn't speak, but she could hear him.

"Soon," she murmured, "I promise, Killian."

He lost that seductive purr and dark promise and there was only simple truth in his words, "Emma...just, I miss you. I always miss you. Don't make me wait too long."

"Goodnight, damnate."

"Goodnight, my beata."

__________________________

Spain - 1570

*He had got himself into quite the predicament this time.*

It had all started out with such promise, roaming a country that prided itself on it's devotion to the one true church and as such kept making war on England's Protestant queen and the sullen, stolid Dutch, hemmed in on their southern borders by an empire they viewed as barbarous infidels, rife with suspicion and mistrust and easily whipped into a frenzy under his guiding hand.

It had been glorious, until somehow it had turned back on him and he found himself on the wrong end of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, taken into custody and charged with a litany of crimes. Chief among them blasphemy, but also sodomy, usury, bestiality.

While he was certainly guilty of most of what they claimed, he was rather affronted by that one.

He groaned and felt like a poker had been shoved down his throat. Someone had suspected that he was more that just an ordinary heretic, and he'd been clapped in irons that had been blessed and consecrated and they'd taken precautions to ensure that he couldn't escape. He could do nothing except lay where they had left him, the verdict had been decided and he was to meet his fate in the morning.

"This is quite the predicament, damnate."
He managed to open one eye and turned his head at the sound of the voice. All he could see at first was blinding white light, but then it coalesced into a slim figure standing outside his cell. He blinked as a memory pulled at the back of his mind and recognition dawned.

"So we meet again, beata. I do wish the circumstances were more to my advantage and you'll have to forgive me for not rising in your gracious presence."

"I am not here to offer you forgiveness."

The cell door opened and she came over to where he lay sprawled in the dirty rushes against the wall, the hem of her gown dragging across the cold stone floor. The light washed over his face as she neared and he shut his eyes again.

"Oh, what have they done to you?"

He sensed she was very close, crouched down next to him and he wondered absently why her light wasn't burning him. Or maybe it was and he was simply too far gone to notice. The torture had been extensive...and rather creative. He did admire how inventive the inquisitors could be.

"If you've come to hear my final confession, fair warning, it shall take some time."

Something that sounded suspiciously like a snort came from above him and he chanced opening his eyes again. The angel was gazing down at him, so near that a loose strand of her golden hair was resting against his cheek.

"They're going to execute you in the morning," she said, with no expression save a slight lift of her brow.

"They're going to try," he retorted. Torture was one thing, but they did not possess the means to actually destroy him, a fact that she was certainly aware of, "Will you come watch? I'm sure it will be most entertaining when they attempt to burn me."

His mouth was filled with ash and he turned his head and spat into the filthy straw.

"I'm not here for that, either."

Her voice was as serene and unaffected as he remembered, and she was just as lovely. Green eyes the colour of sea glass swept over him, taking in his weakened condition, and settled back on his face.

"They do not yet know for certain what you are. If they obtain actual proof when you don't succumb on the pyre, it will only encourage this madness to continue. More poor wretches will continue to suffer and perish in the flames."

He closed his eyes as he resigned himself to the reason for her appearance, "So you have come to dispatch me properly then, blessed one? Well, just do me the courtesy of making it quick."

He tilted his head back and bared his neck, steeling himself for the slice of the flaming sword. But instead he felt her hands on his chest through the sackcloth he'd been forced to don, and the soft exhale of her breath on his face when she spoke with a hint of amusement, "Have a little faith, infernal one."

There was a clatter as his irons sprang open and fell away from his wrists and ankles.

"Was that a jest?" he asked, rubbing at the livid red marks the shackles had left behind and hissing
slightly at the pain as the feeling slowly returned to his numbed limbs. She didn't answer, but he looked at her again and saw her lower lip was caught between her teeth as if she was trying to hide a smile. But then her face grew serious again.

"Can you walk?" Emma asked.

He sounded as incredulous as he felt, "You've come to release me from the custody of the Holy Tribunal?"

She waved her hand over him, "There is nothing holy about this. And you came to my assistance once, I am merely discharging my debt to you."

She helped him to his feet. Her gloved hands held him steady and he had a fleeting wish to feel the white skin that lay underneath the embroidered satin. It was a foolish impulse, her bare touch would be more painful than that of the implements that had been used in the attempts to draw a confession from him.

Still, he collapsed in the bed of the wagon she had procured and imagined what it would feel like to brush his fingers over hers. He lay on a bed of straw, thankfully clean this time, and welcomed the diversion as his body recovered from it's ordeal, bones knitting back in place and skin healing over the many abrasions.

When the wagon stopped several hours later at the outskirts of the next town, he was nearly restored and he climbed down from the bed without assistance and watched her pass a coin to the silent peasant who held the reins.

He urged the large draft horse on and the wagon rumbled away over the hard-packed dirt road. The angel looked at him briefly, and then she drew up the hood of her cloak and turned.

"Why did you really come for me, Emma?" he called out, and she paused.

Her answer was barely above a whisper, "Because I heard you, Killian."

Their eyes met and held for the space of a heartbeat, but as soon as he blinked, she vanished.
Chapter 5

"Why am I even here?"

Will stood on the sidewalk and looked at the large sign posted outside the church, chewing on his lip. The times for the daily Masses were listed, along with the church's phone number, website and email address. He glanced at his phone to check the time, according to the schedule in front of him a service would have started less than fifteen minutes ago.

All Are Welcome

It was proclaimed on the sign, and he shook his head and wondered how true that was. Would he really be welcomed here, after all his sins?

"Why the hell am I doing?" he muttered even as he climbed the stone steps and pushed open the large door as quietly as he could. His years as a thief had served him well, he didn't make a single sound as he crossed the small vestibule and into the church proper, and not one head turned to look at him when he sat down in the back pew.

The choir was singing the last verse of a hymn, the final notes faded away and a middle-age priest clapped and smiled at the group. He stood at the pulpit and gripped the edge of the lectern with one hand and shoved his glasses up his nose with the other as he began to speak.

Will's leg bounced up and down in a jerky staccato as he looked around at the stained glass and statues, listening to the priest talk without actually hearing the words. It was his day off, and he could be playing Xbox, or watching porn, or smoking a joint, or doing any one of a hundred things that would be a hell of a lot more fun than sitting in a drafty old church attending Mass. But for some reason he had been unable to stop thinking about it, ever since the day he had driven that girl Katie from the club to the train station on the boss's orders.

She had been insanely young, so much that it made him uncomfortable to look at her in the too-short, too-tight dress she'd been wearing, and he'd used some of the boss's money to buy her an oversized sweatshirt from the gift shop in the station's main hall. He'd waited outside the ladies room while she'd scrubbed off her makeup, and when she came back out with her hair tied back in a ponytail and the sweatshirt hanging down to her knees and covering her hands, she'd looked like a damn kid.

They didn't really talk, she'd answered in a whisper when he asked her the name of the town he had to buy a ticket for, and had merely nodded when he pointed to the small restaurant and offered an early lunch. Will had stuck to coffee, downing three cups in succession while she picked at a burger and fries. From what he had seen at the club, it hadn't looked like she knew Mr. Jones, and he couldn't fathom the man's interest in her.

He squinted at the name of the town at the ticket and asked, "Why are you going there?"

She looked up from her plate, clearly startled by the question, "I'm going home."

When the schedule board flashed the track number and that her train was ready for boarding, he guided her to the correct platform and gestured to the open doors, "Well, there you go."

Katie pushed the sleeves of the sweatshirt up to her elbows and stared at the ground, "Will you tell her I said thank you?"

"Yeah, I'll tell...wait, her? Her who?"
The girl's big brown eyes blinked at him, "Emma. You're a friend of hers, aren't you?"

*Emma?* Mr. Jones's private late-night visitor? She had said she needed a favour, but he hadn't heard what it was exactly. Mr. Jones had spoken of a personal interest in the girl, and was paying for her to go home. Was this the favour Emma had asked?

Suddenly Katie flung her arms around him, hugging him with much more force than he would have thought her slight frame capable of.

"I didn't think she'd really be able to get me out, but she promised she'd help me. Tell her I'll never forget this, and please tell her I said thank you?"

Will patted the girl awkwardly on the back, "Uh, sure. Of course."

He'd waited with his hands in his pockets, standing on the platform until the train started moving, Katie giving a small wave from her window seat that he found himself returning. The text he sent to Mr. Jones confirming that the job was done wasn't returned, and the boss had barely acknowledged him when he'd gone back to the Jolly Roger, he'd been in his office and up to his elbows in paperwork. The auditions had been over, but Will found he had lost some of his earlier enthusiasm for the chance to conduct personal tryouts.

Mr. Jones had seemed strangely subdued for a few days after, spending long hours by himself behind closed doors and being curt and dismissive to anyone who approached him. But he'd come out of his funk and had gone back to holding court in his private booth with Will standing silent guard next to him, either allowing the sycophants to sit down at the boss's nod or sending them away when he shook his head.

The church's choir was singing again, a hymn about angels watching over the world. He had to admit it was kind of pleasant to listen to. The voices rose and soared, filling the nave and making him feel a sense of contentment and something else that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Maybe it was nostalgia, the hymns had always been the part of Mass he disliked the least when he was a kid.

Will recited the Our Father along with the rest, surprised that he still remembered all the words to the prayer after so many years. But it came flooding back in an instant, "Our father, who art in heaven...your will be done...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...amen."

He didn't go up for communion, he couldn't, not unless he'd made his confession first and been absolved and there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of that happening. Most of the congregation went up and accepted the wafer and wine from the priest's hands, but a few stayed in the pews and no one looked askance at him for not partaking.

When the service was over he didn't slip out immediately the way he thought he would. He watched most of the parishioners leave and when the church was nearly empty he stood up and wandered around, looking at the little side chapels, reading the inlaid brass plaques that proclaimed the names of the families who had donated the money to build them and were buried in the tombs within. He didn't really recognize any of them, but then he'd never been too interested in history.

He found something he remembered, a long narrow table with rows of candles, little votives in glass holders that were to be lit as a prayer for a soul that had passed on. His gran had always lit one, every Sunday without fail, praying that the people she loved had found their way from purgatory and into heaven.

There was a lockbox with a card listing a suggested donation of two dollars. He pulled out his wallet and stuffed in a fifty, it wasn't like he couldn't afford it now, and besides, it was for his gran...and his
sister.

Penelope. Gone too young, much too young. No angel had been watching over her that day.

He mumbled a prayer under his breath and lit two of the candles, watching the wicks catch and flare to life and smelling the honeyed scent of the beeswax before zipping up his jacket and turning to leave. He didn't even make it one step, he almost collided into someone who had been standing behind him.

"Can't say I expected to see you here."

Will froze, his mind going blank for a split second. He gaped at the woman who had seemed to appear out of thin air, her arms crossed over her chest and looking him up and down with a slight frown. It was the blonde, Emma. She looked different from the first time he had seen her, the sexy white dress and bedroom hair were replaced with a simple button-down shirt over jeans and a long braid hanging on her shoulder.

"Yeah? Why's that?" he shot back when he got over his shock.

She rolled her eyes and sounded vaguely amused, "You work for Killian Jones. Aren't you afraid you're going to burst into flames?"

The thought had crossed his mind but he jammed his thumbs into his belt loops and rocked back on his heels, "I could say the same thing about you. After all, you and Mr. Jones are-"

The word died in his throat. She tilted her head slightly when he didn't continue, "Are...?" she repeated, looking curious.

He was going to say "fucking", but he couldn't bring himself to swear like that in a church. Gran would spin right out of her grave, plus he was sure there was more going on between the two of them than just sex. He knew what it looked like when the boss was casually screwing a girl, the previous night he'd taken two of the dancers into one of the back rooms with him and Will was under no illusions about what had gone on in there. But the soft smile and inside jokes he'd shared with her had been absent, and no other woman had spent the whole night in his bedroom.

"Emma!"

The priest who had conducted the service poked his head into the alcove where they were standing and shoved his glasses back up his nose again when he noticed Will, "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I'm Father Hopper."

He extended his hand and Will shook it, "Will Scarlet," he mumbled, feeling a flush creeping over his neck.

"Is this your first visit to Saint Raphael's?"

Will nodded, "Yeah. It's a lovely church."

It sounded lame and insincere to his ears, but Father Hopper nodded in agreement, "It certainly is, I like to think the grandeur of the setting makes up for my rather mundane and ordinary sermons. We have some pamphlets at the front you can take with you if you like, about our history and our current programs and schedule. I'd bend your ear some more with all the information myself, but I have a call scheduled with the bishop this afternoon that I have to prepare for. Emma, I just wanted to ask, can you swing by my office for a quick meeting before you leave?"
"Of course, Father. I'll be there in a minute, once I finish talking to Will."

The priest's face lit up with a beaming smile, "Oh! You're a friend of Emma's? Any friend of Emma Swan's is most welcome here. She's a great asset to the church and the community."

He didn't know how to respond to that, but Emma answered for him, "We have a mutual friend, so to speak."

"Well, good to meet you, Will. Hope to see you at Mass again," Father Hopper said, lifting his hand in a wave and heading back up the aisle.

What kind of woman was a "great asset to the church" and yet was sleeping with Killian Jones of all people?

When the priest was out of earshot she gave Will another searching look and asked, "Why are you here?"

He shrugged helplessly, "I don't know. I've just been thinking about it, and I used to go to Mass every Sunday when I was a kid...and somehow I just wound up here today."

Her face softened and she smiled, "Well, this is a church. It's a good place to come when your soul is troubled."

"My soul's not troubled," he protested, even as he realized that was exactly how he was feeling and had been feeling for days.

"If you say so," she said, her eyes flicking to the candles behind him and clearly not believing a word of his denial.

He scuffed the toe of his boot on the stone floor and gave a clipped nod, "Yeah, well, I should get going."

Will pushed past her and headed for the doors, stepping out into the fresh air and taking a deep breath, his shoulders slumping and his hands clenching at his sides. Coming here had been a mistake. Gran was gone, Penelope was gone, nothing would bring them back and he needed to forget and just focus on his new life. Working for Mr. Jones was the ticket to getting everything he could possibly want and he didn't care about anything or anyone else.

But the girl had been so young. Too young.

"Will."

He hadn't even heard her follow him, she was quieter on her feet than even he was, which was really saying something.

"Miss Swan," he said, turning around again to face her.

"You can call me Emma," she offered.

He had the feeling the boss wouldn't like that very much, "No, I don't think I can."

She came closer. No one else was around, save the cars that were driving by, everyone who had left after the service were long gone. He remembered his gran used to linger and socialize for at least an hour after Mass concluded, while he waited, twitching with impatience and wanting to home and get back hanging out with his friends.
Emma gave him another look that made him feel strangely exposed, as if he was standing naked in front of her. She examined him with narrowed eyes and when she spoke she sounded a bit sad, "You're not like most of the people who work for Killian. At least, not yet. But if you stay in his world, well, it's not just a job, is it? It will consume you, in the end."

He didn't know what the hell to make of that statement but he felt a burst of anger flare up in him and he retorted hotly, "Oh, that's rich coming from you, the little bit on the side he keeps tucked away."

Will regretted the words the instant they left his mouth, if she told Mr. Jones what he'd said the man would probably have his head on a silver platter. The boss didn't seem the type to suffer any insult.

As if she knew what he was thinking Emma sighed and said, "I'm going to do you a huge favour and not tell him you said that."

Oddly though she didn't sound affronted or upset, she merely put her hand on his arm and he immediately felt more calm at the gentle touch.

"I've known him for a very long time, Will Scarlet. I know exactly who he is and what he does. Do you? Do you want to know? Ask yourself that question, do you really want to know everything about Killian Jones?"

The hand was withdrawn and she stepped back and disappeared through the door to the church, leaving him standing on the steps with a sudden chill trickling down his back and her words repeating over and over again in his head.

He did want to know everything about Killian Jones.

Didn't he?

The club was full, but it wasn't packed. There was room for plenty more patrons and they had shown up, but he alway made a point to have some turned away at the door whether they were at capacity or not. It kept the customers slightly on edge, knowing that their money and connections would not be enough to get them in if they were one of the unlucky ones stuck on the wrong side of the velvet rope. Even the very best regulars were denied at times.

When they were welcomed in there was always that slight sigh of relief and they were spurred on to make the most of their visit, indulging in anything and everything they desired, knowing in the back of their minds that the next time the door could be shut in their faces.

Killian was in his office, leaning back in his chair and watching the feeds from the various hidden cameras on his computer screen. Everything was in full swing, the drinks were flowing freely, drugs were being consumed with various degrees of discretion, and money was changing hands in the private rooms, where everything from standard lap dances to full-on orgies were taking place.

All in all, it was a typical Saturday night at his club.

He clicked on one of the feeds, maximizing the window to fill the whole monitor and drummed his fingers on the desk as he watched the scene currently unfolding in room four. A dancer had entered with a customer he'd been waiting patiently for, a semi-regular that he needed to talk to alone. Now he had shown up and was right where Killian wanted him. A grin crossed his face as he stood up from the desk and buttoned his suit jacket, shooting his cuffs and heading for the door.

Killian moved through his club with single-minded purpose. In his peripheral vision he could see everything that was taking place around him, but he was focused only on his goal. The writhing
dancers in various states of nudity, the drunk customers leering at them as the music pulsed and the lights flashed, illuminating and concealing, he passed them all by without acknowledgement, only pausing to crook his finger at Scarlet to follow. The man got up instantly from his seat at the bar and fell in step a half pace behind.

"Wait here," Killian said to him when they reached room four. He didn't bother to wait for Scarlet to reply, he simply turned the knob and opened the door a crack. The discrete "occupied" sign was lit but he ignored it and slid in noiselessly, pulling the door shut behind him.

The room was one of the smaller ones. It had a tiny square of a polished dance floor with a retractable pole that faced a wide couch. Music was playing, a dark, grinding beat, and from the shadows he watched one of his dancers bounce and sway on top of a man who was sitting on the couch. The girl's dress was rucked up to her waist and her bare ass was on full display, her lace underwear clutched in the customer's hand and his grunts and groans were audible even over the song coming from the speakers. It was clear that much more than just a lap dance was taking place.

Killian flicked his finger over the panel on the wall that controlled the lights and sound system, turning the music off and the overhead lights on in one swoop. There was a shriek and the dancer looked over her shoulder at him. Her eyes widened and she Instantly got off the customer's lap, ignoring his groan of protest.

She wasn't the most popular dancer in the club but she got around, it seemed every customer wanted to try a redhead at least once. Unlike most of the other girls she didn't go tanning, her skin was pale and slightly freckled. She also didn't wax or shave herself completely bare and there was a strip of auburn left between her legs. The men really liked the visible proof that her hair colour was natural when so much was fake these days.

"Boss?" the girl questioned.

"Go wait outside for a moment, sweetheart," Killian instructed, "I need to talk to this gentleman in private."

She tugged her dress back down and obeyed immediately, slipping out the door without a backward glance. Her customer was fumbling with his pants, trying to cover himself up and looking none too happy about the interruption.

Killian slid his hands into his pockets and leaned his shoulder casually against the wall, crossing one foot in front of the other as he spoke, "I know, it's dreadful bad form to intrude on a man in mid-fuck like that, but our business couldn't wait, Mr. Spencer."

Albert Spencer was a successful businessman turned city councillor, a pillar of the community who was very vocal about civic duty and was rumoured to be planning a run at the mayor in the next election. He was also very much married, his perfectly coiffed wife was a fixture in the city's arts and culture scene.

"What business is that, Mr. Jones?" he asked, squirming with discomfort on the couch.

Killian knew it probably drove the man nuts to have to address him formally, but no one was afforded the privilege of using his actual name in his club. It was a reminder, in this place he was the only one in charge.

"The mayor's gala," he explained, "I wish to attend this year, and you are going to acquire a ticket for me."
Spencer protested immediately, as Killian knew he would, "That's absurd! The gala is for philanthropists, not."

He held up a hand, cutting Spencer off, "Not for my type, I know. Normally I'd have no interest in attending, but this year I feel I should become more involved in making this city the very best that it could be. Isn't that what you always say, Mr. Spencer? Is that going to be your slogan when you run against Mills?"

Spencer eyed him balefully, "No. It's impossible. I can't be associated with you in public, surely you understand that."

Killian pushed off the wall and took a step forward, looming over him, "I'll cut right to the chase. I don't care how you get it, but I want a ticket to the gala. I will ignore you completely while I'm there, no one has to know of our association. Say yes, and you have three days to come through with my invitation. Say no, and my employee will immediately escort you from this building and you will be permanently banned from the Jolly Roger, and all of my dancers will be forbidden from meeting up with you off the premises, so don't get any bright ideas. They work only for me."

A muscle in his jaw worked and he looked like he was going to say something, but Killian wasn't done and Spencer kept his mouth shut under his warning glare.

"If you get me what I want then a generous contribution will be made to your mayoral campaign, from a company that no one knows I own and it will all appear completely above board to the public. The choice is yours, Albert. Do I send the lovely redhead back in to finish you off, or will my man throw you out on you ass into the parking lot?"

He could feel the conflict in Spencer's soul as he thought it over. There were other gentleman's clubs in the city, but none offered the complete discretion that his did, nor had dancers who were anywhere near the same calibre. The man continued to squirm uncomfortably on the couch, the prospect of being sent away in his current unsatisfied state was obviously not a pleasant one. But using his influence to get a ticket to the mayor's charity gala and accepting a campaign donation that he knew full well was dirty money no matter how clean it would appear were the exact sort of ethics violations he frequently blasted other politicians for in council meetings and in the local press.

When he didn't reply Killian lifted one shoulder in a shrug, "Suit yourself then," and went for the door. He was just about to turn the knob when Spencer called out, "Wait!"

Money, power, and sex. Albert Spencer wanted all three and he had decided to pay the price. He hung his head slightly and wouldn't meet Killian's eyes as he spoke, "I'll get you an invitation. As long as you swear that you won't even look in my direction at the gala?"

"We have a deal. As far as anyone will know, we're complete strangers. I might ask your lovely wife to dance, though."

He smirked at Spencer and was through the door before he could even form a reply.

Scarlet and the dancer were both waiting outside. Killian beckoned the redhead to him and grazed a finger delicately over the swell of her cleavage, "You can go back in now sweetheart. And be sure to show our customer a very good time."

He leaned forward, pushing her hair off her shoulder and she shivered violently when he brushed his lips over her neck in what was almost a kiss.

"You'll do that for me, won't you?" he murmured into her ear.
"Yes, Mr. Jones."

"That's a good girl."

He skimmed a hand down her side and gave her ass a quick squeeze. Her eyes were slightly glazed, pupils dilated to the point that not a speck of colour showed and he knew he'd just sparked a wave of lust in her that she'd be desperate to satisfy any way she could. Spencer was about to have the ride of his life.

Killian opened the door with one hand and guided her back in with the other on the small of her back, caressing the bare skin revealed by the skimpy dress. The door shut behind her and he heard the music start back up a second later.

Scarlet had watched the who exchange without speaking, and he followed silently behind when Killian went back into the main lounge and slid into his booth. A waiter materialized and he ordered them both drinks while gesturing for Scarlet to sit down opposite him.

"Enjoying the job so far?" he asked, leaning back and watching Scarlet's face.

"Of course boss," he answered immediately.

The drinks arrived and he sipped his scotch while Scarlet took a swig of his beer.

"So...have you availed yourself of any of the fine entertainment yet?" he asked, with a nod towards the main stage. He knew for a fact that Scarlet actually hadn't, which was somewhat curious. Most of the men who worked for him couldn't wait to exploit their positions and work their way through the talent.

"Erm, no. Not yet."

He saw Will's eyes flick over to a table where one of the dancers was having drinks with a customer. A pillow-lipped blonde, she was currently suckling on an ice cube and fondling the customer's knee under the table.

"If that's the one you've got your eye on, she has very expensive tastes and won't do freebies," he said, swirling his scotch and raising his eyebrow.

There was a sudden longing on Scarlet's face that he tried to cover up with his beer, lifting it up and taking a long swallow. Killian filed that little tidbit away in his mind, wondering if Scarlet would attempt to impress her with money or gifts. But she was vastly above his pay grade, she had a knack for attaching herself to the richest man in the club during her shifts, and it would be interesting to see how Scarlet's infatuation with her would play out.

He didn't look too happy when she got up from the table with the customer and led him towards the private rooms with her hand brushing against his crotch.

"Back to work now, Scarlet."

He stood up and took his place next to the booth, his eyes still lingering on the door that she had disappeared through.

Killian finished his scotch and the waiter had another on the table before he set the empty glass down. On the main stage a dancer who had almost made it as a professional ballerina was performing, under a blue spotlight in pink pointe shoes and a completely sheer black leotard. He watched her rise up on her toes and lift a leg behind her in a perfect arch, feeling deeply satisfied.
Albert Spencer had fallen to temptation and he intended to keep the councillor firmly in his back pocket from now on, and he had got what he wanted, as he always did.

An invitation to the mayor’s annual charity gala, where the city’s elite would meet in support of many worthy causes, including a little charity run by a certain angel.

*We'll see each other soon, blessed one.*

All in all, it was an excellent Saturday night.

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**London - 1668**

The arrival of his letter had come as quite the surprise.

She knew he was in the city, their paths had crossed more than once in the past few months. The first time had been startling, when she’d been compelled to look up just as his carriage drove by and she’d seen him pull back the curtain and their eyes had met. He had smiled and winked at her before the coach was swallowed up in the hustle and bustle of the crowded thoroughfare.

London was bursting at the seams, the devastating fire that had swept through and razed great swaths of it right to the ground a few years prior had destroyed thousands of homes that had yet to be rebuilt. The Crown and the city were still locked in disagreement over how best to proceed, and while the architects and the Lord Mayor and the restored Stuart king all argued over the plans she listened to the prayers of the dispossessed, those left widowed or orphaned, the ones who had been maimed and scarred, and answered all she could.

The work filled the hours and she had little time to spare for much else. She was not overly concerned by the presence of the demon nearby, one of many who walked the earth and sought to corrupt the souls of the weak and the desperate. While he could be considered dangerous, the servants of hell and the servants of heaven each knew their place and most practiced simple avoidance as a general rule. There were clashes and skirmishes at time, when one side or the other would strike if the opportunity arose but she had never partaken. Her mission was to redeem and she wasn’t a warrior, nor did she have a desire to be one.

Emma was content to simply leave Killian be and assumed he would show her that same courtesy. It seemed to be his intent, he kept his distance whenever they saw each other and although he insisted on winking at her and giving her that knowing smile they never spoke directly.

Until he invited her to dine with him.

"...when last we met, you stated that you had a debt to me that you wished to discharge, though you already repaid my most generous assistance by bestowing upon me what I requested. Now, I am in your debt, as your hasty departure from my company did not allow for me to offer you anything in return for your kindness. As that is an unacceptable state of affairs for a gentleman such as myself, I wish to invite you to a private supper…"

She had to read the letter twice, somewhat shocked by the arrogance of his words and the boldness of his request.

"A gentleman...more like the serpent offering Eve the fruit of the forbidden tree."

She propped her chin in her hand and looked out the window of her chamber with his letter laying on the desk in front of her. Was it a ruse, an attempt to lure her into a carefully laid trap? His kind was well known for their deceptions and trickery, after all.
"I shall await your reply. Though I know your natural inclination would be to decline my invitation, I find that, contrary to my natural inclination, I have faith that you will accept."

He had faith. She ran her finger over the letters, smudging the ink as she muttered under her breath, "The serpent was said to be subtle. You, infernal one, are not."

She recognized the attempt to goad and challenge her with her own words. He was daring her to come to him, but for what purpose? Certainly not just for a meal of thanks.

The candles flickered and danced in the dark room as she drew a sheet of paper and began to write out her reply to his audacity. When finished she poured fine white sand over the wet ink to dry it quickly and sat back in her chair.

Would the fruit be good to eat?

She looked into the yellow flame and supposed she would find out.
Chapter 6

London - 1668

His residence was opulent, suited for an earl or marquess or one of the king's bastard sons, and it was a far cry from her own modest lodgings on the other side of the city. A silent footman granted her admittance, but recoiled away when she met his dulled and clouded gaze. She knew in an instant that the man was lost, his soul was beyond her reach and undoubtedly bound to the demon he served.

The servant skulked back into the shadows and disappeared into the gloom. She heard footsteps from the floor above and watched as Killian appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Behold," he said as he began to descend towards her, "I have been blessed with the presence of an angel. It seems my faith was not misplaced."

He reached the bottom stair and was standing in front of her the next moment, bowing low at the waist, "Salve, beata."

When he rose his lips twitched slightly, hiding a smile. He was dressed as a gentleman, but one who was attired to receive only the most intimate company. Close-fitting velvet breeches and silk hose, and a fine shirt that he wore loose, without doublet or waistcoat, it was open at the throat and simply belted at his hips. He had not donned a wig nor powdered his dark hair, it was pulled back in a neat queue and tied with a black ribbon. The blue of his eyes were the only spot of colour, and they were striking, the vivid hue was unnaturally bright in the dimly lit hall.

Emma removed her heavy cloak, revealing the rather plain muslin gown that lay underneath. She didn't miss the way his gaze dropped and lingered over the swell of her breasts under the stiff bodice and the curve of her hips draped in the layers of skirts.

"Salve, damnate," she replied to his greeting.

Killian's lips twitched again and he laid a finger against them in contemplation, "Perhaps we may set aside such formalities for tonight, Emma?"

He snapped his fingers in the air and the servant appeared again, taking her cloak with cold hands and avoiding her gaze.

"Killian," she agreed with a small nod. He smiled when she spoke his name, a demon's true name held dark power. She could feel it, the whisper and slither, the shadows around her seeming to lengthen and stretch and almost envelop her where she stood. A demon could be summoned by use of his name, just as she could hear when hers was invoked in prayer.

"Emma," he repeated, coming even closer. His voice dropped lower than what mortal ears would be able to hear, "It is a pleasure to have you as my guest tonight."

He offered his arm, and she looked at it and then back at his face. He was still smiling, but there was a challenge in the curl of his lip as there had been in his letter and she hesitated. While he could dress and act as a gentleman, she could feel the darkness that lay inside him. A barely caged beast, it hungered to feast upon her grace and devour it.

When she made no move to accept, his smile faltered slightly, "I mean you no harm, Emma. You are an invited guest in my home and I give you my word that you are not in any danger from me. As I trust that you will not bring forth your heavenly light and blind me over the soup?"
"You have truly invited me to simply dine with you?" she questioned, "Why?"

"I have, and you accepted for reasons as yet unknown. Come, or the meal shall grow congealed and spoil as we question each other's motives. The night is young, there is plenty of time for suspicion later if you wish, but for now may I escort you to my table?"

She looked again from the arm, still extended and waiting, and then to his face. The smile was back, open and inviting, on a face that was finely formed, darkly handsome and charmingly seductive. He was meant to seduce, to tempt, to entice, to offer up the forbidden fruit with that smile and to delight in the consumption.

He was sin incarnate. He was a servant of hell, bound to his creator as surely as his footman was bound to him. There was no possibility of redemption, no way she could bring him into the light. As he said, it would only blind him instead of opening his eyes. There was nothing to be gained by spending time in his company and while it was not actually forbidden to her, it was simply unheard of. Demons were too dangerous, too cunning, and too untrustworthy.

Yet her fingers curved slowly over his forearm, accepting another escort as she'd once accepted his assistance out of Rome the day the city fell to the dark ones. She could feel the heat under the finely woven linen, it was rolling off of him in waves and she could smell the faintest scent of the sulphur and brimstone in the air.

She could feel the fire. But it didn't burn.

The doors at the end of the hall were open and the dining room on the other side was visible, the table set and waiting. Killian nodded towards it, "Shall we break bread together?"

"Words I never thought to hear from one of your kind, infernal one," she said.

"Killian," he corrected, "Nor did I ever expect to utter them to one of heaven's blessed, Emma, but then I never thought one would be listening. I never expected one to hear my call."

Her fingers tightened on his arm at the reminder of their last encounter, even as he gave another pleased smile and pulled gently, guiding her down the hall. She allowed him to lead her into the dining room, sitting down in the chair he pulled back for her and accepting a goblet of dark spiced wine.

He sat opposite her with a flourish, "I have heard much of your good works. Word of the beautiful lady who offers hope to those who've lost so much has spread across the city, and they have begun to call you the angel of London. A rather apt moniker."

She was aware of his reputation as well, whispered in hushed and scandalized tones.

"As I have heard of your...activities. They say you are an unholy scoundrel of the highest order, a seducer of virgins, and a corrupter of virtuous men. One who can fulfil every desire imaginable, at a price."

Killian tented his fingers together and lowered his chin, "And what is it that you desire, Emma? Imagine it, and perhaps I can fulfil you."

She could feel the wine staining her lips vermilion as she drank from her goblet, and she met the intensity of his gaze head on over the rim, "You can't give me what I desire, Killian."

He leaned forward, his fingers caressing the smooth tabletop in slow circles, "Are you quite certain about that, lovely angel? I excel at giving."
The footman appeared from the shadows again and she gave him a pointed look, watching him flinch. He was eternally damned, his soul claimed by the one who sat across from her.

"You excel at taking, demon."

The meal was a grand procession of rare and expensive delicacies, the wine was intoxicating, and Killian never took his eyes off her, nor ceased his suggestive comments of what he could offer. She could well imagine the effect it would all have on impressionable souls. The ostentatious wealth, the implied promises, all arranged in a carefully designed tableaux. "This could all be yours," it whispered, "As long as you pay the price."

When the last dish was whisked away and the cognac served as the digestif had been drunk, she folded her hands on top of the table and regarded him over the candles, "Do you consider your debt to now be paid?" she asked.

Killian gave her another searching look and set down his glass, "I have a proposition regarding that."

"There shall be no more debts or obligations between us. Should you ever require my assistance, I will grant it if it is within my power to do so and I will ask nothing of you in return. Come to me for any reason you wish, even if it is merely because you desire my company. And I faithfully believe that you will desire it."

He spoke with conviction and she was shocked by him once more, "Your arrogance is astonishing, infernal one."

"Everything about me is astonishing, as you will one day find out."

Killian rose from his seat and came around the table. He stood behind her and leaned down, she could sense his hands gripping the back of her chair. Warm breath touched the side of her neck and as she felt the incipient lick of the flames, she tensed and prepared to repel him with divine radiance.

But he merely spoke in her ear, "And my name is Killian."

Emma twisted around to look him in the eye, "I am quite astonished by your apparent belief that you can seduce me as easily as a naive virgin or a noble's bored wife. I know what you are, Killian."

He smiled and tilted his head, looking amused, "As easily? No, of course not. A naive virgin would have succumbed before the first course was even served and I'd have had the bored wife on the table in between the venison and the oysters. And then again after the pudding. But you are neither bored nor naive. You know what I am and yet you were intrigued enough to accept my invitation, and you do not seem displeased with my company. I will take that and be glad, and wait for you to come to me again."

As he spoke he moved almost imperceptibly, his hand sliding over the arm of her chair and crouching down on his knees so that their faces were level. They were so close that anyone who came upon them would think they were about to witness a lovers' embrace.

"You will be waiting a great while, then," she said with firmness, ignoring the truth to his words that she was a little bit intrigued and had been since long before his letter arrived.

He grinned at her answer, "Ah, but you did not say I would be waiting in vain. I can bide my time for a great while."
"For eternity then."

The demon did not look deterred. He lifted one shoulder in a shrug and rose to his full height, resting his hands on his belt, "No matter. I've made my decision, Emma, and I'm in this for the long haul."

Present Day

Scarlet got out of the driver's seat and opened the back door of the car. Killian stepped out onto the pavement, one hand smoothing down his jacket while the other held the embossed invitation. There was a line of cars all pulling up to the front of the museum, the chosen venue this year for the mayor's annual gala. The local news was there, a reporter with a microphone and cameraman was set up and was interviewing various arrivals, while photographers had their cameras trained on the stairs that led to the museum's front entrance, snapping away.

"Go park somewhere close by and wait. I'll text you when I'm ready to leave."

Scarlet nodded at the instruction and got back behind the wheel, pulling away from the curb and driving off.

Killian walked up the steps, ignoring the press and the gathered onlookers. He could avoid having his image recorded if he wanted to, so there would be no pictures of his arrival. He could spoil all of the pictures if he so chose, in the old days when they still used film it would simply melt right in the cameras. Now the data would just mysteriously erase, but he didn't bother. There was no need to ruin everything. When the photographers flipped back through the images on their memory cards and the onlookers checked their phones there would only be a dark smudge where he had been standing, and they'd chalk it up to no more than a spot on the lens or a trick of the light.

He presented the card at the door and the gatekeepers checked their iPads and found his name on the list, waving him through. Albert Spencer had not disappointed him, the invitation had arrived within the appointed three day window, sent to the club by courier and accompanied by an unsigned note reminding him of his promise to pretend they were strangers. He would uphold his end of the bargain, but he did plan to make the man sweat just a little. His deals almost always came with strings, after all.

The museum's entrance opened up into a large rotunda where the gala was currently taking place. Some of the displays had been moved to make way for the tables where the dinner would be served, draped in snowy white and tastefully decorated with clear glass and white floral centrepieces. There were two bars where the guests were already congregating, and waiters moved through the crowd bearing silver trays of hor d'oeuvres and flutes of champagne. One stopped in front of him and he lifted a glass lightly with his thumb and forefinger, taking a sip of the Veuve Clicquot while he surveyed the room.

The dress code was formal, and men in crisp tuxedos that were decidedly not rented mixed and mingled with women in designer gowns, bright as jewels and just as expensive, if not more. He had followed the code, but had opted to dress entirely in black, from his tie to his silk pocket square and onyx cufflinks, all the way down to his polished shoes. It was a slight cliche, he knew, but the effect was striking and it made him stand out in the crowd. Killian saw the looks, interest from the women and the pale faces and nervous gulps from the men who recognized him, there were many of his club's customers in attendance. He smiled blandly at them when their eyes met, which only flustered them even more.

The mayor herself, Regina Mills, was holding court amidst a group of admirers, dressed to the nines in a sleek column of dark red silk with a string of diamonds around her neck. The chief of police
stood next to her, looking very uncomfortable in his dress uniform and white gloves. He was on the younger side to be holding such a prestigious position, but the mayor had been insistent on his appointment and there were several rumours in City Hall about the exact nature of their relationship.

Killian watched them both, wondering if Regina would be amenable to a large donation from him to her campaign come election time. He could feel great potential in her, and politicians were usually easy to corrupt. Spencer belonged to him already but his victory against Mills was hardly assured, if he backed both horses in the race he'd come on top no matter who won.

The room continued to fill as more guests arrived and he retreated to the shadows, slowly drinking his champagne and watching for Emma. He felt her light before he saw her, it beckoned to him from across the room like the soft notes of a siren's song and he sighted her at last.

She was dressed in a long gown of midnight blue lace, it shimmered under the lights with the barest hint of silver threads woven in the fabric. The dress was modest, with long sleeves and a high neck, not a hint of cleavage on display, but he could see a flash of slim leg from a slit in the skirt and when she turned he saw that most of her back was bare, revealed by a large keyhole opening. Her hair was swept up in a complex-looking style of braids and curls, showing off the long curve of her white neck. A tall man stood next to her, they were talking with the ease of friends. He was blond, handsome, late twenties to early thirties, with a wedding ring on his left hand. A woman with short dark hair joined them and the man's arm instantly found her waist. Killian put names to the faces, they must be David and Mary Margaret from Emma's charity.

As he watched her Emma's back went straight and her head turned towards him. She swept a glance across the room and locked eyes with him. He lifted his champagne to his lips and drained the rest of the glass in one swallow, dropping the empty flute into the hand of a startled waiter passing by.

The bar didn't have his preferred brand of scotch, but it had a perfectly acceptable single malt and he placed an order with the bartender. The drink was set in front of him, and the bartender turned to his next customer. Emma requested wine, waiting patiently as a new bottle was opened and her glass was poured.

"Quite the shindig, isn't it?" Killian asked casually, turning to face her.

"Yes, they really go all out," Emma replied, taking her wineglass.

He held out his own tumbler and smiled, "Cheers, love."

She tapped the glasses together and they both drank the toast. He gave a mock frown, "Now where on earth are my manners? I'm Killian Jones, Miss..?"

Emma played along, her face betraying nothing, "Swan. Emma Swan. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Jones."

He waved a hand, "Please, call me Killian. And the pleasure is all mine, Miss Swan."

They drifted away from the bar with their drinks in hand, appearing to be nothing more than two strangers sharing some polite small talk.

"What brings you here tonight?" Emma asked in a somewhat arch tone.

"Well, I've heard so much about the good works being done in our fair city by all these various charities, and came to show my support. Perhaps I'll find one in particular that would appreciate a sizable gift. What's the old adage, give until it hurts? I really do enjoy giving, Miss Swan."
She looked him up and down, "Do you now?"

He smiled and inched closer, making sure to keep the distance between them respectable, "Know anyone who would be interested?"

Emma downed her wine and wiped an errant drop from the corner of her mouth with the tip of a delicate finger, "I'm sure you can find a willing recipient for your sizable gift, Mr. Jones."

"Killian," he corrected, "No need to stand on formality, Miss Swan."

He dropped his voice low, knowing no one around them would be able to hear him but her, "Besides, I like it when you say my name. You have no idea what it does to me."

"Don't be so sure about that," she murmured back, and walked away with an innocent smile. He stared at her back, the bare skin just above her waist called out to him and he wanted to go down on his knees behind her to lick and bite every square inch that was on display. He finished his scotch without tasting it, he craved something far sweeter than the smoky liquor.

The gala was in full swing, the rich and powerful all rubbing elbows to the strains of a string quartet playing on a raised dais. Emma moved through the crowd with her natural grace, engaging potential donors in conversation. He watched as she bestowed her beatific smile and drew them in, laying her hand on their arms and leaning close as she emphasized whatever point she was making. They would be inspired to give, to help, perhaps even to roll up their designer sleeves and actually get their soft hands dirty. Emma always had that effect on people.

Killian circled around the room, keeping her in his line of sight as he sought out his club's customers and made them squirm, their nervous hands pulling at their collars and their faces flushing as he madeneedling comments and oblique references of their particular proclivities when they visited the Jolly Roger. He enjoyed their embarrassed attempts to deflect and avoid him, and how none would actually say anything rude directly to his face no matter how much he provoked them.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Since he had put all contacts except Emma on silent he pulled it out immediately and read the text.

*I don't know what you're doing, but they're all praying to be saved from you. You're terrible*

He typed back quickly, *Are you going to answer their prayers?*

The little dots appeared, indicating she was writing back. After a moment the message appeared, *Begone demon. There, did it work?*

A brief chuckle escaped him and he replied, *Afraid not. Still here.*

*Well, I tried. And what exactly are you doing here, Killian?*

*Texts don't count. I want to hear you say my name, then I'll tell you.* He sent back.

Two words appeared, *Mr. Jones.*

He shook his head and tapped on the screen, *Say my name, Emma. Or I can make you scream it if you'd prefer. Lady's choice*

She was across the room looking down at her phone. Her head lifted and their eyes met, he winked and she slid it into her little silver evening bag without texting him back.
Dinner was served and the mayor gave a rather self-congratulatory speech, followed by brief presentations from representatives of the different charity groups. The woman with the short dark hair spoke on behalf of the table where Emma was seated, and he had been right, she introduced herself as Mary Margaret Nolan. Her words were simple and to the point, "We offer what has become increasingly rare in today's cynical world, a sense of hope."

Regina briefly looked like she'd sucked on a lemon, and he was even more convinced that he could work something out with the woman. He suspected her weakness would be power, obtaining and keeping it by any means necessary.

After the meal the string quartet was replaced with a band, and couples started drifting onto the dance floor. Killian remembered his comment to Albert Spencer, and the man went purple when he sought out Caroline Spencer at the bar and introduced himself. After a short conversation she accepted his offer of a dance and he led her to the floor. She was an attractive woman, and he flirted with her shamelessly, watching a blush spread across her decolletage when he let his hand accidentally wander over the curve of her ass and licked his lips. He wondered how difficult it would be to entice her into a quick tryst in one of the washrooms or a dark stairwell, adultery was always one of his favourite sins. If he wasn't here for a more elusive quarry he'd do it just to piss off Spencer. It would be amusing to watch him cough and sputter and try to claim some kind of moral high ground, men like him could always justify screwing twenty year old redheads and yet be completely outraged at the thought of their wives daring to cheat on them.

Caroline let her breasts press briefly against his chest and her fingers stroked through his hair as she slid her hand a little more firmly around his neck. It wouldn't be difficult at all.

He backed off and returned her to her husband at the end of the dance, ignoring Albert Spencer's glower and giving his wife one last lingering glance. He promised to email her soon so they could continue their conversation and walked away with a smile. A furious, hushed argument erupted between the two in his wake and he suppressed the urge to laugh.

At the bar he was just about to wave over the bartender and order another scotch when a hand tapped his shoulder, "Would you care to dance, Killian?"

He turned smoothly on his heel, "Certainly, Miss Swan."

Emma took his hand and made for the dance floor, pulling him behind her with her long lace skirt swishing around her legs and looking at him over her shoulder, "Please, call me Emma."

The Spencers and the mayor were all forgotten as his angel turned to him and curved one hand behind his neck. He placed his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, looking down into her face. Emma glowed, the radiance of her inner light shone faintly through her skin even on the dimly lit dance floor. He could feel it, could sense it in the very air around her.

He coveted it more than anything.

"Satisfied, Killian?" she whispered into his ear and he set his hand a little more firmly on her waist. The lace of her dress tickled his fingers, he wasn't touching her bare skin.

"Nowhere near, but it's a start," he whispered back, and spoke in a normal tone, "So, tell me about your group. Your colleague spoke so movingly, but what exactly do you do to restore hope to people who've lost everything?"

They moved around the dance floor in a slow glide. He rubbed his thumb against her lower back in a slow caress and pretended to listen as Emma told him about her charity, all things that he already
knew. Anyone who looked at them and overheard their conversation would find nothing amiss, he was a potential contributor that she was talking into a donation, nothing more. No one present had any inkling of what they really were.

"And that about sums it up," she said when she finished explaining about Shared Blessings and its mission.

"It sounds like you do a lot. The people you help must think you're an angel," he teased with a smile.

Emma answered dryly, "For some reason I get that a lot."

His leg slid between hers and their hips swayed together under the guise of the dance. Her fingers brushed against his neck and she lowered her voice, "Why are you here tonight, Killian?"

The song ended before he could answer, and they broke apart, applauding politely for the band along with everyone else on the floor. Regina Mills stepped onto the stage and took the microphone from the lead singer, giving one of the most insincere smiles he'd seen in a century and announcing the start of another of the evening's fundraisers, an auction. He could see Mary Margaret Nolan on the other side of the floor waving at Emma, trying to get her attention, and he spoke quickly before she started making her way over.

"Meet me in fifteen minutes. In front of your portrait."

She looked confused for a second before understanding dawned, and he turned and melted into the crowd.
The gala had taken over the museum's main floor, with the other levels blocked off and lit only by the dim security lights. But barred gates made only of steel could hardly keep him out, and he stood in a shadowy alcove on the third floor, hands in his pockets and looking at a painting hung among a row of similar works. There was a whole line of tortured martyrs and obscure saints, benevolent seraphim and rather insipid cherubim, and smack in the middle was a small and easily overlooked painting in a bronze frame. The little plaque set next to it had scant information.

*The Angel Listens*

*oil on canvas*

*mid-late 18th century (?)*

*Artist Unknown*

It depicted two indistinct figures kneeling in prayer, and above them rose an angel portrayed in the classical style, with a long white robe, great feathered wings, and a halo radiating heavenly light. One hand was extended, reaching out to almost touch the supplicants on their bowed heads, and the angel's face was serene and stunningly beautiful.

It was Emma's face.

He heard the click of her heels behind him and spoke without turning around, "That was twenty minutes."

"Patience is a virtue, damnate," she chided.

"When have I ever been virtuous?" he asked rhetorically.

Her shoulder brushed his when she stood next to him and faced the painting, "I forgot this was actually here. It's been years since I last saw it."

Her hand reached out and almost touched the information plaque as she took a step closer, "Artist unknown. Such a pity that his name was lost to history, I always thought that he deserved more recognition for his work."

He scoffed at that, "You are horribly biased. His work was pedestrian at best, this one is only elevated by the beauty of the subject matter, nothing more."

Emma turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder with an amused smile, "The beauty of the subject matter? Now you're the one who's biased."

He didn't answer, he only moved behind her and ran a finger lightly down her arm, from shoulder to wrist. The long sleeve kept him from touching her skin, but he could see it peeking through the dark blue lace. He knew she never wore perfume and he tilted his head down to the exposed nape of her neck, smelling nothing but heaven itself.

She exhaled slowly, "Why are you here, Killian?"

The sound of his name on her lips made his groin clench almost painfully and drew him even closer to her, summoned by her call. His fingers circled her wrist, so small and seemingly fragile when caught in his grip, "Do you really need to ask? You made me a promise, darling. I've come to collect."
Emma swayed forward, away from him, "You may not be virtuous but you did used to be patient. It's only been a few weeks, and you've waited far longer than that before."

He had, and he'd wait as long as it took for her to finally come to him again if necessary, days, weeks, months, years, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that, "Yes, but it's not an experience I really care to repeat. Do you?"

She stared at the painting and he moved forward, still holding her wrist in one hand and tracing along the edge of her dress with the other. He outlined the keyhole opening on her back that revealed her white skin without actually touching the flesh.

"I still have work to do," she said, but he sensed the hesitation behind her words and she swayed back towards him, seeking out more of his touch.

He almost let his fingers slip under the edge, toying delicately with the lace as he offered further incentive, "You know what they say about all work and no play. If you still need more money just tell me how much and it's yours."

But Emma resisted him still, "I'm not here just to raise money. There's people downstairs that I can help too."

"Oh, fuck the people downstairs. Blessed one, there's far more sinners than saints at this thing. They wring their hands about children going to bed hungry while they spend thousands just on the champagne. They loudly condemn sex trafficking, yet half of the men are customers at my club and have never given a shit where the dancers come from as long as there's someone newer and younger there to blow them on a Saturday night. They don't care the way you do, it's all just lip service, they get their picture in the papers handing over a check that they'll just write off on their taxes anyway, and then they go back to being the same rich, arrogant assholes that they were before. They don't deserve your help."

She closed her eyes. They'd had this debate, many, many times before over the years. It was in his nature to see the worst in people, just as she saw the best.

"Being rich doesn't automatically make someone an arrogant asshole," she argued, "Just as the poor are not all noble. There's good people down there."

Killian was hovering behind her, his hand on her hip and his thumb pressed into her lower back, "What, like the mayor?" he challenged.

Regina Mills was a real piece of work, she'd give him that. She could feel it, which meant he could too. But she didn't answer him, she looked at her own face hanging on the wall in front of her. *The Angel Listens.*

The room grew darker around them, the dim lights going even dimmer, and she knew it was him. Killian's voice surrounded her, "Listen to me, angel. Forget them and come with me. Come home with me. Stop trying to deny what we both want."

She tried to tune him out but she never could and she felt herself weakening, "You make me so reckless, infernal one."

The next thing she knew he had her pressed against the wall with her arms around his neck and his hands circling her waist. Killian's hips rocked against her and she could feel his erection through the layers of clothes, pressed right where she wanted him so desperately.

"Be reckless with me then. I'll make you scream my name, right here, right now."
Her head fell back against the wall and she could feel his breath on her face, hot and smelling of brimstone as his hands starting rucking up her long skirt. She knew him and knew he wasn't kidding, if she didn't stop him then they would have sex up against the wall two floors above the mayor and the chief of police and over two hundred other invited guests.

Killian nuzzled at her neck, his lips sliding over her skin. They were soft and warm, hiding the sharp white teeth that lay behind them. A needy whimper rose in her throat and she ran her hands down his back and slipped under his suit jacket, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and pulling it out of the waistband of his pants. He had her dress yanked to her upper thighs, bunching the fabric in one hand as he started to undo his belt with the other.

She was on the verge of giving in, ready to wrap her legs around his waist and not let go until they were both satisfied, when she looked up and locked eyes with herself. The painting hung directly across from where he had her pinned and she stared at it over his shoulder. From the moment he had touched her she had stopped listening to everything else and only heard him. The pleasure he offered wasn't the sin, but shutting herself off to chase after it was and that was the first step down a path she feared to tread. Once she had come very, very close, decades ago, as close as she ever had to walking that path and she had sworn that she would never set foot on it again.

Not even for him.

"I can't," she choked out, "Killian, stop."

He went stiller than a statue at the command and she felt her skirt fall back down over her legs as he released his grip on it. His shirt was half untucked and she had her hand under it, splayed across his back. She pulled it out as he lifted his head from her neck and stared at her. He was the picture of frustration, she could see a muscle ticking in his clenched jaw and his eyes burned at her like butane flames, the only spot of colour on him along with his reddened lips, going even darker as he bit down sharply, dragging the bottom one between his gnashing teeth.

Killian's hands hovered just above the curve of her hips and his voice was rough and wrecked, "You drive me insane, Emma."

She caught his wrists in her hands, stroking and soothing him with her thumbs, "I need to go back down and stay until the end of the gala. If you can be a little bit patient and wait for me, I'll come over to your place afterwards."

The tension slowly drained out of his face and he gave a nod, a smile playing at the corner of his lips, "I can wait. As long as you promise that you will come to me, I'll leave now and let you get back to work."

She nodded back, "You have my word. It might be very late, though."

"I don't care. My car will be waiting for you outside, my driver will bring you over."

He twisted his wrists, rolling his hands over hers and grasping them neatly. He lifted them to his mouth, kissing the backs in an old-fashioned gesture that men seldom did anymore. When he let go she flicked her fingers at him.

"Begone, infernal demon," she intoned.

Killian smirked, "Smite me then, blessed angel."

"Oh, just shut up and go."
He leaned in as if to kiss her, but angled his head and spoke lowly in her ear, "I'm praying that you'll scream my name tonight. Let's see if it's answered."

She felt the drag and scrape of his whiskered cheek along the line of her jaw and the press of his hips into hers, letting her feel exactly what he planned to make her scream with. He pulled back, his suit smooth and unruffled, shirt tucked in and jacket buttoned as if they hadn't just been pawing at each other like oversexed teenagers. Killian whistled a few jaunty notes through his teeth as he sauntered down the hall to the stairwell, pulling his phone out of his pocket and tapping on it one-handed. As soon as he was gone the lights noticeably brightened and she blinked.

On display a few feet away from her painting was a depiction of Saint Anthony in the desert, facing down the grinning satyr who'd come to tempt him. The ancient saint had his hands raised to ward off the demon, and his face was stony and resolute. Anthony had defeated all temptations that had been placed before him.

"Yeah, well you never had Killian Jones to contend with, did you?" she muttered.

He waited patiently in the dark, sitting on the sofa in the living room and listening for the knock at the door. His jacket, tie and vest had all been tossed aside and he had loosened his collar and undone the top two buttons on his shirt. It was past two a.m. and if he'd been waiting for anyone else he might have thought that they weren't going to show, but not Emma.

If an angel's word couldn't be trusted, then the world really had gone to hell in a handbasket.

When he heard the soft rap at last he tossed his phone on the coffee table and went into the foyer to answer. He twisted the knob and swung the door open, stepping back to let her cross the threshold into his domicile. She was alone, he had ordered Scarlet to escort her as far as the elevator in the underground garage and then to leave immediately. Since he was feeling magnanimous, he had also given the man the following day off. Secretly, he hoped he could get her to stay and it would be a far easier task to accomplish if no one else was around.

Light pierced the darkness at her entry and he gathered his angel into his arms. She came to him willingly, eagerly, pulling his head down to hers and kissing him, sliding her tongue over his bottom lip.

"You taste like scotch," she whispered against his mouth.

She tasted divine and he drank deep, sliding his hands over her slender waist and rolling his hips firmly into hers.

Emma was still wearing the long lace gown, the silver threads catching her light and flashing like little sparks. He turned her around and traced the line of her spine the way he had wanted to do when he had first spotted her at the gala. A slow drag of his fingers and lips from the nape of her neck to her waist and back up, where he found the fastening that held the dress closed. It parted easily and he slid the lace down her arms. Twin grooves ran along her shoulder blades, barely visible, and she shivered when he breathed over the lines.

She reached up behind her with one hand and threaded it through his hair, mussing it and cupping the side of his head. Her updo was still perfect, each soft curl in place and the braid that wrapped around the crown of her head looked fittingly like a halo.

Her skirt zipped up the side and he dragged the little metal tab down, letting the dress slip to the ground and puddle at her feet. Underneath her legs were bare and she had on a strapless bustier with
a very low back and simple navy blue underwear. There was nothing particularly salacious about
either, but he didn't need Emma to wear fancy lingerie to get him hard or make him lust after her, her
sheer presence went straight to his cock and brought it springing to life in an instant.

The bedroom was too far away. He spun her around and lifted her, cupping his hands under her ass
and leaving her dress lying in a heap on the floor. She kissed him again, sucking lightly on his
bottom lip as she gripped his shoulders and wrapped her long legs around his waist. The bustier was
discarded in the hall along the way to the living room, he ripped it off with one hand and she pulled
back from his mouth long enough to chide him about his impatience, "You love it," he answered,
nudging her nose with his and rolling a taut nipple between his fingers. He made the coffee table
move out of the way with a flick of his wrist and laid her back on the couch. It was long and wide,
with firm cushions and plenty of room for what he had in mind.

Emma's legs fell open on either side of him and she arched her back, her lovely breasts bared to his
gaze and swaying enticingly, practically beckoning him to taste her there first. From her raised
eyebrow and brief glance down she was clearly expecting it, so he took a different approach. He
knelt between her calves and lifted her foot, easily discarding the strappy heel she was still wearing.
Her toes wiggled in the air, the nails painted a deep glossy blue that matched her dress.

"You went for a pedicure?" he asked, surprised. That was unlike her.

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug, "Mary Margaret wanted me to come with her and share girl talk.
The colour matched my dress."

"I can see that."

He turned his head and kissed her ankle, starting a slow procession up her calf with his mouth,
nibbling, licking, and sucking. She lay on her back, watching him through heavy-lidded eyes with
one hand behind her head and the other on her stomach, her fingers drawing slowly back and forth
just above the waistband of her underwear.

"Killian," she murmured, lifting the hand to reach for him. He gave it a mock slap.

"Patience, Emma."

Her eyes closed, "This is payback, isn't it?"

He didn't answer immediately, tracing a figure eight with his tongue on her inner thigh. She hooked
her foot behind his neck and tried to pull him down on top of her, but he continued to resist, "I
waited for you, now it's your turn."

The muscles in her thighs quivered as he continued to draw patterns with his lips and tongue and
teeth, and the heady scent of her arousal wafted to his nose and almost made him lose his mind,
ready to tear off the navy panties with his teeth and fuck her so hard that she'd feel it for days. But he
kept himself in check, this wasn't a quick and dirty screw like the ones he had with his dancers in the
Jolly Roger's back rooms. This was a seduction, and it was an art form that he excelled in. He went
all the way up her leg and let his nose brush across the scrap of fabric that still covered her, relishing
the dampness that he felt there, before straightening back up and reaching for her other foot.

Emma made a protesting noise when it became clear that he planned to repeat the whole ritual on her
other leg, from instep to the most sensitive part of her inner thigh, "You're the virtuous one," he
reminded her, smiling against her skin, "Be patient."

When at last he reached the apex of her thighs he used his hands to spread them even further apart.
Since he had already ruined her bra and would undoubtedly be buying her a replacement anyway, he pursed his lips and blew a hard, hot blast that burned the panties right off her body. Emma gasped as she was fully exposed, already so wet for him that she was glistening with it. When he bestowed an open-mouthed kiss to her there, her hands sank into his hair and she yanked him closer, urging him on. *Not so virtuous then,* he thought, pleased.

He turned on a dime, slow and teasing turned into fast and punishing. But Emma didn't protest when he sucked hard on the most sensitive part of her and slipped two fingers deep into the most beautiful cunt he'd ever had the privilege of fucking, a right he planned to exercise as many times as possible before she left him again.

She tasted even better like this, her honeyed sweetness spreading on his tongue and filling his senses, and he briefly lifted his head to tell her that before diving back in. Emma swatted the side of his head and muttered something not very complimentary about him under her breath, but then her nails scraped his scalp and she rolled her hips up against his mouth with a moan, so clearly she wasn't offended by the sentiment.

He sensed she was getting close and he shed his remaining clothes like a snake shedding it's skin, they slid right off him and landed on the floor. Emma went rigid, her back arching up and the scream he had been waiting for spilling from her lips. He gladdied in it, she could be as loud as she wanted, the condo was completely soundproof with both extra insulation in the walls and his own methods of ensuring his ignorant neighbours never heard a peep of what transpired in his home.

He gave her no respite, covering her with his now naked body and plunging himself inside her with one hard stroke. She yielded easily around him, a fact that both gratified him and drove him crazy at the same time. If only she would yield to him completely, give in to his temptation and finally fall, then they would have this every night and she could join him and be his light, his consort, his companion, the only star in his very own heaven.

"Killian."

An angel spoke his name and it only spurred him on, "Fuck! Again! Say it again!"

She shook her head, one arm wrapping around his neck and her thighs squeezing tight over his hips, "Make me, damnate."

"Beata...say my name," he grunted, thrusting to the hilt and then stilling inside her.

Emma gave him a teasing look, her lips firmly shut. Oh, the angel was playing with fire, and he was going to make her burn.

He pulled out almost completely and hovered there for a moment. He went back on his knees and with her legs draped over his elbows he started a rhythm of short, shallow thrusts, teasing her with a single deep stroke and relishing the gasp it elicited, and then lightly rocking only the barest inch inside. Emma lifted her hips and tried to pull him closer, fluttering her lashes at him and smiling coyly, but he only leaned forward enough to brush his lips over hers before sitting back again and keeping at it. He could go like this for hours, never falling over the edge, an exquisite torture for the both of them.

"Say it," he ordered. One more hard thrust aimed right at the sweetest of spots inside her and he felt her jerk against him, her legs trembling and her hands clutching at his shoulders, the nails digging into his skin.

"Killian," she cried out, "Killian."
It started as a tingling sensation, like the soles of his feet were being tickled by something soft, and then it shot up the backs of his calves and thighs, pooling at the base of his spine. It went off like a firework, shooting through his whole body and flooding him with bliss. It was the ecstasy the medieval saints had spoken of, when they communed with the angels and were granted holy visions, a golden tidal wave of pure rapture the poured over him. Emma screamed his name, and he lost all semblance of control, falling forward onto his palms and slamming into her over and over again. He was merciless, pounding so hard the whole couch was shaking, and she matched him, hands over her head to brace herself against the arm of the couch, hips tilting up into his, welcoming his cock into sweet, slick paradise.

They burned together, infernal fire fanned by divine incandescence, locked in an embrace of light and dark that were never meant to touch. As the pleasure crested and he came at last with a hoarse shout of, "Emma!", half curse and half prayer, he wondered dimly if he really wanted to corrupt her or if he hoped she could save him.

Even though he knew that was impossible. Angels could fall.

But demons could never ascend.

She made herself sit up, the sheet falling to her waist as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. They had made it into the bedroom eventually, with a detour along the way when Killian had pressed her against the wall in the hallway, and that time she hadn't told him to stop. Round three had taken place in the bed, and she had fallen asleep after. It had still been dark then, but now she could see the sun through the blinds and her internal sense of time told her it was 10:17. She hadn't planned to stay this long, and she should go home. It was a good thing that no one was expecting her at the office this morning, the gala always went late into the night and she, Mary Margaret and David all technically had the day off. She had planned to attend early morning Mass, and then go to the soup kitchen afterwards to help with the lunch prep, even if she wasn't on the schedule extra hands were always welcome. But that was before Killian had shown up at the gala with his smile and his outrageous flirting (sizable gift, seriously?) and she had known in an instant that he was there for her. He couldn't resist tormenting the men who knew him from his club and hitting on married women, but she had felt his presence even before she saw him, focused on her and the rest was all just petty amusement while he bided his time and waited to make his move. Since it was inevitable that he would approach her at some point, she had gone to him first.

If she left now then she could either go straight to the soup kitchen and then to afternoon Mass, or church first and check in at the office after.

"You know, sometimes I think you just use me for sex."

She answered in the same blase tone he had used, "Oh, you finally figured that out, huh? Took you long enough."

The sheets rustled and his arm slipped around her waist while his chin settled on her shoulder. She covered his hand with hers.

"I need to go," she said.

Killian tickled his fingers against her stomach,"You could stay. We can just stay here in bed all day. Use me as much as you like, love."

There was a hum in the back of her mind, the sound of all the prayers being offered up in that moment. She could separate out each little silvery thread and hear them all, and she heard the one he
was currently thinking, directed only at her.

But demons shouldn't pray, and angels shouldn't listen. She couldn't answer him.

Her shoulders slumped, "Killian...how long can this go on? Are we going to spend eternity sneaking around behind everyone's backs?"

She could feel him shrug and then the press of his mouth behind her ear, kissing her softly and completely unlike the fiery ravaging he had done with that mouth earlier. If she was one of the women he normally slept with, she'd be covered with hickies and beard burn, all over her breasts and neck and inner thighs. But even though her skin was smooth and unblemished she could still feel every spot where she should bear his marks.

"You know what I want, Emma, and it's not to spend eternity sneaking around," he answered simply.

She played with the hair on his forearm. He was a corrupter. She knew he wanted to corrupt her. She didn't blame him for that, he was a demon. It was his nature.

The arm around her waist pulled and she ended up on her back in the rumpled bed, looking up at him. A demon with a major case of bedhead, dark tufts of hair were sticking up at all angles. She reached up and cupped his face, running the pads of her fingers gently over his cheekbones and thumbing over the small scar that was the only remnant of his run in with the Inquisition centuries ago. His face was the first part of him she had ever touched with her bare hands, and she wasn't sure which one of them had been more shocked by it at the time.

He was on his side, propped up on one elbow, "You know, if you stay with me then you're really defending the virtue of many, blessed one. You're keeping me from all those innocents out there by distracting me with your heavenly beauty."

She couldn't resist a smile, "That's some very self-serving logic, infernal one."

"But you can't deny how sound it is. Who knows how many sins I would have committed so far today were it not for you."

"It's not even noon yet."

"At least twenty then," he insisted, leaning down.

They kissed languidly, tongues curling together, her hands going into his hair and making even more of a mess of it. When they broke apart he gave a boyish grin, "And I bought you some of those disgustingly sweet bear claws you like so much. It would be bad form for me not to at least offer a lady breakfast after such intense physical exertions."

He pushed his tongue against his teeth and grinned even wider, obviously thinking about the exertions the night before.

"Trying to lead me into temptation with donuts?" she teased.

"Well, gluttony is not my preferred method, but if it works...is it working?"

Of course he noticed that she was weakening, and he pressed his advantage, whispering in her ear as he sought her out under the sheet with warm hands. She stared up at the ceiling over his shoulder, no one was actually expecting her anywhere today. The gala had been a great success, they had raised enough to cover the shortfall from the previous months and fund them fully for another six. Some of
the donors had also expressed interest in also volunteering, but that would take time to co-ordinate.

"You are entitled to a day of rest, Emma," Killian mumbled, kissing her neck, "Knowing you I bet you haven't taken a single one in weeks."

"Not all day," she protested, "I can't stay all day,"

It was insanely reckless to stay at all, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Killian hopped out of bed with a gloating smile and a satisfied stretch, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck. He proclaimed that he'd start the coffeemaker and bring her a cup and a bear claw. She watched him leave, padding down to the kitchen completely nude and obviously unabashed about it. Modesty was not one of his non-existent virtues.

She burrowed back into the sheets, laying her head on her arm. Even though she didn't require much rest, she did need it on occasion and Killian was right, she hadn't taken a day off in weeks. Preparing for the gala had taken up a lot of time on top of everything else, and she was suddenly exhausted.

Of course, the amazing sex with her infernal lover probably also had something to do with it. Pure temptation in the form of Killian Jones.

Forgive me, blessed Father, please forgive me these moments of weakness.
He didn't use the kitchen much, but it was fully equipped with all the bells and whistles, the granite countertops and restaurant-quality appliances that were de rigueur these days, fueled by the popularity of the Food Network and all those home buying shows on HGTV. When he bought the condo he hadn't bothered with altering the builder's plans for the kitchen, purchasing the decor package that had the appliances, cabinets and assorted fixtures all included at a hefty markup so he didn't have to waste time looking at samples of tile and finishes. It was all very tasteful and for the most part, barely touched. In the past he'd employed cooks and scullery maids to serve him, but now he usually ate out or had food delivered.

The coffee maker did see regular use, and as he started a pot brewing he checked his phone. Since he hadn't gone to the club last night there was a flurry of texts from Peter and he quickly scrolled through them. A recap of the latest petty squabbles between the dancers, who were always jockeying with each other for the best customers and the choicest shifts. A report on a patron he was keeping an eye on, who was blowing far more cash in every visit lately than he could possibly afford. An update on the bartender who was skimming off the top, something he already knew but he was letting her think she was getting away with it. What had started as the odd twenty or fifty slipped into her pocket instead of the till was now entire bottles of top shelf liquor being sold with the transactions voided or just not rung up at all. The girl was getting greedy, her sticky fingers taking more and more of his money every night, and Peter kept a running total of the thefts.

She wasn't the first employee to steal from him and she wouldn't be the last. He made it easy for them on purpose, letting them dig themselves deeper and deeper as they grew complacent and enjoyed their ill-gotten gains. The bartender would be dealt with, eventually, but not at the moment, and he set the phone down without answering back. None of the messages were urgent, Peter could wait.

The coffee maker shut off and Killian poured out two mugs, adding cream and sugar to Emma's and leaving his black. A white bakery box sat on the counter and he opened the lid, wrinkling his nose at the smell that wafted out. The bear claws reeked of sugar, he had no idea how she could stomach the damn things. While he enjoyed fine food, he didn't really bother much with pastries or desserts and usually just drank coffee in the morning. Emma had quite a sweet tooth though, so he'd had Scarlet stop at a 24 hour grocery store after leaving the gala to get them for her. Temptation came in many forms, after all.

"I said I'd bring it up to you," he said, turning around. Emma was standing behind him, balanced on one foot with the other rubbing up and down her bare calf, dressed, of all things, in one of his T-shirts. She bit into the bear claw with relish and smiled.

"And I'm impatient," he scolded, picking up his coffee.

"I figured I'd save you the trip."

She leaned over to retrieve her own mug and the shirt rode up, revealing that she wasn't wearing anything underneath. Of course she wasn't, he'd destroyed her underwear in his haste the previous night. Her hair was loose, the elaborate style she'd worn for the gala was long gone and she tossed the heavy waves over her shoulder, gorging herself on her treat.

Emma paused between bites, her brow furrowing, "Stop smirking."
He looked at her over the rim of his mug, "I don't know what you're talking about."

It was difficult to keep a straight face when all he wanted to do was crow his victory from the rooftops. Emma had come to him and she had stayed the night, again. She was drinking coffee and eating breakfast in his kitchen, wearing his clothes, and showed no intention of leaving anytime soon. Her protests had been mere tokens, more for show than anything else, and he sensed that she was weakening, the walls she'd built against him finally crumbling and collapsing after his long siege. Maybe she was ready to succumb all the way.

"You make me so reckless," she'd said. He needed to encourage that, exploit it.

The last of the bear claw disappeared between her lips and she licked her fingers like a greedy child, "That was good. You don't want one?"

"I'll take a pass on that saccharine monstrosity, you know I don't care for sweets, Emma. Well, most sweet things, there is one exception I do like to...eat."

He let his gaze drift down her body to where the hem of his shirt hovered just below the sweetest part of her and ran his tongue across his upper lip at the sight, "A much tastier way to break the nightly fast, wouldn't you agree?"

Since he hadn't bothered to put on any clothes before coming downstairs there was nothing to hide the erection he was currently sporting at the thought of her sweet cunt. Not that he wanted to hide it, he wanted her to see him, he liked it, and from the look on her face she was certainly enjoying the view.

The coffee mugs were set aside and her mouth tasted of sugar, sticky glaze smeared on her lips. It was, as he suspected, not to his taste at all but it quickly dissolved into pure angel, sweeter than any confection and far more addicting. The edge of the counter dug into his back but he paid it no mind with Emma pressed to his front, her hands on his shoulders as they kissed and the soft cotton of the T-shirt rubbing against him, dragging across his skin when she rose up on her toes to better reach his mouth. Killian had both hands on the tight curve of her ass, slowly grinding himself against her and feeling his cock brush against her damp blonde curls.

Emma left his lips and kissed her way down his neck, scraping her teeth over his collarbone and making him shudder at the burst of pleasure-pain, moving lower, nosing her way through his chest hair and sinking down in front of him. He watched, enthralled, as she gripped his hips and bent her head with a murmured, "Let's see how tasty you are."

The wet heat of her mouth enveloped him, sucking hard, and he swore loudly, leaning back and laying his palms against the counter. If Emma wanted to she could bring any man to his knees with that mouth, the most pious of priests would strip off his collar and forsake his vows in a heartbeat for such a divine blowjob. That she lavished this pleasure on him was nothing short of a miracle, although not one that would be found in any holy text. She brought him right to the brink almost embarrassingly fast, doing positively unspeakable things with her tongue.

"You're not sweet," she said, pausing in her ministrations and looking up with her own smirk.

"No, but you love it, blessed one."

He hauled her up and sat her down on the breakfast bar, her legs dangled over the edge and he pushed her knees apart. It was the perfect height, Emma's heels pressed against his ass and her arms went around his neck as she sighed into his ear, "Yes, my demon, I do."
A dark thrill ran down his spine at the uncharacteristic note of possession in her voice. The T-shirt was bunched around her waist, he left it on and nibbled kisses on the bit of cleavage revealed by the V-neck. While he relished the feeling of being pressed skin-to-skin with Emma, there was something very appealing about seeing her in his clothes, swathed in something he owned and covered in his scent. Underneath the artificial "fresh meadow" smell of the laundry detergent his cleaning service used was his own natural musk that no cologne could ever fully mask, of burning embers, smoke and flame, the metallic tang of iron and the faint echo of sulphur and brimstone.

Her head tilted back when he slipped inside, her long throat bared to him, open and vulnerable, he ran his tongue down it and started to move. The tiles were cold against his bare feet, the granite counter hard and unyielding, but Emma was warm and soft and his. He buried his face in her shoulder and wrapped an arm around her back, bracing himself with one hand on the counter and grunting with each push of his hips. Her feet stayed firmly planted on his butt, her knees butterflied around him. Killian rocked into her, never pulling out fully, staying buried deep in his angel until he could hold back no longer. His groan of satisfaction was muffled by the T-shirt as he spent himself, pulsing and jerking until he went soft and slack.

"Fuck me, beata," he breathed.

A hand ran down his back, "I just did, damnate."

A loud buzzing sound interrupted the afterglow as his phone started vibrating on the counter, the screen lighting up with the call.

"Duty calls?" Emma asked, her hand slipping away and leaning back with her palms on the breakfast bar and her breasts heaving slightly under the cotton.

He felt a flicker of annoyance, cursing whoever was calling and that he had neglected to set the phone back to silent, "Whoever it is can fucking wait."

She untangled her legs from around him and he reached for the phone, turning it off and shoving it back across the counter. Emma slid off the counter, raising her arms in a stretch and making the T-shirt ride up again. He braced himself for the inevitable, expecting that she was going to make her excuses and leave now but she dropped her arms back down and merely said that she needed to take a shower.

It seemed like he would bear witness to more than one miracle today. She downed the last of her coffee and put the mug away in the dishwasher, pausing in the kitchen doorway to look at him over her shoulder, "Are you coming?"

Another dirty retort sprang to his tongue but he kept his mouth shut this time, leaving his own half-drunk coffee behind and following Emma up the stairs to the master bathroom.

The hours ticked on and she still gave no sign of wanting to leave. After the shared shower that he enjoyed very much, no sex but plenty of kissing and wet fondling under the guise of soaping each other up, he reheated the pot of coffee and this time they drank it in the rumpled and very well-used bed, with Emma dressed in another purloined T-shirt that she had snuck out of a dresser drawer after towelling off her hair.

"How did you wind up faring at the gala? Did all those rich assholes put their money where their mouths are and fill your empty coffers?" he asked.
Emma nodded, "Yeah. We did really well, actually, better than last year. I won't have to bother our anonymous benefactor again for a while."

She gave a wide grin and her foot nudged his. Killian set his coffee mug down on the nightstand and nudged back, "Well, your anonymous benefactor doesn't mind giving a little extra when it's needed."

Her teasing smile vanished and she gave him a serious look, "Thank you for that, Killian. We would have been in a serious bind if you hadn't helped us out last month, David was afraid checks were going to start bouncing."

He shrugged off her gratitude, "Happy to help."

"Mmm," she cleared her throat, "Well, you might not be happy about this, I also told some of the men at the gala a story about a runaway fifteen year old girl who was almost forced into the sex trade at a certain gentleman's club and came to us for assistance."

"Ah, preying on their guilt and hoping they'll repent?" he shook his head and laughed, "Emma, the ones who recognized me on sight are the kind that don't change. Maybe they'll stay away from the Jolly Roger for a week or two, but mark my words, they'll sin again. The guilty conscience will fade as soon as they get their next hard on, otherwise I'd have been out of business long ago. You can't save men like that."

She stretched out on the mattress and her fingers played with the edge of the towel wrapped around his waist, "I'll still try, Killian. Even if it means your club goes bankrupt and I lose my anonymous benefactor."

He snorted at the idea, "Not bloody likely. I do admire your tenacity, but there's always those who are beyond even your powers of redemption, blessed one."

The towel was tossed on the floor and he laid down. She scooted across the bed and set her head on his shoulder, her arm draping over his chest.

The angel sighed deeply, her nose brushing his neck, "We'll see."

She left just after sunset, still wearing his T-shirt with a pair of his track pants added, hanging loose on her hips and cuffed above her ankles so she wouldn't trip. Her lace gown was stuffed into a shopping bag with her little evening purse, he offered to have the dress sent out with his own dry cleaning but she demurred.

"Perhaps you should start keeping a few things here?" he suggested, looking her up and down, "Not like there isn't room in the closet."

She knotted the T-shirt at her waist and avoided the question, "I'll give these back to you later."

"Keep them," he said, eyeing the strip of pale skin on display between the pants and the shirt, the delicious curve of her waist bared, "They look much better on you anyway."

For a moment she just looked at him, tucking her hair behind her ears and hesitance flickered over her face so quickly he thought he might have imagined it.

"Goodnight, Killian. I'll call you soon."

One last sweet kiss, gentle and brief against his lips and then she was through the front door, closing it quietly behind her. A town car was waiting downstairs to take her home, he had already prepaid
the fare with a generous tip included. Even though she could appear and disappear at will it was more discreet for them to move about as an ordinary mortal would, the driver would take one look at the beautiful blonde wearing men's clothes leaving an upscale condo building and draw his own conclusion about an ordinary walk of shame. The truth would remain their shared secret, for now.

After she was gone he sat in his office with his laptop open in front of him, drumming his fingers on the desk. He would go to the club in a few hours and he was already dressed for it in a dark navy suit and white shirt, with a heavy platinum watch on his wrist and a thick chain around his neck. The casual clothes like the ones Emma had left with were reserved for private wear, he always made sure he looked the part in public and in front of his employees.

Peter phoned, again, he had been the one who almost interrupted the bout of kitchen sex with Emma, calling to see if his texts had been received. Killian answered the second call and listened to Peter's whining about not getting a reply for all of thirty seconds before tartly reminding his manager, "You work for me and not the other way around. We'll discuss this later."

He did a little online shopping after he hung up on the irritating snot, ordering some insanely expensive silk and lace bra and panty sets for Emma to replace the ones he ruined and emailing his preferred florist to have an arrangement delivered to her apartment tomorrow, specifying that he wanted two dozen purple tulips, no substitutions. The success of the bear claws also had him hunting for a bakery, checking reviews to figure out which one was considered the best in the city. Plenty of women had been seduced by his gifts, costly perfumes, jewelry, furs (before they became politically incorrect), but Emma was much more difficult. It was a fine line to walk between what she would accept from him and what she would refuse. He'd keep her in complete luxury if she allowed it, but until she finally gave in he had to hold back and restrain himself, somewhat.

But speaking of women who were more easily swayed he noticed an email in his inbox from Caroline Spencer, suggesting they meet for lunch to continue their conversation from the gala. The restaurant she wanted to make a reservation at was located in one of the hotels downtown and he knew that was no accident. Some flirting over the meal, perhaps a hand disappearing under the tablecloth to caress a thigh, and then a room upstairs and "I've never done this before" and "it just happened" and every other excuse in the book. It was an old dance that he'd shared with many a man's wife, the music had changed over the years but the steps were still basically the same.

Killian leaned back in the chair. If Spencer did become mayor, having a hold on his wife as well as him might prove useful. He left the email unanswered for now, he wanted to think about the possibilities some more before replying.

With a few clicks he brought up several bank accounts and initiated a series of money transfers. His promised campaign donation to Albert Spencer was first, fulfilling their deal. Other transfers covered various expenses, chief among them the bribes he regularly paid. He had a collection of useful people on retainer, city inspectors who renewed his liquor license without question and squelched complaints, the dirty cops who ensured that a blind eye was always turned and no raids were ever conducted on his premises. All the usual costs of doing business. The last transfer came from an account he kept in a bank in the British Virgin Islands, a longstanding tax haven for hiding assets. The money was sent in a matter of milliseconds to the one recipient he had set up for the account.

"Enjoy my sizable gift, Miss Swan," he said out loud to the empty room as he hit the return key.

The money was above and beyond his regular contribution to her charity, a fact known only to the two of them and something he kept very well hidden. Fucking an angel was one thing, but tithing to said angel would be a little more difficult to explain if it was ever discovered.

For the most part he operated independently and with little oversight. Unlike some of the others he
had no great craving for power, no urge to seek the unholiest of thrones. The infighting that went on was as petty as anything that happened behind the scenes in his club, endless feuds for position among the ambitious members of his kind. He took no part in those battles, content with his own little fiefdom where as long as he paid his tribute to his king, he was left alone. A faithful servant in eternity, his loyalty had never been questioned and his leash was left loose as a result. The left hand didn't know what the right was doing and the little favours he granted to his angel went unnoticed, carefully concealed behind his many sins.

He closed the laptop and sat in the dark, reaching into the bottom drawer of his desk and opening the hidden panel underneath a pile of paperwork. From the concealed compartment he retrieved a small wooden box and set it on the desk. He flicked open the lid and carefully withdrew the item inside, wrapped in a length of velvet to cushion it. Despite the lack of light he could see perfectly, and he pulled out an oval case made from solid silver, intricately etched with a repeating pattern of lilies with inlaid peridot leaves. It looked like a large pocket watch or perhaps a compass, but when he touched his thumb to the knob on the side and the tiny hinges swung open he was met with a painted miniature on the inside.

It had come up for auction in postwar Paris and he immediately snapped it up. Sold by a once grand family that had lost most of their fortune as so many had in those days, their loss was his gain. Emma's face looked out at him from the silver frame, painted by the same loving hand as *The Angel Listens*. Unlike that piece, the miniature was a simple portrait, head and shoulders in three quarter view but with the eyes facing forward, towards the viewer. She had been depicted naturally, which was unusual, the hair down instead of styled in an elaborate coiffure and no white powder or false beauty marks added to her face. The affection the artist had for the subject was clear in every precise brushstroke, and the subject's smile and soft gaze seemed to return it.

A flash of jealousy flared low in his gut even though he knew the man was long dead. Emma had been his muse once, and his paintings of her were the best work he had ever done. Most were lost now, and his name had faded into the ether of time, the miniature had only been described in the auction catalogue as an unknown 18th century lady, sold as a lot with some silver snuffboxes that were relics of another time. He remembered those days, the dawning of the Age of Enlightenment, the fall of the ancien regime, an era when the whole world changed around them. Emma had been wary of him then, hesitant to even touch him, and he could still recall the feel of her hand on his cheek for the very first time, that spark across his skin like the strike of steel to flint.

He had almost set the chamber they had been standing in on fire that night.

The miniature was carefully wrapped back up and put away in the desk. Killian stood up, sliding his phone into his pocket and grabbing his car keys on his way out the door. Since he was driving himself tonight he opted for the Viper instead of the Escalade.

It was all about the image.

Emma might be out and about on the streets, driving around in her bright yellow Volkswagen and handing out coffee and sandwiches to the homeless. With that graceful smile and a rare kind word for those who were lost and alone. Trying to save those that the rest of society had all but given up on.

Many called her an angel.

Some might even realize that it was the literal truth.
Chapter 9

She slipped out of the bed, striding naked across the room and reached for the bathrobe hanging on the back of the door. Will propped one arm behind his head, enjoying the fantastic view.

"You need to get dressed," she said with her back to him.

"In a minute," he mumbled, staring at the pert curve of her ass. She thrust her arms through the sleeves of the robe and tied the belt, covering up the best damn body he'd ever seen in person and he made a disappointed face, wheedling and beckoning with one hand, "Come back to bed, sweetheart."

"Will!" Ana snapped angrily, turning to glare at him over her shoulder, "I need to get ready for work, and so do you. Now get up and get dressed."

He fell back to the pillows with a sigh, staring up at the ceiling as she disappeared into the bathroom. The pipes squealed and the shower came on a moment later, and he briefly considered joining her before throwing the blankets back and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He reached down and retrieved his jeans from where they lay crumpled on Ana's bedroom floor.

They'd gone out a few times and fallen into bed easily enough, but Ana was adamant that they weren't dating. She was pretty upfront about what she wanted in a boyfriend, and her main requirement was a bank balance with at least seven figures, preferably eight.

The boss had said she had expensive tastes, and the bastard was right. Her closet was packed with designer clothes, shoes, and purses that cost as much as a used car. All were gifts from customers at the club. Even his new salary wasn't enough to keep up, her usual clientele was more along the lines of pro athletes and investment bankers. She was getting ready for tonight's shift and he really wasn't looking forward to another night of watching her zero in on the next rich jackass who walked into the Jolly Roger with a limitless credit card.

Will started to dress, tugging on his T-shirt and scrubbing a hand over his face. Why did he even care? He was getting fucking amazing sex without any strings, and it wasn't like he wanted a relationship either. Just enjoy the ride for as long as it lasted, and move on to the next girl when he got bored. There'd been offers, some of the other dancers had whispered things in his ear, passed him their phone numbers and suggested meeting up outside the club. But he had the feeling that they weren't really interested in him, it was all about his position. He had access to the boss that they didn't, knew things about him they didn't and he had quickly learned that most of the dancers were desperate for whatever advantage they could get over each other. At least Ana had never pressed him for information about Mr. Jones.

But then, she was the top dancer at the club. She didn't need to.

The blast of the hair dryer came from the other side of the bathroom door and he left without saying goodbye, grabbing his jacket and making sure the front door was locked behind him. His motorcycle sat on the pavement outside her apartment and he kicked it to life, heading down the road and back to his own place. The ride cleared his head a little bit, but despite the fact that he had just been spectacularly laid by a gorgeous woman and should be feeling good, he still felt a vague sense of dissatisfaction that had been plaguing him for weeks on end.

His own apartment was cold and smelled a little stale, he hadn't been home much in the past few weeks. Between work and Ana and his new...pastime, he'd been busy. He ran errands for Jones all
across the city, some made sense and some really didn't. The other new guy, Ben Kriesel, accompanied him at times and frankly, he gave Will the creeps. He hardly ever talked, he was pale and always seemed to be on the verge of breaking out in a cold sweat, it was like hanging out with a fucking zombie. But he didn't dare bring up his dislike of the man to Mr. Jones, not with the mood he'd been in lately.

The boss had been quiet but short-tempered when he did speak, seemingly annoyed with everyone around him before retreating to his office alone with the door firmly shut behind him instead of sitting in his booth at the club. The dancers and staff all speculated wildly as to why he was acting so withdrawn and irritable, but Will suspected that he knew the real reason behind Jones's wild mood swings, recalling the last time he had acted this way and the woman who had been present and then absent both times.

Emma Swan.

As far as he could tell she hadn't visited the boss since that night Will had picked her up from that fancy party at the museum. She had sat in the backseat of the SUV while he drove, but he had felt her eyes on him the whole ride and when he had glanced in the rearview mirror she had been watching him.

"I haven't seen you at Mass again," she said out of the blue. His fingers tightened on the wheel as he turned a corner. It was late enough that the roads were practically empty, and he didn't have the excuse of having to pay attention to the traffic to avoid conversation. Plus, he was still worried that she might change her mind and tell Mr. Jones that he had insulted her outside of the church that day when he had gone to the service on a whim and run into her.

"It's not really my kind of thing," he answered lamely, looking straight ahead at the street they were currently driving on. High-end stores lined the road on either side, they were in the richest part of the city and only a few minutes away from Mr. Jones's condo. He willed the SUV to go faster. The lights just ahead turned red and he braked, cursing and swearing inside his head.

"Hmm," she made an appraising noise and he could feel her eyes on him even though he kept his gaze forward and didn't look up into the mirror, "Did you find the answers to your questions then, Will?"

What questions? Why did his little sister have to die? Why did he take the easy way out and became a thief instead of working an honest job? Why couldn't he get his head on straight and just enjoy his new life without feeling guilty? Why was he half in love with a woman who made no bones about the fact that she wanted a rich sugar daddy to support her and would drop him in a heartbeat if one came along?

He pulled into the parking garage and guided Emma towards the elevator as per the boss's orders. One was ready and waiting with the doors open, and he gave a silent prayer of thanks that he didn't have to wait around with Emma and endure her probing gaze any longer. She gave him a sharp look when she brushed past him and got on the elevator, and he felt a flush rise on the back of his neck.

"Seek, and ye shall find, Will Scarlet."

She reached over and pushed the button for the penthouse after offering up the quote he vaguely recognized. He gave her a brief nod, "Enjoy the rest of your evening, Miss Swan."

Will showered quickly, thoughts drifting between Ana, Mr. Jones, and his weirdly religious girlfriend. After that night he had gone to Mass again and Emma was there, sitting in a pew with her hands folded demurely in her lap. He had chucked another fifty into the collection plate and looked
away when she turned her head and smiled at him. Every time he went to the church she was there, Will was ready to believe that she must live in the damn bell tower like Quasimodo or something. Always with that smile, like she knew all the answers to the questions he didn't want to ask.

He quickly ran a razor over his cheeks and chin and got dressed. Navy suit, crisp white shirt, silk tie. It was a good thing he was now getting paid bank, the dry cleaning bills were insane. He fixed the knot in his tie, looking in the mirror. As far as he knew, no one else was aware of his new hobby of attending Mass, or whatever it was. Ana would probably laugh her ass off, as near as he could tell she hadn't grown up attending Sunday services every week like he had and probably had never really gone to church at all, save for the odd wedding or funeral maybe. He wasn't about to tell her and open himself up to her ridicule, people like them didn't go to church. Mr. Jones might know what he was up to, if Emma had told him. If she had the boss hadn't said anything about it, not that Will really expected him too. He went to Mass on his own time, not when he was on the clock. Why would Jones give a shit?

Will stared at his reflection, steeling himself for another night of standing next to Killian Jones and keeping his poker face under the boss's piercing ice-blue stare, another night of watching Ana slip into the private rooms with her customers and pretending to himself that she was merely giving the men lap dances and nothing more.

He didn't need to seek a damn thing, he had what he wanted and he could handle anything and everything that was thrown at him.

With a nod to his reflection he grabbed his keys off the hall table and switched off the light, heading back out into the city. The man who went to church and laughed in bed with Ana was gone for now, the one who worked for Killian Jones had taken his place.

The cafe was small, but bright and airy with cheery chalkboard menus and mason jars filled with bunches of white and yellow daisies in the centre of each table. Every single one was occupied, it was well known as one of the best cheap brunch spots in the city.

Emma ordered strawberry pancakes, a side of melon and the cafe’s signature hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon, while Mary Margaret chose a spinach omelet and fresh squeezed orange juice.

"Coming right up!" the waitress said with a wide smile, tapping her pen against her pad and tossing her long dark hair over her shoulder. She handed the order ticket to the grey-haired woman behind the counter and refilled coffee mugs at the next table.

Mary Margaret was uncharacteristically quiet, fidgeting in her chair and shredding a napkin into long thin strips with nervous hands. Emma watched her, she had already guessed why her friend wanted to meet this morning but she waited for her to speak first.

"We're going to have a baby!" she finally blurted out, after the waitress dropped off their drinks and sashayed back into the kitchen. Her face was lit up, cheeks pink and glowing with happiness. Emma smiled, feeling Mary Margaret's joy practically bubbling in the air around them.

"Congratulations! David must be so thrilled.

She had heard the prayers from the both of them over the past few months, the fervent wish for a child and the disappointment when they failed to conceive. She'd longed to answer their prayer, but the blessing of a baby was beyond her ability to grant. It grieved her that all she could do for her friends was listen.
Mary Margaret sighed, her chin dipping a bit, "Thrilled...and a little terrified too, I think. His dad, well, he wasn't the greatest role model, and David's worried about how he'll handle fatherhood."

"Well, he'll have time to get used to the idea. How far along are you?" Emma asked.

A hand was laid on her still-flat stomach and Mary Margaret leaned back in her chair, peering down and smoothing her blue polka-dot dress over her midsection, "About six weeks. I know it's early, and we're not telling anyone else just yet, but I had to share the news with you!"

The food arrived, large plates piled high with generous portions. The waitress set them down with a smile and a wink and they both dug in while Mary Margaret chatted away excitedly, about their plans for the nursery and the new crib David had already bought.

Emma wasn't surprised by that. David might be a bit nervous about becoming a parent, but she had seen him with the children of the people they assisted and the runaway teenagers who came to them for help. He kept a basket of toys in his office for little ones to play with while he helped their parents fill out applications for low income housing and coached them for job interviews. The skittish and distrustful teens also opened up to him where others had failed, he had a knack for coaxing them out of their protective shells. She told her friend the truth, "He'll be a wonderful dad, Mary Margaret, and you'll be a great mom."

She beamed from under her dark bangs, tucking them behind her ears, "There's something else, Emma. David's going to kill me because we wanted to ask you this together, but I can't help myself. Will you be our baby's godmother?"

Of course the woman had no idea what she really was and the somewhat ironic nature of her request. Mary Margaret viewed her as a friend, a close friend, but there were many things she didn't know. Emma rarely revealed her true nature these days and most people would simply close their eyes and refuse to believe even if she did. Appearing to saints in visions and raining damnation down on sinners had fallen by the wayside, the world had changed and the angels had followed suit. Well, some did. Some had more trouble adapting to change, they weren't mortal but they were like mortals in that regard. She had found a place for herself in this new world, she worked small miracles where she still could and nurtured the faithful outside of the church more than inside it now with her little charity.

The fact that Shared Blessings had been made possible in the first place by Killian's financial support and would have gone under if it hadn't been for him was another great irony. He had managed to tempt her away from Heaven, just not in the way he wanted. She might have withdrawn from the mortal world and retreated to her eternal home along with the others who had left if she didn't have another way to help those who still called out for aid.

But she didn't usually get to answer requests like this one.

She reached across the table and gave Mary Margaret's wrist a gentle squeeze, "I would be greatly honoured."

They toasted playfully with their drinks and continued to eat. The pancakes were excellent, light and fluffy and studded with strawberries that were obviously fresh, not frozen. Mary Margaret was inhaling her omelet, talking about how her appetite had changed already and she was hungry all of the time now. Emma listened, hearing the words Mary Margaret spoke out loud and the ones she didn't. For eternity she'd heard the prayers of mothers, the hopes and dreams they had for their children, the despair when they strayed and faltered in the world. Mary Margaret and David were good souls, kind, generous people, and she made a silent vow that she would watch over their child for his or her entire life.
After all, an angel as a godmother, who could be better suited to such a task?

"So," Mary Margaret said, toying with a forkful of egg. "Anything new in your love life, Emma?"

She swallowed her bite of syrup-dipped deliciousness and answered lightly, "You know I'm married to the job, it kind of gets in the way of having a love life."

It was basically the truth, even though her "job" was actually a divine mission. Over the years she had taken lovers, but the relationships always invariably came to an end. The sacrament of marriage was reserved for mortal souls, she could not fully cleave herself to another. The ones who shared her bed for a time moved on, like the man who had once painted her centuries ago. They had other destinies to fulfill, wives, children, before they inevitably passed on to the next world and she remained behind.

"At the mayor's gala you were dancing with a guy, Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome or whatever his real name is. The one with the blue eyes? He looked pretty into you, have you talked to him since?"

Mary Margaret's tone was casual but Emma heard the underlying tone of interest. She cursed her own recklessness, dancing with Killian in public like that was a mistake she should have never made. The last thing she needed was for her friend to start getting ideas and try to find out more about him.

"Yes," she admitted, choosing her words carefully, "But I've spoken with him enough to know he's not the man for me."

It wasn't technically a lie, since Killian wasn't actually a man. Certainly it was a sin of omission though.

"What's his name?" Mary Margaret asked.

There wasn't a snowball's chance in the whole of the infernal expanse of hell that Emma would give her Killian's real name. She wouldn't understand why it was not a word she should ever utter, even unaware of it's potential power. The dark path lay behind a demon's name, beckoning and enticing the curious and unwary. He would never go near anyone under her protection, but Mary Margaret and David didn't need to catch even the briefest glimpse into his world, both his public life as Mr. K. Jones, owner of the Jolly Roger, or his real purpose as Killian, demon and corrupter.

Emma glanced at the waitress and willed her to look up. She did at once, pulling the bill from the pocket of her short apron and coming over to the table drop it off with another bright smile, asking if they enjoyed the meal. Mary Margaret answered, praising the spinach omelet as they both pulled out their wallets and divvied up the check. Emma drained the last of her hot chocolate while she talked to the server and by the time their change had been given back and they were packed up and ready to leave, Mary Margaret had forgotten her question about Killian's name.

Small miracles.

The soup kitchen's busiest day was Sunday, when they served dinner to a full house and usually had a line of waiting people out the door. No one was turned away on Sundays and it required a dedicated group of volunteers to prep, cook, serve, and clean. They had been able to buy some better equipment with the money raised at the mayor's gala, but many hands were still needed to peel and chop, mix and bake and turn out a decent meal for the city's poorest souls.

Most of the volunteers were regulars who greeted Emma with smiles and hugs when she arrived at the kitchen's storefront location after her brunch date with Mary Margaret. Father Hopper wasn't on the schedule, but two young men who had joined the congregation at St Raphael's recently were
present, having heard about the kitchen's need for helping hands from the priest. Their names were John and Michael, and they were a bit overdressed for the work in almost identical sober, starched button-down shirts that were sure to get splattered and spilled on. They were a bit quiet but polite and well-mannered, tying on the aprons and donning the hairnets they were given without complaint. A woman Emma had met at the gala had also come by with her daughter, who needed to do her volunteer hours to fulfil the graduation requirements at her high school. The girl quickly commandeered one of the new KitchenAid mixers they were quite proud of and set to work making cupcakes for dessert.

It might well have been Killian's money that paid for the shiny red appliance. The donation he made to them after the gala had almost made David choke on his coffee when they opened the office the following Monday and he saw the email from the bank with the deposit information.

Kilian always was a bit of a show-off. Even anonymously it seemed he couldn't resist one-upping the other donors, although his contribution would never be acknowledged.

Aside from the donation he had also sent her flowers, multiple bouquets of purple tulips, pink camellias, red roses, and the ones he sent her most frequently, pure white gardenias. Thankfully he had them all sent to her apartment this time, not the office, a new arrangement arriving just as the old one was beginning to wither and fade. A large box from a luxury retailer had also arrived by courier, filled with lingerie all perfectly folded in gold tissue paper and tied with matching ribbons. The card in the box simply had "For Emma" on the front and the letter "K" on the inside and nothing else. She knew what the gift was for, to replace the one set he had ripped and burned off her body that night after the gala. While a strip club owner might be expected to send things like pleather bras and vinyl corsets to his lover, Killian had excellent taste and everything in the box was gorgeous, silk and lace underwear in delicate pastel colours. It was also, she noted, all non-returnable and non-refundable.

Clever demon.

She hung up her jacket and sweater in the kitchen's tiny staff closet and donned her own apron over her plain T-shirt and jeans, losing herself for a while in the labour-intensive but simple work. Just before the doors were opened to the hungry men, women and children the group of volunteers all joined hands behind the counter and bowed their heads. They offered up a prayer of thanks, the old hands reciting the familiar words with ease while the newcomers stayed respectfully silent. The mother and daughter just listened while John and Michael were praying on their own, rather reverently inside their heads.

Many of those who were waiting outside were also regulars, filing in quietly and taking their seats at the long tables in an orderly fashion. They had strict rules at the soup kitchen about manners and good behaviour, both from the clients and the volunteers. Anyone who showed up visibly intoxicated or high wasn't seated, but they were sent on their way with a bag containing a sandwich, granola bar and piece of fruit and told they were always welcome to come back sober. A number of them usually did.

They had to do three rounds of seatings to serve everyone who showed up, long hot work of getting the large trays in and out of the ovens, cleaning and resetting the tables, and keeping the line moving. John and Michael rolled up their sleeves, loosening their collars and wiping their sweaty brows with paper towels, and the teenager volunteer, Aurora, had to take a ten minute break at one point to compose herself, upset by the sheer number of children who had shown up with their parents. She returned with red eyes but handed out her cupcakes with a smile, crouching down and talking softly to each kid as she put the dessert on their plates.

At the end of the night Aurora was already promising to return on Wednesday for that night's dinner.
shift in addition to the Sundays she had signed up for to cover her volunteer requirement. John and Michael both shook Emma's hand and praised the kitchen's efforts to feed the hungry, also saying they would be back soon to help out again. They offered to see her home safely and she waved them off, thanking them for taking the time to volunteer and seeing them out the door.

She did one final round to ensure everything was back in place, the ovens were all switched off and the pantry was securely locked before slipping her dove-grey sweater and tan leather jacket back on to head home. Her car was just where she left it down the block, while petty vandalism and theft was somewhat of a problem in the transitional neighbourhood where the kitchen was located, her yellow Bug was well known and was always left alone.

It was very late by the time Emma returned to her apartment but she wasn't tired, she didn't have a mortal constitution that was affected by long hours or physical labour. Another cellophane-wrapped delivery from the florist was waiting for her, left on the floor in front of her apartment door. She lifted it up and carried it inside with her. It was the largest of the ones he'd been sending lately, bright, oversized bird of paradise flowers with a little white card attached that was again signed with only "K". The arrangement took up half her coffee table and she sighed, although they had an agreement that he could send her flowers and she wouldn't refuse them, he was going overboard lately and she really should rein him in.

He answered on the first ring when she called with a hurried, "Give me two minutes and I'll call you back."

The thumping music in the background told her Killian was at his club. She had never set foot in it, although she could imagine what it was like. Brothels didn't really change all that much, no matter what people today thought of the supposed prudishness of earlier times.

Her phone lit up and she swiped her finger across the screen to answer, "Hi."

"Emma. You rang?"

The music was gone now and there was only Killian's voice coming through the line, he had obviously retreated somewhere private to return her call. She stared at the orange flowers he had sent and suddenly couldn't bring herself to tell him to stop. It was too much but she didn't care, he may be calling her from his den of sin and vice across town but the tulips and roses and birds of paradise reminded her of his secret moments of grace, the money he freely gave her despite the risk he took in doing so, the long list of favours he had done since the day they met. Perhaps it had all been with an ulterior motive in mind, but the fact that he was even capable of such acts of generosity, that he could even look into the light, well, far lesser things had once been called miracles.

"Killian? Do you have some time to talk right now?"

"For you darling? I have all the time in the world."

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**Aix-en-Provence, 1694**

He sensed the divine presence the moment he slipped noiselessly over the windowsill and into the dark bedchamber. After a moment's pause where the urges to fight or flee the light warred within him, he relaxed, recognizing that particular heavenly aura.

"Blessed one."

The candles in the room all ignited at his command and her voice came from behind him.
"Killian."

This was an unexpected surprise. The richly appointed bedchamber belonged to a young, unmarried noblewoman, a virtuous creature who had dreamed of nothing but taking the veil at the Ursuline convent nearby and devoting her life to holy service. Or it had been her sole dream until he had begun to fill her mind with longings of a different kind, dark images of carnality that had her flinging off her nightclothes against the rising heat in her blood and writhing helplessly on her bed, her wandering hands fruitlessly seeking satisfaction while he watched unseen from the shadows.

He turned and Emma was standing in a pool of yellow candlelight, regarding him with an unreadable expression across the few squares of polished floor that separated them. It had been several years since he'd seen her in person, but the correspondence that had started between them in London had continued at odd intervals, missives arriving at his various residences addressed simply to "Killian" in her elegant hand and never failing to bring a smile to his face.

"I was unaware you were also in France now, or I would have come at once to pay my respects," he said with a bow.

A faint look of amusement crossed her face at that, "Are you certain I would have received you, infernal one? But in fact I have actually only just arrived, at the behest of a rather distraught young comtesse who has been praying desperately for salvation from the demon who is tormenting her."

"Oh?" he felt his own amusement play across his lips, "If you heard the noises she makes you would hardly think her distressed. Besides, she summoned me."

He refrained from adding that the girl had no idea what she was invoking the night she and her cousin had sought to amuse themselves with occult practices they didn't really understand and spoke his name at the centre of their ritual. The cousin had eagerly welcomed his subsequent nocturnal visits to her bed, even if she now despaired of managing to hide her ruined state when she wed her fiancé in a few weeks' time. With one seduced and permanently branded with his mark, he had moved on to the other.

The angel crossed her arms over her chest, drawing his attention to the soft swells of her breasts under the simple, unadorned gown she wore, "Killian, the poor girl is on the verge of a nervous collapse. She had reached out for succour and I will grant it, if you still wish to have her you must now go through me. However, I have come to see if you will keep your word and release her at my request."

The night had just become far more interesting. While he had intended to reveal himself fully and lie with the girl at last, taking his pleasure and her innocence in one fell swoop, he was not disappointed by the turn of events. As enjoyable as the deflowering would be, he would much rather spend some time in Emma's company instead. He couldn't get into her head and influence her the way he could with a mortal mind, but the challenge only made the possibility of eventual surrender all the more sweet.

However, he could not grant her what she wanted so easily and he wondered just how much the young noblewoman had admitted to when she prayed. He went over to the bed and stroked a hand lightly down the embroidered coverlet, leaving a long dark scorch mark on the satin as he went.

"I have no desire to challenge you for the girl, but Mademoiselle la Comtesse has made me a promise, contracted herself to me in exchange for certain...satisfactions. Such contracts are not so easily broken, beata, as you well know."

Emma didn't move, "But do you have the ability to free her from your agreement? As you said you
would grant me your assistance if I asked for it when it was within your power to do so."

"Yes," he answered with a nod, "But not without an exchange of some kind. The girl was terribly foolish with the vows she made into the darkness where I stood. I am bound to collect something of value tonight or I must seek her out again, otherwise I would withdraw as you have asked."

She clasped her hands loosely in front of her and tilted her head, "Is that the truth, damnate?"

It was, although he understood her doubt. He smiled a toothsome grin, "Do you trust me?"

The room was plunged into darkness again as the candles suddenly blew out. Killian frowned, it had not been done on his command and he was confused for a moment before he realized it must have been her.

He could still see Emma where she stood, he was a creature of darkness and he didn't need illumination to make out the angel's slender figure or the fall of her hair over her shoulder. But as he looked upon her he saw the faint pulse under her skin, a glowing white light in the place where a mortal would carry their fragile human heart.

It flared up in him again, the need to fight or flee that light but he forced himself not to move, even as his hands curled into fists at his sides and his palms started to burn.

"What are you doing?" he gasped, fearing that she was about to make good on her promise to defend the girl from him and was forcing him into a physical spar after lulling him with the playful verbal joust.

"Do you trust me?" Emma asked, repeating his own question to her. He stayed his hand as she came closer, moving slowly and carefully in a graceful glide across the floor with her eyes locked on his.

The touch of her fingers on his cheek nearly made him rear back like a spooked horse, seeking to throw off the unfamiliar. He could feel the light on his skin, it was as warm as the summer sun blazing suddenly to life in the middle of the harshest winter but the blinding and binding glare that he expected to bring him to his knees and incapacitate him was absent. There was nothing but the soft caress, along the line of his jaw and drawing close to his lips before moving back to cup the side of his face. His eyes closed and he turned into the angel's touch, nuzzling against her palm. Everything else faded away and he wanted nothing more than to feel this way for the rest of eternity.

When Emma pulled back his eyes snapped open, "What was that?" he demanded.

A smile crossed her lips, "Something of value. A moment of divine radiance, do you consider that a fair exchange for what she promised you, Killian?"

Shock flooded through him, "You touched me with your light? But it didn't ...it should have...why didn't it hurt? How did you know it wouldn't harm me?"

The smile grew wider and she answered with one word, "Faith."

He had no response to that as she lifted her hand and turned it to and fro in front of her face, examining it as she asked, "Can you light the candles?"

The flames leapt halfway to the ceiling and left burn marks on the walls as he willed the wicks to life. Emma started, looking up at the sudden conflagration that died down as soon as he realized what he was doing.

The angel laughed, clashing the hand over her mouth and he shook his head and looked away,
strange new sensations prickling under his skin.

"You didn't burn me."

He faced her again and saw that she was speaking of the hand that had touched him, pushing up her sleeve to reveal the white skin that was smooth and unmarked.

"Were you expecting me to?" Killian asked.

"No," Emma replied.

She picked up her skirts and went to the window, throwing the sash wide and trying to wave out the smoke that hung in the chamber.

"Infernal fire," he explained, "Don't bother, it will linger for days."

The feel of her hand on his skin lasted for far longer and when it finally faded away he was filled with sudden conviction that he would get to savour it again one day. Of course Emma would probably correct him and refer to said conviction by another word, the one she had used.

_Faith._
Chapter 10

The man was slumped down in his seat, fidgeting and not meeting the boss's eyes. His tailored suit was obviously expensive but it was a wrinkled mess and his shirt collar hung open, the white fabric stained dark with the sweat that also beaded on his forehead and plastered his thinning hair to his head. He reeked of BO, booze and stale cigarette smoke and Will tried not to let his nose wrinkle in disgust when he caught a whiff of the rank stench. The man was a customer of the Jolly Roger and he'd been on a hell of a bender, showing up right when the club opened three nights in a row and not leaving until dawn the next day but by the looks of things - the party was about to come to an end.

Mr. Jones sat behind his desk, as cool as a cucumber while he ignored the squirming customer and focused on whatever he was looking at on his computer. Finally, he reached for the stack of credit and debit cards sitting on his desk and started dealing them out in front of him like a hand of poker.

"Rejected. Maxed out. Rejected, rejected, you reported this one stolen, maxed out."

The last card was dropped on the desk and the boss leaned back in his chair, giving the customer a hard look that Will was surprised didn't make him piss himself right there and then.

"Mr. Preston," the boss continued, "you have racked up a considerable bill in my establishment that you clearly are incapable of paying. Bottle service. Cuban cigars. So much cocaine that it's a wonder your nose hasn't fallen off yet. Lap dances. Group lap dances. Private shows, you really like to watch, don't you? Did you think all that was free? That the girls were fawning over you because they actually liked you? Everything you ordered on and off the menu had a price."

"I'm good for it, I swear," Preston mumbled, looking like he wanted to sink right into the floor and disappear.

"Really?" Jones questioned with mock surprise, "Then why did you call your bank and try to dispute the charges from your visit last week saying you've never set foot in a place called the Jolly Roger?"

Preston swallowed audibly and didn't speak. Will stayed motionless, wondering what Mr. Jones was going to do to the man.

"That's considered fraud, Mr. Preston. You think I don't have proof of what you do in my club? Would you like me to provide said proof to the bank? Or to your employer, since this is a corporate card."

He flicked one of the credit cards towards Preston, who flinched and slumped down even further into the chair. The boss steepled his fingers together and lowered his chin, "A man must pay his debts. The wicked borrows, but does not pay back. You have borrowed forty-six thousand dollars in total with these bounced charges and I am giving you a generous three days to come up with the money, plus an extra four grand for all the aggravation you've caused me tonight."

Will almost blanched at the number and Preston actually started to whimper, burying his face in his hands and moaning, "Fifty grand in three days? How am I supposed to come up with that?"

"That's your problem, not mine," the boss retorted. Preston's phone was sitting on the desk and Mr. Jones picked it up, ignoring his feeble protest and thumbing through the call log and texts.

"Texting Erica you were working late on Thursday when you were actually here, spanking one of my dancers and telling her to call you Daddy, if I recall. Who's Erica?"
Preston was silent and Mr. Jones looked at him over the phone, eyes narrowing and voice going low, "When I ask someone a question in my club they answer it."

Will had to glance away, even though he wasn't the target of the boss's ice blue stare.

"My wife," Preston admitted after a few seconds where Will could have sworn the temperature in the room rose several degrees. The sweat was dripping off Preston now, rivulets of it running down the back of his neck and the underarms of his dress shirt were probably soaked through.

"Hmm," Mr. Jones went back to the phone, "Your wife. I'm guessing you've never spanked her, huh? Who's this?"

He turned the phone and Will saw a picture on the screen, a beaming teenager with long blonde hair. Preston started to shake and his voice was a bare whisper, "My daughter."

The boss's lip curled in a leer as he studied the photo, "She could work off your debt for you here. Wouldn't take long for her to raise the fifty thousand once she takes her clothes off on my stage."

"You son of a bitch, she's sixteen!"

Preston tried to stand up and lunge for Jones but Will clapped both hands on his shoulders and forced him back down into the chair. The boss gave him an approving nod before focusing back on the angry customer, "And just how old do you think the dancer you were spanking on Thursday is? The one you had strip in front of you and bend over with her lovely bare ass in the air? She's young enough to be your daughter and you fucking knew it."

Mr. Jones wagged a finger in reproach as he shook his head and tsked, "Oh the hypocrisy. You have three days. Take out a title loan on that Mercedes in the parking lot. Hock your wife's engagement ring. Empty the retirement fund. See how much your daughter really loves her daddy."

He smiled at that as Preston shrunk even farther into the seat. Will felt slightly sick to his stomach but he kept his eyes forward and didn't let it show. The boss kept talking, he didn't yell or scream or raise his voice at all but it somehow felt like he was speaking far louder than he actually was. Preston kept flinching as if each word was hitting him like a punch and it probably was as Jones spelled out what would happen if he didn't come through with the money, "Or you can explain to your wife and your boss and your bank exactly what it is you've been doing in here when they find out a strip club is suing you for nonpayment and trust me, Mr. Preston, they we'll find out. Oh, but I'm sure they'll understand, won't they? Scarlet, you can escort this gentleman to his car now, and don't be gentle about it."

He threw the phone across the desk, it struck Preston in the chest and landed in the man's lap. He put it in his pocket with shaking hands and gathered up his useless credit cards under the boss's knowing smirk. Will grabbed him by the back of his jacket and hauled him to his feet, shoving him towards the office door.

"Scarlet," Mr. Jones said again, and Will turned around, "When you're finished with him go find Stacey and tell her I want to see her. In private."

Will tried very hard to keep any hint of emotion off his face. Stacey was the name Ana danced under. He gave a nod, "Yes, boss," and pushed Preston through the door with more force than was strictly necessary.

He dragged the man down the employee-only stairs in the back of the club. Unlike the dimly lit public areas, the stairs had harsh fluorescent lighting that made everything look a rather sickly green.
One of the dancers was coming up as they were going down, she paused on the landing and moved out of the way as they went by. Preston stared at her in mute appeal but she continued on without acknowledging him at all, hips swaying and stilettos clicking loudly on the metal steps. They went through the heavy fire door and into the parking lot. Preston stumbled and went down on his hands and knees, grunting in pain as he made contact with the dirty asphalt. He coughed and brought up a wad of yellow phlegm that dropped on the ground with a disgusting wet plop.

"How the fuck am I supposed to come up with fifty thousand in three days? Three weeks, maybe, but three days?"

"Like Mr. Jones said, that's your problem," Will pointed out. The boss had also said not to be gentle with the men, and he was debating just how rough Mr. Jones wanted him to get.

An image of Ana bent over the desk in the boss's office with her legs spread and his hands on her hips, pushing her skirt up and over her ass flashed through Will's mind, and he grit his teeth and cracked his knuckles. He had been in his fair share of fights growing up, but he had never actually enjoyed inflicting pain on anyone. He still didn't, but he hauled Preston up and delivered a hard blow, a punch to the stomach that had him falling back down again, gasping and curling up into a ball. Will walked around to his other side and kicked him in the kidneys, making him arch backwards and cry out.

He left the man where he lay on the damp pavement, tears running down his face from pain and what Will assumed was regret. Fifty large was nothing to sneeze at, and he wondered how Preston was going to pay his debt. Would he actually bring his daughter in and force her to strip for the boss? Was Mr. Jones actually serious about that? Will felt sick again, stomach rolling and churning and he squelched it down as much as he could so he didn't wind up puking all over his fucking loafers. As soon as he went back inside he stumbled into the closest bathroom and locked himself in a stall, pressing a paper towel to his bloody knuckles and hiding for as long as he dared. He still had another job to do, and this one would be ten times as hard as roughing up the deadbeat customer in the parking lot.

"Mr. Jones wants to see you."

Ana looked up at him and mouthed, "Now?"

Will rolled his eyes, when Mr. Jones wanted to see someone it was always "now". She got up from the table in the main room and left her disappointed client behind with a promise that she would return as soon as possible, Will resisted the urge to tell the asshole to take a hike when she was out of earshot and walked quickly to catch up with her before she got on the elevator that led to the second floor and the boss's private office. They stood side by side during the brief ride, not speaking. There was really nothing to say. Ana ran a hand self-consciously down her hair and smoothed out a few creases from her short red cocktail dress. Most of her working clothes were red, dresses, skirts and lingerie in every shade from bright candy apple to dark wine. The other dancers sarcastically called her the Red Queen because of it, but she didn't care. Will didn't miss the slight push she gave to her cleavage, plumping her breasts up in the cherry-coloured lace bra that peeked out from the dress's very low neckline. She lifted a hand and knocked on the boss's door.

"Enter."

She squared her shoulders and went in, her long legs accentuated by her red-soled heels and each flash of crimson as she walked towards the boss made Will feel like his heart was being crushed to dust under those designer shoes. He could see that Mr. Jones was leaning against the desk with his arms crossed, watching her approach. Ana stopped in front of him and he looked her slowly up and down, then he smiled coldly at Will over her shoulder.
"In private, Scarlet," he said, and then the bastard actually winked.

Will reached out and closed the door, his throat filled with something hot and choking. He yanked on his tie, loosening it with a silent curse and stalked away. The door to the stairwell was flung open with a crash as he went down the steps again and back out into the parking lot for the second time. Jones might be expecting him to wait outside the office like a good little lackey, but he just couldn't stand there and ignore the noises that came through the wall as he always did when the boss was holed up with anyone else.

Preston was gone now and the parking lot held nothing but cars. All were luxury vehicles, the expensive toys of rich men. He used to boost cars like these, taking them for brief joyrides around the city and abandoning them before the APB went out on the plates. He leaned against the brick wall outside the building. The keys to Mr. Jones's Escalade were tucked in his pocket, like all those sleek stolen German sedans and souped-up American muscle cars he could drive it but it would never be truly his.

Will pulled his phone out from his pocketed and rolled it around in his hand for a moment before punching in a number he hadn't dialed in a while. It rang twice before the familiar voice answered, "Will Fucking Scarlet. Been a long time."

"Hood," Will replied, trying to keep his voice even and calm, "How are you?"

"Oh cut the crap, Will. You didn't call to catch up with an old friend. What do you want?"

He lowered the phone and sighed, banging his head against the wall. He'd thought his days as a thief were behind him, but if he wanted Ana and didn't want to end up like Preston, up to his eyeballs in debt and getting the shit kicked out of him in parking lots, then what else could he do? He lifted the phone back to his ear.

"I was wondering if you had any jobs coming up that you might need a hand with?"

Hood laughed harshly and his voice dripped with sarcasm, "What, you want to get the band back together? Thought you had a fancy new gig with Ki...with Jones."

"This would just be on the side. Need some quick cash and come on, Hood. There's no one else who can even come close to my skills and you know it."

For a moment there was silence, and then Hood chuckled again, "You always were a cocky little shit, Will. Yeah, I've got something coming up that's right up your alley. I'll call you when I need you. Cheers."

He hung up and Will slipped the phone back in his pocket, breathing hard. His back suddenly itched, right at the spot on his shoulder where his tattoo lay hidden under his suit. A shield with an old-fashioned looking lion, it was the emblem of his old gang. Their leader was Robin Locksley, or as he was called on the streets, Hood.

Ana stayed in the boss's office for over an hour. When she finally came back out she was toting a small glossy shopping bag with a name scrawled on the side in gold letters that Will vaguely recognized. A gift from Mr. Jones, Ana explained, as the wheels turned in his head and the name clicked into place. It was the name of a jewelry store, but not one of those chain places in the mall. No, it was one of those boutiques downtown where they only buzzed you in if your clothes passed muster and the salespeople all wore white gloves to handle the merchandise. The churning started in his gut again, bile creeping up his throat as she went to tuck away whatever it was Jones had gifted her with. Had he given it to her before or after fucking her? Will fled back to the bathroom and
swallowed down the sour taste in his mouth, he really didn't want to know.

He hoped to hell the job Hood mentioned would come through quick.

He sent Anastasia back out with a pat on the ass and a bracelet, a white gold bangle capped with twin panther heads made from diamonds and emeralds that he said was a gift for the club's top earning dancer. Which she was, but the showy piece was not merely a token of thanks.

Killian had been slightly surprised by her relationship with Scarlet, his employee wasn't anything like her usual type. Short, tall, older, younger, attractive or not, all the men she went after had one thing in common, money, and lots of it. He paid Scarlet well, but not enough to lavish her with all the things she was accustomed to. Anastasia was beautiful and elegant and a gold-digger of the highest order. It wasn't against the rules for her to see him, the dancers were all free to fuck whoever they wanted on their own time except for customers who had been banned from the club. But he seized on the opportunity to push Scarlet a little and see how he would react.

The private meeting would give the impression that he had called her in to fuck her. The bracelet would seem to support that, along with reminding Scarlet that he couldn't give Anastasia what she knew she really wanted. Invidia - envy, one of the deadly sins and along with it's twin, jealousy, extremely useful.

He didn't sleep with her during their meeting, but Scarlet would never believe that. He would just assume she was lying if he asked and she said nothing happened, and the green eyed monster would take root even more. Killian could give Anastasia everything she wanted, like the bracelet, he could snap his fingers and have her as his mistress or his own private entertainment every night, and Scarlet knew it. What he would choose to do about it was the question. Fly into a jealous rage? Times may have changed but in his experience men were still possessive bastards when it came to women and what lay between their legs. Every time he called Anastasia into his office it would eat away at Scarlet a little more, every gift she flaunted under his nose would put the image of them fucking in Scarlet's head. But Killian wouldn't have sex with her, as pleasurable as it would be he was more interested in screwing with Scarlet's head instead. The man was frequently conflicted, he could feel it and it was time to give him a hard nudge in the wrong direction.

Just as he had done with Preston.

"The devil made me do it." The excuse was one of, if not the, oldest in the book. And that's all it was, an excuse. He didn't make anyone do anything, he didn't force his will on people. He could charm and influence to a certain degree, or coerce and threaten, but in the end the final choice was always theirs. Preston could come clean, confess his sins to his wife, his employer, do his penance and be absolved of his sins. Or he could sink further into the quagmire his deadly sin, luxuria - lust, had led him to, he could lie, cheat or steal to pay off his debt. He could even sell his own flesh and blood into virtual slavery. Killian had put the ideas in the man's head, now he would sit back and see if it bore fruit. Desperate men did desperate things and it was always amusing to watch.

He went back to his computer and his email, typing out a few messages. Scarlet had not returned, he was probably off licking his wounded ego somewhere in the club. He was just about to text the man and tell him to get his ass back to work when he felt something that made his head jerk up from his phone. It was a prickling awareness of a nearby presence, of dark mischief being wrought somewhere on his turf and he was up from the desk and making for the door when it suddenly flung open and Peter poked his head in with a worried, "We've got a bit of a situation, boss."

He pushed past the manager and followed his own sense, heading down the stairs two at a time and into the club proper. Customers watched the action on the main stage and waiters moved around with
trays of drinks, at first glance nothing appeared amiss. But he could feel it even stronger now and he went straight for the private rooms in the back and zeroed in on one where the door was shut and the occupied sign was lit. The presence he had felt in his office was on the other side of the door and he realized there was more than one. Two infernal creatures had come to play in his domain without his permission and he shoved the door open in a growing rage, taking in the scene in an instant.

She lay half on and half off the couch, her long red hair falling over her face. The dancer was still partially dressed in spike heels and a leather miniskirt, but her top was gone and her pale breasts were even whiter than usual against the black bra. A shoelace was tied around her upper arm and the table that normally sat to the side of the couch had been moved in front of it. There was a blackened spoon, a lighter, a packet of tinfoil and a syringe all spread out on the table. While drugs were available in the Jolly Roger he didn't allow anything that required a needle, the really hard stuff was more trouble than it was worth and his club wasn't a seedy crackhouse. Whatever the girl had injected had been brought in from outside and his eyes narrowed at the others in the room.

There was two of them. They looked like young men, dressed in dark jeans and T-shirts that exposed full sleeve tattoos on their arms. The symbols were no longer reviled quite so much these days and plenty of mortals now sported similar ink, but the two were far from mere wannabe goths. They were members of his kind and had many names in different languages and lore but were best known as imps. He was a corrupter and they were pranksters, shit disturbers and pot stirrers. They thrived on chaos, they were the ones who would attend a peaceful demonstration and turn it into a bloody riot, inciting looting and police brutality and run laughing all the way back to hell leaving ruin and misery in their wake. He had never been particularly fond of imps but now he was seething at the sight of them.

"Peter, go get Scarlet and Kriesel. Bring them here and don't say a damn word to anyone else."

The manager shut the door and went to fetch the two men while Killian grabbed one of the imps by the neck and slammed his head down on the table next to the drug paraphernalia.

"What the fuck is this?" he demanded.

The other one pulled out a cigarette and picked up the lighter, "She said she could handle it," he drawled, "Said she was down to party."

Killian turned the whole cigarette to ash in the imp's fingers and twisted the other one's arm behind his back, pushing him down even harder and almost making the table break under his face, "This is my club, you don't pull any of this crap in here. Names. Now."

The one who was still standing smiled and pointed to himself, "Tweedledee."

"And I'm Tweedledum," the other one finished with a high pitched laugh.

He was not in the mood for their stupid jokes and he leaned over the one he had pinned, "Alright, Tweedledum, then tell me this. Who do you answer to?"

Imps were minor demons, they fell far below him on the hierarchy and were always bound to a master. Whoever held their leashes was supposed to keep them in check otherwise they would run completely wild and their pranks would get even more disturbed and debauched until they actually imploded from glee. For them to come onto his turf and screw with one of his employees was a major offense and he wanted the name of whoever had allowed this to happen.

Tweedledum started laughing, the sound muffled since he was still face down on the tabletop. Killian yanked him back up by his hair and hissed in his ear, "Give me the name."
It was Tweedledee who answered, still playing with the lighter. He ran his hand across the flame and intoned with a smile, "The Dark One."

He shoved the one imp to the floor and advanced on the other, tossing the lighter aside and pressing him against the wall with an arm across his throat, "The Dark One is not his fucking name. His name is Rumpelstiltskin."

The imp shivered at the sound of his master's true name and the smile quickly dropped from his face.

"Boss?"

Peter was back, flanked in the doorway by Scarlet and Kriesel. Killian kept his arm on the imp's neck, thinking quickly. The dancer was still unconscious on the couch but she was alive, he would know if her soul had passed on from her mortal body. She was spasming, her whole body twitching and shivering at odd intervals and as he looked closer he saw that the skin under her nails had gone blue. It was the signs of an overdose, she clearly wasn't handling whatever it was she had injected. He nodded towards her, "Scarlet, get that thing off her arm and put her in the backseat of my car as discreetly as you can."

Scarlet's eyes flicked from the two imps to the spoon and syringe lying on the table. He wouldn't be able to tell what the imps were but it was pretty clear what had happened to the girl. The lace was untied and he lifted her with Peter's help. She was as limp as a rag doll in his arms and he carried her carefully through the door without uttering a word.

Killian addressed Kriesel next and pointed to Tweedledum, "You, take that one down to the basement and chain him up. He's not leaving here until I get to have a chat with his employer about this little mess."

Kriesel went after the imp from the floor with no expression on his face. His soul was Killian's and he no longer felt any emotions, he was a slave who could do nothing except obey the commands he was given until either the day his mortal body died or if the contract he had signed was burned and he was released from his bondage. Until then he would serve in silence and he dragged the imp behind him out of the room at the order. The club's basement was divided into two sections, a regular storage area and the unfinished room for the furnace, water heater and the other necessities for the building, and a private space that was strictly off-limits to the regular employees. They not so jokingly called it the dungeon, and they were not that off base.

He turned back to Tweedledee, "Go tell your master that I expect him to come here and answer for your behaviour. He either shows up on his own or I'll make it a formal summoning."

The imp shook his head, "The Dark One does not like to be summoned, Corrupter."

"Do I look like I fucking care if he likes it or not?" Killian hissed from between his teeth, "I'll be holding your twin until he shows his face and don't you dare set foot back here without him."

To make sure that the imp obeyed he marked him, right across the face like a farmer setting a brand on a herd of cattle. But he didn't need a red hot iron to imprint his mark against the skin, his own hand made the flesh sizzle and burn when he pressed it to the prankster's cheek. All of his cocky attitude disappeared and the imp let out a shriek of pain as the brand flowed out under his skin like the spreading ink from another tattoo, a large black stain that could not be washed away. The mark also was the anchor to an invisible chain, Killian could track down anyone he marked wherever they went although he didn't usually make the branding so painful or so obvious. Most didn't even notice it and fewer still understood what it meant anymore. But when one was marked by a demon there was nowhere to hide and the imp would know it. If he didn't pass the message on to his master in a
timely manner Killian would go after him and drag his mischief-making ass right back to hell to throw him in the fire himself.

That would certainly get Rumplestiltskin's attention.

Scarlet had the girl laid out across the backseat of the SUV with the seatbelt awkwardly strapped around her. Killian snatched the keys from his hand and went around to the driver's side, yanking the door open. He ordered Scarlet to watch over the club and slid behind the wheel, glancing in the rearview mirror.

There was no personal attachment, the dancers came and went and he felt no sense of obligation to the girl. His natural inclination was to do nothing to assist her in her distress but he pulled his phone out and hit the first number in his favourites. It rang four times on the other end and went to voicemail. He tried again and got the same result.

"Why do I carry this bloody thing around if you're not going to answer it?" he muttered, glaring at it.

Emma wasn't picking up her phone for whatever reason but there was another way he could reach her. The words flowed over his lips, "Beata angela Emma. "Blessed angel Emma, hear me and answer my prayer, the prayer of the one you know as the infernal demon, Killian, "...damnate, Killian."

After his recitation he waited, feeling that gnawing knot of worry that he always felt when he called out to her, wondering if she'd heard him but was choosing not to answer. The phone buzzed to life in his hand and as he answered with one hand he threw the SUV into drive with the other, pulling out of the parking lot and onto the street.

"What's wrong?"

He closed his eyes briefly in relief at the sound of his angel's voice, "I need you to come meet me. Now."

Emma asked why and he told her quickly about the nearly comatose dancer in the back of his car. He could still feel her soul but it was starting to dim, preparing for the long passage into heaven or hell. They agreed to meet on a side street that wasn't too far from his club and would probably be empty at this time of night and she hung up while he continued to drive. The street lights all flickered when he went past, going dark from the force of his anger. The insult could not go unpunished, he would make Rumplestiltskin pay for his two unleashed dogs. Maybe that would bring the pretentious demon down a peg or two. "The Dark One" was a dealmaker, a purveyor of Faustian bargains with unwary souls who delighted most in manipulating people into giving up the thing they loved the most in exchange for what they sought from him. He was also one of the most power hungry demons in the entire infernal pantheon and was utterly despised by many, Killian included. He'd always detested the sneering prick who hid his real name behind his self-appointed moniker, trying to make himself seem more important.

He pulled off a main road and into the narrow lane that was little more than an alley and empty save for a dumpster. It was dark and unlit, with only a faint glow above from some apartments in the building that backed onto the makeshift meeting point. Those lights also burned out under his gaze and left him sitting in pitch darkness. A few minutes later a pair of bright headlights swung into view and illuminated the inside of his Escalade. It was Emma's ridiculous yellow car and he stepped out to meet her. She was dressed in grey yoga pants and a thick white fisherman's sweater, blonde hair knotted messily on top of her head.

"A drug overdose?" she questioned, throwing open the back door to the SUV and peering in at the
redhead, "That's not really your style, infernal one."

He seethed again, hands clenching at his side, "This was not my doing blessed one, and believe me I am going to deal harshly with the one who was behind this."

Emma gently shifted the dancer into a sitting position and pressed a hand to the pale chest. Golden light shone under the girl's skin for a moment and the angel frowned, looking at him over his shoulder.

"She's fading fast."

They could both feel the soul losing its mortal tether and flickering like a candle that had burned down to a nub and was about to snuff out.

"I'll take her to a hospital. My light will help her hold on a little bit longer and they might be able to save her there," Emma said, "That's all I can do for her now."

Killian hefted the girl up and carried her to Emma's Volkswagen. He set her down in the passenger seat and Emma spread a blanket she fetched from the back over her and tucked the edges in.

"Which hospital?" he asked.

"Saint Luke's. They know me there, she won't be the first lost soul I've brought to the ER."

He nodded and closed the passenger door when Emma straightened up and stepped out of the way. They faced each other and he reached out to touch her hand. She squeezed his fingers and stepped into his embrace. It was brief, just a quick brush of his lips across the top of her head and her nose pressed against his neck for a moment, and then he was opening the driver's door for her and holding it while she got inside.

"When are you going to let me buy you a decent car?"

Emma turned the keys in the ignition and a hint of a smile crossed her face, "There's nothing wrong with my car. It's vintage."

"Vintage is just a pretty way of saying old."

"It's a lot younger than you, Killian," she shot back as she reached for the door handle, "I'll call you later."

He looked at the girl, still hovering between this world and the next, "I'll be waiting."

She glanced over at the young dancer as well and then back at him. Her lips pursed slightly as if she wanted to say something but she didn't speak, she merely shut the door and reached down for the gearshift.

The laneway was too narrow for Emma to pass his car and exit at the other end so she backed up, headlights retreating away from where he stood with his hands in his pockets. The black shadows spread around him again as his angel drove back the way she came, leaving him alone in the dark.
Saint Luke's was one of the oldest hospitals in the city, founded during the 19th century by a group of nuns to provide for the sick and injured poor who had no one else to care for them. It had been named for the patron saint of physicians and was run solely by the nuns for decades in a small building next door to their convent, but it eventually outgrew its modest beginnings and now occupied a modern complex that incorporated various clinics and healthcare options for people of all classes. Well-heeled young couples now took prenatal classes and booked birthing suites, people with diabetes consulted with nutritionists in addition to their doctors, there was a heated indoor pool for physical therapy and a state of the art cancer treatment facility. The black-robed nuns who had once tended to the patients had long given way to nurses in pastel scrubs, one of whom had quickly risen from behind the triage desk in the ER when Emma arrived. An orderly had helped her carry in the young redheaded dancer, still wrapped in the blanket from her car and still unconscious, limbs slack and limp under the knitted afghan and head lolling like a doll that had been tossed aside and forgotten. A few words to the nurse and she was whisked behind a curtain and laid out on a bed while the doctor on duty was paged over the intercom. He came in a wrinkled lab coat with dark shadows under his tired eyes and had a paper cup of coffee clutched in his hand, obviously using the caffeine to help fuel another overnight shift filled with car accidents, mystery midnight illnesses, domestic violence and whatever else that came in through the thick glass doors before the sun rose.

"I'm Dr. Whale," he said, setting his coffee aside with one hand as he glanced down at the intake form the nurse placed in the other without being asked, a dance they had obviously done many times before, "Suspected drug overdose? Do you know what she took and how much?"

Emma shook her head. All Killian said was that the dancer had been shooting up in his club and was already passed out by the time he found her. The nurse read out her vital signs and Dr. Whale checked her pupils, shining a light into first one eye and then the other with a deep frown on his lips. He gave orders for tests and notes were scribbled down on a chart. They worked quickly and efficiently, the nurse pulled a pair of latex gloves from a box and snapped them on to draw blood, filling several little vials and handing them off to an orderly who would bring them to the lab. The girl seemed to go even paler as they took the bright red fluid from her, and a dark bruise bloomed in the crook of her elbow when the syringe was finally withdrawn and the nurse threw it out in the special biohazard container. A smaller mark was visible on her other arm, where another needle had pierced her flesh and pushed a toxic concoction into her veins. Opiates were nothing new, people had always sought ways to dull their senses or chase a high despite the potential consequences. She'd been around long enough to know that for many, it was worth the risk to escape from whatever pain laid buried deep inside. But the need could so easily become a compulsion, until there was nothing else left but getting that next fix at any cost.

"Are you a friend or family member?" Dr. Whale asked, handing off the chart and turning his attention back to Emma after determining that his patient was stable enough for the moment.

It was the nurse who answered, "You're with that group, the charity that does all the work with the homeless and runaways, right? I think I've seen you in here before."

Emma nodded, "Yes, that's me. There was no one else to help her."

The nurse clucked her tongue in sympathy, brushing some of the red hair back from the dancer's face, "Poor unfortunate soul."

Dr. Whale moved on to the next patient, gulping down coffee that had probably gone cold and the nurse closed the curtain around the bed to give the girl a bit of privacy even though she still hadn't
regained consciousness. There was nothing much else they could do until the preliminary test results came back, as long as she was breathing and didn't have any more convulsions they would simply wait and watch. Emma pulled her phone and debated stepping outside to call Killian, but slid it back into her pocket and headed deeper into the hospital's main building instead.

She had spent most of the day at the soup kitchen, watching Albert Spencer smile for the cameras as he ladled soup into bowls with his shirtsleeves carefully rolled up to his elbows and a spotless white apron tied around his waist. His twenty years younger wife, Caroline, had her hair pulled back and was dressed down in jeans and a simple sweater, with her own matching apron and picture-perfect smile. The mayor's race was now officially in full swing. Although several candidates were running it was basically a head to head match between the incumbent, Regina Mills, and city councilman Spencer. Mills had a slight edge, with the backing of the powerful police union, while Spencer was courting the endorsement of the church. He and his wife had come to put in a shift at the soup kitchen with Father Hopper, a camera crew from the local news in tow to record every moment.

Mary Margaret was also interviewed by the reporter as the public face of Shared Blessings. She wasn't showing much yet, but her hand frequently drifted down to rest on the slightly more rounded curve of her stomach while she talked. The regular group of volunteers moved around her, serving up lunch with the Spencers' "help". It was all for show, but any mention of the soup kitchen on the news always resulted in a spike in donations so they all grinned and bore it.

"What do you think, Emma? Mills or Spencer?"

Father Hopper had a streak of flour on his cheek that the news crew had asked him not to wipe away, claiming it was the perfect touch for the story. He lifted the hem of his apron and scrubbed it off anyway behind their backs.

She looked at Albert Spencer and back at the priest, "I believe, Father, that the phrase the lesser of two evils is particularly apt for this situation."

"Ah," Father Hopper suppressed a snort, "Miss Mills's office keeps calling the bishop, pushing for a public statement of support. She has done good things for the city, but..." he let his voice trail off without finishing what he was going to say. He didn't need to. Regina Mills had been dogged by rumours of corruption ever since the sudden death of her husband, the previous mayor. She had ran in the hastily called by-election and won by a landslide, amid claims of stuffing the ballot boxes and rigging the vote. Plum assignments at City Hall were promptly given out to members of her inner circle after she took office, a group frequently referred to in the press as her "royal court"

"But will Mr. Spencer really keep all his promises to make the city the very best it can be?" she wondered aloud, "Mills or Spencer. The devil you know, or the one you don't?"

Father Hopper looked surprised by her statement, shoving his glasses up his nose and blinking, "You're not usually this cynical."

Caroline Spencer pulled a tray of cookies out of one of the commercial ovens and Albert leaned over her shoulder to take a theatrical sniff while the cameras continued to roll. Just out of the shot she could see John and Michael watching, the two brothers were now regular volunteers and they regarded the Spencers with the same cynicism she felt, shooting each other silent looks. Caroline turned to grab a spatula off the counter and Emma could see the black mark on the back of her neck, just below her hairline and revealed by her prim chignon. It could have been a birthmark or a large mole, but it wasn't. The dark smudge was a fingerprint, a brand.

It was the mark of a demon. The devil you know.
The devil she knew all too well.

It was the middle of the night by the time she left the ER and weary hospital staff moved quietly through the long halls. Visiting hours were long over but a few people still lingered beside their loved ones' bedsides and no one gave her a second look, assuming she was one of them. Some patients slept and some lay awake, the dull blue glow of their TVs spilling out into the hall and their prayers spilling inside her head, "Please let me get out of this place....Make the pain go away, oh God, make it stop.....Dear Lord, if you're really up there and listening....I don't want to die."

The hospital's chapel was tucked away on the third floor just past the orthopedic ward, the linoleum tile and buzzing fluorescent lights giving way to stained glass panes and dark oak pews. It was empty and still, no one save her was currently seeking solace or doing penance among the icons that hung the walls or under the simple white cross that rose above the small altar. But there was a faint echo in the air, the ghost of the many who had come into this small room in search of an answer to the simplest question of all, "Why?"

It was the question she had spent centuries asking without an answer. Why had her path crossed with a demon's all those centuries ago and continued to cross over and over again, in Spain, in England, in France? Why had he called out to her, and why had she heard him?

Angels heard and answered the prayers of mortal souls. Their own immortal pleas could only be heard by the Heavenly Father himself, all knowing and all seeing. Only He was omniscient in all things, but whether He was allowing her to shine her light into the darkness or was simply waiting to cast His judgement for her actions was the answer she had yet to receive. If she returned to the world above and dared to ask in person then perhaps she might be granted what she sought. Or perhaps the Gates of Paradise would be closed upon her forever, as they were to the fallen and the damned.

She wasn't brave enough to finally find out which one it would be.

There was a rack of candles beside the altar. It was probably a violation of city fire codes to have them, but the little flames burned anyway under icons of the hospital's namesake saint and the Holy Virgin. A cup full of thin sticks that looked like coffee stirrers sat on one end so people could light their candle from the flame of another. But she only needed to touch the wick with the tip of a finger and from her divine radiance it sprung to life. The holy fire could not be extinguished by breath or wind, it would continue to burn while the candle remained uncorrupted by the heat and would not melt. If anyone noticed that the wax didn't drip and the votive didn't shrink while the wick remained lit then it would be called a miracle, like the statues that wept real tears from their blank eyes and bled from their sculpted hands and feet. She offered it up for the redhead dancer and the hope that she would be able to find her way back.

The air moved around her and the altar cloth rippled from the sudden gust, while she caught the woody, ancient scent of myrrh behind the antiseptic hospital smell of disinfectant. A voice called out softly, "Salve, beata angela Emma."

Emma turned and smiled at the greeting, "Salve, beata angela Elisheba."

The other angel who had entered the chapel appeared to be a young doctor or nurse, dressed in light blue scrubs printed with tiny snowflakes and wearing a lanyard with a hospital ID card around her neck. It had her picture printed on it, along with a name that Emma read and repeated out loud, "Elsa?"

"It's a bit easier for people to pronounce now than Elisheba. You're lucky, Emma never seems to go out of style."
Elisheba, or Elsa as she now apparently called herself was one of her heavenly sisters, a fellow angel. But Elsa's divine purpose in the mortal world was a bit different then Emma's mission of redemption. A hospital was a fitting place for her to carry out her work, she was one who helped ease the passage of a soul beyond the human vessel and onto the path it would travel into eternity. Frequently called the Angel of Death, she was actually one of many charged with such a task. While she could be an agent of holy wrath and was feared by many, death had always been a part of life and one could not exist without the other.

"It's good to see you, Elsa."

She meant it. Being in the presence of another was calming and she felt a bit of her tension drain away as they greeted each other with the kiss of peace, their lips brushing together gently in the ancient way that was a shared sacrament, not a sexual act.

"What brings you here at this time of night, Emma?" Elsa asked.

"A lost soul."

The dancer had been moved from the ER into a room, a ward with three other patients who were all in various states of detox according to the nurse at the station down the hall. She had been dressed in a gown and an IV had been started, the thin plastic tube running from a bag hung on a pole next to the bed down to the needle taped to the back of her hand. Although two of her roommates were in restraints, the padded cuffs encircling thin ankles and wrists to keep them from harming themselves while they came down, she lay peacefully still and quiet.

Elsa's light was a silver glow in the dimly lit room, eerily beautiful as she touched the dancer's forehead with her slim hands and closed her eyes. She had glanced at the chart on the end of the bed and quickly read Dr. Whale's notes, a frown deepening between her brows.

"Suspected heroin overdose," she muttered, "There's been a lot more of those lately than usual."

Emma thought of what Killian had said, that the girl's overdose wasn't his doing and he was going to deal with the one responsible. She wondered if there was a connection and made a mental note to ask him about it later.

"Will she live?"

Elsa nodded with her eyes still closed, "It's not her time yet. But-"

A sudden loud beeping interrupted her and had them both turning towards the sound. It was one of the machines hooked up to the patient in the bed opposite Killian's dancer. Elsa was there in a flash, bending over with her long platinum braid falling over her shoulder. Her silver light grew brighter and she began the final anointing, touching the patient's forehead and the hands with a prayer for the soul about to depart. The room felt suddenly colder as the mortal body started to fail and another patient began to stir, woken up by the noise and the light. Emma went to the woman's bedside as she began to pull on her restraints with growing agitation and tried to sit up.

"Shh," she soothed, her own light spilling from under her skin. The patient's eyes went wide at the sight and Emma willed them to close. The woman's lashes fluttered against her cheeks and her lips curled in a peaceful smile as she fell back to the bed, asleep in moments. If she remembered anything when she woke again it would only be the haziest of images and she would probably dismiss it as nothing more than a dream.

There was a flurry of activity as the nurse from the station down the hall came running into the room,
“Code Blue” was paged over the intercom and the crash cart was wheeled in. Emma melted into a shadowy corner and went unseen while the staff tried valiantly to save the patient. But it was too late, and the time of death was noted quietly as the bedsheets were pulled over her face and the curtains were drawn to shield her from view. The soul was gone to the world above or the world below, and the body would soon return to dust.

She left the ward and went around the corner from the nurse’s station to an empty stretch of hallway by the elevators, where she leaned against the wall and added her own prayer for both the woman who had just died and the others who in the room who still clung to life. A few moments later the elevator door opened and two orderlies wheeling an empty gurney stepped out, followed by a man in jeans and a dark sweater. He draped a purple stole over his shoulder and his white collar was visible at his neck, the hospital priest had come a little bit too late. Their eyes met for a moment as he went past and he reached up to touch the crucifix that lay against his chest before disappearing around the bend in the hall.

The long fluorescent light in the ceiling above her head flickered suddenly and the other elevator pinged. She felt him in the second before the doors slid apart and he set foot in the hall. Killian appeared, a smile on his face when he turned his head and caught sight of her. But she couldn't answer with a smile of her own, not when Elsa was only a few feet away and would undoubtedly also feel his presence. If she saw him as a threat and turned her silver light on him, Emma had no idea what would happen and for a brief terrifying moment she didn't know which side she would choose.

She almost flew down the hall towards him, hissing between her teeth, "You need to get out. Now."

Killian went stiff with surprise and he looked over her shoulder, eyes narrowing, "Shit. There's another one here right now, isn't there?"

"Yes! Now go, please!"

His face changed, any trace of softness vanishing as his chin lowered and his jaw went tight. She heard footsteps approach and a shocked gasp and she did the only thing she could think of to diffuse the situation. Her palms filled with light and she stared Killian down, "Leave this place, infernal one!"

A cold smile was his response, along with an indifferent shrug, "As you wish, angel."

The light in the ceiling flickered again and went dark as he backed up. Smoke poured from his hands, obscuring his figure and filling the hall until it reached the tips of her outstretched fingers. Her light kept the black cloud at bay until it dissipated into thin air and revealed that the demon was gone.

"Emma!"

Elsa's hand circled her elbow and her face was filled with concern, "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

The light came back on as the orderlies reappeared with the now loaded gurney, obviously transporting the patient's body to the morgue. The priest followed them, pausing and looking around the hallway with his fingers reaching up for his crucifix again. He must have sensed that something unholy had just passed through, he made the sign of the cross with wide eyes and his lips moved in a silent prayer.

Elsa's gaze was rooted to the spot where Killian had stood. When the orderlies and the priest were
gone she spoke quietly, "Did he come for the girl? I could feel that she's been corrupted and it runs
depth for one so young. She may be too far gone already to be saved."

"I don't believe that," Emma said, more to herself than to Elsa, "There's still a chance. There has to
be."

"If he returns for her I will make sure she is kept safe within these walls. I promise that the infernal
one will not get to her here, Emma."

Even though she frequently called him "infernal one" something inside her still twisted painfully at
hearing it from another angel. She said it with affection now, but she couldn't forget what it actually
meant. Damnate. Demon. Corrupter. It was what he would always be, and his little moments of
grace could not erase that fact.

She promised to call Elsa later, squeezing her hand and managing a smile that quickly dropped when
she left St. Luke's and got into her car, sliding into the driver's seat of the old Bug that Killian loved
to make fun of and gripping the wheel. It wasn't their first close call, but it had been a long time since
they had come so near to utter disaster and she had become far too complacent. If other angels found
out about them she would become an instant pariah, and banishment would inevitably follow. It had
happened before, some chose to fall and some were cast out for their transgressions. Even the one the
Heavenly Father had loved the most, the one whose light was once so pure and beautiful that he was
called the Morning Star. It was still his name, but the meaning had changed as his shining radiance
had plunged into the depths so far below to reign over the kingdom he conquered in place of the one
he was forever denied.

It was still dark when she got home and climbed the stairs to her apartment, although dawn would
soon arrive as the hour hovered in that uncertain state between late night and early morning. She only
had time to drop her keys when her phone started to ring and Killian appeared on the call display -
not that he was actually saved in her phone as Killian. "K. Jones" popped up on the screen and she
almost didn't answer, weighing the phone in her hand with a sigh. But just before the call went to
voicemail she swiped across the screen and put the phone to her ear, not bothering to say hello,
"Where are you now?"

"In my car parked around the corner from your apartment. I know you're at home, Emma. Can
I...can I see you now?"

His voice was quiet and there was hesitance in the question, like he was afraid of her answer. It was
so different from how he had acted in Saint Luke's. Her eyes closed and she pinched the bridge of
her nose, she should send him away, she should end their affair before it blew up completely in their
faces, she shouldn't want him as badly as she did right now, and above all else she should stop
answering him when he called.

When she didn't reply he sounded more desperate, "I need to see you."

"Killian, we can't keep doing this. We can't."

A pause, and then a request not spoken out loud, but she heard anyway, "Emma. Please let me in."

She answered in a whisper, "Come up."

The knock came a few minutes later and again she debated with herself before answering, Killian
was on the other side, she could sense him again. Her weakness, her sin, the demon who had been
sent to tempt her and lead her astray. But when she turned the brass knob and opened the door there
was no knowing smirk or seductive grin on the handsome face and she felt none of his dark thrall try
to surround and entice her when their eyes met.

He stood silently on her threshold and he just looked like any other man.

She stepped aside and allowed him inside her apartment. There was nothing in his hands, no flowers, no gifts to try to win her over with that way. He reached out to her, but she held back and after a moment his arm fell back down to his side.

"Did the angel suspect anything?" he asked at last.

"She thought you were just there for the girl, she knows that was you."

A muscle ticked in his jaw, "I told you Emma, that was not me."

"Maybe not the overdose, but she works for you. She's been corrupted by you."

He had no response to that and she pulled her hands into the sleeves of her sweater, covering them and wrapping her arms around herself. She turned and went into the living room, leaving the lights off as if the darkness could hide them from view.

"Why did you even come to the hospital, Killian?"

"You said that you would call me and when you didn't, I got...concerned."

There was an edge to his voice that made her suspicious, "Why? What aren't you telling me?"

"Two imps showed up at my club without my permission tonight. They're the ones who brought in the drugs and gave them to her before I caught them."

Imps. Her nose wrinkled in disgust at the word, imps were nasty pieces of work who would love to watch someone suffer in the throes of an overdose. Elsa's comment about an increase in overdoses lately ran through her mind and she quickly relayed what she had said to Killian, who looked even more chagrined by the information.

"It may be connected. I'll look into it, someone might be trying to make a play behind my back. I will take care of this, Emma."

"You're paying the hospital bill. Every cent."

"I'll take care of that too."

"Just," she sighed, "you can't go back there in person. The other angel, Elsa, she's going to be watching for you."

His smile was crooked, "Your concern about my safety is quite touching, darling."

She turned away from him, "We need to stop doing this."

"We just need to be more careful, tonight was my fault and I'm sorry for that. It won't happen again."

"But what if it does?" she interrupted, "Yes I am concerned. What if you get caught? What if someone finds out about all the money you give me? Your own kind would tear you to pieces for that alone!"

He sounded the least bit cowed by the idea, "It's a risk I'm willing to take. I can handle my side, if there's one thing I'm good at, it's surviving."
"Who saved who from the Inquisition again?"

"Beata."

His hands settled on her upper arms from behind as the questions continued to spill right out of her.

"What happens to me if I get caught, damnate? What happens if I get cast out?"

His fingers tightened, digging in almost painfully through her sweater, "I would be there to catch you. We would be together and I would give you anything you want, anything you need. Anything."

Temptation. But she had no desire for the expensive gifts he would shower over her and she knew that his offer had another motivation behind it, "And you would be the one who made an angel fall. I would be your greatest triumph. Do not pretend otherwise."

Killian didn't try to deny it, but he pulled her back into his chest and murmured in her ear, "All this time, Emma. Everything I've ever done for you. It's more than just that, you have to believe that by now."

"You're asking me to give up Heaven for you."

Her voice broke a bit and he turned her in his arms, his warm breath on her face and their foreheads almost touching as she reached up and gripped his shoulders. Killian kissed the edge of her lips, moving along her cheek with feather light touches until he reached her ear.

"I know. I'll never see it with my own eyes, but the closest I've ever come is the first night I saw you, my angel."

It was not a sacrament when their lips met in a kiss, it was something else entirely. He should be poison in her mouth, more toxic than any drug, but by some strange unfathomable miracle he wasn't and she marvelled at it again as she had done the first time when his head had lowered to hers and they shared that moment where the rest of the world fell away.

There was usually a level of urgency whenever they fell into bed, the clothes that were ripped and burned in their haste to get at each other since they had all of eternity but there was never enough time. Her bedroom was still shadowed as the night outside had yet to give way to day and they undressed each other slowly and carefully. His suit jacket fell to the floor and was joined by her sweater, his fingers skimming gently over her ribs as she unbuttoned his shirt. Shoes were toed off and Killian knelt in front of her to slide her pants down her hips, pressing kisses to her stomach while she balanced with her hands on his shoulders and lifted one foot free and then the other. Soft dark hair slipped through her fingers when she cupped his head and his mouth was just as soft, moving up her body as he rose to his feet and leaving more kisses in his wake. Her bed was smaller than his and he looked a bit out of place against the floral sheets, lying on his back and looking up at her through his dark lashes. Their eyes remained locked when she sank down on him and started to move, a gentle, steady rhythm that he matched with each upward tilt of his hips. There was none of his usual dirty talk, their lips simply met over and over again until he rolled them over and buried his face in her neck. Their fingers linked against the mattress and her ankles crossed behind his back, keeping him inside while he rocked between her legs and the pleasure simmered under her skin. It finally burst and he followed her quickly with a groan, going still except for the pulse where they remained joined for long moments after. The sunlight dappled against his bare shoulders while he continued to lay on top of her, his weight pinning her down and holding her in place. She always liked to see him in the light, the way it would catch the glints of auburn in his beard and the little flecks in his eyes.

"Are you not happy like this? Can't you see that we could have this all the time, Emma?"
"It's a sin, Killian."

"The world is a fucking cesspit of sin. It always has been, and it always will be. The rich still get richer and the poor still get poorer, only now it's CEOs instead of kings and bad credit instead of debtor's prison. Endless wars over names on a map and which direction to pray. They eliminate diseases and then invite them right back in, forgetting that less than a hundred years ago fifty million people died from the flu. All that is a sin, but you and me? No. Not in a million years could this be a sin."

Her hands ran up and down his back as he propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her, her foot hooked behind his calf. They had forever but Killian still wanted more. The one thing that had never really been possible with anyone else. A future.

But like everything else he offered, it came with a price.
"Paris - 1740"

"How much longer?"

"Just a few minutes more."

"That's what you said an hour ago."

Auguste looked up from the easel and smiled at her over the edge of the canvas, "Art can not be rushed, ma belle ange."

Emma watched him bend back down and heard the soft scrape of his brush as he continued to work. She held her pose on the small dais she was perched on, standing up straight with one foot placed slightly in front of the other and her arm extended, reaching for someone who wasn't there. The sun shone through the tall window behind her, spreading a rich amber glow over the somewhat dusty tarps laid on the floor and it was warm on her back through the thin white linen of her robe, specially made just for this. It had been early morning when Auguste had started to paint and now it was late afternoon, but she felt no fatigue nor had any trouble maintaining her position. She frequently posed for him for hours on end, watching as he lost himself in the canvas and paints.

"There," he said after another hour had passed, "Come look."

He set down the brush and palette and started wiping his hands off with a rag while she descended from the platform and came around the easel to see his progress. Her own face looked back at her, painted with care along with her shoulders and outstretched hand. The rest of her was still just a rough sketch, an outline of the fall of the robe to her ankles and a hint of her other arm.

Auguste leaned over her shoulder and indicated towards the bottom left corner of the canvas, outlining the shapes of two figures with his index finger, "The two worshippers shall go here, with their heads bowed and hands at prayer. You have come to answer them, as you did that fateful day with me."

She turned and wiped away a streak of yellow paint that was smudged across his stubbled cheek. Auguste's arm slipped around her waist and he pulled her closer, turning his head to place a kiss on the inside of her palm. The white silk ribbon that held her robe closed was easily opened under his nimble artist's fingers and the worn chaise in the corner of the studio was soft against her back when he carried her across the room and laid her down on the cushions. She made the curtains fall across the windows, the heavy folds of damask blocking them at once from any prying eyes. Even though it was common knowledge in the household that she was both his model and lover, the lock on the door was also turned to ensure their privacy as Auguste hurriedly stripped off his paint-stained shirt and breeches and she welcomed him into her arms.

Afterwards, he bustled about the studio bare-chested and whistled a happy tune through his teeth as he tended to his prized brushes and costly pigments. Emma stood up from the chaise and slipped on Auguste's discarded shirt, it covered her loosely to mid-thigh and she combed her tangled hair with her fingers, approaching the half-finished painting propped on the easel again. A little over two years prior she had heard the frustrated artist's prayer for inspiration and answered him, discovering when she did that Auguste possessed a very rare trait. He saw her at once for what she truly was, a gift of divine recognition that was usually bestowed only upon holy prophets and devout saints. With a heavenly muse to inspire him his work had found patronage from the wealthy and well-connected.
Duke of Orleans, a grandson of the late Sun King, Louis XIV on his mother's side and cousin to the current monarch, Louis XV. But unlike most of the male members of the royal court the duke was a pious man, a widower who still honoured the memory of his beloved wife and did not cavort with courtesans or keep a mistress, and he gave most generously of his vast fortune to the church and the poor.

"I had hoped to finish before we left, but I think I may have to present a different work to His Majesty should I be granted an audience."

Auguste pressed a kiss to her temple as he wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his chin on her shoulder.

"It's beautiful, Auguste. What are you planning on calling it?"

"La Belle Emma."

She turned in his arms, "No."

"But it's true. It is my tribute to my divine muse and it will be known as La Très Belle Emma!"

"I may be your muse, but this is entirely the fruit of your labour. Please do not name it for me."

He gave a mock frown, "Well, if you insist. Un Ange Avec Deux Adorateurs?"

"That's rather literal, don't you think?"

"I'm a painter, not a poet. If you will not allow me to name if for you, then you should think of a worthy title, Emma, it would not have been possible without you anyway."

She contemplated the unfinished canvas for a long moment, "Well, I will try to come up with something suitable during the journey to Versailles."

"Versailles," Auguste repeated in a hushed whisper, "To think that I will soon see such splendour as the royal court and perhaps even be presented to Le Roi Louis himself. And with my muse at my side I shall be inspired even more! Louis will bestow upon me commissions for the glory of France and your face will grace the altar at Notre Dame itself. All will know the angel who heard my prayer."

He suddenly lifted her up, spinning her around with his hands circling her waist. She laughed, bracing herself against his broad shoulders and looking down into his clear blue eyes. When he set her on her feet again he continued to hold her in a close embrace, burying his nose in her hair and murmuring her name, "Emma. Ma belle ange Emma. Thank you."

She had never meant to stay past that first visit when he had taken charcoal to the page for the first time in weeks and drawn her face over and over again until his fingers were stained completely black and the candles in his chamber were burned down to mere nubs of wax. The sunrise had caught them both by surprise in the morning, when the light spilled into the room and fell over the many sketches that littered the floor. His prayer had been answered but Auguste implored her not to leave so soon, not before he had a chance to capture her image fully with his paints. The days had turned to weeks, and the weeks to months, and they had fallen into bed together after one session when he had told her with pride that he had sold the painting he had done of her appearing in a holy vision to Saint Geneviève on the banks of the Seine for a sum that would keep him for an entire year.

The ancient patron of Paris had been a nun sworn to a lifetime of celibacy, but she was not. Auguste had yet to marry, nor was he betrothed or promised to any local girl and there were no vows broken
by their liaison. His small workshop flourished and grew thanks to the support of the duke and if he were to find favour with the king himself then he could take on more apprentices and larger commissions, everything he told her he’d dreamed of since he was a young child. Perhaps he might even reach such heights as the true masters of the craft and leave a grand legacy of art that would be known across Christendom as their names and work continued to endure long after their mortal passing into Paradise.

Auguste carefully draped the unfinished painting in a cloth to protect it while she dressed in a loose gown of pale blue silk trimmed with yellow satin rosettes, and they left the studio with her arm threaded through his. Emma insisted that he take some sustenance after the long hours he had spent working with nought but a little wine and a scant mouthful of bread passing his lips. They sat down to a late supper of a simple fish stew and the first ripe strawberries of the summer, playfully tossing the fruit into each other’s mouths and drinking more wine until Auguste leaned across the table to kiss the sweet juice from her lips and the rest of the berries in the wooden bowl were left behind and forgotten for the rest of the night. Her lover slept peacefully, lying on his stomach with the rumpled sheets pulled to his waist and his fingers twitching slightly against the pillow, obviously continuing to paint even in his dreams. She curled up in the window seat, wrapped in an oversized shawl and rolling a fold of the nubby wool between her fingers while she stared out of the glass and watched the stars above until the sun rose again. In the distance she heard the faint chime of the bells ringing from the village church, tolling nine times to mark the morning Angelus devotion as they did three times each day.

The prayers that followed were like the sound of the bells, echoing softly in her mind as she rested her chin in her hand and listened.

Versailles was indeed as grand as the tales that were told about it. Less than a day's ride from the capitol the sprawling château was practically a city unto itself, a hive of ambitious courtiers who surrounded Louis XV’s royal person along with the various advisors, ambassadors, statesmen and Church officials who came to pay him homage. They were all tended to by the veritable army of liveried servants who staffed the kitchens, the gardens, the private apartments and public areas, working long before dawn and long after dusk to perform the enormous amount of daily upkeep required to maintain the palace's status as the envy of Europe. There was not a single smudge on any of the hundreds of fine Venetian mirrors in the famous hall, the vast parkland around the palace was meticulously maintained down to the last blade of grass, and the sheer cost of the whole enterprise was staggering. But the Bourbon king at the centre of the whole spectacle would not be overshadowed by his close cousin Philip in Spain or the newly crowned Hapsburg empress in Vienna, so the livres poured from the national treasury as freely as wine to maintain the showpiece of France. It was a court bound by rigid, unforgiving etiquette that governed every interaction between the inhabitants but was awash in unimaginable luxury, where everything and anything was done to excess.

The Duke of Orleans had a set of apartments in the palace reserved for himself and his retinue, spacious accommodations as befitting his status as a Prince du Sang, a prince of royal blood, and close friend to the queen. A fortnight after their arrival the duke arranged for Auguste to be formally presented to Queen Marie Leszczyńska, where he gifted Louis’s Polish-born consort with a small painting he had done of Saint Casimir in honour of her homeland.

"Her Majesty la Reine was most pleased with my gift," Auguste recounted when he returned to their chamber after the audience and removed his newly purchased wig to mop at his brow with a
handkerchief, "She called for it to be hung at once in her own chapel."

His face was alight with happiness as he talked and it warmed her own heart to see it. Auguste sat down at the small writing desk with pen and ink to compose a letter to his father, quickly filling several pages with rather florid descriptions of the royal court and his successful meeting with the queen herself. Emma left him to it, slipping outside the duke's apartments by the servants' stairs to take a walk about the grounds. Ladies of the court strolled languidly along in their bright gowns, followed by more soberly clad servants carrying their shawls and baskets. Male courtiers either accompanied the ladies or simply watched their progress, and she could feel more than a few interested eyes dart her way as she passed. She'd already been propositioned by several men in the days since their arrival, the king was a notorious womanizer and most of the nobles and minor members of the court followed their sovereign's lead. Their advances were all met with cool rejection, not that it seemed to deter them much. Adultery was commonplace among the aristocracy and practically expected, men like the duke, still faithful to the memory of his long departed wife, or Auguste, faithful to her since the day they had met, were a rare breed indeed.

Emma walked the garden paths alone, eschewing any would-be escort from accompanying her and enjoying the small moment of solitude. The sound of the water running through the fountains made for a pleasant hum in the background, as the sun created rainbows from the fine spray that arced gracefully in the air. A pair of swans glided along the largest pool, swimming in lazy circles with fat droplets rolling off their pristine white feathers as they went. She watched them for a while, enjoying the sight of two of the Heavenly Father's beautiful creatures who lived in the midst of such extravagance yet needed nothing but clean water and good feed to be content.

Her peaceful contemplation was broken by a low rumble that shook the ground under her feet. The thundering roar of approaching hoofbeats rent the air and there were startled squeals from a group of young ladies when the horses suddenly came sailing over the manicured hedges and landed scant inches from where they had just passed in their afternoon promenade. There were half a dozen riders in all astride the tall stallions, high-spirited beasts who tossed their heads and sent clumps of trampled sod flying as they pranced about on the now ruined lawn. Velvet lips curled back over snapping yellow teeth and the young men in the saddles rose up in the stirrups to exchange rude bon mots at each other's expense over the proud heads of their steeds. They were all clearly of noble blood, save for the one who rode a fearsome black mount and had been the first over the hedge. He was dressed in a dark coat embroidered in silver thread, booted to the knee in gleaming black leather and was the only one the others did not insult. The familiar face looked her way and he dug his heels into his horse's side, clicking his tongue and taking up the reins in one hand. She stayed beside the fountain as he approached while his companions watched him leave and fell silent at once in his wake.

Killian swept off his hat and clasped it to his chest, inclining his head in a nod of acknowledgement, "Madame."

"Monsieur," Emma replied, not really all that surprised to see him. Louis's court was rife with sin and intrigue, rich pickings for any demon both spiritually and materially and his fine riding clothes and the large ruby stud that pierced his ear were the equal to anything worn by the many comtes and chevaliers in residence. His horse was also clearly of quality stock, at least eighteen hands high at the withers and rippling with muscle under the shiny black coat.

The stallion snorted, blowing out a hot puff of air through flaring nostrils. She regarded him carefully, looking into the large liquid eyes that blinked slowly under her scrutiny. The long tail swished and flicked in the air while the ears twitched to and fro and she reached out a hand, running it gently down the long nose. A soft nicker sounded and she smiled, opening her palm and revealing a small red apple. It was gobbled up at once and the stallion nudged against her hand, clearly seeking another treat.
"You know, there's not a single groom in the stables who'll even approach his stall. Bad tempered and willful this one is, took two fingers clear off the last man that got too close. Yet he is putty in your hands."

She glanced over at the noblemen who had accompanied Killian, all still watching with avid curiosity and not bothering to hide it. The stallion dipped his head towards her shoulder and she scratched the pale star hidden underneath the black forelock.

"Are we still talking about the horse?"

Killian smiled, white teeth that were far sharper than the stallion's flashing in the sun and his voice dripped with enticement when he replied, "Come closer, Madame, and we shall see."

Another apple miraculously appeared from inside her sleeve and she tossed it up to him with a flick of her wrist. He caught it easily in one gloved hand and bit into the smooth skin with relish. Emma turned on her heel and began making her way back along the footpath towards the palace without looking back. There was a trumpeting cry and the pair of swans took flight from the water, soaring high above the heads of all and disappearing into the shelter of the clouds.

It did not take long to learn that the demon was well ensconced in the upper echelons of the aristocracy, the head of a group of young unmarried men who were not yet tasked with the running of their ancestral estates or granted a government post to exploit. With no wives to restrain them or duties to occupy themselves with, they were free to run riot in the many brothels and gambling dens of Paris with their fat purses and indulge themselves to the fullest. Rumours abounded of the darker aspects of their uninhibited sprees, shocked and scandalized whispers of sodomy, blasphemy and devil worship and speculation about the true identity of the dark-haired, blue-eyed man who led them into debt and decadence. Killian claimed to be Irish gentry, a Lord MacSeoin of Galway, and was accepted as such at court even though he clearly had far greater means than that of a minor nobleman from a rather poor country. He lived lavishly even by French standards, spending enormous sums on everything from his clothing to his residence to the gifts he bestowed upon his mistresses. It was said that he never lost at the gaming tables and could charm his way into the bed of any woman, married or unmarried, that he desired.

After their chance meeting on the palace grounds a messenger dressed all in black who wouldn't meet her eyes delivered a letter and a small package to the duke's apartments, addressed to her. The note was short, a single page with only two lines written in his flamboyant script.

_Madame,_

_It does me great pleasure to converse with you again and to look upon your angelic face once more. The enclosed is but a mere token of my eternal appreciation of your favour._

_K_

The package yielded a small velvet box that contained a pair of earrings, a perfectly matched set of black pearls hung from round diamonds of a size that would make a royal duchess green with envy. The jewels were lovely, but she sent them back to the demon at once with her own note.

_Monsieur,_

_Your appreciation is duly noted, but my face does not require any such tribute._

_E_

... 

Auguste spent long hours shut up with his paints, as he had received a commission for a marriage portrait from a marquis who was preparing to wed the eldest daughter of one of the queen's ladies.
While he was occupied with his work Emma travelled in the duke's carriage to the humble hamlets and villages that surrounded the palace to distribute his largesse among the needy souls who all flocked to her upon her arrival. While the king and his court lived in absolute splendor, his subjects bore the steep cost of the many taxes that paid to keep them in their riches. The divide between the two was a strict boundary that few dared to dream of crossing and even fewer managed.

At night she would walk the palace grounds for long hours after Auguste fell asleep, listening to the prayers that were offered up from the inhabitants of Versailles. There were many desperate pleas for power, for wealth and prestige, entreaties to catch the king’s roving eye and to receive royal favour. But there were also the ones who prayed for forgiveness from their sins, who sought absolution and heavenly guidance. Those voices were far fewer in number and some nights she had to strain even to hear them at all.

"You are pensive tonight, Madame."

A figure slipped noiselessly from the shadows and fell in step next to her, his feet making no sound against the earth while the night air stirred his coat about his legs and rippled through the dark hair. He offered her his arm with a slight bow and she rested her fingers lightly on the rich satin of his sleeve, the wide velvet skirts of her dress brushing against his thigh and knee as they walked side by side along the wide path.

"Shouldn't you be sporting in the bedchamber of your latest conquest, infernal one? Or leading your group of noble followers through the streets of Paris and straight to their eternal damnation?"

Killian gave a dry chuckle, "While both prospects are certainly tempting, neither can even hold a candle to simply taking a midnight stroll about the king's gardens with you, blessed one."

"I see you still have the flattering tongue of a courtier."

"The earrings you returned to me were an attempt at flattery, that was not."

Oddly enough she believed that he was being genuine, although she was not entirely sure as to why. The statues arranged artfully around the perimeter of the fountains loomed above them, pure white marble that depicted the changing seasons from the nubile maiden of spring with her pert upturned breasts and garland crown, to the wizened old man with his protruding ribs and shrunken shoulders who represented winter. The water was dark under the moonlit sky and as still as a mirror, the fountains had been turned off for the night though the grand display would begin anew before His Majesty rose for his morning levée, where he would be ceremoniously greeted and dressed by his most intimate confidants.

Killian's voice was reflective, as if he was talking more to himself than to her, "Quite the spectacle, Versailles. All this revolving around the whims of one mortal man, the feast in the midst of the famine. Where everyone jostles for a better seat at the table and revels in the gluttony, yet is never truly satisfied and never once thinks about the day when it will all end. But you and I know better, despite our considerable differences. Empires rise to the most dizzying of heights, and then they inevitably fall."

"Mmm," she made a noncommittal noise as she mused on what he had said, "it seems I am not the only pensive one tonight. But there are still good souls among the revellers and those who do not let the grandeur of the spectacle blind them."

"Men like your artiste, I suppose?"

"Yes," she replied evenly, "Like Auguste."
"I have seen some of his work. It is...adequate, he is not entirely unskilled, but when he portrays you, well. It almost compels even me to fall on my knees in adoration."

Emma shot him a sharp look but he merely continued to walk at a measured pace with his face betraying nothing. The question on the tip of her tongue slipped out, "Attempts at flattery and seduction aside, why do you really continue to seek me out, Killian?"

The sound of his name made him stop at last and he looked down at her, a faint frown crinkling his brow, "Many try to summon me for their own gain, Emma, but you are the only one who has ever heard my call."

He lifted her hand from his arm and bowed formally, her fingers still clasped in his kidskin glove. Slow and deliberate, he took a step towards her and raised her hand to his lips, pausing for a moment as she realized what he was planning to do and she felt her eyes widen. The urge to pull back and snatch her hand away from him was strong, but she didn't resist and his eyes didn't stray from her face as he pressed a kiss to the bare skin just below the lace-trimmed cuff of her sleeve. Though no clouds drifted in front of the moon overhead the sky grew darker around them and a warm wind stirred at the hem of her gown, making the velvet dance about her ankles. His mouth was warmer still and his touch should disfigure and mar her skin, but the dark imprint his lips left behind melted away in a brief flash of divine light.

"Hmm," he made a small, satisfied noise as he rubbed his thumb over the inside of her wrist and straightened up again, "As always, it was a pleasure to share your company."

The demon melted back into the darkness and she heard his parting prayer, "Bonne nuit, belle ange, bonne nuit et merci."

"Goodnight beautiful angel, goodnight and thank you."
Auguste bowed somewhat stiffly and held out his arm with some hesitance. He was attired in a new coat of cut velvet, a rich, deep blue in colour, with a matching waistcoat and an immaculate ruffled stock at his throat that was held in place with a jewelled stickpin. His dark hair was hidden underneath a white horsehair wig, curled tight around his ears and tied in the back with a blue ribbon. While he was the very picture of a fine court gentleman, there was no smile on his face and the light blue eyes held only sad resignation. Emma had not looked in the mirror, but she knew that her own face reflected much of the same emotions that he was feeling this night.

"An invitation to a royal ball," she whispered, laying her hand on his sleeve, "With the king himself in attendance. It is everything you ever dreamed of, Auguste."

His lips tilted upwards but the rest of his expression did not change, "Oui. Another prayer answered, bel ange."

She noticed that he did not call her his beautiful angel anymore but said nothing, merely allowing him to lead her from the quiet of the duke's apartments and join the growing assembly in the Hall. The noblemen and women who milled about were the scions of France, the holders of grand titles and lavish estates, but they were not the only ones in attendance. Scattered among them were men drawn from the upper ranks of the military, standing straight-backed with broad chests full of medals and ribbons, the wealthiest of the untitled bourgeois, dressed in their best and casting about with ambitions to one day marry a daughter to an impoverished comte and raise above their station, and those like Auguste, artists of various mediums from the pen and the page to the brush and the canvas. Playwrights had come from Paris to amuse duchesses with their wit, while generals recounted old battles to bankers and a group of somewhat bored-looking lords competed to see who could drink the most glasses of ruby red claret before His Majesty made his appearance. Servants carried silver trays laden with delicacies, though both she and Auguste let them pass without sampling the various and inventive offerings of the palace kitchens.

Neither had much of an appetite.

They strolled the length of the long chamber, catching snatches of conversation and watching the byplay between the various guests. Extravagant compliments were given and received with ease, the French were grand admirers of themselves and their accomplishments. But it was also currency, spent as freely as gold livres to influence a desired paramour into a dalliance or to find allies in a fickle court where politics shifted as quickly as the tides and no one wanted to be left high and dry when the waters retreated. Louis kept his nobles on a short leash, preferring to keep watch over them in person and dependent on the favours granted from the royal hands. Even Auguste's patron, the Duke of Orleans, was not immune, and was currently in a bit of a snit over Louis's refusal to marry one of his daughters to the Duke's son and heir. His Highness was contemplating retiring from court for good over His Majesty's insult, devoting himself fully to a country life and his good works.

But the quarrel between the cousins had not deterred them from attending the ball, and Emma kept her hand firmly on Auguste's sleeve, her shoulders back and her head held high. The gown she wore was as fashionable as any from the wardrobe of a marquise or a rich merchant's wife, yards of silk in several tones of coral from the overgown of dark rose, the same colour as a virgin's nervous blush, to a light seashell pink that lined the bodice and was visible through the front split in the skirt. Brussels lace trimmed the neckline and sleeves of the gown, falling in cascades to her wrists and as finely
woven as a cobweb. She wore no jewelry, her throat and ears were bare and unadorned by gold or gems, but her hair was piled high in a mass of curls at the back of her head and banded with a spray of white swan feathers.

"You do look beautiful," Auguste said, a compliment far more simple than one that would be given by a courtier but all the more heartfelt and true for its plain honesty, "All the times I had portrayed you as a heavenly vision, I wish now that I had also painted you as a woman. Perhaps I will do so from memory, one day."

"Perhaps," she agreed, feeling a painful squeeze around her heart. At the other end of the Hall of Mirrors the king was finally making his appearance, pausing briefly to admire his own reflection in the glass. The most powerful man in France was striking to look at, Louis had large dark eyes that did not lack for intelligence as he swept his gaze over the assembly and a somewhat prominent nose. He was dressed in unmatched finery and fully bedecked with sumptuous jewels, everywhere from the sapphire-studded buttons on his coat to his heavy emerald rings, right down to the wide diamond buckles on his high-heeled shoes, and was followed closely behind not by the queen, but by his favourite mistress Pauline de Nesle. She was the younger sister of his previous favourite and her shrewd and suspicious eyes kept watch over every young woman in Louis's vicinity, forever on guard against the ones who could eventually supplant her hard-won place in the royal affections. Such was the cost of sharing the king's bed, the price to be paid for the gifts and titles that could so easily be taken away by someone younger and more beautiful.

The members of the court all bowed to their king and parted for him at once like the Red Sea, wide hems of the satin gowns sweeping across the marble floor while the musicians struck up Louis's favourite piece with no prompting. Every candle was lit, every glass was full, every surface was polished to a high shine and the whole effect was dazzling. On nights like this Versailles truly felt like it was the centre of the world.

"Dance with me, Emma."

Auguste ignored the presence of the sovereign he had sought for so long to impress, taking her hand in his own and joining in the minuet taking place in an antechamber. They faced each other as the music rose around them, Auguste bowed while she dipped into a curtsey, the starched petticoats rustling under the rose-coloured silk. Her palm reached for his and they pressed flat against each other for a moment, before breaking apart as the steps of the dance took them away from each other and they turned in time with the music, facing in opposite directions.

A flash of something dark amidst the brightness of the fantastically gilded room caught her eye as she danced, with the prickling feeling of being watched suddenly making a shiver run down her spine and she looked up. Killian stood in the upper gallery, half-hidden in the shadows of a carved pillar with one hand resting on the wide lip of the balcony railing. Unlike most of the men present he was not wearing a wig, as surprisingly unfashionable as it was for him to appear at a court ball without one, and his black hair shone in the candlelight like the sleek pelt of a seal. Their gazes met for a moment and a smile curved his lips, but the music chimed and she turned her back to him to dip down towards the floor with a bend of her knees, matching Auguste's bow that marked the end of the measure and the conclusion of the dance.

When she looked up again the demon had vanished.

The ball went on for hours, spreading across several rooms in the palace with dancing, drinking, and the favourite pastime of many at court, gambling. She caught another glimpse of Killian at the gaming tables, throwing ivory dice with a flick of his wrist to a cheer from the onlookers who crowded round to watch and the young wife of the Spanish Ambassador on his arm. Playwrights
charmed the now drunk duchesses, whispering in their ears with fingers slowly curling round tightly cinched waists and drawing them much closer than what would be considered proper in the more sober light of day. Generals had conscripted the bankers and were now reenacting old battles, using the king's silver plate as makeshift shields against imaginary Austrian and Dutch troops, and the young lords fortified on several bottles of ruby red claret had gone swimming in the fountains, ruining their fine satin coats and silk stockings in the process. Even for Versailles the behaviour was rather outrageous, though Louis merely laughed as they trooped back through the palace and shook themselves dry like dogs, making ladies shriek as the droplets flew and smeared their careful applied maquillage, rolling down heaving breasts and slipping wetly into the clefts of their deep decolletages.

Emma suspected it was the infernal one's presence that was causing it, his corrupting influence rippling across the court like a heavy stone dropped into a still pool. She should be trying to counter it with her own radiance but she couldn't bring herself to care, not tonight, not when Auguste had his hand low on the small of her back and he was leaning down with parted lips and his intentions plain on his face.

"One last time, please."

"No, Auguste," she countered, pressing her fingers against his mouth and holding him at bay as his hand slipped from her waist, "I cannot. You made your choice and it was the right one, I wish you all the happiness in the world. But I must leave tonight, I've already stayed too long."

His shoulders slumped in the fine new coat, "Emma...I will never see you again, will I?"

She cupped his sad face in her hands, drawing her thumbs gently over the planes of his cheekbones and rising up on her toes.

"I think not, my dear artiste. But I will always be listening."

He covered her hands with his as she kissed his forehead, bestowing her final blessing upon him. Auguste did not try to stop her when she turned and left the light and the laughter of the royal court, heading through a small, paneled door that was tucked away in a corner and into the long, darkened hallway behind that ran almost the length of the palace. It was dark but not empty, from the deep recesses in the walls and behind curtained-off alcoves were glimpses of movement and the soft sounds of intimacy, from couples who had slipped the prying eyes at the ball to seek stolen moments in each other's arms. The air was thick with potential sin but she picked up her skirts and began to run on silent feet. It was not her place to pass judgement on the many adulterous souls of Versailles, not tonight.

A shape formed from the shadows as a black-gloved hand reached out and almost touched her on the shoulder, she felt the tiniest brush against the silk from the outstretched fingertips.

"Emma."

The demon's voice called to her but she didn't stop, darting through an archway and catching his reflection behind her in a fogged window.

"Emma, wait!"

The royal chapel was as grand as the rest of the palace, done in the classical style with rows of white pillars and stone arches that lined the nave and a high vaulted ceiling, soaring over eighty feet above the floor. Like the Pope's chapel in Rome the whole length of it had been lavishly painted, with a depiction of the Heavenly Father's holy promise of redemption to the world. Emma crossed the chapel's threshold and was halfway to the altar when she heard him again.
"Beata angela Emma!"

It was not spoken out loud and she came to a halt, her skirts swaying around her like a ringing bell while she looked over her shoulder. Killian stood behind her, on the other side of the chapel's entrance with a pained expression as he carefully eyed the unseen line on the floor. Of course he couldn't enter into the hallowed space without causing himself serious harm and they both knew it. The promise of redemption did not extend to the infernal creature who paced outside of the holy barrier, lifting his head to meet her gaze with his blue eyes silently beseeching her to come to him. The painted seraphim peeked through the clouds and looked down on them from above, silent witnesses in the dark.

He opened his mouth to speak and she quickly slipped between the columns, disappearing from his view.

The road that ran between Paris and Versailles was normally well trod, with everything from humble barrows pushed by hand to gilded carriages drawn by teams of tall horses passing to and fro on the thoroughfare at regular intervals. But in the pale light of the early morn with mist shrouding the tops of the trees that lined the route it was strangely quiet and still, with only her own footfalls echoing against the ground. The hem of her cloak dragged slightly against the damp, hard-packed earth, yet it remained miraculously clean and unblemished as she walked the long miles. Underneath she wore a plain, high-necked grey dress that was as simple and spare as a nun's habit, as if she were a postulant out on a morning pilgrimage. It was a far cry from the fashionable gowns and elaborate frippery required in Louis's court, there were no swan feathers in her hair or wide panniers and petticoats under her dress. All she had brought with her was a length of silk ribbon, dyed a dark indigo blue and folded in a linen handkerchief with Auguste's monogram embroidered in the corner.

Emma walked away from Versailles, her pace unhurried but steady, and she did not look back at the palace before it faded into the morning mist. Perhaps she would return one day, if the grand chateau stood the test of time. Not everything did, while it was solidly built and filled with dazzling splendor, it was but stone laid by mortal hands and what the proud Bourbon kings had built to celebrate their glory could easily be unmade by those who would follow. Very few things lasted forever, and royal dynasties were not one of them.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the distant sound of hoofbeats, echoing at a fast clip that indicated a rider who was making some haste. The pounding grew steadily louder, and she considered vanishing into the fog above for a moment before sighing and standing her ground. The demon was certainly persistent, but she supposed he had to be. Corrupting a soul past the point of salvation was not a task for one who would give up at the first sign of resistance.

The black stallion appeared at last at a brisk trot, coming to a halt a few strides away from her with a single command from its master. The reins were laid aside on the ebony neck and Killian dismounted in one smooth motion, rising in the saddle and lifting one long leg easily over the horse's broad flank.

"You were visibly distressed last night," he said without preamble, "And I am told that you have bid farewell to His Grace and all the members of his household, including Monsieur Auguste. I became concerned."

She didn't bother asking how he knew, gossip was another form of currency at the royal court, and at times it was far more valuable than gold.

"I am none of your concern, infernal one. There was no need to come after me like a shepherd tracking a wayward lamb."
"Oh, I beg to differ. The darkness always comes searching for the light."

"To destroy it," she retorted, turning her head away from him and pulling the edge of her cloak a little tighter around her chest.

Killian sighed, taking on a somewhat wistful tone when he spoke, "To destroy you would be a sin that even I would dare not commit, blessed one."

She began to walk away from him, hoping he would leave her in peace. Her prayer was not answered.

"Where are you going?"

"Paris," she answered without turning around, wondering why she was even deigning to speak to him at all.

"On foot?"

He sounded incredulous and she paused for a moment, keeping her back to him, "It's not like the journey will cause me any fatigue."

"Still, it's an odd mode of transport for one who has wings."

The horse appeared in her field of vision, sidestepping on the sharp hooves and blocking her path. Killian was sitting astride again with a hand resting on his thigh, "Come with me then, Emma. I shall deliver you safely to Paris."

She exhaled loudly in frustration, another protest springing to her lips, "Killian-"

His horse was apparently in agreement with his proposition and the velvet muzzle dropped, pressing against her shoulder and nudging with surprising gentleness for such a powerful beast. Emma shook her head at the demon's obvious amusement as he beheld the sight and acquiesced, taking his proffered hand and letting him lift her to sit behind him in the saddle. He pulled her arms around his waist and patted her wrist, smiling at her over his shoulder, "Hold on tight to me."

With a click of his tongue and a dig of his heels the stallion began to move, slowly at first, but he quickly urged them into a full gallop. The hooves barely touched the ground as they practically flew down the road, the wind whistling past with her arms locked tight around Killian's riding coat. The deep nap of the black velvet was soft under her hands and she could feel the heat of his body even through the material of both jacket and shirt, a warmth that made her want to press even closer against his back. He held the reins easily in one hand while the other slid back and forth over hers in a rhythm that she found oddly soothing, though his leather glove kept him from touching her skin.

"Merci," she said when the horse had to stop for a rest and Killian slid from the saddle, turning to her at once to assist her down beside him like a gentleman, "But I will walk the rest of the way. Alone."

He didn't try to argue, perhaps sensing that she would not be swayed this time, "As you wish. But if you will indulge me for just a moment longer, why have you decided to leave Versailles with such haste?"

Silence reigned for a long moment. There was curiosity in his voice, which didn't surprise her, but he did seem genuinely concerned and there was no one else she could talk to who would fully understand. The Heavenly Father was always present, but He had the whole of Creation to concern himself with at every given moment and not just the affairs of a single angel.
"It has something to do with Auguste, doesn't it?" Killian prodded, as gently as the horse when she did not answer.

The confession came out in a rush, "His father is dying."

Killian frowned with confusion, "Sad, but such is the fate of all men."

"They have not always...seen eye to eye. Auguste has struggled with his filial duty in the past and has prayed for guidance on how to be a good son. It is his father's last wish to see him finally married and settled before he dies and Auguste has chosen to honour that. The marriage contract was signed three days ago and he will return to his village at Michaelmas to wed the mayor's daughter."

"Ah. Well, marriage is a joy and a sacrament."

Emma ignored the sarcasm, "Yes, it is. Auguste will be a good and faithful husband to his wife."

Killian scoffed, "At the French court? A faithful husband in Versailles is about as rare as finding a pearl in the middle of the desert."

His skeptical look faded into something unfathomable when the tear began to roll down her cheek. Time slowed into the eternity between heartbeats as the droplet fell slowly to the ground, where it soaked into the ground and sprouted into a single rose of a bright vibrant blue, a colour that did not exist in any rose anywhere in the world.

"So you leave your artiste to honour his father and enter into the holy sacrament of marriage with some provincial mademoiselle, even though it obviously breaks your heart to do so? If that's what it takes to be a saint, then I'll gladly stay a sinner, angel."

The words were mocking but the tone was not, Killian's normally silky voice was full of barely suppressed fury. He kicked up a heavy clod of dirt with the toe of his boot and stalked away to the edge of the road, standing with his back to her. She looked down at the miraculous flower that had appeared at her feet and bent to pluck it from the earth, twirling it idly between her fingers.

"Will you be staying in Paris?" the demon asked after a while. His voice had softened somewhat, though he had not turned around.

"For now. But I go where I am needed, and the world is much larger than France."

"The French would argue that greatly."

"You are not French, Lord MacSeion," she pointed out, emphasizing his current nom de plume.

"Nevertheless, Madame le Cygne, the door of my Parisian abode is always open to you."

"Le Cygne?" she repeated.

"The feathers in your hair at the ball," Killian explained, his coat swinging open at his hip when he faced her again, "Swan feathers, were they not? They quite suited you."

"Thank you. For the compliment and the ride."

She pulled up her hood and went to turn towards Paris, but lingered for another moment on the road as she contemplated the rose in her hand, "Do roses grow in infernum?"

"No," he answered, "Nothing grows there."
When she held it out to him he hesitated, flexing his fingers in the gloves, "Will it not wither at my touch?"

At the shake of her head he slipped the leather off and slowly reached for the rose, taking the stem carefully between thumb and forefinger. The bud unfurled, blooming open while his eyes went wide with surprise.

"Until next we meet, damnate."

"I look forward to it already, beata."

The pounding hoofbeats quickly faded away behind her when he departed, the stallion neighing out his own equine farewell into the wind.

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**Present Day**

The SUV pulled into a clearly marked no parking zone next to the curb and Killian had his hand on the door handle and was pushing it open before they even came to a complete stop.

"Leave the engine running, this won't take long," he instructed Scarlet, stepping out onto the sidewalk and shutting the car door behind him. They had stopped in front of a coffee shop, the smell of fresh brewed espresso and baked goods wafting out as the door opened every few seconds like clockwork to admit the newest caffeine junkie in search of a fix. Inside, the line of waiting customers stretched from the butcher-block counter almost to the door while a young man in an apron took orders and wrote instructions for soy milk and extra pumps of flavoured syrups on the cups.

Killian ignored the line completely and stepped in front of the couple who were just about to place their order with a clipped instruction of, "One large dark roast. Black."

The barista blinked at him, marker clutched in his hand and darting a glance at the long line he had just carelessly bypassed, "Um, sir, could you please-"

He just smiled pleasantly and repeated his order, "Large dark roast. Black."

A hand tapped at his shoulder and a voice from behind him piped in, "Hey pal, get to the back of the line and wait your turn."

Killian reached up and flicked the hand away as easily as if he was brushing off a fly, not bothering to turn around. It had gone completely quiet in the coffee shop, even the jazzy music that had been playing over the sound system had mysteriously turned off. The barista darted another glance at the rest of the customers, then at the glass topped display of blueberry scones on the counter as if the pastries could somehow assist with his present dilemma, then back at him. He smiled again at the young man, not quite as pleasantly as before. A large paper cup was quickly filled with strong dark roast coffee and pushed across the counter, and as he was paying for his drink the woman from the couple he had cut in front of broke the silence and angrily stage-whispered to her boyfriend, "You know, there's a special place in hell for people who cut the line."

He picked up his coffee and turned to look down at her, tapping a finger thoughtfully against his lips as if he was mulling over what she had said before shaking his head and replying, "You know, there actually isn't, and I say that from close, personal experience. Now, as for bad tippers...well, that's an entirely different story."

The hundred dollar bill he pulled from his inner jacket pocket was perfectly folded with the denomination clearly visible and he held it up delicately between two fingers for a moment, before
sliding it neatly into the cheerily decorated tip jar on the counter while the woman gaped at him like a fish. He left the dumbfounded barista and the annoyed line of customers behind, sailing back out of the coffee shop while taking a leisurely sip of his large dark roast. It was deliciously bitter and almost tasted burnt. Just the way he liked it. His wallet was now a bit lighter, but the money was immaterial, he didn't care that he had just spent so much on a few ounces of hot water and some ground-up beans. Messing with people's heads and amusing himself in the process was more than worth the price. He slipped back into the Escalade and idly smoothed out an errant fold in his Italian wool trousers.

"Drive."

Scarlet's eyes met his briefly in the rearview mirror but his employee said nothing, he merely flicked on the turn signal and pulled the SUV back out into traffic. Killian settled back against the leather seat, not bothering with the seatbelt like always, and continued to drink his coffee while they made their way out of the city and onto the highway. The skyscrapers gave way to a long ribbons of asphalt stretching as far as the eye could see, and Scarlet expertly maneuvered them into the fast lane and gunned it. The man could drive, Killian would give him that. When he drove himself he did so like, well, a speed demon with a death wish, but Scarlet wasn't that far behind. It was also a smooth ride, nary a bump or jolt thanks to the excellent suspension and Scarlet's deft handling. The interior was deathly quiet, the radio was off and Scarlet didn't try to make any small talk. While he drove in silence, Killian looked out the darkly tinted window without paying attention to the scenery passing by at eighty miles an hour in an indistinct blur.

It had been four days since the dancer's overdose. No sign of the Dark One yet, and the imp currently chained up in his basement wasn't offering anything useful. He'd held up surprisingly well to a bit of torture in the form of a toy pistol filled with holy water, one could buy absolutely anything online these days, the internet truly was a miraculous thing. Killian hadn't gone too far with the imp, not yet, but after the debacle at the hospital he didn't want to walk blindly into another potential minefield and was gathering as much information as possible before forcibly summoning Rumplestiltskin to heel and demanding an explanation for what his minions had done. They might have been out looking for a bit of fun behind their master's back or they might have been acting on his orders, according to the dirty cops who Killian regularly bribed there had been an increase in the amount of heroin seized in drug busts recently, and several suspicious overdoses that had resulted in the deaths of the unlucky users. Emma had probably saved the girl's life when she shared her light for that brief moment in her rattletrap old car that she absolutely refused to let him replace with something from this century, at least. A demon stood witness to a holy miracle in the backseat of a yellow VW Bug, there really was a first time for everything.

Peter had been sent to the hospital to arrange payment of the sure-to-be obscene medical bill and to find out any information that he could, reporting back that she was expected to recover and that her parents had been at her bedside when she was transferred from a ward to the private room that her generous employer was covering. The parents showing up was somewhat surprising, from what Killian knew she had been estranged from them for some time, a hardly uncommon story among the girls who wound up in his club. A former boyfriend who left her high and dry for another woman also had something to do with it. Despite what the clients liked to believe, very few of them took the job because they secretly wanted to sleep with men old enough to be their fathers.

But before Peter could try to question her about what had happened a young blonde nurse had appeared, out of nowhere, he insisted, and barred him from the room. With hospital security backing her up, he was forced immediately to leave since he'd been specifically instructed not to make any kind of scene.

A blonde nurse. It had to be the other angel who was there that night.
She had known what he was at once, just as he had immediately felt her divinity. It was a sensation similar to being in Emma's presence, but as cold and forbidding as a sudden dash of icy water. The holy light that emanated from her was like the reflection of the sun on a field of fresh snow, so bright and beautiful, but blinding and difficult for him to look directly at. The recoil had ripped through him, a feral snarl rising in his throat at the sight of her in the hallway. Her hands had started to rise and there was a ripple in the air around her, the look on her face was that of a combatant entering a battlefield to engage the enemy. They'd been separated by a few feet of cheap linoleum and eons of endless war. Angels and demons were natural opposites, meant to always repel each other. Oil and water could never mix, north and south could never touch. But he and Emma were like magnets, attracted and drawn to the opposing force instead of being pushed away. It had been that way for him since the beginning, that night when Rome had burned and unholy chaos reigned in the holy city. A single, solitary light had shone amidst the darkness, and he was the moth who had been inexorably drawn towards the means of his own destruction.

Only he wasn't a mindless insect, he had known the risk he was taking in getting too close to the light. The risk he still took with each encounter. Emma had not been wrong when she said his own kind would tear him apart, he was immortal but that didn't mean that he couldn't be dragged back down into the depths of Hell and soundly punished for the rest of eternity. He'd never be allowed to set foot back into the mortal world ever again if the full extent of his activities were discovered. Especially since he had nothing to show for it, and wouldn't, until the day he finally convinced her to fall. She had also not been wrong about the prestige she would bring him, the power and standing he would gain from doing the near impossible and corrupting an angel. And angel who was not currently answering his calls. Or his texts, although he could see that she was reading them and was relieved that she had not blocked his number. Though he had the urge to make her acknowledge him - show up at her door and refuse to leave until she let him in again, he held himself in check. Pushing her into contact before she was ready would only backfire and result in her pulling away from him even more, and she might even retreat completely to the one place where he could never follow.

"What happens to me if I get caught, damnate? What happens if I get cast out?"

The words had been hurled at him in the darkness of her small apartment, an accusation that made him flinch. After all this time and she still wasn't willing to make that leap, not fully trusting him to catch her. Even though her banishment would give him what he craved so badly he wanted her to make that choice and not be forced into it, to turn her back on Heaven of her own volition and embrace him openly, willingly. They could make their own paradise on earth together, unbound by the rules that kept them apart.

Killian lifted his coffee to his lips and found that it was scalding hot, he must have been unconsciously heating the cup in his hand while he was lost in his thoughts. He drank it anyway, the heat from infernal fire had no effect on him. Scarlet took the exit indicated on the car's GPS and followed the directions until they were deep within the rabbit's warren of suburbia. Endless rows of big-box stores, chain restaurants, and schools named after dead politicians. Neighbourhoods full of cookie-cutter houses and streets with ridiculously themed names. Petunia Lane met Marigold Street and then gave way to Duchess Drive and Earl Court. A faux-village sign proclaimed that they were entering "Storybrooke", and Scarlet slowed down as he took the final turn onto a nondescript street and looked to the left and right, squinting at the house numbers.

"It's that one. Second on the left."

Scarlet started a bit at the sound of his voice, eyes flicking briefly to his in the rearview mirror before flicking away as he coughed and asked, "Should I park in the driveway?"
"Yes, but park it so no one else can pull in beside or block my car."

"You got it, boss."

He parked the car sideways at the bottom of the drive while Killian pulled out his phone and hit "dial" on one of his contacts. It was as much advance warning of his visit that the man he had driven all this way to see was going to get.

"Come to the door and let me in. Yes, now. Yes, by "now" I mean, get up off your ass right now and come open the fucking door."

Scarlet followed him up the driveway while he spoke into the phone, ignoring the shocked look at his swearing from a passing neighbour walking a little toy dog in a knit sweater and neon pink booties. Bored court ladies with too much leisure time used to dress their tiny lapdogs up for their own amusement hundreds of years ago, some things never changed.

The house's front porch was clean and tidy, it even had a bright blue recycling bin like all of the other houses on the block and a "home sweet home" doormat. But if anyone took the time to look a little closer then the differences started to become apparent, the lack of a flowerbed or any other yard decor, the dark drapes pulled firmly shut in every window, and the discreetly placed but still visible security cameras. Killian stared directly into the one pointed at the welcome mat as he ended the call, not bothering to hide his face. He could hear someone on the other side of the door fumbling with the lock for a long moment before it finally swung open to reveal an empty hallway. He stepped over the threshold with Scarlet at his heels and the door shut behind the both of them.

"Mr. Jones. This is...uh, an unexpected surprise."

He turned and faced the man who had carefully not shown his face to the outside. Despite the perfectly warm temperature in the house he had a chunky wool scarf wrapped several times around his neck and he was standing with his shoulders hunched, his chin dipped down towards his chest.

"Jefferson. I've come to have a little private chat with you, mate. If it's not a bad time, of course."

They both knew the question was rhetorical. Jefferson's eyes widened slightly but he nodded, "Sure. We can talk in my office, just give me a second here."

The door was locked again, in addition to the regular latch two heavy deadbolts had also been added, as well as a thick security chain. Inside, the house had light laminate flooring throughout and plain white paint on the walls, standard builder's grade material. But instead of furniture the first room off the front had had mattresses and piles of pillows on the floor. He saw Scarlet wrinkle his nose at the sight of a man lying on his back almost completely nude, wearing only socks and a pair of oversized headphones. There was a faint audible thump of the music he was listening to with his eyes closed and his lips moving to the words. Two women were also present, one sitting against the wall with her legs stretched out and the other girl's head in her lap. She was stroking a hand over the prone woman's hair over and over again like she was petting a cat, both of them seemingly oblivious to the naked man lying sprawled mere inches away and his and Scarlet's arrival.

Jefferson led them down the hall, past a half bath and a kitchen where the appliances were not used to cook food, and into a large living room. More scenes like the one they had just witnessed were playing out, men and women in varying stages of dress and coherence were draped all over the couches and armchairs and floor. From the outside it was a perfectly ordinary suburban dwelling, on the inside it was the modern day equivalent to a Victorian opium den.

There was a small, sunken room at the very back of the house, probably marked as a den on the
original plans. Jefferson sat down in a tufted leather armchair while Killian took a seat on the small loveseat, leaving Scarlet to stand by the door. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with chemistry and botany texts. Some were new, and some were clearly old, leather bound tomes that extolled the virtues of cocaine for medicinal use and other outdated ideas that sounded ridiculous in this day and age.

Jefferson was clearly nervous about the unexpected visit, stuttering a bit as he said, "I'm testing out a new formulation, it produces a very mellow high but still lowers the inhibitions considerably. If you're interested, I can throw in some samples with my next delivery. No charge, of course."

"Of course," Killian repeated. Jefferson was his supplier for all of the drugs sold off-menu at the Jolly Roger. "Performance enhancers" for the customers, all manner of different uppers, downers, things the dancers took to lose weight and maintain every edge they could get on each other. He leaned forward and fixed the man with an intent look, "But right now I'm more interested in heroin."

Surprise flashed across Jefferson's face, "You always said that you didn't want--"

"I don't," he interrupted, "What I want is information about where it's coming from and who supplies it. One of my dancers overdosed a few days ago on heroin brought in from the outside and I've heard there's been a noticeable spike in recent ODs. If there's a new player in my city, I want to know everything about them."

"Mr. Jones, you know this business is all about discretion."

"So be discreet," he shrugged.

"I value your continued patronage, really, I do, but I'm afraid I can't help you with this."

He regarded Jefferson with a hard stare that had no effect. The dealer was seemingly impervious to his influence, perhaps due to frequent sampling of his own wares, and he quickly considered all of the various ways he could persuade the man to comply. The simplest was to have Scarlet work him over for a bit, but their business relationship would be permanently soured after that and he didn't feel like looking for a new dealer. His usual carrots of money, power, or sex were of little use, he'd seen the stacks of cash that Jefferson's business generated and he was an attractive man with plenty of drugs. It would hardly be difficult for him to get laid.

But he did have something he could offer that Jefferson would be hard-pressed to get otherwise, and leaning back to drape his arm oh so casually on the back of the sofa Killian crossed his ankle over his knee and idly buffed his nails on the lapel of his jacket as he offered up his trump card in a soft voice, "If you saw fit to change your mind, I could arrange for you to spend a day with your daughter."

The air in the room changed as Jefferson jerked like he'd just received an electric shock. Killian made a point to know all about his associates' weak spots, and he was well aware that Jefferson's illegal activities had cost him custody of his beloved young daughter. He was allowed one supervised visit every two weeks, a scant hour in a windowless room with a social worker hovering in the background and he never missed a single one. The drug dealer was quite the devoted dad.

"You can do that?"

It came out as a desperate croak, tinged with just the faintest hint of hope. Jefferson's hands were clenched into fists on the arm of his chair, he leaned forward and questioned, "How?"

"Does it really matter? A whole day without CPS interfering, you can go shopping and buy her all the things her little heart desires, have a tea party, whatever you choose. It will take a bit of time to
make the arrangements, but you have my word that I will deliver, if you get me the information I need."

There was a strange play of emotions across the dealer's face that Killian couldn't quite pin down. He should be jumping at the chance for unrestricted access to his daughter, by all accounts he absolutely adored the girl.

"I...I shouldn't. Grace is getting older now, picking up on more and she even said that I'm a bad influence and she's right."

"But she still loves you," Killian pointed out, "Against her better judgement, perhaps, but you're her father. And what would she give for a whole day with you? Say the word and I'll make it happen."

Jefferson abruptly stood up, "Deal. I'll make some calls and be in contact as soon as I can, Mr. Jones."

They filed back out to the other room and he observed the people lounging about, glassy-eyed and slack. They didn't look like stereotypical addicts, with too-thin bodies covered in track marks and open sores. Most were well dressed, well fed and could easily fit in with the soccer moms and their well-off husbands in the neighbourhood. But each was battling some kind of internal demon that had led them to Jefferson's door and the escape he offered with a handful of pills.

Killian shook his head, "Mellow is one thing, but they all look like they're about to fall into a bloody coma and men who pass out in the middle of a lap dance don't spend money on another. Forget the samples, just get me what I want."

"Where to now, boss?" Scarlet asked when they were back in the SUV.

"The Jolly Roger," Killian replied, fishing out his phone. He had a few contacts who would be useful in arranging access to Jefferson's daughter for the promised day, and he had no doubt that the man would deliver all of the information he could. Love was a powerful motivator, though not one that was usually part of his repertoire. It was a virtue, and he was always better with vices. Lust was easy to manipulate someone with, love was much more complicated.

He looked down at the little screen and saw no missed call or text from Emma. He resisted the urge to fling the phone out of the window and took a few deep breaths. This was fixable. The florist had delivered his order of a bouquet of purple hyacinths to her apartment the day after he had reluctantly left her bed, but he knew it would take more than just flowers to work his way back into her good graces. Getting a lowlife heroin dealer off the streets would be a place to start. If it did turn out to be someone with a connection to the Dark One and he got to stick it to that oily demon and his over-inflated sense of his own importance in the process than so much the better. He'd clashed with Rumplestiltskin before in the past and in this case, absence most certainly did not make the heart grow fonder.

They left Storybrooke and suburbia behind, getting back onto the highway and heading for the city in the distance. Maybe Emma would finally agree to a weekend at his lake house when this was all over, it was private and remote, and no one would interrupt them there. None of his own employees even knew about the place, he handled all of the bills separately and used a local property management company to maintain it. While he preferred the fast pace of city living, there were times when he enjoyed a little peace and quiet. The gentle lap of the water against the shore, a roaring fire in the fireplace, he was sure he could talk her into it if she'd just take his damn calls. The nights were very dark up by the lake, with none of the light pollution that was inescapable in the city. A perfect spot for some secret trysting, he imagined her spread out before him in front of the fire with the flickering shadows from the flames dancing across her pale skin as he slowly fucked her senseless.
The house had an outdoor shower off the master bedroom, it was meant for summer use but he could easily keep it warm at any time of year with nothing but his own body heat and they could stand under the stars on the cedar planks with the spray running over them, slick and slippery and grinding against each other, he'd go down on his knees to nudge her thighs apart and press his face right into the very heart of paradise and-

A buzzing sound interrupted his thoughts. Killian lifted his phone from his lap and saw multiple text notifications from Peter, he'd been so lost in his daydream that he hadn't even noticed that the man was trying to contact him. He felt the familiar flash of irritation and swiped his thumb over the screen, this had better be important and not any of Peter's usual petty nonsense, he really wasn't in the mood for it right now.

You didn't miss much at the auditions this morning

Right, the monthly auditions. He'd been too preoccupied to spare it much thought, but he was short a dancer at the moment.

Only one decent prospect - told her to come in on Thurs for a shift and see how it goes

What do you think?

He looked critically at the photo Peter had attached, taking in the lithe body, dark hair, red lips, and blue eyes. She certainly looked like a suitable replacement for his redhead. As he scrolled down he saw that just below the picture was another message.

Her name is Lacey
Chapter 14

Will shouldered the door open and stepped into the familiar bar, seeing heads swivel his way and recognition dawn on a few faces scattered around the room. Even though it was only just past ten in the morning the regulars were already settled in, glued to their stools with drinks in hand and eyes slipping back to the TVs that were bolted to the ceiling, watching a European sports channel broadcast a soccer match live from the UK.

He stood in the shabby vestibule for a moment with his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his leather jacket, scanning the room quickly for the man he had come to see. It didn't take long, he was at his usual seat, the one that no one else ever dared use even when he wasn't present. Like Mr. Jones's booth in the Jolly Roger, it was permanently reserved and only a choice few could sit with him without an express invitation. But unlike the sleek nightclub filled with the rich and idle where Will now spent his nights, The Outlaw Bar and Restaurant was much more downmarket. Instead of bottle service with top-shelf liquor and a separate cigar menu offered by flirty girls dressed in little more than sheer stockings and stiletto heels, there were baskets of greasy fries and a surly, tattooed bartender in a wife-beater who would grudgingly list the beers available on tap if prodded enough. The Jolly Roger's black leather banquettes and polished dance floor were worlds away from the Outlaw’s plain wood tables and chairs and peeling vinyl tile, no one was dressed in a suit and Will had gone back to his old uniform of beat-up jeans and faded T-shirt for this particular visit.

His leather jacket was new though, butter-soft lambskin bought full price from the kind of store he could only afford to shoplift at when he was growing up.

A few of the patrons offered nods as he passed and he turned down an invite at the pool tables to join the next game. He'd spent hours playing (and hustling) pool as a teenager when he was supposed to be in school, cutting class and making his first, tentative trips into the Outlaw. The worn green felt had served as the venue for his first meeting with Robin "Hood" Locksley, who told him that he was welcome to come in and play as much as he wanted, but he'd have to hand over a cut of all his winnings to the house. It didn't take long for Locksley to learn about his other hobby, stealing anything that wasn't nailed down (and a few things that were), and soon after that Will found himself in the bar after closing one night, sitting backwards in a chair with his shirt off and swigging cheap whiskey straight from the bottle while his shoulder was being tattooed with the same stylized lion and shield design that was displayed on the sign outside.

Locksley had his lion tattooed on the inside of his wrist, visible in the bar's dim light thanks to the rolled cuffs on his plaid flannel shirt when Will sat down across from him at his table. Locksley was several years older than him, a wiry man with sandy hair and a face that women seemed to find attractive enough. Or they were just drawn to his reputation.

"Hood," Will greeted him.

Locksley put his beer down, "Knave," he replied, using Will's old street name, "Thought you'd run off and forgotten your old mates for good."

"I'd never forget where I came from."

"Well, let's drink to old times, then."

His voice was dripping with sarcasm but another beer was procured from the bar by "Little" John, the second-in-command whose nickname was something of an ironic joke, the man was the size of a linebacker and had the intellect of someone who suffered repeated blows to the head. Locksley was
the brains of the operation, Little John was the brawn. He silently handed Will the drink and backed
off, cracking his knuckles as he went in a gesture that was meant to intimidate. Will watched the big
man over the rim of the glass as he drank, reminding himself to be careful. He might have been
welcomed back, but only as a guest. This was no longer his turf.

Locksley waited until he'd set the pint glass back down over a cigarette burn on the table that was
probably older than he was before asking, "So, what's he really like? Jones, I mean."

"He's-" Will hesitated, not really sure how to describe his employer, "He's not that easy to pin down.
He seems to know everyone and he's got dirt on all of them, but he's not the kind of man you sit
down and have a friendly chat with."

Locksley looked annoyed, "Oh come on, you've got to have something a little more juicy to share
than that."

"You know that guy running for mayor, Albert Spencer? Jones is screwing his wife."

She had shown up at the penthouse with a pair of large sunglasses covering half her face and the
collar of her trenchcoat turned up, obviously trying to hide her identity in the most cliched way
possible. Will had escorted her to the boss's office, where she stayed for an hour and emerged with
some rather tell-tale marks on her neck and mussed hair. He had silently handed her back her coat
and watched her pull a scarf from the pocket, tying it around her throat and slipping the sunglasses
back on. The next morning he had seen her on the news, standing next to her husband at some
campaign stop with the scarf still wrapped around her neck and a satisfied smile on her face that
wasn't directed at the pompous-looking man beside her.

Locksley snorted, "Dirty politics, huh? Usually it's the husbands who get caught with their pants
round their ankles, not the wives."

Will took another swig of his beer, "Yeah."

"Though that Regina Mills looks like she'd be quite the hellcat underneath those designer suits, not
that she'd ever give the likes of me the time of day, of course," the other man mused, almost to
himself. He shook his head slightly and his eyes narrowed, "So Jones gets his dick sucked by some
high-class bitch, call the five o'clock news. That can't be all you've got for your old buddy Hood,
Will. Hardly even worth making the trip."

The implication was clear. Tit for tat, if he wanted in on whatever job Locksley was dangling just out
of his reach then he'd have to give up information on Killian Jones. But he had to make damn sure
that nothing he said could ever be traced back to him, if Mr. Jones found out about it then Will was
pretty sure his life wouldn't be worth so much as a nickel. His boss didn't strike him as the "forgive
and forget" type, the man was a complete hardass who had only ever shown the slightest hint of a
soft spot for one person.

Will knew that Locksley would be very interested to hear all about Jones's other secret mistress, not
for any pornographic details about what they inevitably got up to behind closed doors, but because
Emma Swan was obviously more to him than just a good lay. If Jones had real, genuine feelings for
her, then perhaps he wasn't quite the cold-hearted bastard that everyone thought he was. The blonde
who waltzed right into his office and made him smile like no one else could with her weird Latin
greeting was a potential weakness, a possible chink in his impeccable armour, and Locksley would
be all over that like white on rice. Jones was an enigma, no one really knew much about his
background, and he was the type of man who had associates, not friends. But Will still remembered
what Emma had said to him that day when he'd run into her at church, "I've known him for a very
long time. I know exactly who he is and what he does."
How many people would love to know what she claimed to, would pay for the information she obviously had, would try to get it from her by any means necessary?

He took another long pull of his beer to stall for time. Mr. Jones had warned him not to discuss her visits with anyone, and he decided to hold that particular card close to his chest for now. Besides, he felt like he owed her one for not telling his boss about the insult he had carelessly thrown at her before his brain caught up with his mouth. His smart mouth had gotten him in plenty of trouble before, and he was sure she'd go running right to her boyfriend and get him fired (or...worse) after what he'd said.

Locksley was staring at him with clear impatience written all over his face and Will quickly put his drink back down, choosing his words very carefully but affecting a casual tone, "You didn't hear this from me, but he's on the warpath right now looking for some heroin dealer who pissed him off. Only he doesn't know the guy's name so he called in three cops from the drug squad that he keeps on his payroll and ripped them all new ones when they didn't know either, then said that whoever brought him the dealer first would get ten grand, while the other two would get turned into Internal Affairs. Thought they were all going to shit themselves right there and then."

"Who's on the take?" Locksley asked, leaning forward with interest and lowering his voice, "There's been rumours about that for years, Jones paying off cops to stay the fuck out of his club. So it's true then?"

Will nodded, offering up the three names and corresponding badge numbers that he had managed to piece together after the meeting after a bit of quiet sleuthing. The three cops had all left the Jolly Roger like a shot, white-faced and slack-jawed, staring numbly at each other as they silently slipped back into their unmarked car and peeled out of the parking lot in a squeal of burning rubber. Jones had watched them leave with his arms folded over his chest and a smile on his face that made the hairs on the back of Will's neck stand up. He had no doubt that the threat was not an idle one and two unlucky men were about to pay a heavy price for all the fun they'd had on Jones's dime. It was a fucking devious ploy to pit the three of them against each other, they'd be fighting more not to lose then they would for the actual reward, swaggering comrades-in-arms turned to mortal enemies in the blink of an eye.

"Don't try to step on his toes, Hood," Will warned, deadly serious now as he stared at the man sitting across from him, "Jones is not someone you want to mess with."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Locksley said with an innocent look, and it would have been convincing if Will didn't know just how damn good of a liar he was, "Well, Knave, if Jones is tossing out ten thousand dollar payouts just like that, then why are you looking to moonlight, exactly? Sounds like you've got it made, or is the grass not really all that greener at your new digs?"

He tried not to grimace at the pointed jab. Getting back in with the old crew was never going to be an easy task, but he really didn't want to bare his soul to Robin "Hood" Locksley of all people about the sorry state of his love life. He'd picked a massive fight with Ana a few days ago, after long hours spent fuming over the latest showy gift that their mutual boss had bestowed on her and drinking way too much in the process. She'd thrown him out of her apartment in disgust and he'd almost vomited right there in the hallway, staggering into the wall opposite her door with his hands braced on his thighs and his gut churning with a sour mix of beer and bile and what he'd refused to admit to her the whole time he was yelling.

*Jealousy*

"It's a woman, isn't it?"
Locksley had a sly grin on his face and Will looked away, feeling a hot flush creep up his neck and fighting the urge to tug on the collar of his T-shirt. Ana had ignored him completely when she showed up at the club for her shift after their fight, her red lips thinning a bit when she saw him standing next to Mr. Jones's booth but otherwise showing no sign that she even knew his fucking name, let alone had been riding him like a champion on the floor of her bedroom only two nights before, his jeans and boxers hastily shoved down to his knees while she rose and fell above him with her head thrown back and her hands braced on his chest. Her nails had dug in deeper and deeper as he planted his feet and rocked up into her, leaving little white, half-moon shaped marks on his skin.

He could still feel the scratches burning under his shirt as she approached the booth, dressed in a slinky, ruby red sequined dress that was cut right down to her navel in the front and slit up to her hip on one side. She bent over the table to put those lush lips next to the boss's ear, thanking him for the Louis Vuitton purse while deliberately trailing a manicured fingernail along the lapel of his jacket.

The pose gave both him and Will an eyeful of the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra, her spectacular breasts on clear display as the dress gaped open. He felt himself immediately start to get hard under his suit pants even as his hand clenched into a fist at his side, wanting desperately to punch the other man square in the jaw. But luckily Jones had been preoccupied with his phone and hadn't seemed to notice, he barely glanced up and merely patted Ana on the ass, sending her back to work with a quick and dismissive, "You're very welcome, sweetheart."

Ana had sashayed away with a swing of her hips, not even sparing Will a single glance. Clearly, she was still pissed. She'd sworn up and down that nothing was going on between them after the courier had dropped off the package containing the purse and a note in Jones's rather distinctive handwriting, and what did Will expect, that she was going to refuse his generosity and risk her job? He knew what she did for a living, he knew that she had to play nice with the boss, and she didn't know why Mr. Jones was singling her out with all the gifts and private meetings in his office lately but he'd been a perfect gentleman every time and made no mention of expecting any kind of sexual payback. Will had wanted so badly to believe her, but he couldn't stop the drunken accusations that he flung into her face until she finally had enough and told him to leave, throwing the door open and glaring daggers at him until he finally stumbled through it. It slammed shut behind him almost at once and he winced when he also heard the loud click as she turned the lock.

Locksley shook his head, rolling his eyes to the heavens, "Ever the hopeless romantic, Will Scarlet. You're doing it for some cunt, I knew it."

"Shut up," Will muttered, the tips of his ears burning as he hunched his shoulders in his jacket and looked away, "What does it matter to you anyway, Hood? I'll get the job done, that's the important part."

Little John brought Locksley another beer without being asked, he took the glass and stood up from the table, gesturing Will to follow, "Why don't we continue this in private?"

One of the teams scored a goal on the TV and a cheer went up around the room, but Locksley didn't stop to watch the instant replay and Will didn't give a shit about who was winning right now. They moved to the back office, a windowless room off the kitchen that absolutely reeked of smoke where a flimsy card table and several folding chairs were set up. Papers were scattered in a pile next to the overflowing ashtray, handwritten notes, maps, photos that had obviously been printed off the internet from some real estate website. Locksley sifted through the mess and produced a set of blueprints, Will squinted at it and saw that it was clearly some kind of warehouse.

"A little more complicated than the usual snatch and grab," Locksley explained, "Doesn't look like much from the outside, but they've got cameras, motion detectors, a private security firm patrolling the joint. I need you to find a way in."
Will noted the address printed in the corner as he scanned the page, "What's inside?"

"That's on a need to know basis at the moment, I'm afraid. You wanted to work for Jones, Knave, and I was nice enough to let you go, and I even let you keep that lion on your shoulder instead of burning it off. Some have not been so lucky."

A large hand clapped him hard on said shoulder, and Will did his best not to flinch. Locksley gave him a nasty smile, patting the spot where the tattoo was etched into his skin, "Get us in, get us out, and we'll come back here for a nice, friendly drink. Just like old times."

"Right," he muttered, taking the envelope Locksley picked up and thrust at him with instructions not to let anyone see the information inside.

"Not even that tail you're chasing," he smirked, turning back to the door and reaching for the knob without waiting for a response.

Will grimaced behind the other man's back, slipping the envelope into the inner pocket of his jacket and darting another quick glance at the mess on the table. Locksley usually chose easy marks, carjacking rich assholes on their way home from a night out at the city's most expensive restaurants (tipped off by the busboys who earned a little kickback for their call), hitting up delivery trucks full of designer goods before they reached the loading docks behind the high-end stores that were expecting the overpriced shoes and perfume they "lifted" from the cargo compartments and resold at a massive discount to people who were too wowed by the rock-bottom prices to probe too deeply about how such a bargain was possible. Deep down they knew the stuff was stolen, anyway, they just pretended to believe otherwise so they wouldn't feel guilty about buying it.

Locksley didn't touch the little guy, they never held up the small mom-and-pop convenience stores in the neighbourhood or snatched a purse from a woman getting off the bus after dark, obviously coming home after a long day at work or school. They had a code, Locksley insisted, they would never take from anyone who couldn't afford the loss. It had all sounded very noble to Will when he was first initiated into the gang and heard the stirring speech with blood seeping through the bandage that had been slapped over his new tattoo and a mostly empty bottle of whiskey in his hand, but he slowly realized that it wasn't quite as altruistic a gesture as it had seemed. No one in their territory would turn on the man who kept sticking it to people with more money than sense, they happily bought jewellery and iPads and wallets with fancy logos on them from him and kept their mouths shut whenever the cops came knocking.

They were heroes instead of criminals, and the heady feeling went right to Will's head until the night a security guard tried to stop them, a pudgy, middle-age guy whose hands shook on his flashlight and voice cracking like a teenager's when he ordered them to stop. Little John beat the man to a bloody pulp on Locksley's orders, not stopping even after he had clearly lost consciousness and was no longer any kind of threat. It had seemed like it was happening in slow-motion, every punch Little John threw with his meaty hand taking forever to land and the sickening crunch of bones breaking under the heavy blows echoing over and over again in his ears. Locksley had watched without a flicker of emotion on his face, eyes hooded and arms crossed. Afterwards it was like it had never happened, no one said a single word about the guard left for dead when they piled back into the bar and Locksley had ordered "a round for everyone, on my tab."

He was cheered for his generosity by the customers and accepted their sloppy, drunken thanks with a magnanimous smile, while Will shuddereded in a dark corner behind the pool tables, unable to get the memory of the poor man's battered body out of his mind, lying in a crumpled heap with blood pooling on the concrete floor underneath him, dark and wet in the beam from his flashlight, still switched on and pointing right at him from where it had fallen from his hand after Little John
The nightmares had lasted for weeks, until he learned to drown them out with whiskey or vodka or whatever liquor he had on hand in his apartment, he wasn't picky. The morning hangovers were better than the dreams, waking up with a pounding headache and a mouth that felt like it was stuffed full of cotton balls was preferable to sheets soaked with sweat and his heart feeling like it was going to burst right out of his chest.

Locksley closed and locked the office door with a small padlock that Will could pick in under a minute with a bent paperclip if he wanted to, but he suspected it was more for show than anything. Back in the main room the TVs had been switched from sports to local news, the match must have finished and some of the customers were already gone, empty glasses and bottles left behind. Locksley took the beer the bartender poured for him without being asked, resting one foot on the rail under the bar and glancing up at the screen.

"What a fucking moron."

Will followed his eyes, turning to watch the newscast with his elbow propped on the bar. The two helmet-haired anchors were sitting behind a desk and talking while a mug shot was superimposed over the empty space between them. ARREST MADE IN BOTCHED BANK ROBBERY scrolled across the screen while the facts were read out by the male anchor in a deep, booming voice, "Mark Preston, forty-two, was arrested at his office yesterday without incident, on charges stemming from the attempted holdup of a downtown Citibank branch....handed the teller a note claiming to have a gun and demanding fifty thousand dollars...fled with only a few hundred and was caught on security cameras a block away stuffing his disguise of a bandana and a baseball cap into a city garbage can....Mr. Preston is a longtime employee of the well-heeled boutique investment firm Darling & Smythe....an anonymous source within the company has told Channel Six news exclusively that Mr. Preston's corporate credit cards were maxed out...possible embezzlement suspected and are conducting an internal audit of all his accounts....Mr. Preston's wife Erica and their sixteen year old daughter are said to be devastated by his arrest and have refused to comment on the allegations...court date set for next month....calls to Mr. Preston's attorney for a statement were not returned."

"Amateur," Locksley scoffed, looking utterly bemused as he drank his beer. Will stared at Mark Preston's mugshot, taking in the bloodshot eyes, unshaven face and slumped shoulders of the man who had run up a bill of fifty thousand dollars in the Jolly Roger and actually tried to rob a bank to come up with it.

"Yeah," Will agreed, looking away from the TV, "Amateur."

"See you soon, Knave."

It was a clear dismissal and Will took the hint, he wasn't really in the mood to hang around any longer anyway. The envelope in his pocket crackled when he moved, zipping his jacket up as he stepped out of the Outlaw and squinting when the sun hit him full in the face. He cursed under his breath, shading his watering eyes with his hand as he fumbled towards his motorcycle and flung his leg over the seat. The visor on his helmet blocked out the light and he let out a sigh of relief, blinking away the sting as he kicked the bike to life.

When he got to the Jolly Roger it was still closed - it wasn't exactly the kind of club that offered a lunch special or half-price drinks before five to lure in customers. Only a few employees were present, lower level staff doing things like polishing the tables and refilling the supplies in the private rooms, lube, condoms, tissues. Mr. Jones was nowhere to be seen, unless it was open audition day he was hardly ever in this early. Peter hadn't shown up yet either and it was the assistant manager, Felix,
who was watching over the morning staff. Or at least that's what he was supposed to be doing, Will knew that Felix was addicted to online poker and would be holed up somewhere in the club with his laptop, completely glued to the screen. The employees all worked in silence, keeping their heads down and staying out of Will's way. No one challenged him when he slipped through the nondescript door that separated the public area of the club from the private.

The Jolly Roger's basement was accessed from a set of stairs tucked away behind a shelving unit in a storage room. Tens of thousands of dollars worth of liquor was lined up in neat rows, bottles of limited edition Grey Goose, platinum Patron, fifty-year old Glenfiddich, and brands Will hadn't even heard of before he started working for Killian Jones (there were actual people who really drank cognac?) sat ready and waiting for when the bar needed to be restocked. Will's hand twitched at the sight of them, it was tempting to nick one or two and take them home, but he wasn't that stupid. Peter took inventory very seriously and personally oversaw all of the club's stock. He hadn't come in for the alcohol anyway, he bypassed the shelves and went down into the basement, picking his way carefully on the concrete stairs to avoid making any noise.

Once a thief, always a thief. He'd had the whole building almost completely cased by the end of his first week, and the basement had always bothered him. It was bisected in two by a grey cinderblock wall that ran the width of it, with a steel door set smack in the middle that was kept shut by a heavy bar. The bar had to be retracted to open the door, but it was secured with a keypad lock that required a code instead of a traditional key. Will knew locks, the kind Jones had could be programmed with anything from a four digit code to a nine digit one. It would take much more than just a bent paperclip to pick it.

"Just what are you hiding back there, you smug bastard?"

Frustration welled in his chest and he took a few deep breaths to try to calm himself down, Locksley's needling had only served to remind him that fancy new suits and fatter paycheck aside, he was really nothing but Killian Jones's glorified chauffeur. He'd thought the job was going to be his chance at the brass ring, but the blue-eyed devil kept yanking it right out of his reach, with that cold smile that almost dared Will to do something about it.

"I could tell your girlfriend a few secrets about you, couldn't I? Bet you wouldn't like that, Mr. Jones."

He still saw Emma Swan the odd time at Mass, though he always kept to the back row of pews and slipped out the door as soon as the service was over, while the rest of the congregation was busy lining up at the altar for communion. Her blonde head had turned towards him more than once, with a look on her face that Will couldn't quite decipher but always made him slouch down in his seat, feeling like he was a child who just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. They hadn't actually talked, but he could easily pull her aside and share a few choice words about Killian Jones, words like cheater and unfaithful, drop some broad, unsubtle hints into her ear. Maybe she could make Jones sweat for once, put a few cracks in that infuriatingly smooth facade he called a face and he'd stop screwing around with Ana if only to get Emma off his back.

Will sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. Oh, who was he kidding? He'd just wind up getting his own ass kicked, and fired, and he'd have to go crawling back to Robin Locksley again on his hands and knees and give the man a metaphorical blowjob to get back into the gang. Fuck that. Will Scarlet didn't grovel. He'd do the job, get the money, and buy Ana whatever the hell she wanted. Locksley was a dick, but he knew what he was doing and whatever was in the warehouse he wanted to hit would be both valuable and easy to turn into cold hard cash. Ana might not be speaking to him right now, but money always talked.
He gave one final glance to the locked door before he turned around and went back up the stairs. He'd keep his head down but his eyes and ears open, try to figure out Killian Jones's secrets while he was distracted with his search for the drug dealer. Will wasn't sure why Jones was suddenly so obsessed with finding the guy, he'd never shown any special interest in the dancer who OD'd. But if it kept him looking the other way for a while, then that's all that mattered right now.

Felix had come out of his hidey hole when Will sidled back out from the storage room, he was a tall man with a long, thin face that was currently screwed up in an expression of extreme annoyance.

"No drinking in the club unless a client buys it for you, that's the rule."

"I'm sorry, I just...I'll put it away, right now."

The petite brunette he was talking to stuffed a water bottle into her bag that Will guessed had been filled with something besides Evian. She was dressed in a sleeveless shirt that was only buttoned halfway, letting the edges of her black lace bra peek out. Will recognized her as the new dancer, the one hired to replace the redheaded girl, and he watched her shuffle her feet and blush under Felix's displeasure, trying to hide her bag away behind her back and fidgeting nervously with the bra strap on one shoulder. Will felt a pang of sympathy, she was hardly the only girl who snuck in a drink or two, she just had the bad luck to get caught.

Felix was clearly less understanding, "If I catch you pulling this shit again, you're fired, you understand?"

Her lip quivered and she sounded like she was on the verge of tears, "I forgot, but it won't happen again, I swear."

"Oh, lay off her. Isn't it also against the rules to be playing Texas hold 'em when you're supposed to be managing, Felix?"

He looked up, face darkening with rage while Will casually leaned against the wall and regarded him with a bland expression. The brunette had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from laughing while Felix twitched and sputtered.

"What the fuck are you doing here so early, Scarlett?"

"Me?" Will asked innocently, pointing to himself, "Nothing. I'm certainly not checking up on the staff for Mr. Jones, to make sure they're actually doing what he's paying them for."

He flashed a smile as Felix turned an interesting shade of purple, mouth opening and closing as he obviously struggled to think of a retort. But dropping the boss's name and hinting he was here on his orders had the desired effect and Felix stalked away without another word, pushing through the swinging door that led to the kitchen with such force that it bounced off the wall and almost hit him in the face on the backswing. The brunette doubled over, fist pressed to her mouth and shoulders shaking while Will gave a tiny little wave to Felix's retreating back.

"Thank you," she said when she had recovered from her giggle fit, "Really, Mr. Scarlett, I won't do it again."

"Call me Will," he offered, "I'm sorry, I don't remember your name…?"

"Lacey."

She stuck out her hand and he shook it, repeating her name back so he wouldn't forget, "Lacey. Nice to meet you."
"Am I going to get in trouble?"

He rolled his eyes and reassured her, "Don't worry about Felix, he's probably just in a pissy mood because the wifi cut out or something."

"No," she corrected, lowering her voice and stepping a bit closer, "I meant, with Mr. Jones?"

Will forced himself to keep his eyes on her face and not give into the temptation to look down her shirt while she blinked up at him through spidery lashes, "Nah. What Mr. Jones doesn't know won't hurt him."

A look of relief crossed her face, "Thanks. I'm not an alcoholic or anything, but I just needed a little dose of liquid courage. In case any of the other girls were here getting ready, I came in early to try to avoid them since, honestly, a lot of them are kind of...bitchy."

Ana flashed behind his eyes and he closed them briefly, mumbling in agreement, "Yeah."

"Well, I'm going to go and get changed now. Thanks again, Will, I really can't...don't want to lose this job."

She gave him another smile and turned towards the direction of the dressing rooms. Will felt a little flutter in his gut as he watched her go, and he cleared his throat, "Uh, Lacey, if you need another shot of courage later, how bout I buy you a drink?"

Ana was scheduled to work tonight, and if she happened to see him with Lacey and got a little jealous...well, he was just being friendly to the new girl, that was all.

Lacey looked at him over her shoulder, "It's a date."

Will leaned back against the wall again, jamming his thumbs into the pockets of his jeans with a satisfied smile

Two could play this game.

"Emma!"

She looked up from her phone at the sound of the voice and smiled as Elsa squeezed her way through the crowd, lifting the messenger bag she carried off her shoulder and sliding into the empty seat at the small table in one graceful movement. Her blue hospital scrubs had been traded for a pair of faded, low-riding jeans and a navy tank worn under an oversized, open cardigan. A thin, delicate gold chain was hung around her neck with a tiny cross pendant resting in the hollow of her throat, and her platinum hair was pulled back in a pair of French braids. She looked more like a college student than an angel, virtually indistinguishable from the young women who surrounded them on all sides in the cheerful knockoff of an English pub, all dark wood, green leather, and a fish and chip special on the menu, that Elsa had suggested for their meeting. She fit right in, though Emma felt a bit overdressed in the dark pencil skirt, heels, and silk blouse she was wearing. Mary Margaret had taken the day off for some prenatal appointments and she'd had back-to-back meetings all day, covering for her friend while David was on soup kitchen duty.

"Nice place," Emma remarked, switching her phone off and putting it away in her purse, "Is it always this busy though?"

Elsa pulled a face, "Sorry. There's a nursing college a block over, a lot of the students get jobs at Saint Luke's after they graduate. This is kind of the unofficial school pub, and I think they must have
just finished exams."

"Ah."

A cheer went up from a group of girls a few tables away, tipping back a round of shots in unison and immediately calling for another. Students blowing off steam after exams, that certainly explained the crowd, and the fact that it was a nursing school explained why the majority of said crowd was female. Only a few men were present aside from the pub staff, scattered around the room and looking even more out of place than Emma did.

"We can go somewhere else to talk?" Elsa offered over the chatter.

"No, this is fine. Besides, no one will hear us anyway."

A sudden hush fell over them, an invisible bubble forming around the small booth where they were sitting while the people around them continued drinking and carrying on without paying any mind to the two angels in their midst. Their eyes were closed, they were blind and deaf to what was happening right in front of them.

Elsa pulled out a thick printout from her messenger bag and wordlessly handed it over. The paper unfolded into several sheets worth of information, with perforated lines to separate the pages. Emma quickly skimmed over the list of names, dates, somewhat incomprehensible acronyms and codes, all laid out in neat blocks of text. SAINT LUKE'S INTEGRATED HEALTH SERVICES was printed across the top and just under that, SEARCH RESULTS - REQUESTOR: E. ARENDELLE, R.N.

She folded the page down to look at Elsa across the table with a raised brow, "Aren't there privacy laws against sharing health care records nowadays?"

Elsa gave a half-smile, "Laws made by man. I'm not afraid of the hospital's ethics board, what are they going to do about it, fire me?"

"Mmm," Emma replied, going back down the list again, "This is what you called me about?"

She deciphered some of the information for each patient easily enough, sex, date of birth, height, weight.

Date of death.

"Overdose fatalities. Every last one for the past six months. I compared it to the same period last year and it's almost an eighteen percent increase."

"Eighteen percent?" Emma repeated, incredulous at the figure, "Are you serious?"

Elsa's face was grave, "Yes. And the numbers are only going up. They're dying, Emma, right in front of me, every night I bear witness to the passage of more and more souls on my ward, and most of them are young, otherwise healthy. They're not like typical addicts who relapse after a period of sobriety and just can't handle the kind of dosage they took before, or ones with compromised immune systems from HIV or hepatitis, or just the general damage after years of using, this is something else."

They looked down at the pages, stretched out across the table. Men and women were listed both, with ages ranging from late forties right down to a few who'd only barely been teenagers when they died.

"Fourteen years old...in a coma for twenty-two days before her heart finally gave out," Emma shook
her head as she ran her finger over one of the entries, a life cut far too short and the tragic end marked with nothing more than an epitaph of impersonal medical jargon.

**TOXICOLOGY RESULTS: POSITIVE FOR POTENTIAL OPIATES**

"Her parents prayed over her bedside with Father Rodriguez every day," Elsa said, "But I knew…"

Her voice trailed off and Emma closed her eyes. *Not all prayers could be answered.*

"Some have been marked."

She opened her eyes again and levelled her gaze across the table, "You think there's a connection?"

Elsa leaned forward and jabbed a finger against the table for emphasis, "It seems like there has to be. The demon did not return to Saint Luke's himself but he sent another in his place, probably trying to cover his tracks. Records have gone missing, when I went to cross-check some of the information I found that patient charts had just disappeared. *Someone* is behind this, Emma."

What had started as a late-night phone call from Killian asking for a favour was turning into something much more complicated. Now she had to contend with possible rogue imps, a sudden influx of heroin, and a suspicious Angel of Death.

She never should have answered him.

"I need a drink."

The rest of the room snapped back into focus when she stood up and made her way to the bar, finding an empty space in between a dark-haired man who was talking to the woman on his other side and a despondent-looking student who had a textbook propped open in her lap and was wailing into her phone that she'd failed her biology final. Emma caught the bartender's eye at once and he poured her a gin and tonic at her request. She needed something a bit stronger than wine, but she ignored the bottle of scotch she could see sitting on the shelf over the bartender's shoulder.

Elsa had the medical records all folded back up when she returned to the table, the neat stack was virtually unreadable from a distance and looked so benign. They could have been sharing study guides or test notes like some of the students around them were doing, comparing questions and answers over pitchers of beer.

"Can I keep these?" Emma asked.

The other angel nodded. "Please."

The sharp juniper tang of the gin rolled across her tongue, only slightly muted by the tonic water as she drank from her glass. She hadn't ordered it, but the bartender must have poured her a double.

"It's odd, how quickly the infernal one retreated when you confronted him."

Emma watched the liquid move, running a finger around the rim and creating a tiny whirlpool as it followed her motion, "He was outnumbered."

"Still," Elsa said, sounding unconvinced, "His kind is not known for their restraint."

The whirlpool collapsed and she lifted the glass to take another sip, "Perhaps He is not the only one who works in mysterious ways."

Elsa's brows immediately knit together in a puzzled frown, "I never really thought of it like that. But
you're probably right, if he is the one responsible then the fate of one soul would be inconsequential. Better to lose one battle then the entire war."

They say in silence for a little while until Elsa had to leave, she worked the overnight shift at Saint Luke's and she slid out of the booth as gracefully as she had sat down, slinging her plain messenger bag back over her shoulder.

"No more flaming sword, I take it?"

Elsa shook her head, "Not anymore. Sometimes I miss it, but that thing was freaking heavy."

Emma smiled, thinking of the divine gifts she once bestowed so easily on prophets and saints, "It's not like the old days, is it?"

"No. The infant mortality rate is much lower, there's fewer plagues, smallpox is completely gone. Of course now we have antibiotic-resistant superbugs and idiots who ride motorcycles without a helmet, so in some ways it evens out."

"Everyone still dies in the end. So many of us thought that we were no longer needed to serve the needs of man, but there will always be a place for you in this world, beata Elsa."

The other angel tilted her head, looking concerned, "The others were wrong, beata Emma. You still hear them, don't you? Even when they think that no one is listening, they still pray."

Emma propped her chin in her hand and drummed her fingers on the tabletop after Elsa was gone. The group of girls sitting a few tables away were now knee-deep in empty shot glasses, sitting with their arms draped over each other's shoulders and swaying back and forth while singing Lean on Me. Badly, off-key, and forgetting half the lyrics, but they seemed to be having fun.

Her purse sat beside her on the padded seat and she pulled her phone out, turning it back on and pressing the button for her contacts. "K. Jones" stared back at her, and her thumb hovered over the screen.

She knew she needed to call Killian about the information Elsa had given her. They hadn't spoken in days, or more accurately, she hadn't spoken to him. He had been calling, and texting, the frustration clear in his voice, "It's not bloody Lent, Emma. Call me back," when she listened to the messages he left, the ones that she should delete but hadn't managed to do so quite yet.

"Finally. The angel listens, but she certainly takes her sweet time in answering, doesn't she? You know, it's a good thing it didn't take you this long when I was rotting away in a Spanish dungeon, another innocent falsely accused by the wretched Inquisition."

Emma rolled her eyes even though Killian couldn't see her, "Innocent? You were guilty of every single one of those charges!"

"I have never, not once, in the whole of eternity, fornicated with a goat!"

He sounded so offended and she rubbed a hand over her forehead, caught between the urge to argue the exact technicalities of the charges laid against him by the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition almost five centuries ago and the urge to laugh at the absurdity of having this conversation in the first place,"Killian-"

"Don't," he interrupted, suddenly sharp and abrupt.

"Don't what?"
"Don't say my name right now."

She was confused, "You like it when I say your name."

"No, I don't like it, darling, I relish it. And you know what can happen when someone says a demon's name."

Demons were summoned with their names and Emma sat up a bit straighter, holding the phone tighter against her ear as the breath caught in her throat. Killian sighed, and she could almost feel the warmth of his soft exhale, "Don't say it, Emma. Just...don't."

"We need to talk."

He sighed again, "I find when a woman says that, I'm rarely in for a pleasant conversation. Is this it, then? Is this the end?"

She realized he thought she had finally called to break off their affair and a strange feeling ran down her spine as she hastened to answer, "No...we need to talk about some information I just got, about the eighteen percent increase in overdoses recorded at Saint Luke’s."

There was a pause before he replied, his tone losing some of its sharp edge, "Oh...I assumed, well, never mind. I have some information as well, but this would probably be easier to discuss in person?"

He wasn't wrong, although meeting him in person would inevitably end up with them falling into bed at some point, "Your place or mine?"

"My car stands out like a sore thumb in your neighbourhood, beata."

"If you drove something a little less flashy, damnate, we wouldn't have that problem," she pointed out. His condo was closer than her apartment anyway, "I'll come over to your place, then."

"I'm still at the club," Killian said, "Give me an hour?"

She agreed to that but didn't hang up, suddenly reluctant to break the connection after the days of no direct contact. He didn't end the call either, breathing quietly on the other end of the line until he finally said in a low confession, "I thought that maybe...you didn't hear me anymore."

*Even when they think no one is listening.*

"I always hear you."

The ice in her drink had yet to melt, a tiny little miracle that went unnoticed as she sat alone in the crowd with the whisper of a demon's voice that she shouldn't hear.

"Did it hurt when you fell from Heaven?"

A tall shadow fell over her, and Emma looked up into the face of a man who had stopped next to her table with one hand in his jeans pocket and a bottle of beer in the other.

"Come again?"

He gave a somewhat rueful grin, shrugging, "I know, I know, it's a line, and a lame one at that, but I saw you sitting here by yourself and I couldn't think of anything better to break the ice. Do you mind if I join you? Just to talk for a bit, that's all, cross my heart and everything."
She recognized his grey sweater and dark hair, he was the man who had been talking to a woman at the bar when she went up for her drink. His back had been to her then, but now she could see his face and he was very attractive, with light eyes that some would call blue and others green, heavy stubble on his cheeks and chin. He actually looked a little bit like Killian did, and if her infernal lover was at all indicative of her type, then the man in front of her also fitted the bill quite nicely.

"All right," she agreed, "Just to talk."

Instead of taking the seat across from her, he snagged an empty chair from another table and put it next to the booth, setting his beer down on the table and almost knocking over her own glass in the process, "Oh, sorry. I seem to have butterfingers at the moment, don't I? I'm Arthur, by the way."

"Emma."

Arthur smiled as he finally sat down, scooting the chair a bit closer, "What a lovely name for such a lovely angel."

He really didn't mean anything by it, she could tell, there was no hint of recognition in his eyes or reverence in his voice. But there was a shadow behind his words, a dark stain that she could see as clearly as if it was ink spilled all over his sweater. The man in front of her was handsome and flirtatious, possessing an easy charm and a self-deprecating smile.

But he was also a sinner, his soul was a twisted, misshapen, mess, dark, and rotten right to the core. It looked out at her from behind his eyes, hungry to sink its ragged, poisoned claws into another.

Her own smile was serene as she wrapped her hand back around her glass and lifted the gin and tonic to her lips. She had an hour to kill before meeting Killian anyway. She had said to Elsa that the old days were gone, and times had changed.

But sin was still eternal, and her divine mission was not confined to only answering prayers.
Emma didn't know the precise nature of Arthur's sins, but she could make an educated guess at what was behind his smarmy white grin and dated pickup lines. As soon as he sat down at her table he waved over a waitress and ordered them both a drink and a shot, brushing off her protest that she was still working on her gin and tonic with a comment of, "Come on, live a little, sweetheart. I'm buying."

His smile was bright but it didn't reach his eyes, hard and flinty and calculating, he sat way too close and his fingers brushed her knee under the table when he shifted in his chair. She raised a brow at that and asked him what he thought he was doing, clearly taking him by surprise at being confronted, but he recovered quickly and played it off like an accident. It was almost believable, but to her angelic ears the lie was as clear as a ringing bell.

Arthur leaned back in his seat and gave a tiny smirk, "What happened to your friend? Let me guess, she ditched you for a hook up?"

"She had to go to work," Emma corrected, "Night shift."

He moved his chair again and again his hand brushed her leg. She pulled them both away, angled the other way under the table and frowned. But Arthur was undeterred and when the drinks came he tried to cajole her into taking the shot with him, subtly implying that it would be rude for her to refuse. He did not look pleased when she held firm and pushed the glass back across the table at him, giving her an incredulous, "You're really not going to drink it? It's not like I spiked it or anything. But okay, if you insist."

There was something insidious about his behaviour, proclaiming his innocence of something he hadn't been accused of, and the way he kept pushing forward and backing off when challenged directly, with a smile and just enough plausible deniability. He insisted it was too loud in the pub to hear her properly so he had to keep leaning in close, too close, invading her space with his hand resting on the leather bench seat right next to her thigh, but not actually touching her this time.

They talked for a bit, she was still slowly nursing her gin and tonic while he quickly drank his beer and offered insincere compliments that all seemed to end with some kind of put down, "You look really pretty, so much more sophisticated than all these twenty-two year old students. So what kind of movies do you like? Cheesy rom-coms, I bet, boy meets girl, all that soppy nonsense with misunderstandings and kisses in the rain and an overweight best friend for comedy relief. I'm right, aren't I? It's okay, you can admit it."

Killian frequently teased her about her love for old Hollywood musicals and the fact that she wound up watching Grease whenever it came on TV, but that was different, there was no malice in it when they were talking on the phone and he heard You're The One That I Want playing in the background for the umpteeth time. Despite his attempt at a lighthearted tone Arthur wasn't trying to be playful, she knew about "negging" and how it was part of the incredibly sexist pick up artist techniques for persuading a woman into bed. Morally dubious at best, and at worst...she suspected Arthur's sins were the all too common sins of men who prowled in bars and clubs, looking for women who were a little bit or a lot drunk (the drink and the shot), who got separated from their friends (he only approached her after Elsa had left), who were too nice and polite to tell them to back off until it was too late.

The world had changed much over the centuries, but in some ways it hadn't changed enough and it really ticked her off.
When Arthur went to the washroom a woman, young and pretty with curly brown hair and full lips, pushed her way through the crowd to their table. She leaned over and spoke in an urgent tone, harsh and fast, "Look, I know you don't know me, but just listen, OK? Don't go home with him. He seems decent at first, but he's not a nice guy. He's really not a nice guy."

"Gwen!"

The woman's friend pulled her away with a hand on her elbow and Emma saw a flash of pain on her face as she looked back over her shoulder, the memory of her own encounter with Arthur clear in the twist of her lips and the shaking hand when she lifted her drink and took a heavy swallow. Her friend put a comforting arm around her back and they were swallowed back up by the crowd, disappearing into the press of drunk students that surrounded them. Emma looked around at the innocent souls, so young and bright and happy, and finally downed the last of her gin and tonic, setting the empty glass back on the table. She stood up, gathering her purse with the printout Elsa had given her folded and tucked away inside, and glanced towards the pub's front door. It would be easy to just leave, but she couldn't walk away and let him prey on another woman like Gwen, putting that look on someone else's face tonight, the look of regret and fear and most of all - shame, for something that wasn't her fault.

A sign next to the bar directed her down a flight of rather perilous stairs to the narrow hallway where the washrooms were located. The ladies' room was empty, and there was only one soul in the men's. She'd planned to ask Arthur to take her back to his place and deal with him there, but she didn't want to keep Killian waiting too long and the hallway would do for what she had in mind so long as no one interrupted them. There was a rectangle of light visible at the top of the stairs and with a flick of her wrist it went dark, as if a curtain had suddenly been pulled across it. The noise from the pub was abruptly cut off, the clinking of bottles and glasses and the loud buzz of dozens of different conversations disappeared, leaving only a low, static hum and the sound of running water coming from the men's room. It shut off and a few seconds later the door opened, Arthur stepped out and did a double-take in surprise at the sight of her waiting for him.

"Emma?"

She took a step towards him, cutting right to the chase, "You know, a woman upstairs just warned me not to go home with you. Said that you're not a nice guy."

He twitched a bit at that, head going back and eyes narrowing a fraction. She waited to see how he'd reply to the accusation, suspecting either denial or anger or possibly both.

"Oh? Did this girl tell you her name?"

It was said casually, but the undercurrent of something dark and threatening seemed to ripple in the air around them while the stain on his soul went even deeper, oily, and black as tar.

"No," Emma answered truthfully. The woman's friend had called her Gwen, but she wasn't going to tell him that.

"And what, you just believed her?" Arthur scoffed, choosing to go on the offensive, "I don't even know who she is and that's hardly fair, is it? Do you think that's fair to just say that about someone and not give them a chance to respond?"

He was trying to turn it back on her, get her to agree that it wasn't fair, but she wasn't going to play this game by his rules, "So? Why don't you respond. Are you a nice guy or not, Arthur?"

There was a note of divinity in her voice that echoed in the hallway like the vibrating string on a
harp, making Arthur drop his gaze and run a hand through his hair as he stared down at his shoes. A weaker soul would have immediately crumbled at the hint of heavenly grace, but he was made of slightly sterner stuff and continued to try to wriggle his way out.

"Look, I'm not going to lie to you, I've had a few one-night stands and obviously some girls…well, they think it's going to lead to a relationship afterwards and when it doesn't they get all mad."

So he was going for the "jealous ex-fling" angle and she took another step closer, tilting her head to the side as she regard him where he stood, "Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned, is that it?"

"Hey, it's not my fault if she got her hopes up and thought we were dating. Look, why don't we go have another drink and-"

His sentence was cut off by her hand wrapping around his throat, making his eyes go wide in shock before an expression of pure rage flitted over his handsome face. It was as if a mask had dropped, the smile turned into a snarl and he managed to choke out, "What do you think you're doing, you crazy bitch!" before her grip tightened painfully around his windpipe and she ordered, "Be quiet!"

Her form was that of a human woman but she was much, much stronger than any human, male or female, could hope to be. Arthur's hands came up and he tried to dislodge her arm, clawing helplessly at the sleeve of her blouse as she turned them and shoved him back against the wall. The hallway was narrow in width but it was long, running probably the length of the whole pub and there was more than enough room when she rolled her shoulders and felt her wings begin to unfurl. Arthur stopped struggling, mouth dropping open and his hands falling back down at his sides at the sight of them. His eyes darted from side to side, taking in the long rows of feathers that spread out and out until they completely filled his line of vision. Each one was perfectly formed, pure, unblemished white in colour but with a golden sheen that shimmered even in the poor light from the low-wattage bulbs that sputtered and popped above their heads. Her feet left the floor as she rose up in the air and hovered in place with a single flap that hit Arthur like the stream from a passing jet, blowing his hair back and plastering him to the wall while she looked down at him.

"Behold, for I am the messenger, an angel of the Lord and you are about to answer for your sins against Him and your fellow man. Or in this case, women."

A strangled noise escaped his throat, it might have been a cry for help, but no one could assist Arthur now. As Emma bored down on him he couldn't look away from her, pinned in place and staring up at her face as she whispered, "Reveal."

They began to play behind Arthur's eyes and she could see them too, the memories of all the sins he had committed against women. A high school girlfriend who wasn't ready for sex but he overcame her resistance in a locked bedroom during a loud party….college dates who said no when he slid his hand up their skirts but he didn't stop….girls he secretly filmed with his phone when they were asleep or passed out from the alcohol he plied them with relentlessly, young and vulnerable with exposed breasts and spread legs. It passed in a blink, a sickening parade of evil deeds that had received no punishment save the lightest slap on the wrist, a tearful breakup the morning after, a talking-to by campus security in school that ended with an admonishment to "take it easy" on his classmates, a warning from HR about inappropriate texts to coworkers. Arthur had gotten away with his sins for years, thanks to his handsome face and easy denials, "it was just to loosen you up, sweetheart...we both know you were just playing hard to get...she's just a crazy ex with a grudge….I was just joking, I didn't know she was going to be so uptight about it."

Arthur stared up at her, unable to look away as his sins were laid bare between them. He was stripped right to the bone, more naked than the day he was born under her scrutiny. His lips moved, but no sound came out and she was done listening to him anyway. She leaned down so that they
Divine radiance spilled from under her skin as the light of Heaven shone through her and filled the entire hallway with an ethereal glow. Her hair turned to molten gold, her eyes were lit from within, more brilliant than any gemstone as she looked into Arthur's soul with an unblinking stare. It was beautiful, but as the light grew even brighter it obliterated everything else in sight, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, it all was lost in the searing, blinding power of His glory.

Arthur's eyes were also beautiful, a colour that was a cross between blue and green and fringed with long, dark lashes. When her light faded away and her wings folded back into place she landed back down on the floor with a click of her heels and let go of him, watching as he slumped against the wall, staring forward but seeing nothing. A milky film now covered both his pupils, a gauzy cloud that blurred and blocked his vision.

Arthur had looked straight into the light, and he had been blinded by it.

He slowly slid down to the floor in heap, landing with his legs extended in front of him and head lolling bonelessly to the side. Emma flicked her wrist again and the dark void at the top of the stairs vanished, the happy buzz from the pub was audible again and everything went back to normal. Someone would come down soon to use the facilities and they'd find Arthur, just another guy who'd hit the pub and had too much to drink, or so it would seem. The 911 call would come later, when he came to and started screaming that he couldn't see, clawing at his face and groping helplessly into darkness that he couldn't escape. Doctors would examine him, specialists would be called in, tests would be run, but in the end it would be written off as one of those unexplained mysteries, some unnamed disease or infection that had robbed a seemingly healthy man of his sight. Arthur would end up a footnote in an obscure journal, a case study taught to students in med school.

She squared her shoulders, now wingless an ordinary, and nudged him with the toe of her shoe, "You have been judged, and found guilty for your sins. The punishment has been rendered."

The milky eyes blinked once at the sound of her voice and he stirred weakly against the wall before slumping back down again. He'd remember the light, but whether he'd remember her or not was up in the air. Even if he did, he might not believe what he had seen with his own eyes, mortals were strange creatures who were frequently, stubbornly blind to what was right in front of them even with perfect vision.

A silhouette appeared at the top of the stairs and then another, tipsy laughter floating down and the stumble of somewhat unsteady feet on the steps. Emma took a step back from Arthur's slumped figure and vanished, disappearing in a final flash of divine light.

The hallway was empty, and whisper-quiet as always when the elevator doors opened and Emma stepped out. The entrance to Killian's condo was directly opposite, it only took one step across the plush carpeting that was so thick her heels sank into it to be standing in front of his door. She lifted a hand and rapped her knuckles lightly against it, immediately hearing the rattle and turn of the handle on the other side. He must have been waiting right in the foyer for her arrival.

One arm swept out theatrically and he bowed slightly at the waist.

"Salve de inferno, beata. You're late."

She let out a snort at his greeting, stepping over the threshold with a click of her shoes on the marble tile while he closed the door behind her. Killian was dressed in suit pants but no jacket, his charcoal-coloured dress shirt was open at the throat and the sleeves were rolled up almost to his elbows,
revealing the dark hair on his forearms as he lifted the tumbler of scotch he held to his lips and took a sip.

"Hell is a fortieth-floor penthouse, damnate?"

He smiled at her over the rim of the glass, "Perhaps I should say salve de caleo then, since an angel has seen fit to grace it with her presence."

It brought to mind Arthur's cheesy pickup line from the bar, but unlike that jerk and his pathetic excuse for a come-on, Killian was being sincere. They were alike in some ways, with their dark good looks and smooth voices, but the demon in front of her always gave people a choice. His influence only went so far, if they decided to sin with him, they did it of their own free will.

"Would you like a drink?"

The question was barely out of his mouth before her fingers were in his shirt, yanking him to her by the collar and making him drop the heavy tumbler to the floor. But it landed without shattering or spilling a single drop of the amber liquor inside, hitting the marble tile as gently as if it was a feather instead and rocking back and forth on the thick glass bottom twice before settling down flat with a barely audible thump.

Her back met the door and his hands slammed against the wood, bracing on either side of her as their lips met, hot and hungry with the smoky taste of scotch on his tongue. She was usually more of a wine drinker herself, or the odd cocktail like the gin and tonic at the pub, but she kept a dusty bottle of single-malt stashed in the back of a cupboard in her apartment for the nights when she missed him the most, pouring herself a small glass to drink and fighting the pull of his temptation under her skin as she sat alone in the dark.

Killian ground his hips into hers and she smoothed her hands over the muscular curve of his ass, pulling him even closer while thrusting her breasts against his chest. They were still kissing, neither one stopping even to take a single breath, and Emma felt a bit lightheaded as she worked his belt open and went for his zipper. He was hard and ready, velvet smooth in her eager hand and hot enough to burn.

"Inside me. Now."

It was a plea against his mouth that had him groaning low in his throat, his hands groping for the hem of her skirt and yanking it up it up almost to her waist. It was like the mayor's gala all over again, being pressed up against the wall by her infernal lover and teetering right on the edge of surrender, only this time there was nothing to stop her, no disapproving Renaissance saints or her own painted face looking back, no wealthy donors to court or waiting friends wondering where she'd gone, there was only Killian hefting her up in his arms while she wrapped her legs around his hips. Like her, he was much stronger than he looked and he had no trouble holding her in place with one hand while he tore through her stockings and lined himself up.

"Emma."

She looked down and was met by a smile on the demon's face that could only be described as devastating. He was positioned right at her entrance, she could feel him poised to slip inside with only the slightest push and the needy ache pulsed between her legs. But he didn't move, holding her firm and letting out a low chuckle when she whined in complaint and tried to pull him closer with her legs, digging in with her heels.

"Say you want me."
He had said that to her the night she had finally succumbed to him at last, voice rough but with a strange hitch to it as he'd hovered above her with his dark hair falling over his forehead and his arms braced on either side of her, staring directly into her eyes with a maelstrom raging behind his as he demanded, "Say you want me, say you want this. Say it, Emma!"

Her own voice was higher than normal and more than a little unsteady when she replied, "What part of, inside me, now, was unclear, exactly?"

The grin on his face grew wider as he rocked his hips the tiniest bit and her head fell back against the door, teeth dragging along her bottom lip in anticipation of the stretch and burn. But he continued to tease with the shallowest of thrusts, stubbornly refusing to give in.

"You want me inside you, Emma? You want me to fuck you right here against my front door, like this? Tell me how much."

This was payback for not taking his calls over the last few days and her eyes fell shut as she whispered, "Damn you."

He sounded matter-of-fact when he replied, "Too late. But don't worry, I'll give you what you want."

With that, he loosened his arms enough to let her drop down on him while he gave a sharp, upward thrust with his hips. One moment she was empty and aching, the next he was buried so deep that she could feel him all the way to the hilt, every thick inch of him filling her completely. Her mouth opened in a gasp and her whole body jerked, spasming with the shock of his sudden impalement that balanced right on the knife's edge of pleasure and pain. If she hadn't wanted him so badly then it would have hurt, but the bastard knew that she was far gone enough in her lust to take it. Killian wanted her to want him, wanted her wet and desperate and begging for him, he got off on it, she knew he did, and he let out a satisfied noise when she pressed her forehead to his and chased his lips.

"Yes," she muttered between kisses, nipping at the curve of his mouth, "I want you. Just like this. Now move!"

He set a fast pace, cursing under his breath as his hips slammed into the backs of her thighs and the door even rattled from the force of it. Emma clutched his shoulders and squeezed hard on each drive, determined to give as good as she got. Killian's jaw was clenched, his burning gaze never wavering from her face as he moved inside her with near bruising force. But it was exactly what she wanted and it didn't take long until she was muffling her cries in his neck while he wasn't nearly so circumspect, letting out a loud groan as she felt the pulse of his climax through her own shuddering release, and the hot spill that accompanied it, sticky and wet between her thighs.

They collapsed onto the floor with clothing all askew and their limbs in a tangle, her legs still wrapped around him, still joined in the most intimate of ways. Killian wasn't a mortal man and he didn't soften so quickly as one after sex, he remained hard and rigid inside her for several long minutes after. His hand rested on her back, thumb rubbing slow circles through the bunched-up fabric of her skirt. Emma closed her eyes, feeling a flash of guilt and regret. Even though she'd known they'd wind up sleeping together from the moment she agreed to come over, she hadn't meant to jump him like that the second she walked in the door.

"This is one hundred percent not a complaint, so don't take it as such, but what exactly was that about? Because as much as I would like to believe that you simply find me completely irresistible…?"

She opened her eyes again as Killian leaned back to give her an expectant look, shifting her on his lap in the process. The motion made him slip out of her at last, leaving her feeling empty and hollow.
"Yeah," she breathed, hearing her own lie and pretending she didn't, "That's it."

They disentangled and she ignored the hand he offered after he zipped his pants and rebuckled his belt, standing up on her own and shoving her pencil skirt back down her thighs, smoothing the stretchy material into place with her head bent to avoid meeting his eyes.

"C'mon."

His fingers slipped into hers and he gave a gentle tug, pausing only to snatch up his half-finished drink from the floor and pulling her down the hall into the spacious living room. The lights had been dimmed down low and the heavy drapes that covered the wall of windows were pulled back, giving a bird's eye view of several smaller buildings nearby and the streets below. A faint yellow glow was visible on the other side of the glass, the reflection of streetlights and headlights and other apartments where people were busy cooking, reading books and watching TV, entertaining friends, checking baby monitors or doing any one of a hundred other mundane, mortal activities. Most were decent souls but there were always those like Arthur, wolves in sheep's clothing who hid their snapping teeth behind a thin veneer of civility that concealed a multitude of sins. Accountants who fleeced their clients, parents who abused their kids, online trolls who bullied and spewed hate like projectile vomit all over the Internet from the protection of their anonymous screen names and fake profiles. But, like Arthur, their true selves were always revealed under the glare of the light.

Killian sat down on the couch and she curled up next to him, tucking herself into his side with her legs stretched out on the cushions and her head on his chest.

"Emma?"

There was a note of concern in his voice that carried not a hint of falsehood. She recounted what had happened in the pub in a quiet voice, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing under her cheek as he listened with his hand still holding hers.

"Men sin and women suffer, what else is new?" he said when she was done, downing the last of the scotch and setting the glass aside on the side table.

"Says the strip club owner."

She felt him shrug, "We all serve our purpose. Demon, darling, remember? So that explains your uncharacteristic tardiness tonight, you were going all Old Testament on this Arthur. A fitting punishment for the crime, do you want me to pay him a little visit and also give him a taste of what awaits him down below? He may be blind to this world now, but I can conjure some interesting visions inside his head."

"No," she said, still staring out the window, "He'll find out eventually, anyway, unless he truly repents."

"Repents," Killian repeated with a scoff, "In your many years of experience, how many sinners truly, honestly, repent for what they've done? They're like children, saying they're sorry when they get caught with their hand in the cookie jar but they don't actually mean it. They're given the gift of divine forgiveness, yet all they see is an empty box and they throw it away."

He flicked his wrist as if to demonstrate, but she didn't want to have this argument again with him right now and she continued to look out at the city below.

"It really is a beautiful view from up here."
Killian tensed underneath her and she glanced up, watching his jaw work as he swallowed heavily and then gave another one-shouldered shrug, "Well, this was the tallest residential building I could find at the time. Might not be as grand as some views you've seen before, but it's the best I can do."

The implication of what he'd just said sank into her like a sudden downpour in the middle of the desert. Killian's gaze was fixed towards the window and she didn't know how she had never realized it before. He'd always favoured lavish residences in the time that she'd know him, but in the last century or so he had gradually been moving higher and higher as the advent of elevators and heavy machinery allowed for skyscrapers to be built ten, twenty, fifty stories up.

A bitter smile twisted his lips, "After all, I can never have what they have, can I? Divine forgiveness is not something He has seen fit to grant to my kind. Even if I did repent...I would never ascend."

"Killian."

The blue gaze drifted back down to her face, "This is the closest I can get, Emma."

They stared at each other for a silence that stretched on in the eternity between heartbeats until he finally stood up and stalked over to the small bar in the corner of the room, where the bottle of scotch was perched on the black marble slab. With his back to her he poured out at least three fingers of liquor into his glass, tipping his head back and throwing it down his throat as easily as if it were water. He set the glass back down and leaned against the bar, hands braced against it like it was the only thing holding him upright. Emma felt her fingers twitch against her skirt, blouse still half-untucked from their tryst and the throb and echo between her legs a reminder that would continue to linger long after she had left.

The closest he could get.

She was trying to think of something to say when the doorbell suddenly rang, startling them both. Killian recovered first, glancing towards the hall and then back at her, giving a nod as he obviously realized what it was.

"I took the liberty of ordering us a late dinner before you arrived. Why don't you go upstairs and freshen up a bit while I take care of this?"

"Okay," she replied, feeling her shoulders slump in relief and grateful for the change in subject. Killian picked up his leather wallet from the coffee table and pulled out a credit card while she started up the stairs, heading for the master bath.

"Oh, and take a look in the second drawer of my dresser."

He sounded far too casual and that made her instantly suspicious, "Why?"

"Indulge me, blessed one."

He disappeared from her view with a familiar smirk and she huffed out a breath, shaking her head as she finished climbing the steps and went through the open door to his bedroom. It was dark and quiet, king-size bed neatly made with nary a wrinkle in the deep plum comforter and pillows fluffed up against the iron headboard. For a demon whose middle name could easily be "decadent" - if demons had middle names, he had always been rather fastidious and neat. Yet another strangely virtuous trait for one who always scoffed at the very notion.

The second drawer of the lacquered dresser yielded carefully folded T-shirts, tanks, yoga pants, bras, and several pairs of lace underwear in the style she knew he particularly liked. A quick check of the labels revealed that everything was the right size to fit her, and it was all obviously brand new
although the price tags had been removed. She remembered his offhand comment during her last visit that she should keep a few clothes at his place, and clearly he had just gone ahead and bought her some.

"Always wriggling through the loopholes, aren't you damnate?" Emma muttered to herself, tossing an outfit onto the bed and sliding the drawer closed again. She padded into the bathroom and peeled off her ruined stockings, wadding them up and leaving them in the wastebasket. After a quick clean up and change of clothes, she was back in the living room and found him waiting for her with a freshly opened bottle of wine, the delicious scent of Chinese food wafting from the white takeout boxes now spread out on the table.

"Did you order extra egg rolls?" she asked, choosing not to comment about the drawerful of new clothes for now. He looked her up and down, taking in the simple, heather grey tank and black yoga pants she had picked from the pile, her hair finger-combed and hanging loose down her back. A small smile played at the edge of his lips but he didn't say anything about her change in attire, he merely gestured to one of the takeout boxes and answered, "Of course. Have I ever forgotten?"

Killian had a separate dining room in his condo, decorated in a mix of old and new with a long, antique table set under a modern steel and cut glass chandelier, but they ate at the coffee table instead. He sat on the couch while she opted for the floor, sitting with her legs folded Indian-style as they passed the fried rice and lo mein back and forth. It was a communal feast, they didn't bother with plates and just dug right into the food with their chopsticks, eating straight from the containers. She told him about her conversation with Elsa, showing him the printout from the hospital with the long list of names and the notation next to each - Cause of Death. He scanned it quickly with narrowed eyes, moving it back and forth with his elbow while he ate.

"I put out a few feelers and got some information back," Killian said between bites, leaning forward with the chopsticks held easily in his left hand while he slid over the box of egg rolls to her side of the table, "There's a new, potent strain of heroin that's been circulating, and from what my sources tell me, it first surfaced a few months ago. Apparently it's been dubbed, get this, Heaven's Gate." He made finger quotes around the name and she frowned, "You have got to be kidding me."

"Afraid not. And it's not a reference to an 80s box-office bomb, it comes from the high the users experience when they take it. It's supposed to feel like they've flown all the way up to heaven before they inevitably come crashing back down. It wasn't easy or cheap but I managed to get my hands on a decent sized sample, and I've got someone running some tests on it to see what makes it so special."

She swallowed the last of an egg roll, glancing at the list of names that had been pushed to the side. Cause of death." An intense high," she muttered, thinking out loud, "It's potent….so that means it's stronger than regular heroin and it's easier to overdose on it."

Killian nodded, "The dark side of paradise, yes. The cops have definitely noticed an uptick in OD calls, especially in the last month."

"And people are dying," she spat, angrily jabbing her chopsticks in the rice, "Why isn't the news all over this?"

"It's all being kept very hush hush right now. Direct orders from the top brass at headquarters, from what I heard from a few upstanding members of our city's finest."

He said it with a thick layer of sarcasm and she knew he was probably getting his information from the dirtiest of dirty cops, but she still didn't understand all the secrecy.
"Why?"

"Emma, it's an election year," Killian pointed out, "And the police chief is in bed with the mayor – figuratively and literally if the rumors are true. Mills has always positioned herself as being tough on crime and the last thing she wants right now is headlines about a new drug threat and pictures of dead junkies on the front page of every paper. Especially when the cops have zero leads on the culprits responsible."

She had to admit that he was probably right about that. Regina Mills was extremely image-conscious and it would not bode well for her campaign to have to answer questions about heroin at her next perfectly choreographed ribbon-cutting or chichi black-tie fundraiser.

"Okay, so the police don't have any leads, but you obviously do. Who is it?"

He smiled at that with a flash of his white teeth, "So certain?"

"Infernal one, I know that your methods of getting information are a little bit different than anything the police can accomplish, since last time I checked a cop couldn't eternally damn a person's soul."

The smile grew wider, "Point taken, blessed one. And yes, I have learned a few things the police aren't privy to yet, but I don't have the name. Or names, since my sources claim that it's a family business handling this new strain. Usually that's code for mafia, but that doesn't seem to be the case here. The mob's usual distribution channels aren't involved, and are pretty pissed about it, since this stuff is selling at a premium and there's nothing a mafia don loves more than money. Root of all evil and all that."

He snagged an egg roll from across the table with his chopsticks and bit into it, chewing thoughtfully for a few moments before continuing.

"There's something not quite right about all of this. Whoever's behind it is breaking all kinds of rules, and the drug trade is not known for being particularly forgiving about that. Either they're too stupid to realize they're playing with fire, which I doubt, or they just don't care."

Their eyes met across the table, "Who?" she asked, "You suspect someone, I can tell. Who is it?"

His expression went hard in an instant, "The Dark One. Not his actual name of course, but I'm not going to speak it and risk him appearing in my living room to spoil our lovely dinner with his unwanted presence. The imps who brought the heroin into my club in the first place are his, and I can almost see his dirty fingerprints all over this. Drugs that promise heaven but deliver hell? That's exactly the kind of price an unwary soul would pay for one of his deals."

Emma felt *something* run down her spine, something icy cold despite the warmth of the room. The hint of a memory tugged at the back of her mind, she knew that she'd heard the words somewhere before.

"The Dark One? That sounds familiar."

She squinted at nothing, trying to place it. *The Dark One.*

"You've met him," Killian said at last, clearly reluctant to admit it.

"What?" she asked, sitting up straight and blinking in surprise, "I have? How do you know?"

"Because I was there when it happened. Well, "met" is a bit strong of a word, but you have seen him at least once. In Paris."
"Paris."

Killian switched to French, "Oui. The City of Light. Only it was very dark that night, that decade, actually."

She realized at once what he was talking about, "You mean the revolution."

"Non. La Terreur," he corrected.

The Terror. There was silence as they both recalled the mass chaos that had erupted after the fall of the monarchy, when the French throne stood empty for the first time since Charlemagne had conquered all the territories around Paris and carved a new empire from the ash of Roman rule. Violence and hysteria had gripped the capital and beyond as the men who had overthrown the ancien régime of the aristocracy began to turn on each other like rabid dogs as they fought for power and control.

She was still grateful that Auguste had been dead by then, his mortal body laid to eternal rest some years before and his immortal soul at peace. Most of his paintings were lost or destroyed during that time, but a few managed to survive. Divine intervention might have had something to do with it.

Killian set his chopsticks aside with a sigh, "We need to tread carefully. I sent one of his imps back with a message that has not been answered, and I can't let him ignore me for much longer. He knows he has to answer for their interference in my business at the very least, but if he doesn't show his face soon of his own volition I'll have no choice but to summon him. He can't ignore that. I'll do it at the club, you've never been in there and he won't be able to sense any lingering traces of your presence around me."

The corner of his lips lifted in a rueful, half-smile as he looked her up and down, "That would be a little difficult to explain."

"Your silver tongue would think of something, I'm sure."

He brushed his thumb across his mouth, "Be that as it may, the Dark One is a formidable foe and a particularly nasty piece of work to boot. He would not hesitate to go after you if he caught even the slightest whiff of our...association, so we shouldn't see each other after tonight until this is settled. Demons don't consort with angels, after all."

She looked down at the empty takeout cartons scattered across his coffee table and reached for her wineglass. "No," she agreed quietly, finishing off the last dregs, "They don't."

The silk sheets made a whispering noise when he stretched out on the bed, lying on his back in the middle of the mattress with nothing on save the heavy gold signet ring he wore on his left hand. He looked so human like this, he had ten fingers and ten toes, dark hair that frequently fell across his forehead when it got too long, broad shoulders that tapered down to a narrow waist, long legs and muscular arms. The dip of his navel marked his flat stomach, and he would be unable to resist laughing for very long if she tickled him there. He looked so male, his chest and forearms dusted with hair, strong thighs and big feet, and of course, the very male erection that was currently on display, lying thick and proud against his belly.

Killian looked every inch like a human male, but he wasn't. His true nature lay just underneath the smooth skin, hidden behind the blue of his eyes.

She was no different.

Her breasts rose as she lifted the tank top over her head, arching her back and feeling her spine flex
and curve with the movement. The new lace underwear easily slid over the flare of her hips when she slipped her thumbs under the waistband and tugged them down her legs. Her body was that of a human woman, she had slim, delicate wrists and rounded cheeks, pale skin and a downy triangle of pubic hair. She ate and slept and breathed, she had a heartbeat and fingernails and she looked like they did, the mortal souls who were all made in His image.

Emma straddled Killian's thighs, climbing onto the bed completely bare and kneeling over him. He licked his lips with a quick swipe of his tongue, but made no other move, choosing to watch and wait for whatever she was about to do.

His skin was warm, warmer than any man's as she leaned forward and settled her hands on his chest. Light spilled from under her fingers, golden and pure and it soaked right into him, he absorbed it as easily as a sponge.

"Oh, fuck."

Killian's arms spread wide as the light pulsed and spread, a divine caress that covered every square inch of him in a rolling wave. She did it again and he shivered, eyes closed and fingers gripping the sheets.

"Emma."

His hips thrust upwards as he choked out her name, sounding as needy and desperate as she had been when she walked in the door.

*Say that you want me.*

She didn't have to ask, she knew he did, knew he wanted more than she could ever give. But she could offer him this.

Her mouth replaced her hands, lips tracing down the line of his neck and teeth scraping across his skin. She dipped her tongue into his navel, which did make him laugh, stomach muscles quivering and contracting under her touch. The sound made her smile, so simple and human, and she nuzzled at the crease of his hip with her nose before moving lower. His hand cupped the back of her head as she let him slip between her lips, moving slow and easy and then not. A litany of moans spilled from his throat, the long fingers tightened in her hair but he made no move to guide her head, letting her tease him right to the edge and back again several times, not letting him fall. The silk was cool and slippery, and he slithered easily through the sheets with serpentine grace when she finally released him with a parting kiss to the throbbing flesh. Killian rolled her onto her back and urged her thighs apart, dark head descending between her legs. Warm breath made her shiver, muscles tensing in anticipation, and then his mouth was on her. His silver tongue was especially good at this, flicking quick strokes over the swollen bundle of nerves and making her hips rise off the bed and roll against his face, seeking more of the delicious friction. Now it was her turn to clutch the sheets with one hand while the other went into his hair, the soft strands curled around her fingers as she held him in place. The pleasure spread over her like warm honey, thick and sweet as he kept at it, unrelenting until she shattered. Killian kissed his way up her body, her belly, her ribs, the valley between her breasts, but she resisted his attempt to settle on top of her and captured his wrists in her hands, flipping him neatly onto his back again.

He rolled his eyes, "So demanding."

"Oh, you love it," she retorted, sliding a leg over and leaning down to tug on his earlobe, "You spent how long trying to get me into bed, are you going to complain now about who's on top?"
Killian sat up under her, his hands going around her back and her breasts pressing against his chest as she shifted in his lap.

"I prefer to think of it as you finally coming to your senses."

There was no more teasing, she rose to take him in and he eased her back down, his body nestled tight inside hers. They rocked together, skin to skin and breathing the same air, brimstone mixed with ambrosia. Her lips skimmed across his and his brushed hers, the pair of lamps on the twin bedside tables both dissolved into darkness and she could feel the shadows that ran up her back and across her legs like he was touching her everywhere at once. Killian's eyes were closed, but they snapped open at the rustling of feathers and widened when her wings spread open.

"It's been awhile since you've done that."

"I know," she breathed, using them for balance as she rode him into oblivion, holding him to her breast when he came again with a final jerk of his hips and a silent prayer. She followed almost immediately, fingers in his hair and his name on her lips.

The sheet draped loosely over her flank, lying on her side in the bed with her hand resting on his chest.

"What if it's not the Dark One who's behind all this?"

Killian turned his head to look at her, "Then we find out who is and stop them."

"Your way or mine?"

He lifted a brow, "Does it really matter?"

Did it? She didn't like to think that anyone was truly beyond redemption.

"But it's him, Emma, I know he's got his claws in this somehow. I'll deal with him and then you and I are going to go away for the weekend."

She propped herself up on her elbow, "Oh? We're doing what now?"

"We'll have earned ourselves a break. The city can do without you for two days, I'll even close the club if you like, think of all the sinning that won't go on. You, me, a secluded little getaway with no one else around for miles. Say yes, Emma."

"Killian-"

"Or at least, don't say no. Not yet, at least."

He gave her a serious look, also propping himself up and reaching out to twirl a lock of her hair around his finger.

"Don't say no."

"Alright," she nodded, not saying yes and not saying no, "I won't."
Chapter 16

He sat perfectly still and silent in the metal folding chair, one leg crossed casually over the opposite knee as he regarded the sight in front of him with a placid expression.

The contractor who had built the "special" room in the Jolly Roger's basement had not asked any questions, not after a large cash bonus had been handed to him along with a free night in one of the VIP room upstairs. Money and sex, it almost always worked with men, and the contractor had been no exception. He drew up the blueprints to Killian's specifications and worked sixteen hour days without complaint until it was finished. The cell was made of steel bars, three inches thick and welded tight into place. It was sparer than a monk's, lacking any comforts whatsoever and stood in stark contrast to the luxurious rooms directly above where every pleasure imaginable was on offer. Clients who broke the rules were brought down and reminded that he was the one in charge of everything that went on in the Jolly Roger, and that their money and power couldn't save them in this place. It was always satisfying to watch the blood drain from their faces when they realized he was serious, the nervous twitch as they looked at him, really looked at him under the harsh light of the naked bulb dangling from the ceiling and saw something they couldn't explain, something they didn't understand….something that spoke of the world hidden below. Did his eyes really just turn red, or was it simply a trick of the light? Why was his shadow moving against the wall when he wasn't, and why was it shaped like that?

Killian lifted the water pistol he held and squirted it into the imp's face. A sizzling sound rose a split second before the scream, the holy water burning on contact. The imp clawed at his skin helplessly, chains rattling with the movement. Thick iron manacles encircled his wrists, heavy restraints that were a far cry from ordinary steel handcuffs. Those might do for a mortal soul, but an infernal creature required special handling. He'd taken a page from the Inquisition's book and was using shackles that had been blessed and consecrated in a holy ritual, making it impossible for the imp to escape. Like the plastic jug of holy water that he used to refill the pistol, he had ordered them online. The website was cheesy, quotes from the Scriptures taken wildly out of context were splashed all over the pages over bad, public domain art. It advertised a range of implements for the "modern crusader" all 100% guaranteed to work against "the minions of Satan who walk among us, their horns and tails masked with their Dark power and hidden to all but the True Believers who can see beyond their smoke screens and trickery."

Well, they couldn't see beyond his platinum credit card when he placed his order and selected rush shipping, the large box had arrived by courier two business days later. He ignored the book that had been included as a free gift, a how-to guide on recognizing, summoning and destroying demons, tossing it aside with a roll of his eyes. Circles of salt, black candles, pentagrams, blood sacrifice, he knew what he needed to summon the Dark One and it wasn't nearly so showy. But he wasn't ready to pull the trigger. Not yet, though he wouldn't reveal that particular fact to his prisoner.

When the screaming stopped he spoke at last in a flat, bored tone, "Your master is late."

The imp glared at him, blistered skin already starting to heal and reform over the burns, "I told you, Corrupter. The Dark One has more important things to do than to answer your petty summons."

"Ah yes, his famous deals. Like the one he made with whoever gave you that heroin, perhaps? Let me guess, they wanted something that people would literally sell their souls to get. And the Dark One provided that...at a price. Tell me where you got it."

There was no answer, not even after he squirted holy water through the bars until the toy gun was empty. He tossed it aside and peeled off the leather gloves he'd worn in case any of the water dripped...
onto his hands. It would have burned him as well if it had touched his bare skin, like crucifixes, rosaries, anointed oils and relics, he could not touch anything holy and remain unscathed.

Well...with one exception.

His phone started buzzing away in his jacket pocket and he stood up, fussing with his lapels and brushing off a speck of non-existent lint as he warned, "This isn't over, Tweedledee or Tweedledum or whatever the fuck you call yourself."

The imp suddenly lurched forward with a shriek of metal, elbows bending the wrong way as the chains held and grinning a manic smile through melted lips. The sight was both inhuman and profoundly disturbing, or it would have been to anyone else. Killian was neither human nor easily disturbed and he didn't blink as the imp's shoulders folded backwards as it attempted to get even closer and the nostrils flared wide.

"You stink."

He raised a brow, "Is that really the best you can come up with, the witty retort of one toddler to another on the playground?"

The smile didn't waver, eyes taking on an inhuman yellow glow, "It's all over you. The reek...the stench. I thought it was just the fucking holy water, but no. It's you. Whatever the fuck you've been up to Corrupter...shit, I don't think I even want to know."

The implications of that did disturb him, though he didn't let it show as he leaned an arm casually on the bars of the cell. His own eyes burned like twin coals, teeth going sharp as fangs while the rest of his face retreated into shadow and smoke, "Last chance to spill your guts or I might just spill them for you."

"We both know you can't."

To his eternal frustration the imp was correct. A bit of torture with holy water was one thing, but if he actually destroyed the infernal creature then he'd lose all his leverage over Rumpelstiltskin. The other one was in Europe, he'd tracked it by the mark he had left in a short ritual over a map until a blotch that matched the stain on it's face appeared over London, blotting out the city's name. Fleeing back to the sanctuary of the master's house, no doubt, after the fun had been spoiled. He kept the map in his office and had checked it before coming down into the basement. The spot hadn't moved, and while it was no guarantee he was fairly certain that meant the Dark One hadn't moved either. He was probably biding his time, waiting to see if Killian was going to let the infraction slide or make another move. It was like a twisted game of chess and the little clock by the board was ticking on his side, the opponents facing each other from either side of the ocean. Continue the gambit or forfeit, and the stakes were too high for him to back down now.

"I'm going to drown you in it," he seethed, imagining sticking the imp's head into a bucket full of holy water, "Consider that a taste of what's to come."

The door to the small prison closed behind him with a soft snick, it had been fit perfectly into place and the hinges well oiled to avoid making noise. He set the lock, keying in the code that was necessary to both unlock it and to lock it back up. The four digits he'd chosen were ones he'd never forget, corresponding to the year when he'd finally, finally, got what he'd desired for so long. Everything about that night was seared into his memory, the slip of her skin under his fingers and the taste of her on his tongue, but nothing more than the moment when his angel's eyes had locked with his as he lay poised between her legs on the very edge of bliss. As green as the Garden itself, she had looked up at him with her open thighs cradling his hips and a hand reaching up to push the hair back.
from his forehead and cupping the back of his neck with such gentleness, a touch both soothing and arousing as she spoke the words he needed to hear, the flaming sword itself couldn't have driven him away.

A smile played at the corner of his lips as he hit the last number and the lock clamped shut. The memory alone was enough to lighten his mood considerably and he took a moment to replay it in his head, recalling the words, the sounds, the unimaginable ecstasy of their first forbidden coupling all those years ago. First, but hardly the last. When one of the cops he'd been bribing came to the Jolly Roger with a sample of the heroin, stolen from evidence after it had been seized in a bust, Killian had been tempted to try it out himself and see what made it so damn special. But he didn't need drugs to experience a heavenly high, fucking Emma did it quite nicely indeed and there was no way the heroin was that good. So he sent the sample to Jefferson instead for testing, buying his continued cooperation with the promise of pulling more strings to keep the unsupervised visits with his daughter going. Killian knew that one wouldn't be enough, not for a man who loved his child as much as the dealer did. It was no different from the drugs Jefferson sold, the first hit only led to another and he even sent a gift for her along with the sample. A rather twee silver necklace with a heart charm that he'd had engraved with her initials, it was everything a girl her age could want and a pointed reminder to her father of what he stood to gain if he could find out anything useful. And perhaps he had, when Killian slid the phone out of his pocket it was Jefferson's number flashing on the display. He sent him a quick text that he'd call back in a few minutes, not wanting to have the conversation in the basement even though there was no way the imp could hear him through the soundproofing in the walls.

The stairs made nary a creak under his polished leather shoes as he made his way back up and into the storeroom above, where the overhead light had been switched on and unmistakable noises came from behind one of the shelving units. Muffled moans, clearly feminine and from what he could tell, not faked, but his view was blocked by rows of Rémy Martin and he couldn't see who it was. Clients sometimes tried to get out of paying the fee for a private room by wheedling a dancer into a tryst in the washrooms or stairwell instead with the promise of a bigger tip, it wouldn't be the first time he'd caught one with his pants around his ankles and a girl on her knees. He continued to make no sound against the plain concrete floor as he went to investigate, making the light dim and lengthening the shadows with a quick roll of his fingers. It clearly went unnoticed by the culprits, the noises only got louder and more...wet.

It took him a second to realize just who the couple was and he blinked, not expecting this new turn of events. The new girl, Lacey, leaned against the wall with her dress yanked up, the tops of her lace thigh-highs exposed as she braced one hand on the shoulder of the man who knelt in front of her with his face buried between her legs.

Her nails dug into his shirt and she let out a gasp, "Fuck Will, hurry!"

It wasn't a client, it was Scarlet, his tie flipped over his shoulder and his suit jacket draped haphazardly across the bottles of cognac. Lacey had her head tipped back, brunette curls falling from the pile on top of her head and her teeth digging into her lip in what he assumed was an attempt to stay quiet. Her eyes were closed, but even if she was looking right where he was standing she wouldn't have been able to see him, he was hidden in a dark shadow that let him observe unnoticed until he chose to reveal his presence. Killian watched, more amused than annoyed by the flagrant breaking of club rules, for all the jealousy he'd felt simmering from Scarlet like a kettle on the verge of boiling over whenever he'd summoned Anastasia into his office or had her sit with him in his booth, resting his hand on her thigh and slipping fingers under the hem of her dress while Scarlet watched and tried to hide his resentment, now here he was brazenly screwing around in the storeroom with another dancer. Lacey and Anastasia were like night and day, Anastasia was all cool refinement and haughty elegance while Lacey had that up for anything, good time girl appeal, and
from where he was standing she certainly looked like she was having a very good time indeed.

Scarlet stood up and started fumbling with his pants, his intentions clear. Ordinarily Killian wouldn't mind a bit of voyeurism but he had other matters to attend to right now and he loudly cleared his throat, the shadow around him dissipating with a flick of his finger. The would-be lovers sprang apart, Scarlet whirled around with a look on his face like he was spoiling for a fight until he saw who it was.

"Mr. Jones."

He said nothing and gave a pointed look to Scarlet's open fly, watching as he flushed crimson and quickly zipped himself back up, folding his hands awkwardly in front of his crotch. Lacey seemed a bit less perturbed, despite her dress now serving more as a belt and one stocking falling down to sag loosely around her knee. She took her time fixing everything into place, fussing with her stocking and wiggling her dress back over her hips while she eyed him up and down. But if she thought she could wiggle her way out of this so easily she was sorely mistaken.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but both of you are supposed to be working tonight, are you not?"

The question was entirely rhetorical since all three of them knew the answer, but both of their heads bobbed up and down like birds anyway. Scarlet looked guilty, Lacey not so much. Interesting that, but he filed the thought away for now.

"Scarlet, I told you to keep an eye on the floor. Kind of hard to do that when you're face first into a cunt instead, now isn't it?"

Even the tips of his ears were blushing as he lowered his eyes and mumbled, "Yes sir."

He directed his next question to Lacey with a tilt of his head, "And you know that dancers aren't actually allowed in this room, correct?"

She said nothing but she nodded, another curl falling free against her neck.

"Come here."

She wobbled slightly on her stacked heels when he crooked his finger and beckoned her forward. Behind her he could see Scarlet tense, the lust that had been filling the air around him changing to anger. Ira, or as it was known now, wrath. Still a sin by any name, and he smiled coldly at Scarlet over Lacey's shoulder.

"As punishment for this little infraction I'm docking your pay for tonight. No tips, no commissions, nothing. But I wouldn't take that as an excuse to slack off, sweetheart, if you don't bring in at least three grand before closing then you're fired. Understood?"

"Boss, it was my idea, not hers, dock my pay-"

Killian held up a hand, cutting Scarlet off. He put one hand on Lacey's hip and pulled her in closer, so close that there wasn't even room for a deep breath in the space left between them. Even with her heels he was still much taller, she had to tilt her head back and look up to meet his gaze.

"Do we have an understanding?"

His voice was quiet but not soft, lips hovering a bare inch above hers. Lacey's eyes were nearly black, pupils blown wide with what he first thought was fear but quickly realized was something else entirely. He felt the shiver that ran through her, goosebumps rising on the bare flesh revealed by the
skimpy dress and a deep pink flush spreading across her cleavage. Far from being scared of him, his little display had clearly turned her on. Another interesting little nugget of information to file away for later.

"Yes, sir."

She gave a nod and he released his grip on her, silently gesturing for her to leave the room. When he was alone with Scarlet he slid his hands casually into his pockets and spoke without looking at the man.

"Are you familiar with the expression "the house always wins," Mr. Scarlet?"

Unlike Lacey's breathless excitement, Scarlet sounded like he had just swallow a handful of broken glass when he gave the same answer, "Yes, sir."

"This is my house, and everyone plays by my rules. And the house always wins. You would do well to remember that. I'm docking your pay as well as hers, and don't you even think about slipping her some cash to help cover what she owes me for this little...hookup."

He glanced at Scarlet then and caught the guilty flash that told him that's exactly what the man had planned to do as soon as his back was turned again. How noble, the knight in shining armour seeking to rescue the lady fair from the dastardly villain. Killian hid his smirk at the thought, he didn't mind being the bad guy in this little passion play. Noble men who liked to play the hero always fell the hardest, and he enjoyed a challenge. Scarlet followed him back into the club's main room on his order, keeping two steps behind like a good little lackey even as the anger still simmered under his skin. Two dancers were on the main stage, putting on quite the erotic show together with silk scarves used to both restrain and tease while others mixed and mingled with the patrons, offering everything from simple, chaste companionship over a drink to the darkest fantasy imaginable. Anastacia was sitting with a man Killian recognized as a pro baseball player with a well-publicized history of substance abuse issues and a more private foot fetish, he had his arm slung around her shoulder and was drunkenly nuzzling at her neck. But she barely paid him any attention, staring across the floor at the table where Lacey was bent over, hips swaying from side to side while she talked to a group of stockbrokers who always came in when the market was up. Judging by the bottles of champagne and Cuban cigars they'd ordered there must have been some hot new IPO or corporate merger announced, she shouldn't have too much trouble snagging a share of their hefty commissions for herself, or rather, for him. That is if Anastacia didn't burn a hole into the back of her head first. He had never seen her mask slip like that before, usually she only had eyes for whoever was picking up the tab. The baseball player copped a feel, hand snaking down the front of her filmy silk dress to squeeze her breast with far less finesse than he handled the ball and she didn't even seem to notice, still intent on her oblivious dark-haired rival.

Music played over the little love triangle that had developed in his club and the song suddenly cut off, silence falling for a moment before another started up, a woman's voice calling out plaintively to her wayward man. The dancers on stage paused mid-routine, a scarf fluttering to the floor as they both looked towards the DJ booth, clearly confused by the apparent glitch in the sound system. But it wasn't a glitch, he'd done it for no other reason than his own amusement, throwing a bit of gasoline onto the smouldering fire. Anastasia fumed, abruptly shoving the client's arm off of her and standing up, leaving him open-mouthed and protesting as she stalked away on designer heels that he would have paid a pretty penny to worship. Lacey took the cigar out of a stockbroker's mouth and took her own drag, blowing a perfect smoke ring with a wink and popping it back between his lips to a cheer from the rest of the men at the table. Killian was tempted to stay and watch the rest of the show from his booth, but he had a phone call to return and a summoning to plan. Business before pleasure, not his usual modus operandi. At the moment, however, it was very much a necessary evil.
Scarlet was put on guard duty outside his office, forbidden from so much as taking a bathroom break for the rest of the night. There was some squirming and a discreet adjustment to the front of his pants when he thought his boss wasn't looking. Lacey might have gotten off in the storeroom but Scarlet clearly hadn't and he shifted uncomfortably with a grimace, probably dying for a few minutes of privacy to jerk off and relieve the pressure. His unsatisfied erection was his problem, Killian didn't care how blue the man's balls got. Scarlet was lucky he hadn't been thrown into the cell next to the imp and left there to rot, broken rules meant consequences. Nothing in his club was free.

Only the faintest vibrations from the music downstairs penetrated the quiet when the door was shut, leaving him alone in the dark room. With a snap of his fingers the desk light turned on and he poured his customary scotch, pulling the map from a drawer even though he had just checked it a few hours ago and circling a finger around the black stain that remained smack dab over London.

"Where are you, Dark One?"

Smoky liquor slid down his throat and he set the glass aside, frowning. The mark meant that the other imp was still in England, but his master could be anywhere. He could be safely ensconced in the city right now, pulling strings from the shadows. It was his preferred method, and had served him well over the centuries as he amassed power and wealth under a variety of names. Bland and inoffensive, they had faded into history while those who had taken his deals found fame and then infamy like Robespierre, revolutionary and champion of men turned despot and architect of the Terror. The road to hell was paved with good intentions, as the saying went, but it was much more than a simple proverb.

The phone went off again, buzzing over his heart and he snatched it from inside his jacket while he cursed Jefferson's impatience under his breath. But when he flipped it over to see the screen it wasn't the dealer's number, it was a text notification from someone else and three words flashed up at him.

*Te desidero, damnate*

His fingers curled around the phone as he read Emma's message, *I miss you, infernal one.* He'd sent her a box of gourmet cupcakes (devil's food, just to be cheeky) along with his typical floral arrangement after their last night together, knowing that they couldn't risk another meeting until Rumpelstiltskin had been well and truly dealt with. More than two centuries had passed since the encounter in Paris, but he had hadn't forgotten the cold calculation on the other demon's face when he'd caught sight of her from the slate rooftops. If he had reached her first...the scotch turned to bile as his stomach twisted at the mere thought of it. Killian remembered exactly what the Dark One had threatened to do to his angel that day, and while he knew Emma was more than capable of defending herself it was not a risk he was willing to take. He could be patient, much as it pained him when she seemed to be so close to succumbing fully at last.

Dawn had barely broken when he'd woken up, sensing the light rising on the other side of the heavy drapes as he turned away from it, onto his side and propping his head up in his hand. Emma was beside him in the bed, on her stomach with the sheets pooling at her waist. Soft and vulnerable, downswept lashes resting against her cheeks as she lay in repose. *The Angel Slumbers,* while a demon watched with glowing eyes and growing hunger. Her back was bare and he trailed along the curve of her spine with his free hand, fingertips hovering just above her skin. The twin grooves that ran along her shoulder blades were the only hint of what lay beneath, her wings were hidden away again and she could have been any other woman sleeping off a decadent night of sin with him. But when he closed his eyes he saw her in all her divine glory, golden hair spilling over her shoulders in loose ringlets and veiling her pert, rose-tipped breasts, wings spread over his bed, almost as wide as the entire room and the feathers tickling his thighs when she arched her back and took him that tiny bit deeper. It was a sight to behold indeed and he was a more than willing supplicant, genuflecting at
her altar in the best way he knew how.

The shadow from his hand danced over her back as the light found a crack in the drapes and he replaced it with his lips, making a pilgrimage of kisses along her body and pushing aside the heavy fall of silky hair as she began to stir awake.

"Beata angela Emma."

It was whispered into her ear as he rolled on top of her, feeling the curve of her ass nestle perfectly against his groin as his knee carefully nudged hers apart.

"Bless me, for I have sinned."

She shifted deliciously underneath him, one foot hooking behind his calf, "I am not a priest, damnate."

He chuckled, "Believe me darling, I am well aware of that fact. But I have come to confess to you all the same."

Slick heat enveloped him when he pushed forward and sank inside, a more snug fit than usual in this position. He saw Emma's fingers curl around the bars of the headboard, felt the rock of her hips back into his as he began to move. She was essentially pinned under him like a butterfly who'd been caught in the net, completely at his mercy as he wrapped his hands around her wrists and fucked her into the mattress. Knees planted on the bed, muscles flexing with the effort of each deep stroke and whispering sin in an angel's ear, neither one of them lasted very long. The ripple of her climax along his shaft undid him, heat rising like steam as he spilled himself again with a hoarse cry. Heroin wasn't his drug, but he had found heaven's gate anyway.

"I have another sin to confess," he joked, weight balanced on his forearms to keep from crushing her. Emma turned her head on the pillow and squinted up at him, sounding amused, "You're the one who said it wasn't a sin."

Before she could roll over he placed a kiss between her shoulders, lips leaving no damning mark, "It's not."

Killian slid into the leather chair behind his desk, phone in hand and the imp's words in his head. "You reek of it." Her presence lingered on him, he could feel it, and apparently, so could others. That wasn't good, if such a low demon like the imp sensed something amiss then the Dark One surely would as well. Like lipstick on his collar or the scent of another woman's perfume, he needed to erase the traces of his lover à la a cheating husband coming home to a faithful wife after a visit with his mistress. Unfortunately, a shower and a new shirt wouldn't be sufficient, he knew what he needed to do.

Her message was still flashing on the screen. Te desidero. He quickly tapped out a reply, As you are so fond of reminding me, patience is a virtue. Our weekend away will be here before you know it. Pack light, and nothing irreplaceable, thumbs hovering over the text until he saw that it had been delivered, Emma disappeared with a swipe as he switched to another contact in his address book. Caroline Spencer had called and emailed several times over the last few days, suggesting another "lunch" meeting. Adultery was usually one of his favourite sins, though he wasn't really in the mood for an amorous romp between the sheets with anyone else at the moment. But it was probably the easiest way to start covering his tracks, his monthly donation to Emma's charity was almost due and that was non-negotiable, he wouldn't leave her in the lurch. Adultery it was, then.

With the second message sent he refilled his drink and switched contacts again, hitting the call button
this time.

"Mr. Jones."

Jefferson answered on the first ring and Killian leaned back in his chair, tapping one finger against the glass of scotch and pressing the phone a little tighter against his ear, "Jefferson. This better be good."

The dealer started talking at a fast clip and he listened carefully, keeping one eye on the map still laid out across his desk. His gaze went from London to the city that lay only a few inches away on paper, across the narrow section of blue that marked the Channel. The City of Light, marked in prominent block letters as befitted one of the most famous capitals in the world.

PARIS

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Paris - 1794

It felt like he was floating in a gentle sea, warmth filled his limbs as if the midday sun was shining down on him as he rose and fell with the waves that lapped against his skin. He indulged in the feeling, strangely content to merely be held in the unseen embrace and carried along on the invisible current. Awareness came slowly, a languid realization that the heat was not the sun's rays, but from a pair of warm hands running up and down his bare chest. The rolling waves was the shift of the feather tick under him, while the dampness came not from the ocean but was the touch of a mouth dusting along the line of his jaw. Pleasure began to simmer under his skin from the sensations, his blood going hot and firing with sudden need. Killian felt himself harden, hips rolling up in search of friction and meeting a weight that settled astride his lap and moved with him in a delicious slide that mimicked the act of coupling, back and forth, up and down. His hands found a pair of thighs, soft and feminine and encased in silk stockings that slipped under his palms as he slid them up, seeking the bare skin above the garters.

"Speak, mon cher, and tell me your deepest desire."

The voice was like a wisp of smoke in his ear, curling inside his head and tugging gently at the answer that was ready to spill from his lips, it was familiar and yet...

"Say my name."

His eyes opened at the whispered command that was heavy with promise, blinking into the darkness of his bedchamber at the face that loomed over him and smiled when their gazes met. Killian could scarcely believe what he was seeing, licking suddenly dry lips and unable to do anything else but gape at the heavenly apparition that by some miracle had been bestowed upon his unholy self.

The angel was in his chamber, in his bed, sitting astride him with her golden hair tumbling over white shoulders that were bared almost to indecency by a very low-necked gown. Her pink lips were slightly parted, damp and plump and a jolt of pure lust shot through him, making his toes curl under the satin coverlet and his cock leap, swelling to fullness and ready in a blink for what she was so clearly offering to him. Her gasp had him nearly throbbing with eagerness, and when she ground down against him he cursed the sheet that lay between them while a fire kindled in his palms. He'd burn his way to her through the layers of sheet and gown to bury himself between her thighs, taking what he'd wanted since the night Rome fell and a single, glowing light had drawn him from the dark.

Emma leaned forward, so close that their lips almost touched and her hair fanned across his pillow, tickling his neck and shoulders. Just as he was about to surge upwards and close the gap he was
stilled by the strange gleam in her eyes, leaf-green irises changing to cold blue and back again. A
calculating look crossed her beautiful face, twisting it into something else, something that was all too
familiar and lust was suddenly replaced with suspicion.

"Who do you see, Killian?"

His hands gripped her shoulders at the question, hard and bruising as he shoved her away and sat up.
The long throat tipped back and the creature on top of him laughed, a delighted cackle that had him
immediately seeing red.

"Show yourself!"

The air around her seemed to ripple at the command, shadows bending and flexing as the illusion
began to dissolve. Gold hair turned to copper, the long strands turning like leaves in the autumn, the
chin went pointed where it had once been round and the angel's beatific smile became a demon's
ricutus grin. Killian glared at the succubus who had nearly managed to seduce him with Emma's face,
spitting out her true name in fury.

"Zelena."

The grin didn't falter and she had the audacity to wink at him, "Bonsoir Killian."

He caught her wrist when she reached out to touch him again, squeezing hard enough to feel the
bones grind and shift while warning sharply, "Don't."

"You were much more agreeable when you thought I was someone else. Who is she, my dear
corrupter, who is the woman you desire so?"

"I'm not you dear anything, succubus," he growled back, setting both hands on her waist and lifting
her off him none too gently. She giggled when she landed at the foot of the bed, stretching out on her
side and propping her head up on her hand as if she was settling in for a juicy little tete a tete. He'd
set her on fire but he knew it would have no effect, she was like him, born from infernal flame and
sent to the world above with the face and form of a mortal. Only hers was more malleable than his,
she was a seductress of the highest order, a succubus who could take on the visage of a man's wife or
lover in order to bed him unknowing. She could appear as the one they desired most, the young
virgin daughter of a nearby house, hesitant and unsure, the experienced courtesan who knew how to
tease out every last drop of pleasure and charged a fortune for such skill, the haughty nobleswomen
who barely deigned to acknowledge those of lower status. Covet thy neighbour's wife too often and
she might appear in the dead of night, wearing the face like a mask while beckoning with a comely
smile and parting her thighs in invitation. Most were much too far gone in their lust to refuse…until it
was too late.

His own lust had doused as quickly as a snuffed candle when he realized the deception, but his
physical arousal had yet to abate and it only increased his fury, blood boiling as he shrugged on a
velvet robe and rose from the bed. There was a bottle of brandy in his writing desk and he poured
himself a glass with his back to her, throwing the liquor down his throat. It was sweet and
intoxicating, with the faint hint of ripe peaches picked at the height of summertime. He imagined
Emma might taste so lush and inviting should be ever get the chance to do more than just kiss her
hand. Forget the neighbour's wife, he coveted a far more elusive quarry and his unchecked desire
had apparently attracted the seductress who was still lounging insolently on his bed as if she
belonged there.

"Oh come now, your secret's safe with moi," Zelena purred, "Now let's see, it can't be a young
duchesse or a princesse du sang, they're all missing their heads at the moment. Nor a courtesan,
they're hurting for business with their royal patrons so inconveniently deposed and there's none who'd turn down good coin now. So who is the woman you dream of, Killian? What winsome creature has denied you and left you alone to spill in your sheets at night?"

The angel's face flashed through his mind before he could stop it and he could feel Zelena's attempt to pull the name and pry his secret from him, the brush of her inside his head as if she'd sunk her grasping fingers right into his skull. Rage welled in him and the empty glass shattered in his hand from the heat, shards falling to the floor in a glittering shower as he whirled back and was on her in a blink, pinning her wrists to the bed in an iron grip. The smile on her face didn't falter, one foot sliding up the back of his calf and her lips pursing to blow him a kiss.

"Stay out of my affairs, Zelena."

She moved under him, pressing herself wantonly against his hips, "Don't deny that you're not tempted, few can resist what I can offer and we both know you're no saint. Just give me her name and I'll wear her face for you, I promise you won't be able to tell even the slightest difference."

He almost laughed right in her face at the idea, sneering, "I very much doubt that."

Zelena huffed, clearly annoyed. He supposed she was unused to being rejected, but her false charms held no allure for him, let alone the danger he'd place himself in if she learned the truth about who he really desired. Demons did not consort with angels, nor did they dream of the one place they were barred from, the eternal debt they all paid for their master's crime.

One white shoulder lifted in a shrug as she stopped rutting against him like a bitch in heat, "Suit yourself, then."

The tone was casual, but the calculating eyes continued to follow him as he climbed off her and went to throw open the door, yanking roughly on the gilded handle and barking, "Now get out."

A hand was pressed theatrically against her brow and she sucked in a breath, sounding utterly shocked, "Tossing a poor defenceless woman out into the street at this hour? Not very chivalrous of you, now is it?"

Killian was not moved by her protestations. Zelena was anything but poor and defenceless and he met her jab with his own, "Oh, I'm sure you'll land right back on your….back."

"While your mysterious madame refuses to lie back for you."

"Get. Out," he ordered, voice a thunderclap that echoed in the chamber, "Get out of my house, and leave Paris altogether. Try Spain, I hear it's lovely at this time of year and that Spanish men are not at all discerning, I'm sure you'll find plenty of takers."

Zelena stood with a toss of her flame-coloured curls, unfolding her long limbs from his bed, "Leave Paris? Where else would I be right now? Where else would any of us be? They execute clergymen like hogs at market in the name of la Revolution and they have even deconsecrated Notre Dame itself! We can walk right through the doors and sully the great shrine to Their Lady, France hasn't been this much fun since Catherine de Medici massacred the Huguenots. It's positively wicked."

A plume of smoke appeared at her feet, wrapping around her slender form like a snake as she gave a coquettish wave and blew him another kiss, "I'm afraid I'm not going anywhere. Sweet dreams, Corrupter."

With that she disappeared and Killian slumped against the wall, scrubbing a hand over his face. He had let his temper get the best of him and he needed to control himself. Zelena was right, she wasn't
the only one drawn to Paris by the rampant bloodshed and chaos that the deaths of both Louis XVI and his spendthrift Austrian wife had failed to stem. Others were out there, he could sense them, picking over the carcass of a fallen empire and waiting to see who would rise from the ashes. Power changed hands on a near daily basis, shifting like sand beneath their feet from one faction to the other. He had stayed right in the heart of the city throughout all of it, the rampaging mobs, the sham trials, the royal executions. Heads were paraded around on pikes and bodies dumped in mass graves, reason was preached but anarchy reigned. None of it touched him, his residence stood unmolested as he watched it all from his window. The whole of Paris could burn to the ground around him and he'd walk out with nary a scratch.

He padded across the silk rug and pulled back the drapes, unlatching the window and looking out. The sky was black as ink, not a single star shone in the heavens tonight. The air stirred the curtains and lifted his hair, soft as a caress. She was out there, he couldn't feel her but he knew the angel was somewhere within the city limits. Would she come to him as Zelena had? Would she hear him, if he called to her now across the darkness?
Paris - 1794

Revolution had decimated the aristocracy and turned Paris both upside down and sideways, but some traditions continued virtually unchanged. The famous salons, where playwrights, philosophers, foreigners, women of learning, naturalists and theologians all gathered to debate and discuss various topics of interest continued while the rumbling wagons transported the condemned on their final journey to meet Madame la Guillotine every morning and headless bodies were heaped like cords of firewood in mass graves just outside the city limits every night. A man could be holding forth on the ideals of Enlightenment and be the toast of the city one heady eve, yet waken to the gendarmes come to arrest him as the newest enemy of the state come morning.

Killian handed his dark cloak to the waiting footman who withdrew with a silent bow and adjusted his lace cuffs before stepping into Madame Maleficent's fashionable parlour. In her youth she had been a sought-after courtesan who once rather notoriously appeared at a Court masque dressed as a dragon, in a horned headdress and sporting a green silk tail longer than the queen's own train, taught by a Gypsy street performer to actually breathe fire from a mouthful of strong brandy. She had set the Duke of Anjou's wig alight and the servants all panicked at the sight, snatching it right from his head and dousing it in a large tureen of soup waiting to be served. The broth was spoiled, but the Duke was unsinged and she quickly became his favourite mistress. Having entered her fourth decade as La Révolution took away her clientele, she retired from her former profession but was still quite striking in appearance and as slippery as an eel, avoiding arrest while others fell around her and holding weekly salons that maintained her reputation as one of the best hostesses in Paris.

"Bienvenue, Monsieur," Maleficent greeted him, dressed not in the old Court style with panniers that made the gowns as wide as the doorways and a fanciful wig, but in the new look inspired by ancient Greece, a pleated dress that hung narrowly on her slender frame and a golden cord woven throughout her tightly curled hair. She held her hand out for his kiss and he bent low, pressing his lips gently to the white skin. He was all but certain that she had struck a bargain with someone to keep her house and her wealth. The royal men who had once patronized her elegant bedchamber were long gone and unable to shield her from the ever changing winds that had swept across France and cut down so many, the ancient forest of the aristocracy reduced to nothing but tinder and ash. But he didn't know just who had made a deal with the statuesque blonde, it wasn't him and even the notorious Parisian gossip was strangely mum on the name of her protector.

"Madame. As we reach the end of another long winter there is no spring flower that blooms like the roses in your cheeks."

He straightened up as she accepted the compliment and gave one of her own that was equally as insincere before moving on the greet the next arrival. Killian took a goblet of wine offered by a young servant girl whose hair was completely hidden under a white kerchief and dressed in sober grey, a tiny, drab sparrow compared to her splendidly attired mistress. He made his way through the rooms where the guests were mingling about in small groups before the start of the evening’s planned discussion. Some faces he recognized and some he didn’t, men, women, and a succubus in an emerald green gown with a matching gem the size of an egg displayed on a pearl choker around her long neck. Zelena glided towards him across the music room while he hid his grimace behind his wine.

"Zelena."
"Killian."

The form was her own this time, red hair decorated with peacock feathers that matched her dress. She did have a large false beauty mark stuck to her rouged cheek, that shifted when he made no move to kiss her hand and she frowned in obvious displeasure.

"Such appalling manners, monsieur. I see that your humour is clearly still absent, which leads me to conclude that you still have not managed to bed the one you were lusting after with such fervour that I felt it halfway across the arrondissement that night."

He put an arm around her waist and pulled her to a secluded corner next to the polished walnut harpsichord while she simpered and giggled, pressing her considerable décolletage against the cut velvet of his jacket. A few knowing glances were thrown their way from behind lace-trimmed fans and silver wine goblets, it was far from unheard of for a couple to retire behind a curtain or into a disused sitting room for a bit of amorous activity during one of Madame's salons. Killian actually knew from personal experience that there was a chaise placed behind the large Oriental screen that served as a backdrop for the instrument for just that purpose, but he kept them firmly on the public side of it as he lowered his voice to hiss in her ear, "I told you to stay out of my affairs."

She only grinned, "Seems the only affair you're having at the moment is the one with your left hand, cher Killian. It's such a pity too, these luscious lips going to waste."

Zelena plucked a rose from an arrangement displayed on a marble pillar and drew it slowly across his mouth, the very picture of calculated seduction as she leaned in even closer, "My offer still stands, you know."

The blood red petals were certainly soft and inviting, but the feel of them on his skin only reminded him of the rose that had miraculously sprung from the hard-packed earth, bursting into bloom from an angel's tear. Blue for her sorrow, Emma wept over the fickle love of a mortal man and the great swell of anger he had felt rise up in him was shocking in its intensity. The fool had no idea of just what he'd allowed to slip through his fingers in his pathetic attempt at filial obedience, while he might have been aware that she was one of the blessed of Heaven it was clear that he had no idea of just what that truly meant. It was apparent in every line and brushstoke in his paintings that he'd been touched by the divine, a claim that many boasted of but was rarely true. Auguste didn't have to fast in the desert for weeks on end or flagellate himself bloody in the hopes of being granted a single holy vision, she had given him her light, shared it with him in addition to her body and he had rejected the gift like a spoilt child having a fit of temper. He could have been a true master, immortal in name if not in flesh and spoken of in the same breath as the luminaries who had painted for kings and popes, but he had already faded into obscurity while his forgotten bones turned to dust in a provincial grave.

Zelena was clearly waiting for an answer, lips slightly parted and eyes bright with promise as she twirled the rose between her fingers. He gave it a single tap and it withered in an instant, petals shrivelling and crumbling in on themselves as she let out a tiny shriek.

"No."

The succubus's face twisted from seduction into a sneer, "Whoever she is, I hope you never manage to slither your way into her bed, Corrupter."

His smile was cold as he flicked off a blackened petal that had landed on his sleeve, "Oh, I will have what I want, not a pallid imitation seeking to steal away my power so she can increase her own. Go drain the blood from another victim, Zelena, and do so with the knowledge that they do not call out your name in the throes of passion or lust after you. You will never be anything but second best, Succubus, and I am not willing to settle for that. I'd rather take a vow of celibacy."
Pure rage flitted across her features at his rejection, her eyes going as red as the rose for a moment before she regained her composure. Clearly, he'd struck a nerve and she stalked off with her head held high and the peacock feathers practically vibrating from her anger. He downed more wine without tasting it as again he couldn't help but think of the angel, swan feathers falling to the ground behind her as she'd fled Versailles that night and he chased after her until she crossed the barrier that he could not to take sanctuary in the Royal chapel. The one place in the palace where he couldn't follow, he would have pursued her straight into the king's bedchamber itself and not thought twice about it, but to set foot directly on consecrated ground would have weakened him and left him completely powerless if he lingered too long. After being captured by the Inquisition he had sworn never to let himself be made vulnerable and left exposed like that ever again. The gold leaf held no lustre, the threshold seemed to taunt him as he hesitated with the toes of his boots just touching the edge of the unseen barrier that kept him out. She had not stopped when he called out, but his desperate prayer….Emma *had* heard him then, he knew she did, briefly halting her flight to turn and look upon his face.

Across the room Zelena quickly attached herself to a stiff-backed man in military dress who looked like he could use a turn or two on the chaise behind the screen to dislodge the poker he appeared to have shoved up his backside, but Killian could still feel the weight of her displeasure. Provoking her might not have been the wisest move, Zelena was unpredictable at the best of times and had a cruel streak that ran deep behind her seductive smiles and false flattery. He should have placated her and extracted himself from her grip without the blow to her pride, but he was not in the mood to be civil and he tossed back the remaining dregs of wine.

Madame Maleficent appeared in the open door and clapped her hands, calling for everyone to gather in the *salle de réception* so that the debates could begin. The theme chosen for the evening was superstition, whether the old, uneducated beliefs still had a place in this new age of science and reason. Was it acceptable now for thirteen to gather around the table and break bread together or was it still an omen of impending betrayal? Could a knife be given as a gift without being seen as an attempt to sever the relationship between the giver and the recipient?

Did spilled salt really need to be tossed over the shoulder to ward off any demon who lurked in the shadows?

The guests began to file out, Zelena with her arm threaded through the soldier's now and both of them turning to glare at him before sweeping past their hostess. Killian wondered idly what story she'd spun for the man to lure him into her web, perhaps a claim of improper advances and a request for protection? Did he fancy himself a man of chivalry and Zelena was now his maiden fair? So long as she left him alone he didn't much care, and when the mousy servant girl offered him the last goblet of wine from her tray he took it with a wink as her eyes flicked up to meet his with more boldness than he expected and her cheeks coloured. He brushed his thumb on the inside of her bare wrist and touched it to his mouth, watching with amusement as she quickly dropped into a curtsey and scurried out. Everyone else was gone and as he made to follow along he saw that the footman was back and was whispering rather urgently in his mistress's ear. Maleficent's hand clenched into a fist against the folds of her gown with her head bent to listen, face going grave as the fear in the footman's tone was audible to Killian's supernaturally good hearing. The lines around her lips and eyes deepened with her frown, making her age right before his eyes. Maleficent's hand clenched into a fist against the folds of her gown with her head bent to listen, face going grave as the fear in the footman's tone was audible to Killian's supernaturally good hearing. The lines around her lips and eyes deepened with her frown, making her age right before his eyes as she gave a silent nod. Beads of sweat ran down the footman's face as he bowed and withdrew, pulling a handkerchief to dab along the line of his wig. His curiosity piqued, Killian melted into the shadows unseen as Maleficent settled herself on one of the delicate gilt chairs and smoothed the pleats of her dress with shaking hands. The candles began to flicker and the heavy drapes moved, stirred by something that was not the wind.

He could *feel* the presence the moment it entered the house, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up and all of his senses sharpening to a keen edge. Zelena's petty malevolence was nothing
compared to the sheer, unadulterated evil that was slowly filling every nook and cranny in the space between the floorboards and the cracks in the plaster. Notes began to play on the harpsichord, the keys moving up and down seemingly of their own volition but he quickly realized each chord was playing in time to a precise tapping that grew louder and louder from the long hall. The doors to the music room were still standing open, the footman nowhere in sight to present the newest arrival when the approaching figure finally swung into view.

*Rumpelstiltskin.*

Killian recognized him at once. The famous dealmaker, renowned for his unmatched ability to bargain and barter for mortal souls. One of the highest ranked of all the demons, he answered to none save the master of them all, the Prince of Hell himself, the Fallen One, Satan, the Devil, Son of Perdition. But while Lucifer still had the face of an angel and possessed the divine light of the Morning Star that had lit the first infernal flame all those eons ago, Rumpelstiltskin's own appearance didn't match his exalted reputation. His clothing was of the finest quality, heavy satin without a single blemish, spotless linen, and heeled shoes that would infuriate the new Republic who disdained such decadent frippery as hallmarks of the old regime. Not tall in stature, and neither fat nor thin, he had a face that could melt into any crowd from a royal entourage to a rampaging mob. His hair was strangely colourless, appearing either blond and brown depending on the light and sometimes even grey. It was worn loose to his shoulders, very unfashionable and in stark contrast to the elegance of his embroidered coat and breeches. He gave a bow that was more mocking than mannered, straightening up again with the candles reflecting against his skin but not in his eyes. They swallowed the light, so dark they were nearly black and completely unreadable. His cryptic gaze glanced in Killian's direction for a moment before looking away. Of course Rumpelstiltskin could see him, any shadow he cast would only conceal himself from mortal eyes, not immortal ones. But the other demon said nothing, choosing to ignore him and approach Maleficent's chair instead.

"Monsieur."

Killian noted that she did not say his name although he was obviously no stranger to her. The other demon had no such reluctance, enunciating theatrically when he replied, "Madame Maleficent. I apologize for my intrusion on your little soiree, I had no idea you were entertaining tonight of all nights. The messenger must have gotten lost with my invitation."

The rebuke was clear but she did not shrink from the censure in his wagging finger. "What makes you think that I would ever invite you into my home again after what you took from me?"

Rumpelstiltskin leaned on his cane, a long ebony walking stick with an elaborate silver cap in the shape of a reptile's head. It wrapped halfway down the smooth shaft and was obviously meant for fashion, not function, there was no hint of lameness in his gait. "What I took from you? I gave you everything you wanted, chérie. You wished for a noble lover to keep you in splendour and I gave you several. When you clashed with a rival I was there with the jewel that you sent to her as a token of good faith, the one that pricked her when she wore it and deposited untraceable poison into her veins. She went to sleep and never woke up and you mourned so prettily at her funeral, didn't you? Dabbing at your dry eyes and offering comfort to the grieving widower in his time of need. And then there was your child."

She reached up and plucked a locket from the neckline of her Grecian robe, clutching it so tight her knuckles were white and warning, "Don't."

"Your daughter," he continued, ignoring her plea, "Her father wanted her to be raised in a convent and take the veil as penance for his adultery with you and I...interceded on your behalf. And when she came of age you sought a marriage for her that would raise her station above your own. I
provided that, didn't I? As fine a match as you could have possibly hoped for, not an easy feat these days."

Maleficent glanced down at the locket in her palm, Killian assumed it contained her daughter's miniature or perhaps a lock of her hair. He hadn't known that she'd even borne a child, she must have kept the girl completely secluded from society. Not the easiest of feats considering the Parisian love of gossip, but it seemed she had received assistance from the demon who was clearly her much speculated-about benefactor.

"I have not seen her in three years!" she cried, "Not so much as a single letter, and the ones I send are returned unopened. Her husband will not allow her to contact me, he was pleased enough with the dowry I provided but he calls me a damned sinner and says that she must never see or speak to me again lest she risk her own soul. She is my daughter, my only child, and I am barred from her household like a common thief. This is all your doing!"

Rumpelstiltskin only smiled, looking supremely pleased as she threw the vitriol into his smug face. "The terms of the contract were fulfilled. I have upheld my end of the bargain, your daughter is securely wed to a respectable man and it is not my fault that respectable men do not wish to associate with courtesans. Even former ones. Perhaps you should have considered that before you signed."

"Then we'll make another deal. Anything you want, I just….I must have my daughter back."

He tapped the cane firmly against the floor and spoke mildly, "No more deals, Maleficent. I have come to collect what I am owed."

She stood up so fast that the chair overturned onto the rug while she fumbled for something in the folds of her gown. This time she produced a rosary, gold crucifix dangling in the air as she raised both hands and began to chant, "Le diable...démon...arrêtez...quitte ma maison..."

The windows began to rattle in their frames as she spoke it over and over again, devil and fiend, stop this torment, leave my house. Killian felt himself pushed back against the wall as if a pair of strong hands had landed on his chest and shoved hard. Even though he wasn't the intended target of her attempted exorcism, he was being affected by it all the same. He'd seen priests unable to conjure such power with the holiest of relics in the face of a demon, for her to accomplish such a feat with only a single crucifix was astonishing. Clearly, there was much more to Maleficent than just the former courtesan and gracious hostess.

Rumpelstiltskin was driven back by the rolling surge, over the threshold and out of the room. His cane knocked over one of the decorative pillars and it crashed over on its side, roses spilling to the floor like blood from the arrangement that had been sitting on top of it. They began to grow, snaking across the floor to form a thicket across the open door with gleaming thorns that were suddenly an inch long and looked razor-sharp. But the protection didn't hold for long, as flames quickly engulfed the tightly woven stems and petals fell. Within moments it was completely gone, disappearing without a trace as if it had never been there at all. The dealmaker stood on the other side of the door, closing his palm over a ball of fire and resting both hands on top of the cane as he rolled his shoulders and dropped all pretence of gentility.

"Enough of that now. As per our contract, your soul is completely mine at sunrise. I could simply take it now if I wished, but I am not a cruel man and a deal is a deal. You have the remaining hours to lay your affairs to rest, and I will return then to take what is mine. Do not think to flee, if you are not here then I will have no choice but to pay your lovely daughter a visit and collect the debt from your only blood kin instead. Until dawn, chérie."

Smoke rose from the floor and swirled around him, his mocking smile the last to disappear into the
cloud before it evaporated and revealed only empty air where he had been standing. Maleficent sagged, one hand groping for the back of the chair that was no longer there and Killian stepped from the shadows to render his assistance.

"Were you there the whole time?" she asked, blinking at him as the rosary slipped from her fingers. It would do her no good now anyway.

"Oui, Madame," he answered, nudging the chair with his foot and making it turn upright. She showed no sign of surprise at the minor display of his power and he urged her to sit, handing her his undrunk wine.

"I must surround the whole house with salt."

"That will not stop him, I'm afraid," he said with sympathy for her plight, "If what he says it true then a line of salt will not impede his passage to claim what you granted him by your own hand."

Maleficent looked up, her curls falling from the elaborate coiffure to hang limp against her neck as she squinted at his face, "You are like him, Monsieur. I saw you at Court over twenty years ago and yet you have not aged a day since then. He does not age, he still looks the same as he did when I was sixteen and wished for petty revenge against those who spurned me. So young and foolish I was."

She dropped her head to her hand and began rubbing her brow as she continue to mutter regrets under her breath, while her words made him realize with a start that he'd spent far too long in France. He should have moved on decades ago, mortal lives and memories were short and he could always return a century or two later, but so long as the angel remained in the city then so would he in case she ever decided to accept the offer he had made on the road outside Versailles.

_The door to my Parisian abode is always open to you._

He saw the footman and the maid both hovering in the hall, trying to peek in with naked curiosity on their faces and he waved them away with a flick of his fingers and a black look. The guests must all be occupied in the other room, unaware of what had just transpired right down the hall from their little debate. Such was often the case with mortal souls, eyes closed to what they refused to see.

"What happens now?" Maleficent asked.

Killian knelt down beside the chair and spread his hands open, "He returns at sunrise to claim your soul. I suggest you dismiss your guests and all your servants save the one you trust the most. Write a letter to your daughter and have him or her deliver it to my house, I will see that she receives it without her husband's knowledge."

He didn't know what possessed him to make such an offer, but gratitude shone in her eyes and he kissed her hand again before rising and taking his leave with a bow. The street was dark when he exited through the front door and made his way down the steps, not a single lamp on the tall iron poles were lit. From the shadows came the tap of the cane against the cobblestones as Rumpelstiltskin strolled down the middle of the avenue like he was out for a promenade in the park.

"Corrupter. I must say, I didn't expect an audience tonight. Did she summon you in a feeble attempt to ward me off?"

The tone was deceptively light, but Killian felt the pure menace behind it as he replied with careless disregard, "Not at all. I merely came for Madame's salon, a discussion on whether the old ways are still relevant in this new, modern ago."

Rumpelstiltskin smiled, but it was not a pleasant sight to behold. His teeth went as jagged and
pointed as a shark's for a moment before his face shifted back into a more human expression. Well, an attempt at a human expression, at least. "That's reassuring to hear. For a moment I thought you were going to attempt to interfere in one of my deals."

"Why would I want to do that?" Killian asked rhetorically. They both knew that he couldn't interfere, not directly, once a contract was signed then it could only be broken if the conditions were not met. Another demon could not come along and claim the soul, or at least, they weren't supposed to. It happened, they were all covetous, grasping creatures and had no compunction not to steal. But if the interloper was caught...

"Why indeed?"

The cane continued to tap as he moved, circling around on the empty street until he was out of Killian's field of view. But he refused to give the dealmaker the satisfaction of turning, and he held his ground until the voice spoke again from right behind his left shoulder.

"She's powerful, that one. Could have been a saint if I hadn't stumbled across her and seen all that potential, just waiting to be nurtured in the wrong direction."

Killian thought of the roses, transforming like magic into a barrier of brambles and thorns. Power like that was rare, rare and valuable. Any demon would want it and he was no exception, his palms practically itched with the desire to take it for himself.

"It would be a grand shame if anyone got any ideas about stealing my soul."

Rumpelstiltskin's breath in his ear was as hot as the fires of infernum itself and he felt the cane tap sharply against his knee, hard enough to break the joint if he were a mortal. The threat was clear and would have cowed a lesser demon, Killian was merely annoyed.

"I did not come to steal your precious soul, Rumpelstiltskin."

He deliberately did not use the ridiculous moniker the dealmaker had bestowed upon himself, a pathetic attempt to emulate their master's many titles and honours. The Dark One, as if he alone had ownership of the shadows and a name that was too terrible to be spoken aloud. Killian whirled around and met him face to face, warning through his own sharpened teeth, "But strike me again, and I will."

Something flashed in the black gaze, a ripple in a bottomless well where countless unwary souls had drowned. Unlike others, Rumpelstiltskin's eyes did not turn red with infernal fire. His self-appointed appellation was true in one regard, they went even impossibly darker, a smothering darkness that no light would ever illuminate as he said nothing with the tiniest of smiles playing at the edge of his lips. One hand flicked in the air and the smoke rose again, a thick plume that surrounded him from head to toe as he vanished without another word. Killian felt his lip curl, still feeling like he was being watched for several long moments after. He flicked his eyes from side to side and saw nothing but tall houses and empty shadows.

"Where are you, Dark One?"

Silence was the only reply to his thick sarcasm and his cloak swirled around his legs as he turned and lit all the streetlamps at once, setting them ablaze in a shower of crimson sparks and leaping flames before he too disappeared into the cover of night.

Faint singing carried on the wind, an old hymn that exhorted all creatures of God and king to lift up their voices and sing of glory and praise. It was a sweet sound, drifting from the grand building that
had once held what was thought to be the crown of thorns itself and carrying across the waters of the
nearby Seine to the Île de la Cité at the very heart of Paris.

But the king was dead and the choir would soon follow, the singing came from a group of
imprisoned nuns who were condemned to die under the guillotine's blade in the morning. While the
building still maintained the grand facade of a royal palace, on the inside it was now an overcrowded
jail. Vermin ran rampant along corridors that had once played host to the spoils of the Crusades and
disease claimed as many as the guillotine. Still, the nuns sang on, their faith unwavering even in these
final moments when all hope should have died away.

He had once awaited execution in a Spanish cell with far less aplomb, but while the holy sisters were
sure of salvation awaiting in the next world with their echoing calls of alleluia, Killian knew that he
was not one of God's beloved creatures and all he would ever be was eternally damned.

The rooftop where he was standing overlooked the eastern wall of the building where the nuns were
incarcerated among the rest of the pitiful souls held within. He was perched easily despite the sharp
slope of the slate tiles underneath his feet, balanced lightly on his heels with nary a wobble as he
waited for the one who appeared every night to offer the nuns a bit of heavenly comfort in their
darkest hours.

Emma emerged before the dawn, her light a brief, bright flash against the night that still reigned for a
few moments more before it was forced to acquiesce to the rising sun. If she felt his presence gave no
sign, her face not rising to seek out his perch as she reached up and flicked away a drop of silver
from her cheek. Another tear shed by an angel and something twinged deep in his belly, who was
there to give comfort to her when she cried for these mortal souls? The sky began to lighten,
darkness giving way as the singing grew even louder. Emma wore no cloak and her hair was loose,
rippling down the back of a pure white gown that tortured him more that the Inquisition ever did.
They had shed his blood in search of a confession while she drew his lust and most hidden desires
with the turn of her head and the swell of her burned for her like he had for no other, longed to
capture that incandescent light in his hands and rip the white gown from her body with his sharp
teeth. He'd wipe away her tears with the pads of his thumbs and dip his head to taste between her
legs, sorrow would turn to ecstasy as she opened to him at last and he would let her hear nothing but
him.

"So this is your great secret."

The sudden puff of emerald smoke to his right faded away to reveal Zelena, sheer, unabashed delight
on her face as she took in the scene below. A cackling laugh escaped her that turned the blood in his
veins right to ice, the succubus had discovered the true object of his desire and she would inevitably
use that knowledge to destroy him if he didn't destroy her first. The iridescent gem at her throat
glowed and her eyes glittered, flinty and hard as granite. Killian slipped an iron blade from under his
waistcoat and concealed it in his sleeve, considering his attack. He was just about to strike when
another curl of smoke rose from the rooftop and a second figure emerged.

His carelessness and lust had wrought even more disaster. To Killian's complete horror
Rumpelstiltskin appeared, standing on his other side with that knowing smile still playing on his lips
and the ebony cane clutched tight in his long, grasping fingers. He hadn't expected him to stray this
far from Madame Maleficent's while on the very cusp of securing what he'd obviously spent years
waiting for, but the dealmaker's suspicion must have been roused and left unappeased by his refusal
to bow and scrape. If he'd handled Zelena a bit more delicately and taken the blow from
Rumpelstiltskin without complaint...it was his own foolishness in not playing the game properly had
led them both straight-
She looked up sharply with her hair flying in the rising wind, long, blonde strands whipping about
her face and the gown pressing against her legs as she was alerted to their presence. Her eyes met his
and even at this distance he could see the stricken look cross her face while he heard the sharp tap of
the cane on his left. Rumpelstiltskin's oily voice dropped to a low hiss, "Oh, I do so enjoy breaking
an angel's wings."

"Not if I get there first."

The Seine was turning to fire, the dark, rippling waves taking on a deep orange glow, but it was not
the reflection from infernal flame and Killian pointed triumphantly to the east, "Your contract must
be fulfilled at sunrise or you will forfeit Maleficent's powerful soul. Forever. Let her slip through
your fingers now and she will muster all that considerable power directly against you, Dark One. I
spotted the angel first and she is mine, try to challenge me for her and you will inevitably lose both."

Streaks of rose started to pierce through the clouds high above and Rumpelstiltskin hesitated. An
angel would be a far greater prize if he managed to capture her, but his claim on Maleficent's soul
was iron-clad and Killian gambled on his superbia, his pride, being unwilling to risk coming up
empty handed if he failed in the attempt. Every second that ticked past was another second closer to
sunrise and the expiry of his contract, and finally with a scream of frustration he slammed his cane
against the roof so hard that half of the tiles shattered. A choking cloud of dust and shards rose in the
air but the demon was gone. Rumpelstiltskin had chosen the assured victory over an uncertain battle
and Killian nearly collapsed from the relief, shoulders sagging knees going weak. But the feeling
was short-lived, he still had Zelena to deal with. She had vanished from the rooftop as well but he
could see her standing in the narrow-mouthed alley that ran behind the makeshift jail and was barred
by a tall gate to prevent the prisoners from escaping. Emma had not retreated either, she was staring
the succubus down and he expected no less after her stubborn refusal to withdraw when an entire
demonic horde had converged on Rome the night they met.

Killian leapt from the roof in one step, he didn't have wings but he didn't need them to slow his
descent. Demons were fallen creatures, the long drop had no effect. He landed directly behind
Zelena, rising from his bent knees to his full height as she turned and winked at him.

"Well isn't this just precious?"

The buildings rose tall on either side of them, one with several carved gargoyles in the shape of
winged monkeys looming over the side of the roof that overlooked the alley. Zelena raised a
sweeping hand in the air and each monkey suddenly glowed like her necklace, springing to life with
beating green hearts in their breasts and wrenching free of the stone that bound them to the eaves.
One by one they dove down, their sharp-fanged mouths stretching grotesquely wide and ready to
devour. Killian flung fire at one and it shrieked as loudly as if it really was flesh and blood, the
mottled grey fur crumbling into burning ash and raining down around him to the pavement.

"Damn you, Zelena."

His curse only made her laugh louder, "Don't worry, Corrupter, they won't bite. Hard."

Another monkey swooped down, wings flapping and long, curved claws aiming straight for his face.
He threw another ball of flame but before it reached the screeching creature a bolt of light hit it from
behind, illuminating it from the inside out for a split second before it too exploded in the air. Killian
saw Emma, palms raised and filled with more of the divine light. Her path across the alley was clear
and she could send it shooting right at his heart faster than he could hope to dodge and escape if she
wanted to. Their eyes met again through the smoke and ash, puddles of water swirling around their
feet. It was coming down from the roof, a rainwater cistern must have been breached by Zelena's animation of the gargoyles and water was cascading down in rivulets and soaking the whole alley. He saw Emma's gaze dart to the sudden downpour and the light pulsed in her hands. Killian braced himself, but she didn't send it after him or Zelena. Instead, she tipped her head back and he watched with astonishment as her wings unfurled from her shoulders. The swan feathers from the ball were nothing compared to the sight before him now, her wings were twice the height of a man and the feathers were as long and thick as his forearms. Whiter than snow, the wings shimmered with gold radiance as they spread open on either side of her and it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. No wonder man fell to his knees before them. The hem of her gown left the ground and she began to rise in the air as something clawed hot and desperate in his chest. Sunlight made rainbows in the water that still poured over the roof as the clouds suddenly parted overhead and he could still hear the nuns singing from their cell.

"Fly away, little angel," Zelena called, he had almost forgotten she was even there but as he swung to face her he saw her mocking wave turn into a command levelled at the remaining gargoyles held under her thrall, "Cut her down, my pretties, fly, fly, FLY!"

His own roar was an inhuman bellow of rage that cracked the pavement right down the middle of the alley as his blood boiled and flames erupted from his fingers. Another monkey fell, shrieking and screaming as it was immolated and roasted to a complete crisp. Thick, acrid smoke filled the air but Zelena's red hair was as visible as a beacon and he flung the iron knife from under his sleeve at her with all his might. He'd been aiming for her heart but it caught the succubus in the neck instead, hand flying to the wound that poured through her fingers with viscous black blood. Her shriek was as loud as the monkey's as she wrenched the blade free and tossed it aside, injured but not downed completely.

"Exorcizo te, creatura aquæ, in nomine Dei Patris omnipotentis-"

Killian looked up as the angel began to intone, the meaning of the Latin words taking a moment to sink in while he found Emma in the air. Her lips moved with the blessing, voice growing louder and from the corner of his eye he saw Zelena stagger back with her fingers pressed to her neck.

"The water!" she shrieked, as shrill as the monkeys, "No!"

"-sancti tui nominis expetita, ab omnibus sit impugnationibus defensa. Per Dominum, AMEN!"

It came in a wave, crashing around Zelena where she stood and engulfing her completely before she could even move. Holy water, blessed and consecrated by an angel. He had the briefest glimpse of the succubus as the waters receded like the rolling tide before the second wave hit and saw that the skin had melted clear off her face. Empty eye sockets stared back at him amid falling clumps of hair that had turned from red to black, and then the water claimed her completely before she could do so much as scream. Sanctified and pure, it washed away the sins and when it receded again there was nothing left but her necklace, the emerald lying flat on the ground while the pearls broke free from the choker and rolled into a puddle.

They were dotted all over the alley, puddles of holy water that made his nostrils flare as he looked around gingerly and saw that the pavement around him was completely dry. Emma landed without a sound several feet away, wings folding shut and disappearing while the remaining monkeys turned back to stone with the demise of their mistress and were nothing but harmless gargoyles once more.

"Your trap failed, damnate."

Killian reared back as if she'd slapped him, "A trap? You think I planned this?"
"Well, what else am I to assume? You brought another to ambush me! Two of them! Where's the other one, is he going to spring on me now and attack me with more statuary?"

He cursed Zelena and Rumpelstiltskin and himself at the fury in her voice, eyeing where the ground was still wet and treacherous. If the water touched his skin it would burn him too. "They ambushed the both of us! The gargoyles were attacking me just as much as you, Emma!"

"Oh, don't you dare. Don't you dare use my name!"

She was magnificent in her rage, beautiful and terrible all at once and any sinner would tremble and repent at the very sight of her like this. But he was not any sinner.

"Beata angela. I give you my word that I did not betray you tonight. I swear it on my own life! Some part of you has to believe that, otherwise the water would have taken me too."

Emma flinched, her lips thinning as he gestured to the perfect circle around his feet that was dry as a bone. She could have sent the holy water crashing down on his head as well, but she hadn't.

She hadn't.

"You told me in Rome that you didn't trust me, but you had faith. I led you to safety that night, can you not have faith in me again?"

She shook her head and started to back up, moving away from him, "I can't take that chance. I can't risk being wrong about you, damnate."

"Killian," he urged, "I am damned to the rest of the world, but I am Killian to you, Emma."

He chanced saying her name again, taking a step forward. She was standing in the middle of the largest puddle with water lapping at the hem of her gown and just like the threshold to the Royal chapel at Versailles, it was a barrier he could not cross.

"You are nothing to me."

But she paused in her flight and encouraged, he chanced another step that brought him right to the water's edge. He looked down and saw his own reflection. The damned and the divine in one.

"Emma."

The water receded, draining away down the sewers that flowed towards the Seine. Whatever remained of Zelena went along with it, the succubus had been completely annihilated and would not resurrect until the very End of Days and the Final Battle. He'd deal with her then, but for now there was nothing but the angel in front of him. Her hands landed on his chest, neither pushing him away nor pulling him closer. The world spun around them but neither of them moved.

"Am I truly nothing to you?"

She looked up, searching his face. For what he didn't know, but he could see his reflection in her eyes. Did she see hers in his? Dipping his head, he pressed his forehead to hers and felt her fingers curl in his shirt right over his heart. The touch of his skin to hers and hers to his didn't burn, was this what it was to experience a miracle? Their breath mingled in the space between them and then she undid him with a tiny shake of her head and two words, "No, Killian."

The kiss was like nothing he'd ever felt, sweeter than honey and more intoxicating than wine. His knees nearly buckled from the sensation and he groaned into her mouth, pulling her to him and
pressing himself to her as they swayed back and forth while locked in the impossible embrace, reaching to cup the back of her head and feeling the slip of her hair through his fingers. Their noses rubbed as they broke apart and came together again, lips meeting over and over until finally she pulled back and resisted his attempt to follow.

"That can't happen again."

He was more light headed than he could ever remember being and she sounded breathless, fingers still clutching his shirt. She pushed him away at last and he could only stand and gape, stunned into silence. Bells began to toll, but they were not the call to morning prayer and Emma gasped, head jerking towards the sound.

"The executions have begun. The sisters...I promised to be with them at the end. They need me."

Killian's mind was so fogged that it took a moment for him to remember the group of condemned nuns. He wanted nothing more than to sweep Emma back to his bedchamber and convince her to let that happen again, but he forced himself to step back.

"Then I won't detain you any longer."

She gave a slight nod, turning to leave. But before she could disappear into the light he reached out to catch her sleeve and she looked at him over her shoulder.

"If you need someone, you know where to find me, Emma."

A brief look of gratitude flashed over her face before she faded away. After she had gone to bear witness at the guillotine he reached up and pressed his fingers to his lips, letting out a breath. He didn't know which was more shocking, that she had spared him, again, or that she had kissed him. The angel was perplexing, to say the least.

He knew he should leave, but he would continue to reside in France for a little while longer. No more salons or society gatherings, he made a vow to become more circumspect in his behaviour. It was time to retreat to the shadows for a while. With his decision made, Killian clasped his hands behind his back and strolled over to where Zelena's emerald still lay glittering on the dirty pavement. It was a magnificent gem, clearly worth a fortune, and he took great pleasure in stomping it under his heel and smashing it to pieces.

The cracked and shattered remains were left behind for the rats.
Chapter 18

Going to court was nothing like the way it was portrayed in the movies and on TV. Glossy dramas set in hushed courtrooms full of dark wood panelling where telegenic lawyers in designer suits and perfectly styled hair gave stirring arguments to an attentive jury, spontaneous confessions on the witness stand or the sudden discovery of last-minute evidence that exonerated the tearful defendant while the room erupted into chaos and the judge banged the gavel and called fruitlessly for order, press conferences held on the courtroom steps under blindfolded statues of Justice with her scales held aloft while the guilty were punished and the innocent walked free as the music swelled and the credits rolled.

The reality was a rather ordinary office building with no tall columns or grand porticos, where bored cops chatted and drank coffee in the fluorescent-lit halls while they waited to be called into traffic court, husbands and wives hashed out divorce settlements and argued over child custody agreements in the mediation rooms and overworked, underpaid lawyers who hadn't landed the plum jobs at white-shoe firms hustled to file endless reams of paperwork for DUIs and landlord-tenant disputes, the six-figure student loan balances they had little hope of ever paying off hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles instead of Justice's impartial scales.

Emma sat on an uncomfortable wooden bench in one of the courtrooms and watched a parade of recently-arrested inmates from the city jail get ushered in and out like clockwork. Nearly all were represented by public defenders and most were men under the age of twenty-five, Black, Latino, from "bad" neighbourhoods or "no fixed address," so young but with long rap sheets that were read out dispassionately by the nasal-voiced prosecutor, "Possession with intent to distribute...drunk and disorderly...resisting arrest...possession of a controlled substance...assaulting an officer...trespassing...solicitation...petty theft...grand theft. It went on and on in a sad litany, while mothers seated in the public gallery cried and prayed for the boys who had once smiled in school photos with gap-toothed grins and now stood stoic-faced with their heads bowed in supplication as they were arraigned. A few had the charges dropped and were released, but most were remanded straight back into custody pending payment of bail. If their families couldn't scrape together the money for a bondsman then they would languish in lockup like souls in Purgatory until their trials, three, six, nine months away, caught in a limbo between innocent and guilty. Girlfriends would pawn jewelry and mothers would take out payday loans to free them, paying usurious interest rates in the process and continuing the vicious cycle of poverty, hopelessness and debt.

The police reports that accompanied each one with the details of their arrests were debated by both sides as the judge quickly mulled over each case, they contained numerous references to the sale and possession of drugs like marijuana, crack, and methamphetamines, but there was no specific mention of the Heaven's Gate heroin that had infected the city like an insidious plague. These were small-time dealers and users, Emma didn't really think any of them was the mysterious kingpin behind the new drug. Or kingpins, plural, since Killian had said his underworld contacts called it a family business. They touched base daily by text and while he was still convinced that the demon he referred to as the Dark One was the shadowy mastermind responsible for it all, she was still a bit unsure. Something about the whole situation felt "off" in a way that she couldn't quite put her finger on yet so she had come to court to observe and listen, hoping to find some clue that would help answer her questions.

"Hey Emma."

She'd been so lost in thought that the sound of her name spoken out loud made her start a bit in surprise, looking up with a frown that melted in a smile when she saw who it was.
"John, hi. Didn't expect to see you here, please tell me you didn't steal a car or hold up a liquor store or something."

The judge had called a brief recess and most of the spectators were taking advantage of the break, shuffling in and out of the courtroom to visit the washrooms or grab a coffee while the bench was empty and the public defender and prosecutor were both occupied with their phones. Emma slid over to give the young man room to sit down next to her and he shrugged off the small leather backpack he was wearing, plopping it down on the floor by his feet with a rueful grin.

"No, nothing as exciting as that. This is homework for me, sort of. I like to come and watch the real legal system at work whenever I get a chance, not just sit in a classroom debating theory all the time."

Emma recalled that he was in law school, fitting in his shifts at the soup kitchen around his class schedule. His brother Michael was a year or two younger and was also still in college, but that didn't deter him either and they were two of the most reliable volunteers they had. A lot of people were all gung-ho at the beginning but couldn't handle the regular grind of unpaid work, especially the hard and thankless tasks of peeling hundreds of pounds of potatoes or washing dozens of dirty pots and pans that had to be done day in, day out, but the brothers had proven themselves to be the real deal. They were also devout in a way that was rare among people their age, when Michael had a big project due for one of his classes and needed time off he'd called Father Hopper to apologize and asked for a formal dispensation from attending Mass until he was finished, saying he barely had time to even shower. Most wouldn't have bothered and just not shown up to church if they were too busy, Father Hopper had been taken by surprise by the request. He'd told Michael to concentrate on his studies and assured him that He would understand. When he came back to the soup kitchen for the breakfast shift a few weeks later he'd somewhat shyly told David that he'd received an A, blushing furiously under the round of applause that David immediately led as he tied on his apron and rolled up his sleeves.

John pulled out a small notebook from his backpack and balanced it on his knee when the recess was over and the judge settled back down behind the bench. The pages were already full of dense writing, underlined, highlighted, crossed out in parts and he quickly started jotting down more notes while the public defender held a whispered conversation with her latest client. She was one of the few women on the docket, her long hair done in neat braids that fell almost to her waist and growing more and more ashen faced as her attorney talked, facing arraignment for the grand crime of shoplifting twenty dollars worth of cold medicine and a pack of licorice from a drugstore. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking and sobbing as the court reporter transcribed the judge's decision. Denied bail completely and facing a potential five year prison sentence thanks to two prior convictions for theft and the three strikes law making her latest crime a felony.

She was only nineteen years old.

"This is a travesty," John muttered under his breath, jabbing the ballpoint viciously against his notebook so hard that he almost tore a hole right through the paper, the tips of his fingers stained dark with blue ink. From what Emma could tell from the hushed conversation taking place the public defender had fought for bail but the prosecution had opposed it, considering her a flight risk since she was scheduled to testify at the upcoming trial of the man she had stolen the cold medicine for - her boyfriend, a suspected meth dealer.

"She's going to wind up a convicted felon which is going to torpedo any chance she has of getting a decent job when she does get out and statistically speaking, she'll be rearrested within a year because she'll have no other options to support herself except theft or prostitution or dealing. We talk about it
in class, but seeing it in person is...something else."

Emma nodded, knowing that he was completely right in his assessment and watching as the woman was finally led away by a stone-faced bailiff with the limp tissue still clutched tightly in her hand. A lawyer who had more time than the public defender could afford to spend on a single case could have probably negotiated house arrest, got the charges reduced or come up with some kind of deal to keep her out of jail until the trial, but representation like that cost money and the cold medicine would have been the real sticking point, more than if she'd stolen almost anything else. In truth, the odds had been stacked against girls like her since long before she was even born.

In the early seventeenth century the conflict now known as the Thirty Years' War had laid waste to an entire generation across great swathes of Europe, the devastation left in its wake unmatched until World War II. The thirty year old War on Drugs that gained major traction in the 1980s had done the same to the inner cities of the empire that had risen to eclipse the Old World powers, a country where they elected a president instead of crowning a king. The old conflict was a result of the deep schism caused by the Reformation, the divide between the traditional Catholic church and dissenters who eschewed idolatry and the selling of indulgences to the rich, while the new had its roots not in religious discord but in something else entirely. Mandatory sentencing minimums that resulted in harsh prison sentences was aimed at the cheaper crack cocaine associated with the urban poor who were predominately Black, instead of the more expensive powder preferred by well-heeled bankers to fuel their mergers and acquisitions and snorted by models and actors in the bathrooms of upscale clubs. The divide ran deeper than the cracks that had eventually fractured the Holy Church, where the rich and white could still buy their way to freedom and the poor did a far greater penance for their sins.

Time did not heal all wounds.

"There is no greater sin than this," she quoted softly, more to herself then to the man sitting beside her. His prediction had come true, a prophecy spoken by one who intimately understood the evils that lurked in the hearts of man. Their own intimacy had found new worlds then, on virgin ground untouched by sin or salvation. Emma remembered the shocking heat of his embrace that had inflamed her skin right through the laced bodice and the tattered remains of her long skirt as clearly as if it were yesterday. Fashions changed, she hadn't worn a corset or a petticoat in decades, but the face in the mirror was still the same and the sharply-tailored suits that Killian favoured now were a far cry from how he'd been dressed that night, clad head-to-toe in dark leather, gleaming sword strapped tight to his hip, but the soft smile that held no hint of demonic bite remained unchanged as the years passed around them.

"Say you want me. Say it, Emma."

She blinked and pushed the memory away, it was neither the time nor the place to reminisce about that now. Too much was currently at stake to get lost in the past.

Another two arraignments went by quickly, a DUI followed by a possession charge, while John hunched over his notes and muttered about search and seizure laws under his breath and she listened to the proceedings in more ways than one, but the third was another woman who had been picked up for disorderly conduct, vandalism and resisting arrest. It was immediately obvious that she was in some kind of a stupor, glassy-eyed and unfocused, dressed in ill-fitting beige prison clothes that hung loose on her skinny frame, and her hair was a rat's nest of tangles and snarls that looked like it hadn't been brushed properly in weeks. The prosecutor read out the details of her arrest from the police report, that she'd been loitering in a liquor store trying to panhandle for enough change to buy cheap wine, and when the cashier had finally told her to stop bothering the other customers and leave she'd become extremely agitated, throwing a fit and smashing a bottle of vodka on the floor.
There was a thick wad of gauze wrapped around the palm of her hand and the lines of old scars were visible when she pushed up her sleeve to scratch at her forearm, hard enough to leave thick red streaks behind. When the judge asked her to state her name for the record she started mumbling unintelligibly instead, hunching her shoulders and rocking back and forth on her slippered feet. Emma felt John go still beside her, tension practically radiating off him and she saw that he'd stopped writing, a trailing line left across a blank page where the pen had slipped. The public defender repeated the question, gently urging the woman to answer while the prosecutor and the judge exchanged exasperated looks across the room.

A piercing wail made them all flinch and she suddenly collapsed into a heap on the floor, lashing out with her legs when the bailiff approached and tried to haul her back up. The woman started swearing at the top of her lungs and yelling nonsense, as more officers surrounded her and two quickly wrenched her arms behind her back to stop her from striking out. The judge stood and called for the courtroom to be cleared, ordering an immediate psychiatric hold that both lawyers agreed to without argument while paramedics were radioed and everyone else was ushered out into the hall.

"Are you OK?" Emma asked, "That was a bit difficult to witness."

There was a coffee cart in the courthouse that also sold prepackaged sandwiches and a small selection of stale-looking pastries. She ignored the bear claw displayed next to a slice of banana bread and ordered two coffees that John immediately pulled out his wallet and paid for over her protests.

"I'm fine," he said, dumping in sugar and cream and fidgeting with the little wooden stir stick between his fingers until it finally snapped in two, "It's just so depressing. That last one, she clearly had mental health issues and a seventy-two hour hold where she gets loaded up with meds and then turned loose on the streets again with a referral to a psychiatrist she can't afford to pay, what is that going to do? Nothing, that's what. Something needs to be done."

Emma let him rant while she sipped her coffee, hearing a shadow hovering behind his words. He was normally so buttoned-up and quiet at the soup kitchen, soft-spoken and polite to the other volunteers and the people they served, but now he was flushed red with anger and she could feel the righteous fury rolling off of him in waves.

"I agree with you, but there's no easy solutions. The system is horribly overburdened and a lot of people like that woman end up falling through the cracks. Mary Margaret has some stories, she was a social worker until we founded Shared Blessings and one of the reasons she left was because there was only so much she could do with the resources they had. Well that, and she's not too fond of the city administration, especially the mayor."

Regina Mills talked a good game about compassion for the less fortunate, but under her regime social services budgets had been slashed to the bone and programs had been cut. Even Mary Margaret's natural sunny optimism had suffered a major blow and she'd almost left the field altogether until David managed to convince her she could fight back in another way.

The hot coffee fogged John's thick-framed hipster glasses and he slipped them off with a sigh, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry, I know you understand, Emma, I'm just used to dealing with people who don't get it. At school they're all rich kids who've had everything handed to them their whole lives and I know I'm one of them, but-"

She laid a hand on his arm and he opened his eyes, giving her a sad smile.
"This is personal for you, isn't it?"

He answered her question with a nod, leaning against the wall and tipping his head back, reaching up to finger a gold medal that he wore on a chain around his throat. A saint's talisman, engraved with a tiny figure of a holy martyr or prophet. John's chest rose and fell with a few deep breaths and she waited for the confession she sensed was imminent. The conversations around them became an indistinct hum, the people turning away with a tiny, unnoticed flick of her finger and giving the illusion of privacy to make it easier on him to bare his soul outside of the sanctuary of the confessional stall.

"My sister," John admitted, "she's always been...different. When we were kids she used to tell Michael and I all these crazy bedtime stories about a magic land where no one ever grew old and children could fly. And then she broke her leg jumping off the roof trying to get to it and almost convinced both of us to jump along with her. She sees things that aren't there, hears voices...been to dozens of doctors and been diagnosed with everything from depression to bipolar to acute schizophrenia...spent almost two years in a private clinic in Switzerland where they only allowed her one weekly phone call and visits at Christmas and her birthday. And she's one of lucky ones, because our family has money and my parents can afford to pay for it all, otherwise she could be that woman desperately trying to self-medicate with a bottle of wine and freaking out in liquor stores."

Emma's heart squeezed in sympathy for his anguish. She knew that John and Michael were from a well-to-do family but she hadn't realized just how well off they were, they didn't flaunt the kind of wealth that could pay for private Swiss clinics and topnotch college educations for both the brothers. Neither one had mentioned their sister, either, although it wasn't that surprising, there was still such a stigma about mental illness even in this day and age.

"You want to help people like her, don't you?"

One shoulder lifted in a shrug under his blue Oxford-cloth shirt, "My brother and I, we used to pray so hard for her to get better. Every Sunday at Mass, every night before we went to bed. I probably spent hours begging God to fix what was wrong with her, I was too young to really understand what was going on. But she only got worse, and eventually our parents had to send her away. I haven't prayed since the day they put her on a plane to the clinic. God isn't listening to me."

He stared at nothing in the distance for a moment before giving his head a shake, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to just dump all that on you at once, Emma."

"It's Ok," she reassured him, and at his skeptical look added, "I've always been told I'm a pretty good listener. How long have you been holding that in?"

"A while," he exhaled, puffing out his cheeks, "I chose law school so I could make a real difference in people's lives and not just become another stuck-up banker like my father...God, that sounds so freaking cheesy when I say it out loud...but is the system just too broken?"

"It's not as long as there are people who care."

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she fished it out, letting out a breath when she saw "Mary Margaret Nolan" on the call display and not "K. Jones." John drank his coffee while she thumbed the text open and tapped on the attached picture. It was of a sonogram, a black and white smudge where the curve of the head and the limbs had now taken shape and were just visible to the naked eye.

"Baby's heartbeat is strong, just like daddy's!"
Emma smiled, tracing a finger over the little image and feeling John move to peer at it over her shoulder.

"Is that?"

"Mary Margaret and David's baby, yes it is. It's not cheesy to want to make the world a better place, John. And if you ever need to talk about anything, I'll be there to listen."

She had work to do back at the office and the visit to the courthouse had come up empty, so she said goodbye to John and tossed the paper coffee cup into the trash. He walked with her back down the hall, backpack slung over his shoulder and a thoughtful look on his face.

"How is your sister doing now?" she asked.

"Oh," he said, fidgeting with the bag's strap, "She's much more stable than she's been in years. Finally found a treatment that seems to be working, it was a bit unconventional but it was a miracle, how well she responded to it."

There was a crush of people by the entrance, a group of reporters all yelling questions at a woman in a tailored sheath dress and simple pumps who was trying to hide her face behind a newspaper without much luck.

"Mrs. Preston, can you tell us how your husband is holding up considering he's facing a possible life sentence?"

"Is it true that you've hired a divorce lawyer, Mrs. Preston? Are you leaving your husband?"

"Can you give us a comment on the rumour that your husband was embezzling funds from his employer in addition to robbing banks? Will they also be pressing charges against him?"

The man at her side scowled and threw his arm out to block them, "My client has no comment to any of these ridiculous questions, now get out of the way."

The ongoing trial of Mark Preston, investment banker turned bank robber, was currently front page news in every paper. Emma recognized the woman as his wife, mobbed by the press every time she set foot out of their house. She kept her head down as she navigated the steps, not saying a word in response to the barbed questions being lobbied at her but flinching slightly at each one as if they were stones being cast by the gleeful mob. The large diamond on her ring finger caught the light before she disappeared inside the courthouse with her lawyer in tow. Whatever her private thoughts on her husband's alleged crime, she was making a public show of support.

Emma passed by the media circus unnoticed and made for her yellow Bug, parked at a meter down the street. Her quarter should have run out hours ago, but it miraculously showed she still had fifteen minutes left when she slid behind the wheel and turned the key. The radio came to life and the Rolling Stones blared from the classic rock station, *Sympathy for the Devil*, natch.

"Story of my life," she snorted, throwing the car into gear with a bit more force than was strictly necessary.

The namesake saint of the Cathedral of Saint Raphael was not, in fact, a human saint, but an angel. The Archangel Raphael, one of the seven who were the highest ranked of them all and each tasked with a divine mission by the Heavenly Father eons ago. Michael was the warrior Prince of Heaven, the sworn guardian of the Holy Church, Gabriel, sweet-faced and gentle-natured, was the messenger chosen to deliver the news to a young woman in the city of Nazareth that she had been chosen out of
all womankind to bear the Son of God, but Raphael was angel to the angels. He was her patron, as he was to the rest of the holy guardians who walked the Earth with hidden wings and concealed halos. It had seemed serendipitous that she'd wound up in a city with such a grand church that paid special homage to him, though the depiction on the large stained glass window above the altar was not a very good likeness. The nose was all wrong, for one.

Emma sat alone in the front pew, rolling a string of rosary beads absently through her fingers. It was nearly three in the morning and the cathedral was technically closed, with only dim security lights left on that barely pierced the darkness in the long, silent nave and left the side chapels in shadow. The doors were all securely locked and while she did have her own set of keys to the side entrance even though she wasn't actually one of the church employees, she hadn't bothered with the charade of pretending that she needed to unlock the doors to enter when she parked her car and approached the empty building. At one time the cathedral had never closed, offering sanctuary to any lost soul day or night, but those days were long gone. They simply didn't have the manpower to stay open all the time anymore, every year there were fewer and fewer priests left, and convents closed doors for good as elderly nuns couldn't handle the upkeep alone without young postulants joining the order and taking on the work. But a life of poverty, chastity and obedience was a hard sell when unmarried women without dowries could get an education and live on their own and second-born sons who wouldn't inherit didn't need the Church's support in lieu of family estates or titles. There wasn't many nowadays to light the candles and keep vigil during the night, old traditions falling by the wayside as the world moved on.

The rosary beads were worn smooth and shiny with long handling. Emma wasn't particularly sentimental when it came to material goods, she didn't really keep much with her in the way of clothes or knicknacks. The evening gown she'd worn to the mayor's charity gala had been given to the closet that Shared Blessings kept with donated interview suits and steel-toed work boots and other items that their clients needed but couldn't afford on their own on short notice. Every spring they outfitted teenagers from low-income families for their high school proms, and the blue lace dress would wind up on a girl who would probably feel like a princess for the first time in her life when she put it on. The few items that did come with her from city to city fit into a single box, her existence had always been a nomadic one like the wandering shepherds of old. Angels didn't exactly put down roots, but she had carried the rosary with her for over seventy years. It wasn't really anything special to look at, fairly plain and utilitarian in design compared to other more ornate versions, but she hadn't kept it for so long for the aesthetic value.

"Is this the price he demands for his assistance?"

The question rolled around in her mind like the beads between her fingers. The rosary had been a gift once upon a time and she'd kept it ever since, although she didn't actually use it to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. Still, the familiar feel of the beads under her fingertips was soothing, or it usually was. Raphael's blank face looked on silently from the stained glass above, she wished she could actually seek his counsel in person instead of sitting alone under his outstretched wings, but he wouldn't understand her plight. There was another Archangel who might be more sympathetic, but she could hardly seek out the one who had been the Bringer of Light. They had all bowed down to him before the Fall...the one the Heavenly Father had loved the most.

His love hadn't been enough to save him.

There were no grand cathedrals dedicated to her, no medals struck in her honour or feasts celebrated in her name. If she was cast out, her wings blackened and her halo shattered, would anyone mourn her expulsion from Heaven? Would they even remember the Angel Emma, one who listened and tried her best to answer? Auguste was dead, they all were, the mortal souls she had known and sheltered and...loved. They inevitably passed into the next world, and even though she knew they
had been received into Paradise as time went on little remained of the people they had been. Just as
the satin ribbon she had carried from Versailles had slowly faded from deep indigo to a pale grey, the
rosary beads would become more and more brittle with age until they eventually cracked and
shattered. Living memory became history, history became myth, and there would be none left to
remember the night they had been given to her save for Killian. The whole world had been on
fire...and she had almost burned along with it.

Almost...if not for him.

But it was quieter now than it had ever been. The population had completely exploded in the past
hundred or so years, but as they turned away from the Church in droves, disillusioned by scandals, in
disagreement with Rome's stance on current issues like gay rights, birth control, the place of women
in a hierarchy that was designed to keep them out, or just plain uninterested, they ceased to pray...or
they never began in the first place. Each prayer was like a little silver thread that all came together in
a complex web around the entire Earth and she could follow the individual strands straight to the
supplicant, fording the deepest oceans and crossing the barrenest of deserts in a heartbeat. But the
web was rather threadbare in spots now and what would happen to an angel if they all faded away
one day, the silver strands disappearing one by one until nothing was left? The angel could only
listen if there was someone out there to listen to.

"Listen only to me."

Killian's prayers were never silver, they shone a deep crimson whenever she heard him call out to
her. It was the colour of lust, the red apple of temptation and the burning glow of infernal fire, but it
was a warning too, a flashing beacon that she should have heeded long ago.

She was never meant to hear him.

There was no such flash of scarlet in her mind tonight. Whatever he was doing in the darkness that
surrounded him, he wasn't praying. Was he summoning the demon he disdainfully called the Dark
One, a figure she somewhat remembered from a Parisian rooftop centuries ago? She'd been too far
away to clearly see his face, only a shadowed smudge had been visible staring down at her while she
quickly recognized Killian's dark hair and the familiar insolence of his carriage under a gentleman's
elegant coat. Another had also been present, her Jezebel-red hair visible even in the pale twilight and
marking her as a succubus, a tempter and seducer of men.

Emma had thought at first that it was an ambush, orchestrated by the one who had once sworn that
his door was always open to her. Icy fear had seized her heart and shock had flooded through her as
the succubus swooped down from the roof in a sudden tornado of emerald green. It was in that
moment that she realized she had believed Killian, believed him when he said in London that he
meant her no harm, thought that the tentative understanding between the two of them on the road
from Versailles was genuine. His apparent betrayal had actually stung, striking her like a blow to the
heart even as she grit her teeth and let holy light fill her palms. When water started to pour over the
side of the building, so too had the words spilled over her lips without thought. The Latin blessing
had transformed ordinary rainwater into holy water as the wine and bread was miraculously
transformed into His blood and body. It was a divine déluge, a cleansing downpour with the power
to obliterate him right where he stood. The succubus had seen it coming, shrieking like a banshee
with blood black as tar streaming down from the wound on her neck and staining the folds of her
fine gown. There was no escape for either of them in the narrow confines of the alley, but something
stayed her hand when it came to him. A tiny flare deep within her breast that defied all reason and
the waters had receded instead.

Faith.
The old rosary beads dangling loose from her fingers, the worn, cloth-bound copies of the Holy Bible that were present in every pew, the angels of stained glass and the painted crucifix behind the altar...they were all symbols of faith. Some were beautiful, some were mundane, but true faith was much more than just tokens. She didn't need to have faith that the Archangel Raphael would hear her prayer or that Heaven and Hell were real, she knew. Blessed are those who have not seen, but have believed. She'd seen His glory with her own two eyes...but faith came from within. Lucifer had lost his, no longer trusting in the Heavenly Father's divine plan for the universe and taking up arms against Him. Once an Archangel who had stood shoulder to shoulder with Michael, Gabriel, and the rest, he was either cast out or fell of his own volition, no one save He was truly certain of what had happened in the chaos of the First War, when the fields of Paradise itself was the battlefield and the bright, shining Son of the Morning became the reviled, fallen Son of Perdition.

Did the light of the Morning Star still shine deep within the bowels of Hell?

If the prayers ever ceased, would Killian's crimson thread be enough to fill the empty space that would remain?

The cavernous nave held no answer, no secrets hidden in the hard wood of the pews or the embroidered altar cloth where the Host was reverently placed at each Mass. His body, the flesh that was offered in sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Of course they didn't stop sinning, and it was Killian's cynical voice in her ear reminding her that they never would. Even good people like David and Mary Margaret faltered at times, no one was infallible. Not even angels, if the Morning Star could fall, then so could the rest of them. A few had followed in the eons since, it was incredibly rare but it did happen. Killian's own belief that she might become one of them was not made up entirely out of whole cloth, if it happened once it could happen again.

He had texted her earlier, a picture of a cabin on a lake and a single word, Soon. Silver water and tall fir trees surrounded the rustic wood building, it looked tranquil and private and she supposed it was the location for his proposed weekend getaway. Could they really retreat from the world for a few days without consequence, no sin, no salvation, and just be Emma and Killian for a little while?

"I am damned to the rest of the world, but I am Killian to you, Emma."

It was an impossible wish, but she couldn't bring herself to deny it just yet. Once they got the Heaven's Gate heroin off the streets and whoever was behind it, demon or not, was punished, then she'd tell him that it wasn't meant to be. Two days alone with him was not a good idea, it would be all too easy to ignore the silver threads of prayer. She knew that for a fact. In Paris she'd had faith that he hadn't betrayed her and didn't mean to cause her any harm, but he was no less dangerous because of it. If anything, he was more.

A buzzing noise suddenly interrupted the stillness and Emma frowned, setting the rosary down on the pew and groping for her phone. She felt a little flare of hope that it was Killian calling to say he'd solved the mystery of the dealer's identity and everything was now fine, she might not be able to give him a weekend but she could go over to his condo and spend the rest of the night in his warm bed instead of sitting awake and alone in the chill of her own small apartment. He liked to wrap around her like a snake after sex, draping an arm around her middle and throwing his leg over hers. Demons probably weren't supposed to be snugglers, but he'd always been willing to bend the rules.

But like at the courthouse earlier the name that popped up on the screen wasn't "K. Jones." It was "Elsa Arendelle," and a phone call from the Angel of Death at three o'clock in the morning could not possibly be good news.

"Salve."
"Emma," Elsa quickly interrupted in an urgent whisper, "I'm at the hospital and there's been another overdose."

There was a riot of noise in the background, and a voice drowned out Elsa for a moment with a garbled announcement of, "Code blue. Repeat, code blue, crash team report to the ER."

"I think you need to see this one. Can you come to Saint Luke's?"

Alarm bells rang in her mind as clear as the ringing of the Angelus bells once did every morning, calling the faithful to prayer. She didn't have the divine gift of prophecy, but a sudden premonition sent a shiver right down her spine. The cathedral held the echo of a thousand sacraments that had taken place within its stone walls, weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals, all that she could only witness and never have...but she felt that something else was coming.

No, she didn't feel it. She knew.

She almost didn't recognize her own voice when she spoke into the phone, "Elsa, what's happened?"

"I'm sending you a picture, hang on."

The call abruptly cut off and she pulled the phone away from her ear, frowning down at it until she got Elsa's photo text. The face was blue-lipped and pale, vaguely familiar but she couldn't quite place it and she felt her frown grow deeper. The phone vibrated again as another picture appeared, this one a closeup of what looked like a dark mole. But it wasn't an ordinary birthmark or blemish.

It was the mark of a demon.
Saint Luke's was lit up against the night sky like a Christmas tree, the bright red EMERGENCY sign followed by an equal sided cross that was the universally recognized symbol of first aid across the Western world were both clearly visible from across the wide street as Emma parked her Bug in a miraculously open spot behind a van emblazoned on the side with the logo of a local news channel. Two more news vans were parked a little further down the block and white floodlights pierced the darkness, each coming from atop a TV camera aimed at the hospital. Emma stood next to her old yellow car for a moment and watched, taking in the stone-faced security guards who had come outside to hold the clamouring reporters at bay just outside of the entrance to the ER. They were like a flock of vultures, swooping down to pick apart the latest juicy carcass that had crossed their path until there was nothing left but the bones.

"-unconfirmed reports that Caroline Spencer, wife of longtime city councilman and mayoral hopeful Albert Spencer, was brought here to Saint Luke's by ambulance from the Prince Hotel approximately an hour ago. A source has told us that Mrs. Spencer was found in a suite at the hotel in considerable distress and hotel security called 911. It is not known if Albert Spencer was with his wife at the time or the exact nature of her medical emergency, hospital representatives are refusing to confirm if she even is, in fact, a patient, citing confidentiality laws. We'll remain on scene as this story continues to unfold, now back to you in the studio."

The light on top of the camera switched off as the burly cameraman stopped filming and the reporter was on his phone almost immediately, still holding his microphone in his other hand. "Have we found Spencer yet? Tim's on his way to the house and I've got Niri and Dan staking out the other entrances at the hospital so he can't slip in without us seeing. Wait...a drug overdose, are you serious? Caroline fucking Spencer OD'd at the Prince Hotel? Who's the source on this? Is the maid willing to appear on camera?"

He was whispering furiously, obviously trying to keep his voice down with his network rivals standing so close by but Emma heard him anyway, eavesdropping on his conversation easily with a flick of her fingers that made it sound like he was speaking right to her. While Ecclesiastes strictly forbid eavesdropping, warning not to take heed of the words of others, lest you hear them curse you, angels were not subject to the same rules as man and she needed all the information she could get right now. When the conversation turned to the amount of money they would be offering their "source" under the table to spill all the dirty details - and bribery was illegal by both divine and secular law, but she wasn't in the mood to enact punishment for the sin, the reporter could answer for that one to Saint Peter, eventually - Emma stopped listening and pulled out her own phone from inside her jacket. The picture Elsa had sent filled the screen when she tapped on it and she stared down at it with a frown, Caroline Spencer, the elegant society hostess and potential new queen of City Hall if her husband managed to unseat Regina Mills in the rapidly approaching election, was lying on a gurney with a bloody track mark in her elbow and a demon's brand on her skin. It appeared that the Heaven's Gate heroin had claimed another hapless victim, but this one made no sense.

Hospital security could keep the reporters out, but they couldn't stop an angel. She could bypass entire armies, and had, in the past, during ancient battles in the Holy Land and more recently when all of Europe had been laid waste by a madman whose name was as reviled now as Lucifer himself. Emma stepped into the ER and strode through the crowded waiting room without a single questioning glance from a nurse or an orderly thrown her way. Another set of doors required a hospital ID badge or for someone at the triage desk to open them by pressing a buzzer that was mounted safely out of public reach - but that didn't stop her either. The doors parted like the waters of
the Red Sea with a mechanical screech as they swung open, but it wasn't the Promised Land of milk and honey that awaited her on the other side. She was greeted by the Angel of Death herself, with flecks of dark blood drying on her snowflake-patterned scrubs and a halo of fluorescent light shining down on her from above. Death was the final step on the earthly path and when a mortal soul went into the light, they were looking into Elsa's eyes. She too had followed armies once upon a time, walking the fields of battle in their wake, entering the cities devastated by plague. The final visitor to the nursery, the sickbed, the sinners and saints, both old and young, healthy and ill, rich and poor, she came for them all, in the end. Hearts ceased to beat and skin went cold, so cold, under her divine hand. Had that been the fate of Caroline Spencer tonight with the mark of a demon on both her flesh and soul?

Damn you, Killian.

His silky voice immediately answered back in her head, "Too late."

Emma followed Elsa to an exam room at the end of the hall, where another security guard was positioned outside, eyes forward, thumbs in his belt, oblivious to them both when they passed right in front of him. It looked like the most private space available for a high-profile patient in the busy ER, where worried parents sat with fevered children still dressed in their footie pyjamas and what looked like an entire bachelorette party in skimpy clubwear were all huddled around a woman with a rhinestone tiara sitting askew on her head and a ripped sash that read BRIDE-TO-BE slung over her shoulder who was dry-heaving over a plastic basin. A woman in a matching MAID-OF-HONOUR sash with dark makeup smudged under her eyes was rubbing her back and talking to the same doctor that Emma remembered from her last visit, looking even more tired and worn with another paper cup of coffee clutched in his hand as he nodded and listened to whatever had gone wrong on what was supposed to have been a night of celebration.

"I think it was one of the paramedics who tipped off the press that she was brought here instead of City General or Mount Sinai, I'm going to pay him a little visit later," Elsa said, shutting the door behind them, "I always knew Hans was an asshole and his whole modest, first responder, "don't thank me I'm just doing my duty" routine with the new nurses was nothing but a big phony act. Let's see if he can still keep it up with the flaming sword pressed right against his neck."

She waved a hand over the door handle while she talked and it shimmered under her silver light, looking like it had just frosted over with a thick covering of ice. The room had no lock, but no one would be able to enter it now and Emma quickly looked around. There was the usual stainless steel carts laden with supplies and instruments, a box of latex gloves, a canister of swabs, more of those kidney-shaped plastic basins. Machines beeped, and a black silk robe was lying in a haphazard pile on the room's lone chair with a red lace bra peeking out limply from between the folds of fabric, she supposed they were the clothes Caroline Spencer had been wearing when she was brought in. The robe had been swapped for a plain hospital gown and plush hotel lines for a thin blanket that was faded from constant washings in industrial machines. There was an IV needle taped into the back of her left hand, folded on top of her right and both resting on her stomach. Her wedding and engagement rings were still on, a large diamond solitaire and channel-set band that together took up half her finger all the way to the knuckle. She had more diamonds in her ears, a pair of large, square-cut studs that could easily have been a birthday or anniversary gift from her wealthy, older husband.

Or from someone else who was both wealthy, older, and had a keen eye for fine jewellery.

Black pearls hung from round diamonds the size of cherries, delivered to her in a velvet box several lifetimes ago at Versailles with a note written in elegant script and signed with a single K.

His first attempt, but not his last.
"She's still alive," Emma whispered, both surprised and relieved. The blanket was not pulled over Caroline's face but her eyes were closed, slightly sunken in their sockets. Her cheeks too, had both seemed to collapse inward and feathery lines stood out around her blue-tinged lips as if she'd lost twenty pounds and aged ten years overnight. She was virtually unrecognizable from the polished political wife in designer suits and perfect French twists who'd stood next to her husband and smiled for the cameras while he gave speeches and shook hands all over the city during the last few weeks of his high-profile campaign.

Elsa huffed out a breath, pushing back an errant lock of hair that had escaped from her braid with the back of her hand, "Barely. She was seizing when they brought her in and I could feel that her soul was about to slip free, but they managed to stabilize her at the last possible second. If she'd been brought in even a minute later she probably would be dead, but-"

"What?"

Emma looked up and met Elsa's gaze across the bed while the machines and monitors quietly hummed and recorded each fragile heartbeat, every sluggish breath. Caroline Spencer looked like she was asleep, but it was clear that something else was going on. If she was aware of the two angels above her she gave no sign, there was no flicker behind her eyelids or twitch of her fingers at the sound of their voices. She lay unmoving except for the slight rise and fall of her chest, tucked underneath the blanket with her hands folded atop it like a child's discarded doll.

"They're pretty sure she had a stroke," Elsa explained, dropping her voice below what mortal ears would be able to hear, "The neurologist on call wanted to consult with the head of the department in person before confirming it officially, he's on his way in now. Even if she pulls through, there's no telling how much damage has already been done."

Alive, and not. Emma knew that a stroke nowadays could mean anything from a near-total recovery to major impairment, it all depended on so many factors like the speed of treatment, the patient's age and general health. She was caught in a shadowy limbo with her ultimate fate hanging in the balance, in more ways than one. The sin was like perfume, invisible to the naked eye but clinging to her ashen skin and filling the air in the small exam room. But it wasn't the scent of flowers or vanilla of Chanel No 5, it was dark, insidious, and all too familiar to Emma.

Both Spencers had been present at the mayor's gala. Albert had even danced with Regina Mills, Emma had seen them together in the middle of the dance floor, all practiced smiles and ostensibly putting their differences aside for the evening though they'd stood as far apart from each other as possible and barely managed to make it through one song. And while her husband had his hand on his rival's back and was probably wishing for a knife to plunge into it, Caroline had been dancing with someone else.

"We had to pump her stomach before we could even do the MRI, her blood alcohol level was dangerously high. Hans said that in the hotel room the whole minibar had been emptied and there was bottles all over the place, vodka, champagne, scotch, you name it. He was probably sneaking pictures of it all on his phone that'll be plastered online tomorrow, the prick."

"Scotch," Emma repeated, feeling hollow and empty, "There was scotch."

"And then there's this," Elsa continued, completely oblivious to the significance of what she'd just said as she reached for Caroline's folded hands, "It's why I called you."

The mark was even uglier in person, a jagged knot of dark, twisted tissue on the inside of her left wrist that seemed to pulse along with every beep of the heart monitor next to the bed. Mortals might only see a mole, a harmless blemish or birthmark, but to their eyes it was like a tiny curled serpent
that had sunk its venomous fangs deep into the delicate skin and blue vein and was draining the lifeforce from its victim more than any physical wound ever could. Neither she nor Elsa dared to touch it directly, and for the first time in a long time Emma felt a sense of cold apprehension along with the suspicion that was clawing relentlessly at her heart. It was unmistakably a demon's mark, and it was fresh.

Elsa's eyes flashed silver as she carefully placed Caroline's hands back on top of the blanket, her own palms filling with light. She was clearly furious, and an Angel of Death's fury was more dangerous than any other's. The temperature in the room dropped as she clenched both hands into fists, her face pale as snow and her lips thinning to a tight line.

"Daemoniacus!" she practically spat in disgust, the light glowing bright through her fingers. Demonic. "They're behind this somehow, all these overdoses. Men, women, even children! The one who was here that night, with the dark hair and blue eyes, the Corrupter-

Killian. Let me be damned to the rest of the world, but I am Killian to you.

He couldn't be Killian to her now.

"-he's not just corrupting them, he's killing them! They are dying before their time and I can't stop it, it's like a new, unnatural plague has taken hold and it's only getting worse by the day. I'm going to find him and he will pay for this."

"No."

Her voice was colder than ice and a shard of it seemed to have lodged somewhere in her chest where her heart should be. She smoothed back the tangled hair from Caroline Spencer's brow and calmy met Elsa's surprised look. Emma squared her shoulders and felt her own hands fill with golden light. He might have been born from infernal flame with the soot of it on his lashes and the reflection behind his eyes, but he could still burn like the succubus had. She'd spared him once in Paris, and this was the price she had to pay for that mercy.

"If the Corrupter was the one responsible then I will destroy him myself."

It was more than a promise, it was a holy vow that echoed in the tiny room as if it was the grandest cathedral even as someone began to pound on the other side of the door. The handle rattled but refused to turn, Elsa's seal held fast. But she couldn't keep it locked forever. Her head whipped around to look, her thick braid bouncing over her shoulder. Voices rose in consternation and they were clearly out of time.

"Emma-"

Elsa grasped her wrist, her light eyes narrowing as she searched Emma's face. She felt like she was made of stone, as much a sculpture as the marble angels that decorated Saint Raphael's. Cold and forbidding, and yet capable of shattering into a thousand pieces if she fell.

"Vale, beata angela Elsa."

Farewell, blessed angel Elsa.

The light enveloped her and the exam room disappeared in a blink, Elsa's snowflake-patterned scrubs and silver-blonde hair turning into the starry sky and the silver moon as she reappeared outside, hidden in the shadows next to her car. She leaned against the driver's side door and tipped her head back, staring up at the heavens above and wondering if she'd ever see Elsa again. The choice she'd been trying to avoid for centuries suddenly loomed in front of her like a mountain, forcing her to face
what she could no longer ignore.

Killian answered on the first ring, probably wondering why she had called him directly instead of sending a text. They were supposed to limit their contact unless absolutely necessary until he'd taken care of the demon he called the Dark One, but this wasn't a conversation they could have with abbreviations and silly emojis.

"Emma, what's-"

She cut him off before he could finish, not bothering to beat around the burning bush, "Are you having an affair with Caroline Spencer?"

His silence was her answer and she huffed out a frustrated breath, reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose, "Killian."

"Audistis quia dictum est antiquis non moechaberis," he quoted, softly, in Latin. The seventh of the Ten Commandments, *thou shalt not commit adultery*. "You know it's still a sin, and you know what I am."

Emma sighed, she did know what he was, knew it *intimately*, and the word slipped past her lips, "Damnate."

_Demon_

_Damned_

"That I am, beata. But I won't lie to you."

She wondered if that was really true. "So your answer is yes."

Another moment of silence passed before he whispered, "Yes."

The lights of Saint Luke's continued to twinkle across the street, virgin white and blood red. Even more reporters had shown up while she was inside, eager to pull back the curtain and expose the human frailty behind the polished surface. Caroline Spencer had been found guilty, and the world had come to judge her for it. She'd join the long line of fallen women stretching back to Eve, even in this day and age an unfaithful wife was punished more severely than a cheating husband in the court of public opinion, at least. The madonna/whore complex was still alive and well, and Emma wasn't naive enough to think that anyone would believe she'd been in that hotel room taking drugs alone. Not with the red lace lingerie and demolished minibar and any other juicy details that were sure to make their way onto the front page.

But just _who_ had she been with tonight?

Killian was either innocent or trying to play dumb, she could hear the confusion in his voice but she couldn't trust it, couldn't trust her own instincts when it came to him.

"Why are you asking me this now, Emma? Do you want me to break it off? Do you...do you want sexual fidelity from me? You've never asked-"

"You're not capable of that," she interrupted, scuffing the toe of her boot hard against the curb and trying to ignore the burning knot inside her stomach that was making her cheeks flush hot in the cool night air. The feeling was unsettling, the sudden flash of anger and something _else_ that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Something that made her voice bitter and her eyes burn.
"Of course," Killian agreed, but it came out tight and clipped and sounded almost...hurt, "Demon, as you said. And who am I to ask that of an angel, the next time a starving young *artiste* prays to you for inspiration and you deign to answer him."

Emma felt her back go straight against the Bug, "You're not...you are not still jealous of Auguste, are you? Seriously, Killian? It's been almost three hundred years!"

His voice dropped even lower and took on a dangerous edge, "I watched you cry because of that man, Emma, and he was not worth your tears."

The memory washed over her where she stood, a vision of the single tear that shone brighter than any diamond falling to the hard-packed dirt at his feet on the road outside of Paris and the rose that bloomed from it. She shook her head, feeling a shock going through her at the realization that Killian was still holding a grudge against the man after all this time. Sure, he would occasionally toss off an insult about Auguste's paintings that usually included some kind of dig at his obvious lack of skill between the sheets as well as on canvas...but they were getting wildly off track and she needed to steer the conversation back to the present, not the past.

"Look, just forget about Auguste for right now, okay? I need to know, were you with Caroline tonight, at the Prince Hotel?"

She could sense the shift even through the phone, as he suddenly realized that she wasn't asking the question just out of the blue.

"Yes, I was. Why?"

Emma chewed on her lip and when she didn't reply his voice got even more urgent.

"Emma, tell me what's going on."

"I take it you haven't been watching the news," she finally sighed, "Killian, she overdosed on heroin tonight. At the Prince Hotel. She's currently at Saint Luke's."

"WHAT? But....how? That's not possible...she's not...is she?"

The shock and surprise in his voice certainly seemed genuine, but the devil lied. She quickly explained about the seizures and the stroke and Elsa's suspicions.

"Tell me you had nothing to do with this."

It came out as more of a plea than a demand and she heard his sharp intake of breath.

"You think that I....that I what? Held her down and forced her to shoot up?"

"Well what am I supposed to think, infernal one? You just admitted you were with her tonight and I don't think heroin was on the room service menu along with the thirty dollar salads!"

"Oh, you'd be surprised, darling," he drawled back, suddenly dark and knowing, "Grease the right palms and anything is on the menu. Of course they don't advertise it openly along with the free wifi and continental breakfast, but every concierge in this town has a little black book of contacts, including the Jolly Roger's address. I am sin, angel, and you, out of all people, have always known it. I'll confess every last one to you and flagellate myself bloody at your feet in penance, but I swear to you I am not guilty of this!"

Her own breath caught in her throat as her vision swam at the edges and the lights swirled together,
crimson and alabaster. The fork in the road, the eternal choice, sin or salvation.

_Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned._

She wanted to believe him and that scared her more than anything, that even in the face of all the evidence to the contrary she still thought there was a chance he could be redeemed. Not by Him and His grace, but by her and her alone. Her own sin was the sin of hubris, for thinking she could keep playing with fire and not be burnt. He'd consume her long before she could ever save him - it was his nature. Like the old fable about the scorpion who'd stung the frog carrying him across the river and drowned them both because he couldn't help but strike down his own saviour, they couldn't change what they were.

"Emma? Emma, are you still there?"

She heard him but she didn't answer, pressing the phone to her ear and listening to his ragged breathing coming across the line. Telephones had been hailed as a miracle once upon a time, a wonder of science that bridged oceans and crossed impossible distances in the blink of an eye.

_Emma._

She heard that too, even more miraculous than the small device she held in her hand that was now so ordinary and commonplace. Despite everything, despite every reason why she shouldn't, she still wanted to answer him.

"I'm still here, Killian."

_Why did she keep answering him?_

"Give me one more night and I will end this, I will drive the Dark One and his fucking heroin out of the city no matter what it takes but I need more time. Please, blessed one, _please_ put your faith in me for one more night, I know it's asking a lot, but I swear I won't let you down."

It could be one more night to cover up his tracks, to make the Dark One into his scapegoat and wash his hands clean of the sin. She _should_ say no, she should stop pretending they could be anything other than enemies and whatever was between them had to end before it drowned them both, she should keep her vow and do what she should have done when she'd found him held prisoner by the Holy Church in Spain.

"_Have you come to dispatch me properly then? Well, just do me the courtesy of making it quick._"

He hadn't resisted her then...and he wouldn't resist her now, if she went to him. At least, not until it was too late.

"One more night, damned." 

She hung up before he could say another word and the phone slipped from her numb fingers, bouncing off the curb and landing on the street with a thump. When Emma bent down to pick it up she was startled to see a large crack had appeared on the screen from the fall, a lightning bolt that cut diagonally across the glass. It cut her shadowed reflection in two when she angled it in her hand and stared at it. Above her head the whole row of streetlights started to sputter and pop while across the street the reporters all stopped, frowning as they tapped their suddenly unresponsive earpieces and shook their dead microphones. An ambulance pulled into the emergency room bay, sirens wailing, lights flashing, turning their skin red and their eyes black while the noise drowned them all out. It looked like they were screaming into the flames, lost and tortured souls crying out for someone to listen.
But for a moment that lasted for the eternity between heartbeats, everything inside her head was completely silent.

His rage flared almost incandescent, white-hot and boiling under his skin. Killian could feel his eyes turn crimson, his teeth sharpen, his face and form shifting from man to demon and back again. Even the worst of the Inquisition's torture hadn't revealed his true face, he'd maintained the facade and laughed at the pain while his bones were shattered to powder and his infernal blood was spilled was spilled in that vile dungeon all those years ago. But the thought of losing her had snapped his control and his fingers turned to talons around the phone in his hand, cracking the screen clear in two. He flung it across the room and watched it smash against the wall, bursting into flame from the force of his anger. The acrid stench of melted plastic filled the air and he slammed his palms down on his desk, dropping his head and catching a glimpse of his own reflection in the polished black marble.

Damnate

Killian

The pull inside was almost too strong to resist. Every instinct was screaming at him to go to Emma, answer her summons the way he was really meant to and mark her indelibly as his. If he did then she'd have no choice, his brand would bar her from Heaven from the rest of eternity and she'd be unable to return to the one place he couldn't follow. He'd come close in the past to doing it...so close...one night in particular when he'd sensed that she was teetering on the edge of surrender and wouldn't try to stop him, but he'd forced himself to hold back. He could bring her right to the brink and he'd spent centuries trying his best to do just that, but he couldn't push her over. She had to take that final step on her own and fall willingly, if she didn't want it of her own volition, didn't want him both not-human body and damned soul...it had to be her choice, no deceit, no trickery, none of his usual tactics, or she'd despise him forever. Literally. Eternity was a very long time and while he'd openly sneered in the faces of priests and popes, boldly told saints to go fornicate with themselves and gleefully thumbed his nose at the Holy Inquisition itself, wearing their disdain as proudly as a king wore a crown, but if she turned her back on him-

Smoke curled out from under his fingers and started rising towards the ceiling in thin spirals like stairways that dissipated long before reaching heaven while a single tear fell from his eye, landing right on the glowing, pinprick reflection of his pupil with a tiny splat. But no perfect red rose sprang to life from the heated marble, as he'd told Emma once nothing grew in Hell and he was incapable of miracles. He bought her the flowers he couldn't grow, and all he could do was watch while the tear etched into the stone like acid, destroying the perfect and expensive slab in one fell swoop.

"Dark One."

The moniker fell from his lips as a bitter curse and his reflection showed that his eyes were twin flames, burning from within as he dug his claws into the ruined desk and slowly dragged ten parallel lines across it. He'd been so close to getting the one thing he coveted above everything else and now it was slipping through his fingers like sand thanks to the oily dealmaker. All the years of waiting patiently for his angel to fall, biding his time across Europe, the West Indies, the New World...and now his carefully laid plans had been shot right....

...to Hell.

"DARK ONE!"

He wanted the other demon's head on a silver plate, to lay at her feet as the spoils of war and to hear the last confession from the shrivelled lips that would prove his innocence before he burnt his
offering to his divine lover and took what he wanted in front of the smouldering pile of ash. But he had to be careful, and Killian forced himself to take several deep breaths instead of overturning the desk completely. Rumpelstiltskin was clearly taunting him, there was no other explanation as to why he would have gone after Caroline Spencer. He'd told Emma the truth, he'd been with her earlier that night at the same hotel where they'd had their first tryst after meeting for lunch to "discuss" the heritage building preservation project she was spearheading with the local historical society. It had gone exactly as he'd expected from the moment he'd received her email, money, power, sex, she had the first and wanted the third, probably knowing full well that her husband was also getting some on the side. Both Spencers played the game, but Caroline's drugs of choice were Botox and skin fillers, not heroin. There was no earthly reason for her to just suddenly decide to start shooting up out of the blue.

No, Killian was certain that the Dark One was sending him a message, just like he'd sent his imps into the Jolly Roger to cause a bit of chaos without getting his own hands dirty. It could be payback for insulting him in Paris, these kinds of petty spats between demons could go on for centuries, spawn entire wars and topple kings in their wake. Rumpelstiltskin had no scruples, destroying one human soul to enact revenge wouldn't even register with the demon who'd been right in the thick of the French Revolution making deals with everyone from the nobility to probably even Napoleon himself. The strike on Caroline was a taunt, a goad, and the vibrating bass from the music playing downstairs was like the ticking of a clock in his ears.

*Your move.*

He didn't have time to play Rumpelstiltskin's sadistic games, he needed to end this, now, before he lost his angel for good. She was on the verge of leaving him, he could sense it like a shark that smelled blood in the water, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it with the Dark One skulking around unseen in the shadows. He'd carelessly led the other demon straight to Emma once, he wouldn't make that mistake again. The threat to break her wings echoed in the back of his mind and if he so much as tried to touch her, then Killian would destroy him, no matter what the consequences. Even demons could be killed, as Zelena had discovered in Paris under a shower of holy water that melted her right into the sewers with the rats. Rumpelstiltskin was much more powerful than the succubus had been, but he didn't care. He'd risked Heaven's wrath and seduced an angel, he didn't fear anything or anyone. Not the Dark One, not the Angel of Death, not his own unholy master or even the one who'd banished him to Hell.

Except...but he refused to even think it. She'd come back to him, she always did. At the end of every Lent, every time he called...she always answered.

*Always.*

The thought was his anchor, the only thing keeping him from flying off the handle completely. Killian rolled his shoulders back under his suit jacket and straightened up, ignoring the damage to the expensive desk as he fussed with his silver cufflinks. Jefferson was still analyzing the heroin sample and the cops were still searching fruitlessly for the dealer while continuing to keep the existence of the new drug a secret from the press, but he was done with waiting. He wasn't after the Dark One's minions, he needed to cut the head off the snake and the rest would take care of itself. It was time to summon him and finally settle this face to face.

When he opened the door and stepped out of his office not a single soul in the Jolly Roger would be able to tell that anything was amiss just by looking at him. His eyes didn't glow, his nails were short and clipped, his teeth were blunt behind unsmiling lips. To the naked eye he was human, body, blood and soul. He'd burn anyone who tried to touch him, but one look at his dark expression should warn anyone from trying to get too close.
Scarlet pushed off from where he'd been leaning against the wall, clearly debating on whether to open his mouth or not. He'd driven Killian to the hotel and back to the club afterwards in silence, keeping his head down and staying a step behind, not drawing any attention to himself, but he was entirely focused on his employee now and he gave Scarlet a hard look, eyes narrowing with sudden suspicion. His first assumption was that the Dark One was having him tailed, learning about his affair from whoever he'd engaged to follow him around. It wasn't like he'd been particularly discreet about it, she was the one who was married, not him. Caroline had even visited him at home more than once, although she'd been somewhat put out by his refusal to fuck her in his own bed. Emma's scent still clung stubbornly to his sheets, her presence imprinted right into the silk. He'd slept in the other bedroom to keep it off him, unwilling to let go of even that tiny little piece of her.

"Do you believe in sin, Mr. Scarlet?"

The music continued to thump under their feet like the beating of a guilty heart while he stared Scarlet down, watching his face carefully. The man's eyes were normally very expressive, large and open with every thought in his head passing behind them. Windows to the soul, indeed. At the question they went hooded, his head jerking back a fraction and his fingers twitching at his sides. Will Scarlet knew about Caroline Spencer, knew Killian had been with her earlier at the Prince Hotel. Will Scarlet knew about Emma, even if he had no idea what she really was.

He knew far too much for his own good.

"Sin?" Scarlet repeated, sliding his twitching hands into his pockets and rocking back on his heels.

"Yes, sin. You know...sloth...wrath...lust...greed."

He'd felt it from Scarlet, felt the heat of his lust when he looked at Lacey or Ana up on stage, felt the simmering anger hidden behind the blank poker face when he purposefully needled the man, felt the greed that wrapped around his heart and soul with grasping fingers and whispered in his ear that he deserved more.

"Yeah," Scarlet said at last, with a cocky defiance that few dared show him, "You know what, Mr. Jones? I do."

Killian smiled, but it was far from pleasant, "Do you pray for forgiveness from your sins?"

"Do you?" Scarlet shot back.

He clapped a hand on Scarlet's shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze that made the other man's eyes water and his face twist in a grimace. Killian leaned forward and spoke directly into Scarlet's ear, "I pray for one thing and one thing only, and it isn't forgiveness. I know I'm too far gone for that."

If Scarlet was secretly working for Rumpelstiltskin behind his back then it wouldn't be forgiveness he'd be praying for, it would be deliverance from the Hell he'd discover hidden underneath the world he thought he knew. But no angel would come swooping down to save him, Killian would make damn sure of that.

The club was full, drunk, nearly-naked bodies writhing like a pit of vipers everywhere he looked when he entered the main room. It reeked of the deadliest of sins, the teeming mass was indulging in them openly right under his watchful gaze. Gluttony in the form of endless bottles of champagne, the sloth of the soft-bellied men who sat on their asses and leered at the lithe dancers with lust glittering in their eyes. They were oblivious to the flames that licked unseen at their heels, the creeping darkness behind the pulsing lights. Killian moved in shadow, crossing the floor while the flashing strobes from the stage hit everywhere except where he stood.
"Shut it down."

Peter paused halfway out of his seat, shock crossing his face at the order, "Boss?"

"We're closing early. Kick everyone out within the next twenty minutes and tell the employees not to come in tomorrow, cancel all deliveries and call everyone on the schedule. The Jolly Roger is closed until further notice."

"But-"

At Killian's glare Peter shut his mouth and swallowed heavily, giving him a nod. He turned to the DJ booth and made a slashing movement across his throat, pushing through the throng and getting swallowed up almost at once. Killian glanced towards the bar and saw that the thief was working tonight, probably with a wad of pilfered bills stuffed into her low-cut bandage dress. She caught his eye and her face immediately flushed with guilt, liquor sloshing over her hand as she missed the shot glass in front of her.

*Non furtum facies*

*Thou shalt not steal.*

He didn't say a word, he just wrapped his hand around the bartender's elbow and pulled her through the kitchen and into the storage room. The music suddenly shut off, followed by faint exclamations of surprise from the dancers and customers as he threw open the door that led down into the basement.

"Mr. Jones, sir, listen, I can explain!"

It was clearly dawning on her that the jig was up, her heels scraped loudly on the stairs as she twisted and tried to pull free of his iron grip. Killian ignored her pleading, quickly punching in the code on the keypad with his free hand, one eight zero two. The door swung open and revealed the secret room where the imp was still locked up in a steel cell. He looked up with a grin as Killian pulled the cord to turn on the lightbulb.

*"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate,"* the imp intoned, sticking out his tongue. It split into two long forks that wiggled and waved obscenely and the bartender jumped almost a foot in the air, losing a shoe and falling back against the bars of the empty cell behind her.

"Shut up!" Killian ordered, rolling his eyes at the reference. *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*

"Oh, Corrupter, have you brought me a friend? Fi fi fo fum, I smell the blood of a sinner."

The imp giggled to himself while Killian pried her fingers from his sleeve and pushed her gently into the cell. She made a mewling noise in the back of her throat and he grasped her chin, tipping her head back so that she was looking right into his eyes.

"Stealing from me was not a good idea, Jacqueline."

Her face was ashen under the heavy makeup and she tried to shake her head, "I. I didn't, I swear!"

She was only compounding her own sin with the denial. Killian glanced down and saw the outline of something square under her dress, he tapped it with a finger and she paled even more.

"Try that again."
His suspicions had been correct, Jacqueline pulled out a damp wad of cash and handed it over with slumped shoulders while the imp hooted and hollered.

"What the fuck is that?" she cried, glancing at it over his shoulder. Killian thumbed through the money, counting it quickly before slipping it into his pocket. She had been getting bolder and bolder with her thefts, there wasn't anything under a fifty.

"What the fuck are you?"

He ran his own tongue over his teeth and lifted his head. Jacqueline had her arms wrapped tightly around herself, gooseflesh prickling over her bare skin. Killian smiled and watched her shiver even more.

"I am your employer, and you didn't read your contract closely enough before you signed it."

She opened her mouth, probably to scream, but he laid a finger over her lips before she could make a sound and whispered, "Shhh."

The effect was immediate as her pupils dilated wide and her hand crept to her throat. She stumbled back to the wall and slid down it, her legs folding under her as she stared up in mute horror. Killian stepped out of the cell and slid the door closed, locking her in. He didn't want her to scream herself hoarse even if the room was soundproofed, he would have need of her voice tomorrow.

"Say your prayers, Tweedledee."

He watched the imp snort with derision, the tattoos on his arms rippling and moving under the light. A snake uncoiled along his forearm and the gates of Hell swung open, the tiny sinners inside struggling to break free. Killian reached up and pulled the cord again, plunging the room into darkness. One more night and it would all be over.

Scarlet was waiting out front with the Escalade, sitting in the driver's seat with the engine running and his phone pressed to his ear. When Killian emerged from the Jolly Roger he quickly ended the call, his face turned away from the darkly tinted window. The leather seat creaked when Killian sat down in the back behind him, pulling out Emma's miniature from his inner jacket pocket. He flicked it open with his nail and stared down at the faded paint.

One more night….and he would have what he wanted. The Dark One...the Angel of Death...no one would stop him.

Killian lifted his head and met Scarlet's gaze in the rearview mirror. He slipped the portrait safely back into his pocket, over his heart.

"Drive."
Chapter 20

Something was about to go down.

Something big.

Something soon.

Will could sense it, the way he'd always been able to tell the exact moment when he had to ditch a boosted ride before the plates were broadcasted to every police cruiser in the city, or noticed Loss Prevention discreetly following him around in a store and watching to see if he was going to try to slip something under his jacket and walk out without paying. He was good at it, always getting out just before the shit was about to hit the proverbial fan, no matter how much his teenage buddies used to protest when he pulled over in the stolen Merc or Mustang they were joyriding in and ordered them to all get out and scatter. Three of them got busted for Grand Theft Auto one night when Will was busy on a snatch-and-grab job for Hood, one was lucky, he was barely sixteen and got tried as a juvenile, but the other two...they got handed felony sentences and three years in the state pen.

His phone had been vibrating in his pocket during the whole ride from the Jolly Roger to Jones's condo but he didn't dare answer, not with the way Jones was staring out the tinted window, as still as a statue save for the drumming of his fingers on the empty leather seat next to him. He hadn't said a word after his curt order of "drive" and he stayed completely silent while Will parked in the plum spot reserved in the underground garage for the penthouse, exiting the SUV before Will even had the keys out of the ignition and making a beeline towards the elevator. Will watched him in the rearview mirror, the brake lights casting a red glow over Jones's face as he walked behind the car. His head turned and their eyes met for a brief moment, the red reflection going even brighter in his pupils and Will blinked at the weirdly distorted image. He had looked almost…inhuman, for a split-second, all red eyes and lips that curled in a sneer against a mouth as dark as a black hole. But then it was gone, and Will blinked again and rubbed his finger nervously over the key fob, feeling the raised lines and edges of the tiny logo press against his palm like an anchor to reality.

It must have just been a trick of the light.

Jones would expect him to follow, Will knew. Up the elevator to the penthouse condo that looked like it belonged in a magazine, beyond anything he'd ever even imagined and the symbol of everything he could possibly want. But his old instincts were making him hesitate, even though he knew men like Killian Jones were practically bulletproof. They had fancy lawyers who could wiggle them through every loophole, not like his old mates and the shitty public defenders they'd been stuck with. He couldn't picture Jones getting perp-walked out of the building in cuffs or spending even one night in city lockup, the only metal that would get snapped around his wrists were Swiss watches in platinum or gold and he spent his nights away from home with gorgeous women in five-star hotels. Whatever was going down, he'd probably come out of it smelling like a rose.

Will, on the other hand, would not be nearly so lucky.

He had no illusions about the man he currently worked for, the blue-eyed bastard was as cold as Hood, probably even more so. Everyone else around him would be expendable, so long as his own Armani-clad ass stayed out of the fire. But he knew things about Killian Jones, knew about one weakness in particular that he was sure the man didn't want exposed.

Emma Swan.
If he walked away now, got on his motorcycle with a backpack and got the hell out of Dodge...Jones might be too preoccupied with whatever it was to worry about one missing lackey. But he still had Ana \textit{and} Lacey both firmly under his thumb and Will knew it would be too dangerous to try to contact either or both of them ever again if he left. Ana was a wet dream come to life, but classy too, the kind of girl who never even gave him the time of day back in high school...and Lacey, she was exactly the kind of girl he used to mess around with when he was seventeen, getting handjobs in the backseat of cars after ditching class and smoking cigarettes together after, and he didn't want to let either of them go and fuck, he was so, so \textit{screwed}.

He could feel Jones's gaze flick over to him while they waited for the elevator but he stared straight ahead, not even pausing to let the boss enter first when the doors finally opened. They rode up in silence and it wasn't until they were inside the condo that Jones finally spoke.

"An old associate of mine will be coming to town tomorrow. Call him a competitor of sorts, someone who I suspect has been sticking his unwanted nose into my business and sniffing around."

Whatever Will had been expecting it wasn't that, and he felt himself frown, "Oh?"

The other man was behind him in the dark living room, his voice coming from over Will's left shoulder.

"I am a \textit{very} private man, Scarlet, I do not tolerate any leaks in my organization. In this case loose lips don't just sink ships, anyone who even tries to sell me out will live to regret it. Are we clear on that?"

The veiled accusation was clear and Will swallowed hard, "Crystal. Sir."

"Good."

When Jones disappeared upstairs Will sat down heavily on the sofa and took a few deep breaths. Great, just great, his absolutely terrifying boss who could probably have him killed with one phone call thought he was a snitch, Hood was riding his ass about the job he'd promised to do and having two beautiful women fight over him was nowhere near as much fun as he'd thought it would be. Mostly he just felt guilty, all the time, guilty for the things he'd done for Jones, guilty for going back to Hood after he'd finally got away from that life, guilty for trying to make Ana jealous with Lacey and then realizing he had feelings for both of them. A nice heaping dose of Catholic guilt, as his Gran used to say.

He needed air and he chanced going out onto the terrace, sending out a silent prayer of thanks when the door opened without a sound. Even though he was in the middle of downtown it was fairly quiet, he was too high up for the traffic below to be more than a muffled hum in the background. The view was spectacular, the city laid out beneath him like he was king of the castle, but it all belonged to Jones, not to him. He had fucking everything and Will would bet a million bucks that \textit{he} never felt the tiniest bit of guilt for any of it, the wads of cash, the cars, the women who practically fell over themselves to suck his dick. He was screwing both his own girlfriend and the wife of the man who'd probably be their next mayor, maybe even a senator or the governor too one day. Another rich asshole who'd had everything handed to him, while Will had spent almost his whole life fighting for scraps.

His phone went off again and he snatched it from his pocket, almost dropping it over the balcony in the process and swearing to himself as he looked at the call display, expecting to see Hood's number. He'd had to cut their conversation short earlier when Jones had come out of the club sooner than Will expected, much to Hood's obvious annoyance. But "LACEY" was flashing on the screen instead, along with a picture he'd snapped of her without her noticing. It wasn't like she was naked or
anything, he wasn't that kind of guy with a camera roll full of nudes, but he still felt a little guilty for doing it.

"WILL! Finally, I've been calling and calling, trying to get a hold of you. What the fuck is going on?"

"Damned if I know," he replied, scrubbing a hand over his face, "Jones closed down the Jolly Roger until further notice."

"I know, but that's not all he did. Will, did you hear about Jack?"

It took him a moment to place the name, thinking she was talking about a guy at first. But then he remembered the bartender, the one who overcharged him for a shot when he'd first come to the Jolly Roger at Jones's invitation. He'd caught it at once, he knew that scam from clueless idiots who wandered into the Outlaw and got fleeced and her apology had only been half-hearted when she gave him back the correct change, though she'd quickly changed her tune when she realized he'd been invited to the club by the boss himself and comped his next drink.

"What about her?" he asked, confused.

"Mr. Jones dragged her into that storeroom that leads down into the basement and she didn't come back out! I asked around, no one saw her leave before Peter kicked us all out, he didn't even let me go back into the dressing room to get my other bag, the dick, I had to wait for a cab for almost an hour in fucking five-inch heels."

He felt himself frown, "The basement?"

That locked door flashed in his mind, the keypad entry taunting him. Without the code, there was no way in. He was sure Jones was hiding something down there, and now it looked like he was hiding someone. Wasn't that considered kidnapping? What could Jack have possibly done?

"Anyone who even tries to sell me out will live to regret it."

"You know something. Will, what is it? Tell me, please."

Lacey was fun and he liked her, liked her a lot, actually, but as silence stretched between them he realized he didn't trust her. Killian Jones was searching for a leak and he clearly suspected Will and probably Jack as well, he couldn't think of another reason why he'd zeroed in on her specifically out of all his employees. Maybe he was going to go back to the Jolly Roger now that it was empty and interrogate her...but what if she wasn't the one who had sold him out?

He knew next to nothing about Lacey, he didn't even know where she lived. She always wanted to come over to his place and brushed him off when he asked about her apartment, listened attentively while he bitched about Jones, usually naked and with her mouth wrapped around his dick. What if her interest in him had all been an act? He hadn't even questioned it, too distracted by making Ana jealous the way he was of all the men who flocked around her in the club by slipping off into the storerooms or the stairwells with Lacey. Once she even talked him into bringing her into Jones's office for a quickie on the couch when he was out, one place that was absolutely off-limits to the dancers without a direct invitation. Had she been playing him the whole time?

"Will?"

Her voice was soft, encouraging, and damn if he didn't want to spill his guts and tell her everything despite his sudden suspicion, tell her about Katie, underage and clearly scared shitless, tell her about Mark Preston coughing up blood in the parking lot the night the redhead dancer had
OD'd - Will wasn't stupid, he'd seen the needle and untied the tourniquet from her arm himself - tell her about Albert Spencer's cheating wife and the weirdo drug dealer named Jefferson out in suburbia hell, tell her about the room down in the basement with the lock he couldn't pick where Jack had been taken and about Emma Swan, a woman who claimed to know Killian Jones better than anyone and was the only one who he seemed to care about in return.

But that same instinct that had always told him when the joyride was over made him hesitate, the instinct that had saved his ass more times than he could count and almost without thinking his thumb moved to hover over the red button.

"Lacey, I have to go."

"No, wait-"

Her protest was cut off when he ended the call, hearing nothing but the whistle of the wind sweeping across the terrace. When the phone lit up again with her picture, bent over a pool table with cue in hand from that dive bar they had gone to, he immediately hit the decline button.

Ana didn't answer when he tried to call her, served him right, Will knew, so he sent her a text instead, "Lie low for a couple of days, OK? Don't go back to the club until you hear from me, not Peter, not anyone else, I don't think it's safe. Just trust me on this, please."

There was no response, but he could see the messages were delivered, at least. He didn't know if Ana would follow his instructions, but he hoped that he hadn't fucked things up between them so badly that she'd disregard them out of spite.

"I'm sorry."

He stared at the screen and hit send, it wasn't a diamond tennis bracelet or designer shoes, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

Another incoming call popped up but this one had no picture attached, just a name and Will felt his posture change as his hips pushed forward and his thumb sought out a belt loop to casually hook through. The cocky swagger of his old gang persona washed over him and he answered with a single word, "Hood."

Robin Locksley snorted on the other end, "Knave. So kind of you to spare me a few moments of your precious time. You've got some fucking balls on you, you little shit, I'll give you that. But now's the time to put them to the test. No more delays, we're hitting the warehouse tomorrow night. Are you in or are you out?"

Will stared down at the city below, a blur of colour and light against the darkness. Jones had said that this old associate of his was coming to town tomorrow and if he tried to duck out then there's no way that wouldn't raise suspicion, but if the situation got out of control then he might need the cash from Hood's job to get himself and Ana out of town and fast. Men like Jones didn't go down, except to those who were even more powerful, and guys like Will were always the ones who got caught in the crossfire. He'd figure out a way to make it work.

"I'm in."

"Good. I'll text you the meeting point. Don't be late or that smart mouth will be missing a few teeth."

Locksley hung up on him and Will felt his tattoo itch again under his shirt, reaching back to scratch at the permanent reminder of the old life even as his new one seemed to be crashing down around his ears. Jones was nowhere to be seen when he went back inside and he hadn't given Will any orders,
so he was stuck cooling his heels without anything to do except imagine worst case scenarios for God knew how long.

The living room was larger than Will's entire apartment and he wandered about it aimlessly while he loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar, he might as well be comfortable while he waited for his boss to come back and possibly murder him. The liquor bottles behind the bar beckoned and he wanted a drink more than the alcoholics in the park who begged for quarters and drank the cheapest, nastiest shit out of sheer desperation. Jones liked scotch the most, but he also drank other stuff too and the bar was as well-stocked as the Jolly Roger, with golden tequila, crystal-clear vodka and dark rum all on display, all brands that had to be special-ordered from glossy catalogues and certainly not sold in corner markets with bars on the windows and baseball bats behind the counter. Will didn't dare touch a drop of it, he was a thief but he wasn't that stupid. He would have loved breaking into a place like this when he was fifteen or sixteen though and seeing how the other half lived. Everything just dripped money, the furniture, the state of the art TV and sound system, the art. There wasn't a lot of it, but the boss had a few paintings and sculptures and things scattered around the condo. Will knew exactly two things about art, jack and shit, but at least it wasn't that modern crap that looked like a three year old had done it and yet sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars. There was a framed map of the Caribbean, yellowed and faded, clearly very old. Some of the names written over the islands were the same as they were today, Cuba, Jamaica, and some he had never heard of before, Saint-Domingue, the Danish West Indies, all written in faded brown letters that were spidery and difficult to read. Down the wall a few feet away hung a painting of a ship, an old-timey one with tall sails. It was well done, or, at least it was to his uncultured eyes, but if Killian Jones owned it then it had to be worth some serious coin. Waves crashed against the hull and the wind filled the sails under an indigo sky that was heavy with clouds. All the tiny little details must have taken hours upon hours to paint, the folds in the sails, the way the ropes looked wet from the spray in the air. There was a signature in the corner that he couldn't make out, the letters were too smudged, but the date underneath was clear, 1802. It obviously wasn't a reproduction, Will had seen enough fake handbags and knockoff sneakers in his life to have a pretty good idea of what was real and what wasn't.

Or at least, he used to.

"Scarlet."

Will nearly jumped right out of his skin, whirling around to see Jones standing right behind him. He had no idea how he hadn't heard him come back down the stairs, he really needed to get a grip on himself. The long nights at the Jolly Roger plus his stakeouts down at the warehouse to case the security and find a way in for Hood plus everything with Ana and Lacey were clearly taking a toll on him. He was drinking too much and not sleeping enough and he was seeing things that weren't there.

Jones's gaze drifted over his shoulder for a moment and he got a strange look on his face before his eyes snapped back to Will's.

"A sudden interest in art, I take it?"

The sarcasm was so thick Will could probably go ice skating on it and he kept his mouth shut, clearly, it was a rhetorical question.

"I've got a job for you. Take the Escalade and go back to the Prince Hotel. Talk to every last chambermaid and bellboy you can find and see if any of them saw this man there."

Will's vision was suddenly filled with a photograph that seemed to come from nowhere and he reached up automatically to take it, squinting at the image.
"You don't have anything better?"

As soon as the words left his mouth he cringed, looking up nervously at Jones over the top of the photo. But the boss actually looked amused for a moment, the dark brows raising and the faintest hint of a smile at the edge of his lips.

"Anything better?" he repeated, "You have no idea what it took to get this and you're asking if I have anything better? It's probably the only fucking photograph of him in existence, he's not exactly what you'd call the selfie type."

Will squinted harder at the picture, taking in the shoulder-length hair and the cane held in one of the man's hands, even though he didn't look that old. His gran had always refused to use her own cane, preferring to hold on to the edges of furniture and Will's arm to steady herself, slippered feet shuffling slowly and painfully across the worn carpet of their old apartment. The man in the picture was walking down a street, clearly unaware that he was being photographed. His face was completely out of focus, which was weird, other details were crisp and clear. Will could even read the license plate on a car parked next to the curb, a long string of letters and numbers that wouldn't be found on any plate in the US.

"What's his name?" Will asked, feeling a chill down his spine the more he looked at the man and tried to read his features.

If anything Jones looked even more amused by his second question even though Will had no idea why. If he was supposed to go track this guy down then he needed to know who the hell it was he was looking for.

"He's known by many names," Jones said, turning smoothly on his heel and making for the bar. He poured himself a drink, Will noted that he reached for one of the bottles of rum this time and not the scotch.

"A lot of aliases, huh?"

"Something like that."

The longer he looked at the picture the more Will wanted to look away but his eyes seemed to be glued to it. There was something familiar about the man and he racked his brain trying to think if he had ever seen him before.

"He won't be using his real name and I've no idea what moniker he's adopted now."

Jones threw back more rum like it was water and dipped into his pants pocket. He came up with a wad of rubber-banded bills that he threw at Will like a ninja throwing star, almost hitting him in the chest.

"Pay whatever it takes to get the info but be discreet about it, Scarlet. There's probably reporters all over the hotel by now sniffing around but it can't be helped, I need to know if he was there."

Reporters? Will blinked, that sense of impending doom tingling like pins and needles. Something was going down, that was for damn sure. A quick flick of his thumb through the bills showed him that the wad was full of fifties and hundreds, he was probably holding close to three grand.

"Take the money and run."

It was as if a voice had spoken right in his ear. He was a thief, had been since he'd first started shoplifting at the age of ten. He could just pocket the cash and Jones would never know.
"Who is he?"

Will didn’t even know why he was still talking, his big mouth had gotten his ass kicked plenty of times back in high school and he would have thought he'd learned when to shut up by now. The boss had his sleeves rolled to his elbows, jacket gone, looking the most...desperate, Will had ever seen him. It was a strange realization, he'd always seemed to have the upper hand with everyone, the cops he ordered around as if they were his own private security guards, the high rollers who suddenly couldn't make eye contact and acted like kids in the principal's office when Jones caught them breaking the rules in the club. Will had watched grown men actually cry and beg at his feet, men who were fucking CEOs and lawyers and even famous actors and athletes and he never once broke so much as a sweat. But now his shoulders were practically hunched to his ears and his hair fell messily over his forehead as he rolled the drink around in his hands and stared down into the glass.

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to," he said after a moment, and while the warning was clear, there was no bite to the words this time.

It reminded Will of that day at the church when he’d run into Emma Swan after Mass, when he'd run his mouth at her like a dumbass and called her Jones's bit on the side.

"Do you want to know? Ask yourself that question, do you really want to know everything about Killian Jones?"

The man in the picture was the old associate Jones had mentioned, that was obvious. But there was something more going on here than just an ordinary turf war. He'd been through those before with Hood in the old days, and this just felt different. Will swallowed, holding the photo carefully by the edges. Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to.

"What does he want?"

The boss looked up, backlit against the lights behind him from the bar that illuminated the rows of liquor bottles, each one something rare and expensive. His face was a shadow, eyes glassy pools that on anyone else Will would have taken as a sign that he was getting drunk.

"That's the key, isn't it? What do people want. What drives them, what motivates them deep down inside. You came to work for me because you wanted more than the hand you were dealt in life and you were willing to do whatever it took to get it, isn't that right, Will Scarlet? Some people play by the rules and others cheat, cheat on their wives, their husbands, on their taxes."

Jones's voice was low, taking on a hint of that dangerous edge again and Will flinched at the reminder of all the things he had done, the lying, the stealing, always trying to game the system and get ahead. The cars he couldn't afford, the cash he didn't earn, always wanting more.

"What he wants doesn't matter, the only thing that matters is what I want. Because there is nothing I won't do to get what I want. Rules don't matter, not in this game. Not to me. I don't just know where you live, remember? Now get me what I need."

With that clear dismissal, he set the glass down on the bar and went out onto the balcony, the wind lifting his hair as he tilted his head back and stared up at the stars. Will slipped the wad of cash into his pocket and fumbled for the keys, feeling no pleasure at being able to drive the Escalade on his own without the boss watching his every movement over his shoulder. He should have bailed a long time ago but now he was in too deep.

What Killian Jones wanted, Killian Jones got. Will could only hope now that getting him that would
be enough to save his own neck.

_Tortola - British Virgin Islands, 1802_

The building itself was rather nondescript - a somewhat slapdash assembly of half-brick, half-timber, already heavily weathered from the salt air and with a tarnished brass plaque by the door that was engraved "JONES SHIPPING LTD" in careless, uneven letters. Emma ran her gloved fingertip over the name and traced the grooves before squaring her shoulders and pushing the door open. A little bell hung above the lintel jangled, announcing her arrival as she stepped over the threshold and left the dusty street behind. The man behind the counter looked up at the noise and she saw his eyes narrow in appraisal as he quickly looked her up and down. She had a lace shawl draped modestly over her shoulders and carried a small parasol to shade her face from the strong Caribbean sun, as every respectable European woman on the island did. Her face was unpainted and she wore no jewellery, no pearl earbobs or abalone bracelets like the ones sold in the marketplace where the planters' wives and daughters and the naval officers on leave all came to shop for exotic tropical fruits, fresh palm oil and colourful woven textiles.

Among other goods that were offered up for sale.

The man was rather stout, with a round bearded face beneath a red knit cap. Tortola had a more temperate climate and was not as hot as some of the other islands claimed in the names of foreign kings, Spanish, French and Dutch alike were all commonly spoken in the port towns alongside English and the patios of the native inhabitants and the Africans who worked the fields and harvested the new crops of sugarcane and plantains. But since it was the British flag that flew above the governor's whitewashed estate it was no surprise to hear an accent that wouldn't have been out of place in London's Southwark when he jerked his chin and asked, "Can I help you, Mistress?" while puffing out his chest under the rough woolen jacket he wore.

Evidently his perusal of her had been enough for him to decide that she might have legitimate business to discuss, even though a woman without an escort of any kind, no husband or servant to accompany her, was somewhat of a curiosity among the warehouses and offices that lined the road rising above the island's main harbour.

"I'm here to see the captain. I was told he conducts business at this office from noon to six every other Tuesday and therefore might be available?"

The wiry eyebrows rose almost to the red cap and his lips thinned as he took another glance at her attire, clearly taking in the sober cut and colour of her dress.

"A fair warning, Mistress, if you're here in an attempt to spread the Gospel to the cap'n alongside the godless heathens who sacrifice chickens to their idols and the dockside whores who only worship coin and don't get on their knees to pray, he's not going to be very receptive to your message."

Emma hid her amusement, "No, I suppose not."

Many pious men and women had made the perilous ocean crossing to the New World, hauling trunks full of treatises and pamphlets and hymnals with them to found missions and churches in His name. They sought to convert and baptize new faithful along the roads being carved from the virgin ground and in the towns that sprung up as quickly as mushrooms around each harbour and trade route as cargo was transported from island to island. Emma had encountered several of them already, in lieu of a pulpit they would preach in the market square to sailors and stevedores, whores and merchants, whoever was willing to listen.
But the one she had come to see was not likely to be found among even the most unorthodox of congregations.

"Mr. Smee, show the lady in and tell anyone else who inquires that I am indisposed for the rest of the afternoon."

His voice called from behind a narrow door that was standing slightly ajar at the far end of the room and Emma watched as the man jumped into the air like he'd been jabbed by a hot poker at the sound of it. His face flushed the same colour red as his cap and he scurried around the counter, gesturing madly for her to follow him. Emma smoothed out a fold in her skirt and ignored the strange flutter in her chest, taking a moment to calm her nerves before falling in step behind the man and entering what was clearly the inner sanctum to be greeted for the first time by Captain Killian Jones.

The fashionable chevalier in Paris with his tailored breeches and polished riding boots was gone, and in his place was a figure clad in supple leather trousers that rippled and flexed over his thighs when he stood at her entrance. Instead of sumptuous velvets and lace cuffs and collar, he wore a scarlet waistcoat over a high-collared shirt that was open at the throat and revealed a dusting of dark hair on his chest and the glint of a silver necklace. He was as far removed from the courts of Europe as was possible in his rakish attire but the face was the same and the demon smiled, hooking a thumb in his thick belt and rocking back on his heels.

"Well," he said, in a lazy drawl that was nothing like formal, elegant French and yet it felt like the whisper of silk against her skin, "It seems the tides have decided to turn in my favour."

The room they were standing in clearly functioned as an office, with a large carved desk spread thick with papers and a shelf full of fat, leather-bound ledgers. Emma had heard that he had established himself in the colony as his base of operations, owner of a small fleet of ships that transported both cargo and passengers back and forth. There were fortunes to be made in spice and sugar and his was one of many such ventures that plied the waters around the patchwork group of new nations with vessels in every possible configuration of size and shape.

Hello, Captain Jones. Or should I say...Captain Hook?"

She heard a sharp intake of breath from the man Killian had called Smee, still standing in the open door and from the corner of her eye she saw him reach for the the rawhide sheath hanging from his belt. But before he could pull the knife Killian held up a hand to stop him.

"Ah. So you have heard of me?"

Captain K. Jones was a prosperous merchant sailor who didn't deal in contraband and whose papers were always in order on every one of his ships. Captain Hook was a notorious smuggler, a pirate who served no king and had a price on his head in ports from South America all the way to Canada in the north, though he was known to mainly ply his illegal trade on the turquoise blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. There were wild rumours about him, that he had a hook for a hand and any rival who challenged him quickly found their way to the bottom of the ocean, but from what Emma could tell there were very few who knew that the two men were one and the same and no one knew the truth - that he wasn't a man at all.

Well, except for her, she supposed, just as he knew her own secrets more deeper than any confessor.

*Bless me Father, for I have sinned.*

"Leave us."
It was directed at Smee and was clearly an order, a command from one who was used to being obeyed. Emma saw him glance between them with obvious speculation and then he shuffled out without a word, pulling the door shut behind him as he went. They were alone, and not, the memory of Paris and a kiss that she had relived more times than she'd admit was like another presence in the room with them, unseen but clearly felt in the weight of the demon's sideways gaze even as he went to a glass-fronted painted cabinet that would not be out of place in a French drawing room and retrieved a bottle that certainly would, a squat jug that was a cloudy green in colour and bore no label, a far cry from the fine brandy and champagne served at Versailles. But the Bourbons were gone, their dynasty now nothing but a memory that would fade into history within the next generation.

Two mismatched glasses were set on the desk and Killian deftly uncorked the bottle with a flick of his thumb, the silver ring he wore on it a wide band that reached almost to his knuckle. He poured out the drinks, the liquor flowing like liquid amber and a rich smell that was both spicy and sweet filling the small room. He lifted both glasses and held one out to her, she took it without letting their fingers touch even though she still wore her gloves and he clinked his own tumblr gently against it.

"Salve, beata."

The pitch of his voice was low, intimate and the liquor seemed to coat her throat and curled like a flame in her belly, warming her from the inside with a taste that was both dark with hints of smoky char and yet sweet at the same time, a touch of vanilla and a honeyed note that matched the golden colour swirling slowly around in the glass.

"The Romans built an empire on salt, roads were built solely to transport it and they even paid their soldiers with it in lieu of coin. Here they do the same with sugar, I could pay my crews in barrels of this rum and they'd take it as easily as gold. The real treasure of the New World, so to speak."

Killian moved closer, his lips damp with the drink as he reached out to brush a curl that had escaped her hairpins back over her shoulder. She remembered the feel of his hand in her hair and the taste of his lips, darker than than the spirit when pressed to hers. The heat of him was stronger than anything produced by the rum and promised to be even more potent, if she moved to work the little jet buttons of his scarlet waistcoat and let her lace shawl drop to the floor, baring them both and discarding the trappings of what they pretended to be. She knew more than just the names he used in the ports and towns of these kingdoms without kings, she knew what really lay beneath the handsome face and the talk of empires of sugar and salt. They'd had a similar conversation once in the shadows of a palace that had been the showpiece of an empire and now stood empty and ransacked, a mockery of a monument to a fallen regime. Rome fell, Versailles fell.

An angel could fall...an angel did, once.

Which was exactly why she couldn't give in to the urge to touch the flame that flickered and beckoned, even though she knew it wouldn't burn. At least, not at first.

The demon wrapped the curl around his index finger for a moment, over the square-cut ruby on another ring before tucking it back behind her ear and letting his touch linger on the base of her skull as softly as if he was handling something delicate and precious before he pulled back and went to pour more rum in his glass. He held the bottle high and it came out in an unnaturally perfect arc that spoke of his true nature, catching the sunlight through the somewhat dusty window and shimmering as it rippled and flowed. It was a strangely beautiful sight, beautiful like the sweep of his dark lashes against his cheeks when he blinked and the sea-blue eyes that had first locked with hers three centuries and an ocean away in Rome.

More dangerous thoughts, so she looked at the tumbler in her hand and reminded herself of why she
had come to him.

"It's not just built on sugar, you know."

The market in the centre of the island's small capital sold all manner of goods, green vegetables plucked fresh from the dirt and tiny pink pearls harvested from the shallows.

And men.

And women.

And children.

His gaze went sharper than any blade at her reminder and he nodded, taking a deep swallow of the liquor that was practically liquid gold.

"I know," he said, simply. She'd heard many sordid tales of him in his guise as Hook, but in none of them was he a slaver, trading in the cargo of human souls.

Emma sighed, "Captain-"

"We're alone now, angel," Killian interrupted, "Mr. Smee has wisely chosen to vacate the premises entirely and there's no need to be so formal, though should he pluck up the courage to ask I will tell him that you are the Lady Swan, and he'll make his own assumptions about the exact nature of our obvious prior acquaintance, nearly all of which will be wrong."

He set his tumbler down on the desk and snapped his fingers over it. The rum inside ignited, gold turning to red as the flames licked the inside of the glass and the smell of burnt sugar rose, mixed with something else.

*Let me be damned to the rest of the world, Emma, but I am Killian to you.*

He could be that, at least.

"Killian."

There was a map on the desk of the Caribbean Sea, weighed down at the curling edges with a large pink seashell among various other items. Islands ringed the creamy paper like diamonds on a necklace, and, like jewels, some were more valuable than others. She found a name on the map, the letters dark and slanting against a pale blue sea. Like Killian's eyelashes, dark and slanting against the sea blue of his eyes.

"This is not a social call, is it, Emma?"

Those eyes saw too much, the weakness in a man's soul and her own hesitation in Paris, an ocean away but a memory held between them and only them, the brush of lips as the pink and gold sunrise rose above the gabled rooftops and wrought-iron railings. The words were quiet, resigned, he'd seen right through her and she felt a pang of regret.

"No, it's not," she agreed.

"Do you wish it could be?"

It was whispered right into the shell of her ear, he'd moved in the blink of an eye and she could feel him right behind her. So close, but not touching, his presence seemed to wrap around her like the shawl wrapped around her shoulders. A shadow against the sun, she could see his silhouette on the
wall, covering hers. Killian lifted his left hand and it wasn't a hand, it curved like a hook as he traced along the line of her neck. The rumours about him were not just tales, spun by superstitious sailors with tongues loosened by too much drink. A devil of the sea with a hook for a hand, she watched his shadow move with inhuman grace and felt a pull deep inside, a tug like she was caught up in the undertow that rippled unseen under the sapphire waves.

*Give in.*

*Let go.*

*Drown.*

When Emma turned there was no hook, of course, just long, ringed fingers and an unblinking stare that she met head on. His gaze softened, eyes smudged with kohl to protect against the glare of the sun off the water. But he still looked straight into the light.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"A ship…," she answered, darting her gaze down to the map again and looking back up, "and safe passage."

The corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement, "Safe passage? Did you forget again that you have wings, angel? Because I haven't."

She ignored the veiled reminder, "Can you help me, Killian?"

"I have two vessels in port at the moment and could perhaps spare one on this mysterious journey. But I need to know the destination."

His eyes narrowed when she hesitated, glancing over his shoulder and out the window. The sea in the distance was calm, bright as any jewel and as dangerous as he was, full of hidden threats both natural and not. Finally she answered, "Port-au-Prince."

"Saint-Domingue?"

Killian pronounced it the French way, lilting and slightly slurred, even as his face creased with growing suspicion. She said nothing, watching as his mind worked behind the handsome visage.

"Emma," he exhaled at last, closing his eyes and huffing out a breath, "Do you have any idea of how dangerous it is to even attempt such a crossing? I could take you to beaches where the sand is as pink as your lips and the waters are warm as a bath, hidden isles not to be found on any map where flowers grow so thick they're like carpets underfoot and the air is filled with their sweet perfume, and you want to go to Saint-Domingue?"

"I need to go. Killian, please."

They stared at each other, so close that they were nearly touching. He gave a slow, clipped nod.

"As you wish. But it will take a few days to prepare a ship for the voyage."

She laid a hand on his sleeve, "Thank you."

He lifted it in his, stroking his thumb under the edge of her glove where her pulse fluttered against the delicate skin.

"Jones?" she queried, noting the flash of something behind his eyes.
"It was as good a name as any," he said with a one-shouldered shrug. But his jaw pulled tight for a moment and she knew there was more to it than that. Emma decided not to press, not when he hadn't pressed her on why she needed passage to Saint-Domingue.

"He thought I had come here to minister to you, infernal one. Mr. Smee, that is."

A laugh escaped him at that, the mood lightening even as the sun was just beginning to set outside.

"Aren't you, blessed one?" Killian asked with a grin, "Well then, Lady Swan. Let us dine together tonight, and you may minister to me in whichever manner you see fit."

He pressed his heels together and bent over her hand, kissing the glove like a gentleman.

Lady Swan.

She liked that.
The white sails rose high against a cloudless sky, rippling loud as thunder and snapping taut in the wind. The sea breeze raked through his hair like a lover's eager caress while he stood at the helm, watching the unending line of the horizon in the distance and holding their course towards the isle that bore the French colony of Saint-Domingue. The island itself was not yet visible to the naked eye, not even to Killian's gaze, far keener than that of any of the mortal sailors who worked the lines, pumped the bilges and swabbed the deck under his command. They were a rough crew, made up of deserters and thieves and degenerates, a hard-drinking, gambling, whoring group of men who were all guilty right down to the marrow of their bones of a multitude of sins. But they all feared Captain Hook, known in every port from the northern reaches of the Carolina coast down to Rio de Janeiro for his ruthless methods and black heart, a heart - that it was whispered quietly below decks over one too many cups of grog - was not human.

That same dark heart beat a bit faster in his chest with the rise and fall of the ship on the waves, the narrow prow cutting easily through the white swells like a hot knife through butter. With nothing but the sea and the sky surrounding him on all sides it was the closest a demon like him could get to flying, with the whistle of the wind in his ears and the warmth of the sun on his face. If he closed his eyes he could barely feel the planks under his feet or the smooth wood under his hands for a brief moment that seemed to last for an eternity. His initial foray into the Caribbean sea trade had started as nothing more than a whim, an opportunity to invest some capital, add to his considerable fortune and he found the tropical weather to be much more to his taste than the chill of the drab and damp European winters. But Killian had found to his surprise that he genuinely enjoyed sailing for its own sake as well. There was a subtle art to it, in the rise and fall of the sails to make the most of the breeze, in the turn of the hull into ancient currents that led right to the four corners of the globe. North, south, east, or west, under the crimson flag of piracy it was all just pure freedom. The chains that bound him were not the shackles worn by the mortal souls helplessly trapped in the most inhuman of bondage practiced in the whole of history, his irons went unseen by all by him. He felt the weight of them nonetheless, and the burn of the invisible brand that marked him for what he was. Forever damned, with no hope of salvation in this world or the next, his master's leash was long but the collar could not be pried from his neck.

Yet out on the open sea, with the salt in his throat and the spray on his skin, he forgot all of that for a little while.

A flash of gold caught his eye and he looked down to the foredeck, where the angel stood with her back to him. A crewman carefully inched past her, a bear of a man with hands roughly the size of ham hocks and heavily tattooed forearms that were ropy and corded with muscle. He spent as much time in gaol as he did at sea thanks to a temper that could be provoked with nothing more than a curious look, but when Emma flicked her divine gaze to him he merely reached up and lifted his hat to her as if she were a noblewoman come to survey her domain before scurrying away with the back of his neck flushed as red as a whore's rouge. Speculation about the mysterious Lady Swan and her purpose on the ship was rife among the crew, as the single passenger on a voyage where they were carrying no cargo, no smuggled casks of spirits or undocumented silks to be found in the empty hold. It was clear that the haste in which they had departed Tortola was all because of her, the men recalled from the brothels and the gaming dens on his order to ready the ship for the journey with no expense spared in the process. Their curiosity went unsatisfied, Killian was not in the habit of confiding in his crew and none of them dared to ask too many questions of the scourge of the seas, lest his ira, his dark wrath turn upon them, and the wrath of a demon was far more terrifying than the fiercest storm.
Emma had boarded the ship very late at night, emerging through the thick fog that had rolled in over the harbour with the hood of her dove-grey cloak covering her hair and her gloved hand reaching easily for his when he held it out to assist her in stepping from the gangplank to the deck. Mr. Smee had already drunkenly spread the tale of the captain's latest presumed conquest to the crew as Killian knew he would and there was some knowing looks and furtive glances exchanged among them, along with the unmistakeable flare of rising lust in the air underneath the brine of the sea. Luxuria, a commodity in the ports as much as salt beef and ale, where men vastly outnumbered the women and the pleasure houses did as brisk a business as any of the more respectable merchants along the wharves. He gave a warning glare with just the barest flash of red in his eyes that made them all back off, his hand curled possessively around Emma's elbow. It was more for show than anything, she was more powerful than the lot of them put together and then some, but the crew only saw her as a woman with the tantalizing curves of breast and hip hinted at under her close-fitting gown. His little display was enough to let them know without words that she was the captain's honoured guest and was not available to slake their lust during the long nights that lay ahead on the dark ocean. The ache in their loins would go unceased by feminine companionship, they would have to make due with the relief found by their own hands or with buggering each other until they made port again and they all slunk dejectedly away from Emma like rats from the light.

She had her own cabin for the journey, second best on the ship after his own. It was small, but he'd had it scrubbed clean for her arrival and adorned with a large bunch of lilies that he'd impulsively bought in the marketplace earlier that day. Killian had first been drawn to the goldsmith's wares, examining necklaces and bracelets set with Brazilian emeralds and shimmering opals and other precious gems. But he remembered how the pearl earrings he'd tried to tempt her with in France had been rejected and didn't think she'd be willing to accept any jewellery from a demon's hands. Greed, avaritia, was clearly not the way to win over an angel. The flowers had been sold by a child in bare feet and a ragged calico dress, her thin arms dirty and scratched. Children typically shied away from him, even the boldest young pickpocket didn't dare to attempt to lift his purse, but the girl with tangled hair veiling her eyes and hollow cheeks had plucked at his sleeve and stared right into his startled face without flinching away. An innocent young soul, bearing the floral symbol of the Holy Virgin herself in her arms. Lilies of the field were far from diamonds or pearls, but those hadn't worked. Perhaps a more modest gift would succeed instead.

The child snatched the coin from his palm almost quicker than even he could blink and thrust the whole bunch at him before darting back into the crowd and disappearing from his view. He'd only intended to buy one, but he shrugged and handed them to his servant to carry back to the ship. No sense in letting them wither away shut up in the darkness of his own cabin and Emma had noticed them at once when he'd escorted her to what were usually the purser's quarters. The bed was made up with fresh linen and the floor was swept clean, while the flowers threatened to spill out of a large silver cup stamped with with his own serpentine monogram and worth more than a month's wages to a common sailor.

"To browse in the garden and to gather the lilies."

Killian immediately recognized the bit of Scripture the angel quoted softly to herself in the small room, completely unconcerned by the presence of a demon nearby and touching a petal with one finger before turning to face him with a smile.

"Gratias tibi ago, Captain."

For some reason he felt a twinge at the words of thanks, strangely bashful at her acknowledgement of his humble offering.

"They're just flowers, milady."
Emma had given him a speculative look and pushed back her hood, revealing the golden halo of her hair and making the breath catch in his throat.

"Not just for the flowers."

They'd been at sea for three days and two nights and still had not spoken of the true purpose of the journey to Saint-Domingue. So many of the islands in the Caribbean Sea were named for saints, for the glory of martyrs long dead while the gravest sin of all flourished like the lilies under the harsh yellow sun. The beauty of the lush vegetation and the tropical blooms didn't fully mask the ugliness that lay underneath, empires rose on the backs of serfs since the first man had risen to stand on the backs of others and crowned himself king. Killian knew what was raging on the isle named for a holy servant of God, a rebellion inspired by the people of France and the toppling of a dynasty that claimed to rule by divine right. The slave uprising was not the first such outbreak in the colonies, but none of the others had lasted nearly as long or come as close to succeeding, nor had they been as violent. Hundreds if not thousands had already died, whites, slaves and those born of mixed blood, the Angel of Death had come for them all and spared not fragile babes in arms nor the most hearty of men. The situation in Saint-Domingue was a topic of discussion in rough taverns and elegant drawing rooms both, but Emma was utterly silent on the subject when they sat down to dinner in his quarters and shared bread and meat and wine like the lovers the rest of the crew assumed them to be. He did nothing to dissuade them of the notion that the beautiful Lady Swan was his newest mistress, letting the rumours go unchecked belowdecks while he wondered alone in the privacy of his empty bed why she had chosen to seek out a demon and ask his assistance in her endeavor. It seemed that He was not the only one who worked in mysterious ways.

The wind kissed the hollow of his throat and his lips tasted of salt, but he thirsted not for water or wine. His own lust burned hot in his veins and his thoughts turned to the carnal, a dark longing that had not fully abated since that first chaste touch of an angel's hand to his cheek in a virgin's bedchamber and he'd known what it was to experience a miracle. Her skin could touch his without injury to either of them, her lips could breathe the air from his lungs and he wanted - needed - to know if he could press his mouth to the flutter of her pulse and make the blood underneath rise to his touch, wanted to feel her delicate white hands exploring where angels should fear to tread and to see if the divine and the damned could become one without destroying them both. He would have once thought such a thing utterly impossible if he had even bothered to entertain the notion at all (which he hadn't) but he found that something had changed over the centuries since that night in Rome. Darkness was bound to consume the light, and yet he had slipped free of those bonds for a moment and felt for the first time that he might be capable of something more.

They were sailing to the west, into the setting sun. The sky darkened to indigo while the sea ahead almost appeared to be on fire, reflecting orange and red tongues of flame that licked at the hull of the ship until the sun finally slipped below the horizon. Night fell swiftly so far out on the ocean with no hint of welcoming shore in the distance. But the stars were brilliant, and looked almost close enough to touch if one was to climb the ship's rigging all the way to the top and reach for them. Killian turned the helm over to Smee with a quiet order to hold their course and made his way down to the foredeck, where Emma was standing with a white lace shawl draped somewhat haphazardly over her shoulders and slipping down her bare arms, fluttering in the breeze. The temperature had dropped considerably, even this far south the nights could be be surprisingly cool at times. Especially on the open water with no shelter from the elements, his heavy coat was meant to provide the warmth he didn't need and he wondered if angels felt the cold. Yellow cones of light illuminated the deck, the crew had lit the lanterns when the sun went down and the kerosene flames held the darkness at bay. He moved on silent feet, the light faltering around him and shadows flaring out from under the leather that swirled around his knees. She had to have sensed his approach, if she could feel him the way he felt her as the distance between them narrowed until he was standing right behind her. The waves crashed loud against the hull and the ship rocked with sudden violence, as if in warning
against his blasphemous thoughts. Captain Hook paid it no heed, though the men on deck muttered oaths and fought to hold their footing against the movement. Emma was as still as a statue, marble-white arms pale and as finely sculpted as any of the stone angels who stood silent guard over the churches and cathedrals he did not enter.

"I can hear them."

Her voice was low, intimate, the words were clearly meant only for him and not for the crewmen who were still skulking around on deck, shadows in the mist that surrounded them. Killian blinked, confused by the quiet confession.

"Who?" he asked.

"All of them. Saint-Domingue, Martinique, Kingston...they cry out and no one listens. But I can always hear them."

Angels heard the prayers of mortal souls, he knew that and yet he hadn't really considered how that divine gift was also something of a curse. To always be listening to the pain and misery and suffering that mankind was adept at causing itself, he saw it, he was the cause of it, wherever he went, his corruption rotting them from the inside out, but it was easy enough to tune it all out.

She turned to face him then, silvered by the moonlight and her eyes were the marbled green of sea glass, gemstones born not of fire and earth, but of tides and time. They drew him in despite the danger, or maybe because of it. He could set the whole ship aflame and emerge unscathed from the conflagration while it burned right to ash, but he wasn't meant to look into the light.

"A heavy burden, for such a slender back to carry."

He hooked a thumb in his belt while he spoke and rocked back slightly on his heels, "Emma," he said, soft and imploring, "Tell me why I am taking you to Saint-Domingue."

"Because I asked?"

She wasn't wrong, but his frustration clearly showed on his face and her own flashed with what he thought was guilt.

"Captain-

"No," he snapped, and that sea-glass gaze darted away for a moment before she pushed her shawl back up her shoulder and met his eyes again, "You ask this of me, you drink my wine and share my company, you say that you can hear me, when we both know that should be utterly impossible, so do me the courtesy of calling me by my name!"

The flame of his anger licked hot along his spine and would have made any of the crewman flinch and cower under the force of it, but the angel was more defiant.

"Yes, I hear you, Killian, I hear you and I answer! I can answer you, but I can't answer them! I can hear them, but I can't save them on my own and that's why I needed your ship to take me there."

The anger leaked away at once at the sight of the tears in her eyes, even as the sound of his name from her lips made him shudder under the dark leather of his coat while his blood ran even hotter. Killian tamped down his lust, the last thing he needed right now was for another succubus to appear like a siren from the waves and wreak as much havoc as Zelena did in Paris before Emma struck her down.
"I can't save them."

It went suddenly quiet around them when she said it again, the whip of the wind turning into a dead calm that settled over the ship. They were practically toe-to-toe on the deck and he wasn't sure if he had moved or if it had been her, but the space between them had shrunk down to almost nothing and the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

Heaven and hell were not meant to stand so close.

He tipped her chin up and ran his thumb under the curve of her jaw, feeling the velvety slip of her skin under his cautious hand. The contrast of the heat from his body and the cooler ocean air had them shrouded in fog that hid them from view, but he was acutely aware of the fact that they weren't alone. Emma stared up at him, unflinching at his touch. Her hair was loose down her back like a maiden's and the muslin gown she wore was unadorned by embroidery or trim, falling in loose folds to the deck but low-necked enough to display a creamy swath of firm bosom pushed up high by the stays underneath. Any man on the ship would have had her on her back in a heartbeat if they thought they could get away with it, but he wanted to fall down on his knees at the vision before him.

"Then why do you go, if you can't save them?"

She didn't answer and the wind picked up again, stirring the hem of her gown about her slim ankles and filling the mainsail into a white wing against the obsidian sky.

"Why do you not trade in slaves, Killian?"

As the respectable Captain K. Jones of Jones Shipping Limited he transported sugarcane and textiles and other trade goods legally aboard his flagship, *The Jewel of the Realm.* As the brigand known as Captain Hook, he sailed under the crimson flag instead and smuggled uncut gems, seditious books and casks of newly-distilled rum, bribing customs inspectors and port officials to look the other way as he moved contraband from the islands to the mainland and back again, but in neither guise did he traffic in the highly lucrative movement of slaves.

"Does that surprise you?" he asked, leather creaking over his shoulders as they dropped and his hand fell back down to his side.

The corner of her mouth quirked and she looked him up and down, "You are a pirate," she teased gently, her real meaning clear.

His own voice was more serious, "Aye, that I am. And those who sail with me are sinners bound to spend eternity in chains forged by their own hands, but they are all here of their own free will. Slavery is a dark stain on the soul of mankind worse than any corruption wrought by me, there is no greater sin than this belief that one man can own another body and soul. Judge them for the evil they do to each other, but do not lay their crimes so neatly at my feet and blame me for their moral failings. I can only tempt them to fall, I don't push them over the edge. They choose to jump."

His shadow fell over her face and dipped down into the neckline of her gown in a soft caress that he could almost feel with his fingertips while he spoke. Killian took a step back, letting it fall away and leaving her in a pool of moonlight. It laid a path in front of the ship as neat as a line on a map, rippling with the waves and shining bright on the dark sea. Man had always looked to the stars and followed where they led. His own master had been a shining light in the heavens, once, eons ago.

The angel led and he followed, down into the bowels of the ship and to the narrow door that led to her borrowed quarters. He leaned one shoulder on the wall and watched as she pushed it open, swinging silently on oiled hinges and revealing the small, unlit space within. The lilies still sat in the
silver cup, open in full bloom despite the lack of sun.

But then, they had another celestial being to nurture them instead.

"What happens if you cease?"

Emma turned, her brow creased in confusion and one hand resting lightly on the doorjamb, "Cease what?"

"Listening."

He had an inkling of just what would occur that was practically confirmed by the flicker of gold behind her eyes and the sudden curl of her fingers into the wood. The thought was filed away for later, when he could peruse it fully at his leisure and figure out how to use it to his advantage. But for now he only shrugged and pushed off the wall, flicking a dismissive hand in the air.

"No matter. After all, I would greatly despair if you ever ceased listening to me."

It kept him awake for the rest of the night, alone in his own quarters with an open bottle of rum on the table and the gentle rock of the ship underneath him. Stripped to the waist and barefoot, he tilted back in his chair and balanced it perfectly without any support while he contemplated silently in the unnaturally deep gloom that surrounded him.

Nothing he had said to Emma on the deck had been a lie, he had not borne false witness. Like the simple flowers that had been accepted while rich jewels were spurned, his honesty had been rewarded with some very interesting bits of information that was as much currency as coin. But these were to be hoarded instead of spent, and he turned her words over and over in his mind and examined them carefully from all angles. She could hear him. Spain hadn't been a fluke and his suspicion in that chapel at Versailles had been correct, when he'd called out without words and she'd paused in her flight from the palace. He couldn't be saved, but she heard him anyway.

And more than that, she could answer.

Demons could be summoned unwillingly, with the proper incantation. It wasn't easy and it usually required a sacrifice of some kind, a precious object or a blood offering, along with reciting the demon's true name, but it could be done if the summoner was determined enough. Most of his kind guarded their names closely as a result, using titles and aliases to keep their real identities carefully hidden. The dealmaker Rumpelstiltskin was the Dark One, even the cackling succubus Zelena had been known as the Wicked Witch before her not so untimely demise in Paris. Captain Hook was his latest moniker, and not a man on his ship knew that his name was actually Killian. If he were to be summoned with it, he would have no choice but to go to whoever called him to their side and even be forced to do their bidding, if the summoner was powerful enough. But that was rare, most had to offer even more for the favours he could grant, desiring wealth, power, pleasures of the flesh, and were willing to trade their own immortal souls for earthly delights, the bloody fools.

Angels were not bound by the same laws as demons, they couldn't be compelled to appear against their will nor could they be controlled. If any demon discovered a way to summon an angel and force their compliance, they would have unimaginable power that all of them would covet for their own.

Emma came to him in Spain.

She came now for those she couldn't save. He didn't trade in slaves, but he knew many of those that did, brokers of human souls. The rebellion on Saint-Domingue had no hope of succeeding, it was too dangerous to allow freedom to some and give hope for the same to the others still trapped in...
bondage. Or at least he'd assumed as much, whenever the topic came up in the dockside taverns over foaming mugs of rough ale amid rougher company. Now he wasn't so certain, not with her aboard his ship.

It was dark as a tomb in his quarters, tucked away under the stern of the ship and only shadows swirling in the window panes instead of the light from the moon and the stars above. He lifted his hand and snapped his fingers, making a spark that leapt into the air and hung suspended above the table for a long moment. It illuminated the bottle of rum, the glass the murky hue of bottomless seas full of hidden dangers. He could see his own reflection in the curve, not the handsome visage that had seduced blushing virgins and virtuous wives both to his bed, but the true face that lay hidden underneath. Eyes the red of infernal fire, bones that pressed against the skin like knives and a dark mouth full of sharpened teeth.

 Summon the demon, and he would appear.

Killian snapped his fingers again and the spark went out, leaving him sitting alone in the dark.

Emma opened the door at the knock and was met not by Killian, but by the round, bearded face of William Smee, the man she had met at the somewhat ramshackle offices of "Jones Shipping Ltd" back on Tortola. At the sight of her he quickly snatched the red cap from his head and gave a jerky bob of his chin.

"Cap'n demands...er, requests your presence on deck, if you please, your ladyship."

She nodded, pulling the door closed behind her while Smee tried and failed to keep his eyes on the floor instead of on her. The ship's crew were all curious about her, she could hear the whispering that went on behind her back and the somewhat crude remarks about her and their captain. They all thought she and Killian were lovers, who only kept separate quarters to maintain an illusion of propriety. It didn't bother her as much as it should have, they had spent long hours shut up alone together in his cabin after all, and she was hardly worried about the nonexistent "Lady Swan's" reputation being sullied by their association.

There were more important matters that currently occupied her thoughts than the idle musings of lustful sailors.

Smee followed along behind at a respectful distance while she climbed the steep stairs that led to the deck, clearly full of questions that he didn't dare ask. All of the men on the ship were wary of Killian, or as he was referred to by them, Captain Hook. That wariness extended to her, as his presumed companion, and while she could feel their interest none of them had attempted to proposition her in the dark corners and narrow corridors that wound through the ship like a rabbit's warren. Killian hadn't either, the seducer who had charmed his way into the bed of any woman he desired had been a perfect gentleman during their late night suppers at the table so small that their feet had tangled together companionably underneath it and their knees touched. Still, his gaze had lingered, blue eyes darkened to indigo and each swipe of his tongue across his lips to catch errant drops of claret had reminded her all too well of a kiss that could never be repeated.

She was walking a fine enough line as it was.

The light and air was a welcome relief when she stepped onto the deck into the sunlight, sensing his presence close by and turning to seek out his black-clad figure among the more drably attired crew. Killian was standing next to the rail with a brass spyglass held to one eye, fixed on some point in the distance and when she went to stand next to him he passed it to her without a word.
Three ships were visible through the glass, looking as tiny and insignificant as children's toys. Emma closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them again the magnification had been increased tenfold, she wasn't all-seeing like the Heavenly Father but she did have the power to see much farther and much more than mortal eyes did. Killian took the spyglass back and looked through it again, his free hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword.

"They're French," she said, too low for anyone except him to hear.

"Aye," he agreed, equally as quiet, "Warships. Sent to help quell the rebellion at last, most likely. Saint-Domingue is too valuable to lose, not when France is barely clinging to their remaining colonies in the New World by the skin of their teeth as it is. I'm afraid it was inevitable that it would come to this, _avaritia_ is rooted deep in the hearts of men."

_Avaritia._ Greed, the deadly sin that had led to the enslavement of untold men, women and children. As sweet as the sugar cultivated on the islands was, it was the bitter other half of the coin. She'd heard the crewmen talk when they didn't know she was listening, they were all greedy for gold, greedy for more grog than their rations allowed, greedy for the slippery warmth that lay between a woman's legs. Their fear of Killian wasn't enough to deter them from serving aboard his ship, the greed in their hearts was far too strong.

_Do not lay their failings at my feet._

Emma curled her hands around the railing and stared at the French ships. Each was easily twice the size of Killian's vessel, riding low in the water and clearly heavily laden with both troops and munitions. The sea was calm and the wind had been in their favour the whole journey, but that meant it was also in favour of the warships. They were headed straight for Saint-Domingue.

"At this speed they'll make landfall in Port-au-Prince before dusk," Killian continued, squinting at them again through the slim brass instrument, "Unless by some _miracle_ the tides turned?"

It was not a rhetorical question. The lilies in her cabin bloomed continuously day and night, a tiny miracle wrought by her own hands. Hands that could halt entire armies in their tracks, turn day to night and night to day and bestow a holy blessing upon a saint with a single touch. The same hands that were now helpless, bare and ungloved and clinging uselessly to the wood to stop them from trembling. She hadn't wanted him to see, she hadn't wanted him to _know_ the full truth, but...

"I can't."

It was a confession wrenched from the depths of her own, well, she didn't have a soul, not the way mortals did, anyway, blank slates born pure and innocent but with the potential for both the greatest good and even greater evil depending on the path they chose. But she had something that was uniquely hers, her divine light that that marked her as one of the Blessed Angels, granted passage through the very Gates of Paradise themselves for the whole of eternity by His grace.

The one once known as the Morning Star could no longer cross that barrier into Heaven, his own light had been ripped from him when he fell into eternal darkness, or so they all believed. Some said he fell with a smile, some said it was with a scream.

Maybe it was both.

Blue eyes rimmed in kohl narrowed right to dark slits and then the demon was upon her, hands grasping her upper arms with firmness and trapping her neatly between his body and the rail. She _should_ be afraid, she was vulnerable right now as if she really was a lone woman surrounded by dangerous, lustful men with greedy souls and none more dangerous than _him_, but Emma felt no fear.
and when her palms landed flat on his hard chest it wasn't to push him away, if anything she wanted to pull him closer.

"You can't interfere...not that you won't, you can't."

Emma could see that his clever mind was making quick work of everything she'd left unsaid from the moment she'd crossed his threshold and greeted him as Captain Hook. Her fingers curled in his waistcoat and she looked up at him, ignoring the crewmen surrounding them with their ears pricking up and straining to overhear what was being said. This was only between the two of them, no one else on the ship could even begin to understand.

"It is forbidden to you. Moreso, you are bound from intervening, as if your wings were clipped. That's why you needed a ship, and safe passage. That's why you needed me. This...this is outright defiance, your own personal rebellion. Oh, Emma."

"Yes," she agreed, closing her eyes. It was far more dangerous than even he was, she'd been granted her divine light by His grace and His alone, and what the Lord giveth, the Lord could taketh away. She couldn't save Man from this most reprehensible of sins of their own creation and the failure was like ash in her mouth.

"Well then. It is said that fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and three warships against a lone brig certainly qualifies as foolish. Mr. Smee! Hoist the standard!"

"Cap'n?"

She looked up in shock, taking in the firm set to his jaw and the heat she could feel growing under her palms, not the enveloping warmth of divine radiance, but the burn of infernal flame.

"You heard your captain!" he bellowed, "Hoist the Jolly Roger and man your stations, we're all drinking French brandy instead of grog tonight!"

"Killian."

His true name got his attention at once as she knew it would, and his answering smile was as sweet as a choirboy's when he looked back down at her.

"Beata angela," he murmured, "I may be incapable of miracles, but I am not without a few tricks up my own sleeve. I promise you these ships will not reach Saint-Domingue, whether the reprieve will be enough for the rebellion to succeed remains to be seen, but I suppose far stranger things have happened."

The demon winked and she felt a flush on her cheeks that was not from the wind. The late nights they had spent together in his quarters had not involved any of lewd acts of fornication that the crew so eagerly imagined, but it had been intimate nonetheless. Perhaps even more intimate than engaging in the pleasures of the flesh, the hours of conversation had revealed even more clearly that he possessed far more than just that seductive wit that was all surface and no depth, reflecting a flattering image back to the subject of his interest while revealing nothing of himself. Though he had not yet revealed why he had appropriated the surname "Jones" for his own use, he had spoken of his travels since she'd last seen him in France and how he'd crossed the ocean on "not quite a whim" with a wry twist of his wine-stained lips that did not fully hide the bitterness in the statement. What went unspoken was that his will was not truly his own and instead of pitying the poor soul who had obviously summoned him, Emma found herself pitying him.

Stranger things indeed.
There was a flurry of movement from the crew as the orders were carried along the length of the ship with a hue and cry that had them all jumping to their feet and rushing to coil up ropes over their shoulders and tie down loose items on the deck. It was a sudden tempest that swirled around them where they stood in a blur of loud noise and riotous colour, but in the eye of the storm there was nothing except the demon in front of her.

"Emma," Killian said, as serious as she had ever seen him, "I promised you once that I would do anything you asked if it was within my power and not require any form of payment. My word is my bond and this is not a devil's bargain that I am offering, but all actions have consequences."

His expression flickered for a moment, jaw pulled tight and that deep blue gaze darting away from her eyes. It was a clear warning, and Emma wondered if it cost him something to give it.

"I know."

He looked back at her and queried softly, "Do you?"

She reached up and dragged her thumb slowly over the thin scar on his cheek, hearing his sharp inhale of breath at the movement. The mark had been left by the torture he had suffered at the hands of the Inquisition, she'd seen it laid fresh and bloody right down to the bone and been unable to leave him there to suffer any more no matter what sins he was guilty of.

Killian turned his head abruptly and kissed her palm before whirling away with his coat flapping behind him like the wings he did not possess. If she was a swan then he was a raven, dark and sleek and a harbinger of ill omens. Captain Hook yelled orders to his men in a thunderclap, the demon of the sea unleashed and whipping them all into a frenzy as they worked the sails and readied the cannons with the dark flag of a grinning skull atop a pair of crossed bones snapping high on the mast.

The cannon fire was black, smoke as thick as tar enveloping the warships when the captain called, "Fire!" Too much to be natural, it poured across the dark sea in long tentacles like some fantastical monster of the deep while the acrid scent of gunpowder filled the air and faintly beneath it, Emma could smell the sulphur and brimstone of infernal flame. She heard the shouts from the French ships even through the cacophony, blasphemous oaths and the utter shock at the frenzied attack from a single vessel not even half the size of theirs.

David had holy aim and divine intervention on his side when he took on Goliath with nothing but a rock and a sling. This...this was hellfire brought to life by the demon in black with the devil's own smile on his face. The intensity of it was shocking, she felt it more than the violent lurching of the ship underneath her that threw seasoned sailors clear off their feet. Every angelic instinct flared to life from the force of it and she had to fight not to respond in kind, keeping her light at bay and her wings hidden. The crewmen were unaware of her, blind to her continued presence on the deck while the battle raged on all sides. One of the French ships broke off and began to retreat away from Saint-Domingue, obviously too heavily damaged from the cannon fire to continue. Two were left, and amid a rising tide of bloodlust that turned the crew into frothing, howling demons of their own making she heard Killian give another order.

"Ramming speed!"

The heavens went dark with stormclouds and the seas churned white, as if the water itself was boiling over. More cannon fire was traded back and forth, one heavy ball shooting clean across the ship's bow and almost hitting a man square in the back. It landed harmlessly on the planks instead with a flick of Emma's wrist, but she was still bound from performing grander miracles and she let out a huff of frustration.
"What is the point of listening if you won't let me answer?" she muttered to herself.

"Brace for impact!"

She looked up and quickly found Killian high in the rigging, a rope wrapped around one forearm while he pulled a knife from his belt. Their eyes met across the distance, he could clearly still see her even though his men no longer could. A moment of calm seemed to fall over the both of them, where the wind no longer whipped her skirts about her ankles and the sun briefly pierced the clouds above to shine down on his inky hair and the long coat of dark leather.

Then he was gone, and in the next instant came the shudder and crash as the bow of the ship plowed straight into the broad side of the larger French vessel and it was only by her divine grace that she remained standing while others fell down to their knees around her.

There was no prayer she could recite, not for a demon's salvation. All she could do was watch, and bear witness to whatever it was that he planned to do now.

For her.

Killian let go of the line he was holding and easily grabbed onto the thick ropes that formed the warship's complex web of rigging. He'd flown without wings, using his knife to slash the line free and swinging across the tiny gap in the heartbeat before the two ships collided. It was an insane maneuver that was likely to rip them both open and send them straight down to the bottom of the ocean, but the risky gamble paid off. He could see that the bowsprit had been completely ripped off from his ship and the mainsail had collapsed, but there was no buckling of the hull or the deck from the collision. The warship listed on such a steep angle that it seemed to be on the verge of tipping over completely, crew and soldiers both on the deck forced to clutch at whatever they could reach to avoid falling overboard. It hung on the precipice itself for several moments before it began to roll upright, the greater bulk forcing his own ship back on the wave that formed from the motion of the keel. Dimly, Killian was aware of cannon fire, plumes of smoke rising in the air all around him. But fire and smoke could not affect a demon born of Hell itself, and when a hand tried to grab his ankle he looked down into the whey-faced soldier who'd climbed up after him with a grin.

"Mon Dieu!" the soldier cried, an oath that turned Killian's grin into a snarl.

"Your God," he spat back, "Not mine!"

He gave a vicious kick that caught the soldier in the jaw and sent him flying backwards, caught at the last second by his heel in the ropes and hanging upside down. Killian left him there, his own boots easily finding purchase as he picked his way along the line. One man against an entire ship was madness, but he wasn't a man.

Besides, he had been sent on this mission by an angel herself.

His eyes burned red and the wind shifted, sending smoke from the cannons straight into the faces of the French captain at the helm and the navigator beside him. Both disappeared under the choking black cloud, unable to see, unable to steer, unable to give any order. Killian let out a triumphant noise and turned to face the ship's mainsail, rippling like quicksilver against the suddenly heated air rising around it. His own shadow appeared on the heavy cloth, a twisting figure that began to writhe and grow into something else. Something inhuman, with too-long limbs that could bend both back and forth and the twin points that formed not a halo over his head, curved inward, like the hook that formed at the end of what had been the shadow's hand.
Hooks and horns were not all that dissimilar, after all.

A long rent appeared in the sail, another shadow at first that quickly became real with a twist of his wrist. It ran down the length of it, tearing it apart with a great ripping noise while startled yells came from the soldiers and sailors below.

"The Hook! The Hook!"

His legend would only grow from this and it fueled him even as he blinked back a strange, misty haze that had crept into the edges of his vision. Something was sapping his strength, something foreign and unfamiliar that made his fingers slacken on the ropes and his boots nearly slip as he almost lost his footing. But he held on by sheer will, until the sail was rendered into nothing but useless ribbons that tangled around what was left of the rigging and wrapped around the mast in knots that would be impossible to untie. It would take days to get the whole mess completely down and raise a new sail, days where the warship would be as hobbled as a lame horse, unable to continue on in such condition even without the rest of the damage.

He'd broken her wings.

Before he could revel fully in the satisfaction there was a loud popping sound from down below and something small and round and hot came straight at him. Killian felt it graze along his neck with a sizzle, a hairsbreadth away from his jugular. He looked down and saw the barrel of a pistol pointed up at him in the hand of a soldier who was barely more than a child, not even old enough to grow whiskers on his ruddy cheeks. He knew at once that the boy was still an innocent soul, innocence that would be quickly lost in the service of the French army once he'd fought and whored his way to manhood, blood drawn on his blade and between a woman's thighs all in the name of honour and glory.

The wound on his neck smarted but he could easily take the pain, he'd suffered far worse. It would take much more than a mere pistol or a blade to cut down a demon. Still, he felt another wave of dizziness that he fought with a shake of his head, climbing higher up the rigging and slashing more ropes as he went. Cannon fire roared loud in his ears and muted everything else, all he could hear was muffled shouts while the warship began to list again, tilting at a rapidly growing angle. He was surrounded by fire and blood and this was his glory, hacking and slashing his way from one end of the yardarm to the other. His own ship was a league away, ready to overtake the last warship with his crew salivating for their promised rewards. Greedy bastards, the lot of them, not an honourable man left among those who called him master. The old captain had been a man of honour, a rare breed, but…

Killian pushed the thought away, holding his knife between his teeth and reaching for a dangling rope to help pull himself up even higher. He saw that the clouds were drifting, grey storm giving way to pale sunlight and a beam pierced through to shine off his rings, the dark, square-cut ruby flashing with brilliance and as bright as a beating heart. The reflection shone right into his eyes and blinded him for a moment, making his vision swim. His hand groped wildly for the rope but found only empty air. The knife fell first, blade down not into the deck, but towards the rolling ocean. He could see the glittering waves swallow it up and then he was falling as well, thrown clear of the ship and hurtling straight for the water. He'd climbed too high, and he'd been struck down by an unseen hand.

The impact wouldn't kill him, but it would be hard and painful and not the kind of pain he enjoyed. At least the water wasn't sanctified, and Killian braced himself for the final drop with one word slipping past the salt on his lips, a whisper, a prayer, that was swept away by the wind.

The sea below him was marbled green and the clouds above were white and feathery, filling his sight
while he plummeted down and then he saw that it wasn't clouds at all as he collided with something in mid-air. The swirling green sea was Emma's eyes, staring right into his as her wings enfolded them both and everything else vanished into pure nothingness.

"Killian? Killian, wake up! Killian, come back back to me!"

He forced his eyes open at the summons with a gasping breath and saw the angel above him, her lovely face creased with worry and hand pressed to his cheek. It took a moment for the fog to clear from his head and then the memories came crashing back, the French warships, the sea battle, the drain on his power from some unknown source that had made him lose his grip and sent him plunging down towards the ocean. And then...

"What did you do? Emma, what did you do?"

He sat up, stunned by what he was remembering. Emma's arms around his chest...the look on her face...the brilliant flash of gold behind her eyes...

Her wings.

They'd wrapped around him before he'd hit the water, so incredibly soft to the touch and yet as strong as steel. Stronger. The contrast was maddening, and he couldn't quite believe that he, infernal demon of Hell and eternally damned, had been held in their divine embrace.

"How?" he breathed, searching her immediately more guarded expression for an answer while his hand circled her wrist and he implored, "Emma..."

Whether it was his beseeching tone or her own desire to try to articulate the inexplicable, she was a messenger, an interpreter of mysterious signs, either way their eyes locked and she finally said, "I saw you start to fall and I...jumped."

Killian gaped at her, feeling his mouth open and close as his usual eloquence failed him completely. Emma's gaze darted away from his and she rose to her feet, pulling free of his grip and shaking sand from the hem of her gown. Or what remained of it, at least, it was torn and rent in several spots and he caught pale flashes of the petticoat underneath. Behind her he could see the ocean, but it was nothing but an empty, flat expanse for miles. No flags in the distance, not the French tricolour or his own Jolly Roger, and no sound but the crash of the waves against the shore. They were alone, completely and utterly, he could sense no mortal souls at all and for a wild moment Killian wondered if by some miracle he had managed to pass from the Earthly plane into a divine realm of existence in the angel's embrace. He turned his head and saw lush green vegetation that was growing wild right down to the sliver of beach he was currently sitting on, with nary a path or a footprint in sight save for the ones he knew were hers. Flowers grew by the dozens, more lilies like the ones he had given Emma, along with bright orange hibiscus and delicate pink orchids the same colour as the large seashell in his quarters, the one that had belonged to the Jewel's previous captain.

It had no value and only took up space, a precious commodity aboard a ship, but he'd kept it anyway, as a reminder.

Greenery and flowers, and only the two of them.

It was like...like the Garden.

But that was impossible.

"Where are we?"
He stood, hiding his stagger out of habit. Any hint of weakness was ruthlessly exploited in the company he normally kept - although he was usually the one doing the exploiting. But he could feel his strength returning, his dark power sparking under his skin like the coals of a smothered fire flaring to life again. The sword still strapped to his hip left a mark in the sand as he found his footing, marring the pristine surface while the angel walked to the water's edge and let the waves lap over her bare feet.

"I don't think it has a name," Emma said, "It's like a blank canvas. I'm not sure if anyone has even set foot here before, it's completely unspoiled."

"Well," he drawled, looking down again at the quarter-circle slash left on the beach and feeling his heels sink down to firmer ground, "Not anymore."

Emma turned and he gave her a wry smile, "Demon, darling, remember? Damnate. It was unsullied."

He thought the wrinkling on her nose was because of the endearment but she only repeated his other moniker, "Damnate," infernal one, forever damned, softly, as if she was reminding herself, "You think your very presence here is corrupting?"

"No, I know my very presence is corrupting, beata. You, more than anyone, know that too."

The serpent had slithered into the Garden and tempted Eve with forbidden fruit that held within it the knowledge of good and evil. Original sin was born in a place much like the isle on which they now stood, when Man first fell from grace and the angel drove them all away from the patch of Heaven on earth with the flaming sword held aloft.

He carried a sword, not her, but she could still banish him from this place, back to the darkness of taverns and whorehouses and away from her light, but when she crossed the stretch of sand again and he dipped his forehead to rest against hers she didn't push him away and none of the flowers around them withered or turned black from his taint.

If anything, they bloomed open even more in defiance of the setting sun.

"Emma," he breathed, hands circling around her waist.

"You're injured."

He'd almost forgotten about the graze on his neck but with her reminder he felt it again, a dull throb that ached even more when he tried to wrench away, afraid to let his blood touch her own skin and corrode it like acid. It should have healed on its own by now, but perhaps he was still hindered by whatever had affected him back on the warship and he attempted to deflect her attention with a smile.

"I've had far worse, believe me."

Emma didn't let him pull back, shushing him and lifting her hand towards the wound. She didn't fear him, not his wrath or his lust or any of his sins, and he felt a sudden certainty that his blood posed no danger, a conviction that he couldn't explain except with a word that he dared not speak.

Light pulsed in her palm and he closed his eyes, it slid down his throat as easily as the finest spirit and he could feel the wound immediately close up, healing at once with nary a sting.

"Thank you, Killian. For everything."

Their embrace lingered, turning like the tides and slipping inexorably into something more. All the
long nights aboard his ship had been passed chastely, despite the bed in his quarters invitingly made up with a feather tick and rich bedclothes that had seen respectable planters’ wives and slattern tavern maids both seduced by Captain Jones and the notorious Captain Hook. But under a velvet sky rapidly filling with jewel-bright stars he was neither man, he was Killian to her and he always would be, his long coat thrown down to form a makeshift bed atop the flowers while he kissed an angel who kissed him back with a fervour that almost made his knees buckle again under the force of it.

Golden hair spilled down over his hands like a waterfall and he tore right through her gown and underpinnings in his sudden haste that was met with her own eagerness in divesting him of his waistcoat and sliding the linen shirt off his shoulders. Skin met skin and he groaned low in his throat, the heated slide of her bare breasts to his equally bare chest was merely a preamble of what was to come and yet it was more delicious than any full coupling, the way her head tipped back with a sigh and his chin fitted perfectly to her shoulder, lips pressed to the long line of her neck and the fan of her fingers against his back.

He felt no shame in his nakedness and he relished hers when the remains of the dress finally pooled at her feet, he’d seen her as a Roman noblewoman in silks and an English Samaritan in homespun, as an artist’s muse and lover and as a lady at the court of kings, but he’d always seen her for what she truly was and now he saw everything. The firm, full breasts that had to have been made for his hands to cup, tipped in a shade of pink he swore he had never seen before that put every last rose in existence to shame, the flare of her hips, curved just so, the feel of the bones that lay under that velvet skin, from the notch at the hollow of her throat to the ladder of her ribs, the flex of her spine when he dragged his fingers down the long line of it and she arched up against him. Her own hands were hardly idle, exploring all the planes and angles of him as thoroughly as his own perusal of her. Killian felt almost...virginal, at the contact, as if he’d never experienced the touch of another before this. Emma molded him like clay, rising hot and heavy under her hand to full readiness in a blink that had him light-headed again while his palms burned with the desire to mark her as his, leave his brand on her flesh as indelible as any that marked the slaves as property of their masters.

He fought it desperately, determined not to give in to his baser urges. Corrupter he was, but not tonight and he lifted her legs around his waist and fell down to his knees with her arms around his neck and their lips never parting. No spirit he’d ever drunk was as intoxicating, no fruit as sweet as the taste of angel in his mouth, and his eyes were opened to the knowledge that it could be like this.

Emma lay against the dark satin lining of his coat, wrapped in him as he’d been wrapped in her and Killian felt her thighs spread even more underneath him. The silent invitation was unmistakable and the roar of the ocean was nothing compared to the roaring in his ears, blood pounding with the urge to accept her wordless surrender to the sin. But he held back, pulling up on his elbows and wrenching their mouths apart.

Wordless surrender was not enough.

"Look at me, angel. You know what I am…I can never be more than that. Say you want me, want this. Say it, Emma!"

It came out as a desperate plea that had her eyes going wide beneath him. Lips swollen from his kisses parted but no sound came out, and he was sure that she was going to vanish, taking the reprieve as her chance to retreat back to where he couldn't follow and leave him utterly alone in the dark. His hips jerked, balanced on the knife's edge between possession and desolation and for all his charm and the dashing countenance that had won him countless conquests in the bedchamber, he was suddenly as uncertain as a green young lad.

A hand rose, pushing back the lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead and tracing feather-light
along the sweep of his brow and fanning across the apple of his cheek as though she was mapping his face. It was a gesture unlike any that had ever been granted him before, a benediction from an angel who shone with golden light. Gentle fingers pressed to the nape of his neck and drew his head down until her lips pressed to his ear.

"Killian….I do."

He was swallowed by the light, it pulled him in even as he pushed forward and the heat of infernal fire was not doused, it was fanned incandescent by divine radiance. Sparks exploded in the air around them and fell down in a shower of both his crimson and her gold that reflected off the blade of his sword and made it appear to burst into flame next to them. Man and woman had been banished from Paradise by a flaming sword, but Killian was not a man and nothing could stop him now, not when he was joined with the one he had coveted for so long. Zelena had tried to tempt him with Emma's face and form and he'd resisted, declaring that he'd have exactly what he wanted and nothing less. His patience had been rewarded and as his hips pressed flush to the backs of her thighs while his forehead rested on hers again, he understood at long last why it was considered such a virtue. Heaven was forbidden to him, but he'd found it in her embrace and their fingers laced together tight against the bed of flowers.

It was a miracle.

It was a sin.

Darkness surrounded her on all sides, black leather under her and black hair that passed through her fingers, dark as ink, dark as the sea at midnight. His head was bent in supplication and he knelt between her legs, a demon paying homage to an angel. Emma could feel the flames licking at her thighs with each roll of his hips, shadows caressing under her breasts and along the line of her neck like unseen fingers that made her writhe from the sheer, voluptuous pleasure of it. She'd lain with men before, mortal men, a gift bestowed along with visions and prophecies and divine inspiration, but this...this had her arching up into each stroke of his body in hers with no thought for anything else but feeling it again and again and again. It was blissful, and dangerous, but she couldn't bring herself to stop, not when his mouth pressed to a spot behind her ear that made her gasp, not when his pace faltered as she met his thrusts with her own upward tilt and squeeze around him. Killian threw his head back at that, the cords on his neck straining and she pressed her hands to his shoulderblades, the closest he had to his own wings in the shape and solid line of them under her fingers. His skin was dusky, like burnished metal in the moonlight, the colour of sunsets and whiskey as if the fire within was flickering through.

"Is this what it is?"

"What?" she asked, and his head tilted back down.

"To experience a miracle?"

Emma had not expected that. She'd expected him to gloat, to revel in his victory, not to sound so much like the saints and shepherds, completely awestruck by her mere presence. That he thought it miraculous was even more surprising, he was no Puritan but certainly a demon only fornicated, ravished and defiled like the pirate he was supposed to be. Could he also feel the immense joy, the Song of Songs in his heart as she did? He'd brought her lilies like an ardent young suitor, roses blooming in his cheeks when he'd turned suddenly bashful under her praise. Roses and lilies both surrounded them now, along with flowering shrubs covered in pure white blooms that perfumed the night air with a scent that was both sweet and sultry at the same time.
In a flash their positions were reversed, Killian supine underneath her with her thighs caging his hips and surprise on the handsome face, mouth slightly open and sea-blue eyes blinking up at her, crinkling slightly at the corners. Emma drew the tips of her nails down his chest and along his flat stomach, making him hiss and shift at the sensation while the hard length of him throbbed hot inside of her.

"Do you really want to know?"

It was a challenge that had one brow quirking in clear interest while his hands settled on her waist, thumbs rubbing the jut of her hipbones and his shadow fanning along her flank. His tongue darted out to lick his lips and she heard his answer without words.

The wings that had carried him across the ocean unfurled again, as unbound as they'd been when she'd launched herself off the ship and became one with the sky. The feathers brushed the tops of his thighs when she rolled her hips and arched her back, her breasts thrusting up, high and proud. A sound that was something between a gasp and a groan escaped the demon and when Emma looked down at him she smiled and whispered, "Behold."

Her light flooded through him like lightning, brighter than any star in the heavens above as it lit him up from the inside. Her weight was the only thing that kept him anchored to the ground, his body surging upwards and seized with divine ecstasy. It should have been impossible, his damnation barring him from receiving anything that was holy, but as the forbidden fruit held all that was good and evil in the world locked within she held him inside and his fire didn't burn and her light didn't blind.

"Again!" he begged, eyes flying open and every hair on his body standing on end, "Emma, again!"

She rose and fell in a steady rhythm that he matched, knees bending and feel planting, pushing her forward so that her breasts grazed his chest and the light pulsed between them like the pulse of his rigid male flesh, a hot spill that warmed her while his thumb pressed right to where she ached the most and with a flick and swirl she was flying again in a different way. Emma clutched his shoulders, her cry swallowed by his kiss. The flowers should have closed up when the sun set but they continued to bloom, the miracle rippling outward from where they lay as lilies grew from sand and salt water, as blue as the sea, as blue as a demon's eyes.

"Sleep now, angel."

His voice was soft, the only one she heard when she pressed her face to his neck and drifted off with the heat of him gently warming her under the blanket of her wing covering them both.

"Well, we didn't bring about the Apocalypse last night, so I suppose that's good news."

Emma didn't open her eyes, tracing the shape of his heart on his chest and feeling the kiss of the sun on her cheek and the sound of birdsong from the trees. Dawn had broken in their secret garden bower, where they lay entwined under a canopy of greens with her head pillowed on his shoulder. "Is that what you expected to happen?" she asked.

"I've no idea...but I do know that everything comes at a price."

She lifted her head at that and met his gaze, realizing that they were still sheltered under her wing and both as naked as Adam and Eve. There was no fig leaves to guard their modesty here, his bare hip pressed to the inside of her thigh and the hair on his chest ticked her fingers. Killian's hand skimmed up her side and found her breast, he bent to press a kiss to the soft slope of it while his words made
her shiver despite the heat of his mouth. They'd each defied what they were, and rebellions always came at great cost.

*What price would be paid for this?*

*And by whom?*

Her wings folded closed, obeying her command in a heartbeat and leaving her fully bare and exposed. Lips closed around her nipple and a soft gasp escaped her, while a glance down showed her that Killian's ardour had not been fully sated by their first coupling, his cock was hard again against the wiry thatch of hair that surrounded it. Neither had hers, she could feel the growing dampness under her own downy mound and the burning ache when he started to make his way lower, whiskered cheek nuzzling against her belly and that silver tongue flicking out against her skin like a serpent's. The light revealed what had been concealed by the dark, glints of amber at the tips of his eyelashes and threaded through his beard. He'd been born in flame and he bore the birthmarks of his own infernal creation, but then the dark head dipped between her open thighs and her eyes fluttered shut against the rush of sensation.

"You would risk the End of Days for this?"

It came out as a sigh, barely audible over the crash of the waves against the shore. Flowers floated away like driftwood, petals as soft as the pads of his exploring fingers swept away on the tides.

"For my very own guardian angel?" he said, voice somewhat muffled in his current position and yet she heard him as clear as a bell, "Everything."

Afterwards he plucked one of the flowers from the earth, white and fragrant as he twirled it between his fingers and his thumb.

"I like these more than the lilies, I think. They remind me of you."

Killian drew it under his nose and gave a deep inhale before reaching to tuck it behind her ear. In the distance Emma could see his ship, summoned back to retrieve its master and just breaking over the horizon. None of the men aboard had witnessed her flight, they were blind to what they could not see and they would have only noticed a bird, a swan perhaps, straying too far from land.

His hand clasped hers, enveloping it completely while the leather coat swirled about his knees as they stood together on the beach and watched the ship's slow approach in silence. The sun rose high overhead and the sky was perfectly clear, as it had been the day before, and would again tomorrow. Nothing appeared to have changed in the world around them, and yet everything had. An angel had sinned, and a demon had looked into the light.

But when the Final Battle came they would be enemies, Heaven and Hell colliding like armies on the field and they were bound to stand on opposite sides. Darkness would always seek to snuff out the light.

She couldn't save him, and he would try to destroy her.

It was inevitable.
Chapter 22

The Prince Hotel was one of those upscale, five star joints located in the heart of downtown. It was old, but classy, in a grey stone building with balconies overlooking the street below and copper fittings gone green with time. A white-gloved doorman dressed in one of those ridiculous military-style coats to make him look more important was positioned at the revolving door that served as the main guest entrance, ready to hail cabs day or night with the silver whistle worn around his neck, while inside the lobby the concierge desk was staffed by two women who looked more like models than clerks, in sleek little black dresses and strings of pearls who tapped away on their computers to the strains of the classical music that played from hidden speakers and placed at every door and elevator bank there was a man in a dark suit with a Secret Service-esque earpiece threaded through his collar and a walkie-talkie on his belt. Five star hotels had five star security, and every last one of them were all on high alert, clearly following the same order handed down from on high.

Keep the press and any curious rubberneckers out.

Will had heard the news on the radio during the drive over, nearly rear-ending a sweet Audi in front of him in the process. City councilman Albert Spencer's wife Caroline had reportedly overdosed on heroin in one of the hotel's plush suites and had been taken by ambulance to Saint Luke's, where she was said to have lapsed into a coma soon after arrival.

Caroline Spencer, the beautiful and elegant trophy wife whose much older husband was running for mayor against Regina Mills, and was going to win, if the latest polls were accurate. Caroline Spencer, all rich lady clothes and tasteful jewellery, the perfect politican's wife with her Chiclet smile and camera-ready charity work. Caroline Spencer, the woman who Will had last seen leaving Killian Jones's penthouse at three in the morning, with a hickey on her neck and her underwear probably stuffed in her designer purse like a teenager after prom. They'd been having an affair for weeks, maybe months, and now she was laid up in the hospital like some kind of back-alley junkie.

Just like the red headed dancer who never did come back to the Jolly Roger.

Will didn't even glance at the neat row of shuttered shops in the lobby or at the large marble sculpture that took up about half the floor even though just a few years ago he would have been gawking at everything like an idiot, just waiting to be kicked out as soon as someone realized he didn't belong. Now he walked around the sculpture without breaking stride, heading straight to the front desk. Two uniformed beat cops were standing to the side of it, drinking coffee from paper cups and talking in low voices. Will didn't recognize either of them, which was good, since that meant they wouldn't recognize him. As soon as he'd heard the news report he realized he wouldn't be able to just slip into the hotel and loiter around looking for information like he'd originally planned, so he'd pulled the Escalade over and quickly used his phone to book a room online, trying not to wince at the price. He left the SUV with the valet and walked past the doorman as a guest, strolling in with a black duffel bag slung over his shoulder to pose as his luggage, full of equipment from his nights casing out the warehouse for Hood. Usually he tried to avoid attracting notice when on the job, but trying to sneak around the hotel after such a high-profile incident like a rich white woman overdosing on heroin would only be more conspicuous and since he was driving Killian Jones's car and wearing the suit Killian Jones insisted he wear and had Killian Jones's money burning a hole in his pocket he decided to channel as much of Killian Jones's swagger as he could and hide in plain sight instead.

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded when he got to the desk, raising his voice and doing his best to look supremely pissed off, which wasn't that hard considering he was pretty pissed off at the moment. Might as well use that too.
The agent on duty was clearly not having a good night and it showed, he was sweaty and harried with a phone balanced between his cheek and shoulder while he typed frantically on the terminal in front of him. He flicked his gaze up to Will for a moment before looking back down at the screen.

"Sir, I'm very sorry, but unless you're checking in or out you'll have to-"

"Of course I'm checking in!" Will interrupted, slapping a hand down on the counter and making the agent flinch. "I just flew in from Los Angeles, my flight was delayed for four fucking hours and I've got back to back meetings starting at seven a.m, all I want is to shower and try to get five minutes of fucking sleep, but but I'm about ready to cancel my reservation and go find another hotel that doesn't have multiple reporters stationed out on the sidewalk."

The best defence was a good offence. His big mouth usually got him in trouble, but he'd also used it to talk his way out of more than a few jams before. The two cops went back to their coffee, seeing nothing but a jet-lagged businessman in a bad mood, while the agent automatically flew into customer service mode and quickly apologized for any inconvenience, saying there had been a medical emergency earlier that had drawn a bit of media attention, but nothing to worry about sir and please accept this complimentary upgrade to a king room at the back of the building away from the TV crews. Will signed the paperwork in an illegible scrawl and took the little packet with his key card, slipping into his jacket. Now he was officially a guest and he could always play it off like he had forgotten what floor his room was on if anyone caught him poking around. He'd talked his way in and now it was time to figure out his next step. And fast, since Hood was expecting him to show up for the warehouse job in less than twenty-four hours.

If he didn't get the information Jones wanted before then...Will remembered that locked door in the club's basement and shuddered under his suit jacket. If he bailed on Hood and the rest of the crew...he'd never be able to show his face in his old neighbourhood again.

There was a few guests milling around in the lobby despite the late hour, all talking in excited whispers while the stone-faced security guards looked on. Will briefly considered joining them and seeing if anyone recognized the man in the photo, but it was way too public with the cops standing right there. Besides, even if they'd seen him in the hallways or in one of the restaurants they probably wouldn't know who he was, and Will needed a name. For that, he'd need someone like, well, himself. A five star hotel would have an army of chambermaids and room service waiters all working behind the scenes, with access to every floor and room and suite in the place. If anyone had the real dirt, it would be someone a guest wouldn't even look twice at. Just like Caroline Spencer hadn't spared Will a second glance when she'd come to see Killian Jones, and all of the other women he'd opened the door for and escorted to the boss's office (never the master bedroom though) and then chauffeured home afterwards to their clueless husbands never bothered to even ask his name.

Well, all the other women except Emma Swan, that is. She was the only one out of Jones's girlfriends who seemed to actually *see* Will and not just some nameless, faceless lackey. He knew now from the head priest down at Saint Raphael's that she ran some charity group, Blessed Souls or something religious-sounding like that, which only made her involvement with his selfish asshole of a boss all the more perplexing.

Although women always liked bad boys, didn't they? She probably thought she could change Jones if she tried hard enough, love conquers all or some bullshit like that.

Or maybe it was just a sex thing.

That was probably it.

One hideously overpriced room service burger with fucking kale on it and a hundred dollar cash tip
slipped to the waiter later, Will learned that the hotel's Royal Suite had been rented for the last two months straight by someone named R. Gold, from London. He pulled out the photo Jones had given him and the young man in an apron and bowtie squinted heavily at it, while he didn't recognize the blurred figure even with another fifty pressed into his hand a quick Google check after he'd left told Will that the license plate visible in the background of the shot matched the format of English plates.

England.

London.

R. Gold.

It could be something, or it could just be a coincidence. London was a big city. Without a positive ID on the man in the photo, Will didn't want to call Jones in case it turned out to be nothing.

Not after he had not so subtly threatened Ana.

"I don't just know where you live, remember?"

How was it that Killian Jones always knew just where to strike? Hood would probably have Little John break both of Will's hands and possibly his legs as well without breaking a sweat if Will bailed on him, but he hardly cared about that now. But the thought of what that bastard Jones could do to Anastasia...his stomach turned and he didn't even want to touch the stupid hipster burger and sweet potato fries, even though he couldn't remember that last time he'd eaten anything. It made no goddamn sense, they weren't even together anymore and she had broken up with him, besides, it was only supposed to be a meaningless fling in the first place. A bit of fun, no strings, no soppy declarations of-

Fuck. He was fucking screwed.

Will tossed his suit jacket over the back of the armchair and yanked off his tie, trying to think. Who else would know more about R. Gold in the Royal Suite? The front desk was too public, especially with the cops sniffing around. He paced around the room, wondering if he should order something else from room service and hope for a different waiter, or maybe the valet might know, for a two month stay maybe R. Gold had rented a car. It was worth a shot, anyway.

He was reaching for the door to go back down to the parking garage when he noticed the hangtag on the knob, the same one every hotel room had. "Do Not Disturb" on one side and "Please Make Up Room" on the other. Housekeepers would be going into the suite every day to clean, after two months one of them had to have caught a glimpse of this "R. Gold." Will went back to the folder that listed all the hotel amenities, he couldn't wait until morning for a maid to come to his room with fresh towels and mini bottles of shampoo. He flipped past the pages for the spa and the pool and the gym and found what he was looking for. Room service wasn't the only thing available twenty four hours a day, not at the prices they were charging.

Another call, this time for a new pillow from the "Pillow Menu" of all things, even more ridiculous than the burger with kale and house-made aioli instead of normal lettuce and ketchup. Rich people. Will picked the feather pillow over the memory foam, fiddling with his cell phone in one hand while he held the room phone to his ear with the other. Ana still hadn't responded to his text, but he hoped to God and by all that was holy that she would take his advice and stay the hell away from the Jolly Roger and Killian Jones.
The maid was a young woman with blonde hair tied back somewhat messily under a kerchief, a giant pregnant belly under her starched grey uniform and no wedding ring on her finger, pushing a heavy housekeeping cart stocked with linens and the pillow Will had ordered. She swapped it for the one on the bed and Will saw her gaze slide to the burger sitting untouched on the table while the ringless hand absently rubbed her stomach.

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

He pulled the chair back from the table and thumbed out another hundred, setting it down next to the plate.

"Can you give me ten minutes of your time?"

She inhaled the burger in less than five, including the kale. Her nametag read ASHLEY in block letters and she didn't recognize the man in the photo either, but she told Will between bites that a young woman was staying in the suite booked by R. Gold and that the staff had all been instructed to call her Mrs. Gold whenever she called for the minibar to be restocked (which was frequently) or to bitch about the service (which was also frequently).

"She leaves makeup and all her crap all over the bathroom counters, wet towels on the floor and clothes everywhere. It's a bitch to clean and we get written up if we take too long to do it, but if the guest complains that we did a bad job then we get a write up and she nitpicks everything damn thing. And she never tips."

"Uh huh," Will said, catching the broad hint and pulling out a few more hundreds from the tick wad. "Do you have a master key?"

Ashley looked at the money, indecision written all over her face. Complaining about one guest to another was unprofessional enough, what Will was asking now was more than enough to get her fired and they both knew it. She rubbed the curve of her belly again and Will held out the cash, letting it fan out so that each bill was visible and giving a friendly smile. He'd bet the rest of the stack that a hundred dollars would buy a heck of a lot of diapers and that Ashley probably didn't make much over minimum wage.

"For the baby?"

That did it.

She wouldn't give him the key outright, but she took him up to the Royal Suite in the service elevator - dull grey walls that matched her uniform and missing the gold-edged mirrors and marble floors of the guest elevators - with her housekeeping cart forming a barrier in between them. Money had definitely talked, but they were both silent during the ride, staring at the floor numbers as they rose one by one until they finally reached the top. Of course the suite was on the highest floor, just like Killian Jones's fancy penthouse. Will had spent his entire life trying to climb that ladder, the shoplifting, the boosted cars, Hood, trading petty crimes for serious shit, until he landed in the Jolly Roger one night and sat down across from a man in an impeccably tailored charcoal suit, gold ring with a dark red ruby on one long finger and blue eyes that were strangely light, almost as if they were lit from within while the rest of his face was hidden in shadow that curled like smoke around him. That piercing gaze had settled on Will with a laser focus that he thought was a good thing at the time, to finally get noticed by someone who could make things happen.

And now things were fucking happening, all right. What was that old saying, be careful what you wished for because you just might get it?
He stayed out of sight while Ashley knocked on the door to the suite, straining to hear if anyone answered. After what felt like several minutes there was no response and he came around the corner just as she pulled out a key card and slipped it into the reader. It beeped green, and Will was inside in a blink, before she could change her mind about this.

The room he had been upgraded to was nice but it was still just a room, bed, desk, chair. The Royal Suite was something else entirely, even with the lights off Will could tell that it was huge, bigger than most apartments. He had a maglight in his kit, but he used the flashlight feature on his phone instead to poke around, getting caught with burglary tools on you like maglights and lockpicks was a surefire way to have charges upgraded from a misdemeanor to a felony. The light revealed that the suite had an actual dining room with a polished wood table and upholstered chairs, a living room with a wet bar, wine fridge, and even a grand piano with a vase sitting on top of it, full of red roses that were closed and drooping in the dark. A petal had fallen off one and lay on the piano bench, looking more like a drop of blood on the white leather. It would undoubtedly be swept away by Ashley or one of the other maids in the morning. Whoever "R. Gold" was, he had to have some serious coin to have rented the place for two months straight. Will would normally have been jealous, but he was kind of over feeling envious about other men's money at the moment.

A quick sweep didn't turn up anything personal left out on the main level. Much like Killian Jones's condo, the suite covered two floors and Will assumed that the master bedroom was upstairs. He was about to head that way when his sixth sense kicked in and told him to hide, pronto. The nearest spot was the half-open pocket door that led to the library-seriously, was this a hotel or a fucking game of Clue?-all full of glass-fronted cabinets and old-timey looking leather-bound books. He flattened himself behind the door and flicked the light off on his phone a split second before he heard the tell-tale beep of the card reader again, followed by a click as the door opened. His heart was pounding madly in his chest but he stayed silent and still, another skill from his thief days that had only gotten better working for Jones, all those nights in the Jolly Roger when he was expected to blend into the wall while the boss conducted meetings with people like Albert Spencer and the dirty cops he had pressed firmly under his thumb. There was some shuffling noises from the hall and then the sound of voices. More than one.

"Did you check your phone? Anything new?"

"Nah, same as before. Overdose, coma, Mr. Spencer is shocked and appalled, blah blah blah, yeah, I bet he is, the goddamn prick."

The first voice spoke again, sounding annoyed. "Watch your language, Mike!"

"What? It's literally true, if the shoe fits and all that. Why not call it like it is? He's guilty as sin too."

They were both clearly male and Will frowned. One was named Mike, was the other R. Gold? But then someone else chimed in and he felt a cold chill go right down his spine.

"Oh knock it off, both of you. Spencer's done for anyway, his campaign will be over before his wife wakes up. If she even wakes up. The king is dead, long live the queen, Regina Mills triumphs again, hallelujah."

Lacey.

It was her, it had to be, he'd recognize her voice anywhere, but Will still found himself praying madly that he was mistaken, that it was another woman who just somehow sounded like her.

A lot like her.
Exactly like her.

The hall light turned on and he caught a reflection in the glass that covered one of the bookcases, smudged and indistinct, but there was no mistaking that it was the dark-haired beauty who'd shown up to work at the Jolly Roger in what Will now realized was suspiciously good timing. He crept towards the edge of the pocket door and carefully slid it back just a bit, having faith that a high-end hotel like the Prince would take care of all the little things like squeaky hinges as part of the white-glove service. He was right, it moved silently into the wall and he chanced peering out for a better look.

There were two men, one standing with his back to Will and the other turned so that he could only see the side of his face, and that was half-hidden behind a pair of thick glasses. Both were dressed in khakis and long-sleeved collared shirts, as if they were following a business casual dress code for this clandestine, late-night meeting with a stripper. Will didn't *think* he recognized either of them, not personally and not from the photo. The man in the picture Killian Jones had given him had given him had shoulder-length hair and neither of them did, plus there was something about the shadowy figure that suggested he was much older, forty or maybe even in his fifties. These two looked young, or at least the one whose face he could actually somewhat see did. No more than twenty-five, tops, clean-shaven and clean cut. Lacey looked like she had dressed to match the pair of them, her short, tight skirts, stacked heels and backless tops were nowhere in sight. She had on a flowery blouse that didn't show even the slightest hint of cleavage, tied at the neck in a bow, and a loose, pleated skirt that fell down to her calves. It was cute instead of sexy, like a receptionist at an office, or what a librarian would wear. Will ducked back behind the door, blinking. It was definitely Lacey, but that woman out there wasn't the Lacey he knew.

Mrs. Gold

He was beginning to think that he had never really known her.

"But you were supposed to take out both of them together, that was the whole point! It was the perfect opportunity, and now Kil-, now Jones is still loose."

Will felt himself stiffen at Lacey's words, realizing with growing dread that she'd double-crossed the both of them. How could he have been so damn stupid? She'd been playing him like a fiddle the whole time, and the boss was going to completely flip his lid when he found out. Or worse. Probably worse.

Definitely worse.

"He didn't even stay in the room with her for thirty minutes and then he left!" one of the men protested, loud and clearly frustrated. "We thought we had more time, we were getting everything ready so he couldn't escape, the salt, the handcuffs, it's not like it's easy to hold one of them for very long. Do you have any idea of how long we've been waiting for this? We were going to catch them right in the middle of the act and make them both pay. Finally cut that damned bastard down at last and punish-"

"We had a deal," Lacey interrupted. "You made a deal. Jones has to be out of the picture, he already knows too much thanks to that idiot jumping the gun and if he manages to put all the pieces together, he could destroy everything."

"We know, we know. Look, there's still time, right? Once we've sent Jones straight back to Hell where he belongs then it's on to phase two, right on schedule. Once the new formula is out on the streets they'll be no stopping it, they'll literally kill each other to get their hands on a single hit, it's twice as pure as the last batch. Ask Caroline Spencer."
A jolt went through Will at that. He hadn't found the man in the picture, but he'd clearly found the heroin dealers that Killian Jones had been tearing the city apart trying to find. Will had smoked plenty of weed in his life and dabbled a bit with party drugs, coke, shrooms and the like when he was part of Hood's crew, but he'd never gotten into the really hard stuff like some of the guys he'd ran with back in those days did, like heroin, or God forbid, meth. And it was a good thing too, since while he'd heard the new shit, Heaven's Gate, gave an incredible high like nothing else did, it was dangerous as fuck. And now they were talking about releasing a strain that was twice as pure?

"It worked."

It was the other man talking now, the one named Mike, more soft-spoken than the one with the glasses who'd been arguing with Lacey. Will had to strain to hear him.

"It actually worked. It wasn't even a full dose too, just a half hit, but it was enough, the ecstasy became agony in just moments. Not even enough time to pray for forgiveness, not like it would have worked anyway, she was already branded with the mark. And that was only one adulterer, imagine what will happen when it's released and they all come for it, the parents who neglect their kids and squander the grocery money on crack, the pimps who get teenage girls hooked and whore them out on the streets, rapists and murderers who walk around free and think they got away with their crimes. There'll be no way to repent from this, it'll be a cleanse, from the scum in the gutters all the way up to the skyscrapers and people like the Spencers who think their money makes them untouchable. The whole city will be washed clean thanks to us and we'll be given our real reward.....all those years when none of them heard us, now they'll have to listen. And more than that, we'll finally get an answer. The one we've been waiting for all this time will come. She'll be ours, our very own Angela Caleum, and it will be glorious."

Will blinked a few times, trying to process what he'd just heard. It sounded like the dude was high, the way he was talking. High, or batshit crazy, or both. He chanced another peek, squinting hard at the two men. He could have sworn there was something familiar about them, he was suddenly certain he'd seen them before, somewhere. But where? "Think, Will, think!" he told himself. At the Jolly Roger? Maybe that was how they'd hooked up with Lacey...but no, if she was a part of the whole heroin thing than she had to have known them *before* she started working for Killian Jones. He couldn't put his finger on it, at least not yet. What was the connection? And who the hell was this Angela chick and what did they want with her? She'd be theirs? Were they planning a kidnapping on top of everything else? They did mention having handcuffs...and salt. What the fuck did salt have to do with anything?

They moved away, voices fading out and Will took a few deep breaths that sounded far too loud in the small room, feeling himself twitch with the urge to make a break for it. He could just slide the pocket door back a little bit more, slip out of the suite and call Mr. Jones, confess everything about Ana and Hood and Lacey, let him handle the two dealers, but he was glued in place, wavering with indecision. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if Jones was out of the picture, permanently. It wasn't like he was a good person or anything, he owned a strip club, for fuck's sake, he'd been having an affair with a married woman that had almost gotten her killed, and while Will couldn't say he actually liked stuck-up Caroline Spencer or her smarmy husband, she didn't deserve what had happened to her, no one deserved that, he'd pushed that Mark guy into trying to rob a bank to pay off his debt, a debt that Jones had encouraged him to run up in the first place, he could have cut him off the second his first credit card declined, he'd apparently done something to piss off two crazy heroin dealers enough that they were trying to take him out and he had a mysterious locked room in his basement where Will was pretty sure he was keeping Jack the bartender, probably against her will. No, definitely against her will, cause who would willingly go down there?

He was cruel...dangerous...the only real good thing Will could think of that the man had done was to
send that teenage girl Katie back home on the train instead of hiring her to dance at the club, even though she was exactly the type who would have pulled down bank among a certain group of clients who zeroed in on the "barely-legal" girls, the ones who looked, dressed and acted the youngest. Will still felt a flash of guilt whenever he thought of Katie in her too tight dress and too much makeup, clearly scared shitless, and even guiltier when he remembered how excited he'd been to personally "audition" the dancers when Jones had offered him the job and mentioned it offhandedly as one of the perks.

But one good deed could hardly count against all the other shit he'd pulled. If Will did nothing, didn't warn him, pretended he hadn't found out any info on the man in the picture and just let the two dealers, Mike and the other guy, deal with Jones the way they clearly wanted to...then all of his problems would be solved and best of all, nothing could be pinned directly on him. He could just walk away scot-free (maybe with a bit of cash and a few other things lifted from Jones's penthouse) and act like none of it ever happened. It was like all his prayers had just been answered.

Besides, it wasn't like anyone out there would actually miss Killian Jones if he was gone.

Would they?

Emma found herself at the office after leaving the hospital, not caring that it was the middle of the night. She didn't want to go back to her small apartment and stare at the walls until Killian called (or...didn't) and she'd bypassed her usual refuge, the Cathedral of Saint Raphael, without a second thought, parking her vintage (Killian's sardonic voice in her mind whispered "old") Bug outside the building where Shared Blessings was housed instead and turning off the ignition with a twist of the key, headlights snuffing out as she stepped out of the car and closed the door behind her without bothering to lock it. Non furtum facies - thou shalt not steal - was the seventh commandment and she was sworn to uphold them all, but someone coming along and trying to hotwire her little yellow Volkswagen was the least of her worries at the moment.

The building was dark, all the other offices were long closed for the night and the lobby and hallways were all empty and quiet as a tomb. The grey carpet that ran through the common areas was worn and needed to be replaced and the paint was peeling where the walls met the ceilings, cracked and crazed like an old porcelain doll, once grand, now shabby. The whole place had a bit of a neglected air that pointed to a somewhat careless landlord who was too cheap too bother much with upkeep. Emma let her fingertips graze over nameplates for the CPAs and the the tutoring company and the photographer's studio and the other small business who shared the building with her charity. A building that Killian owned, through a shell company named JS Limited. Or Jones Shipping Limited, as it was once engraved on a weather-beaten brass plaque on another ramshackle building centuries ago. The truth was hidden in plain sight, if one knew where to look. Killian had taken the name Jones for his own when he took over the company that bore it and out of all of his aliases, that one had stuck. Not continuously, she knew he'd gone through other fake names and titles as he went from one city to the next, shedding each one in the process before moving on like a snake shedding its skin, the perpetual serpent in the garden. But he kept going back to Jones at odd intervals, for reasons he kept close to the vest but Emma had always suspected were largely sentimental.

Except demons weren't sentimental, of course.

"Captain Jones"

"Lady Swan"

The neatly stencilled letters that spelled out Shared Blessings were stark on the glass door, clear, not frosted like some of the others. They wanted the space to be welcoming and open to all who might
come to them for help and not have anyone falter on that final threshold when faced with a perceived barrier. A memory flashed through her mind when the door swung open at her unspoken command and revealed the faint groove on the floor below, Killian pacing back and forth in the shadows outside a chapel he could not enter and calling fruitlessly over the faint strains of the music to her in a voice no one else could hear.

Shadows filled the small reception area and there was no sound but a barely audible hum from the building's HVAC systems, far removed from the grandeur of that long-ago royal ball filled by a thousand courtiers in their finery and jewels. Mary Margaret and David would have left hours ago, heading home in David's pickup truck to their cozy loft and another evening spent reading baby books together as they counted down the days and prepared to welcome their child into the world. Her friends were moving on with their lives in a way that Emma never could and she felt a strange emotion when she pictured their future little family of three, something that wasn't the joy she should be feeling for their answered prayer. It felt like something was twisting inside of her instead, something dark and slippery taking root deep within, just as it had outside Saint Luke's when Killian quietly confessed to his affair with Caroline Spencer.

Damn him.

Again the voice in her mind, this time with a reminder. "Too late."

Emma set her phone face up on her desk and sat down in the chair. The screen had gone black after she'd dropped it into the street and it refused to turn back on again no matter which button she pressed. It had clearly broken in the fall and while it would only take a small miracle to get it to work again, she didn't summon her light to repair whatever had gone wrong inside and fix the crack that had only grown wider across the glass in the last hour, even though if it was left the way it was the whole screen would inevitably shatter. A miracle, even a small one, was too precious to waste right now.

Killian would buy her a new phone, no questions asked, the newest and best model available. He'd give her anything she wanted or needed, a new car, a better apartment, clothes, jewelry, he was always trying to figure out what she would accept, what she really desired, what would finally make her succumb to him fully at long last.

"Sexual fidelity, is that what you want, Emma? You've never asked-"

"You're not capable of that."

The jagged crack across the screen was a quicksilver line etched indelibly on the dark glass while the phone itself lay silent. She didn't know if Elsa had tried to call her after she'd left the confused Angel of Death back in the ER with Caroline Spencer clinging desperately to life, or if Killian had phoned again to try to-Emma wasn't sure what. Explain? Apologize? Repent? There was nothing he could say, she knew what he was and what he did. A corrupter of human souls, forever bound to sin until the End of Days. It was all he could ever be.

With her phone broken all those late night text conversations with 'K. Jones' might be gone forever now, the silly emojis traded back and forth, the selfies they sent each other, some of which were definitely more on the risqué side. Especially his, he didn't suffer much (at all) from the virtue of modesty, and he was ever the seducer with that smirk and the perfectly framed shots in the mirror, all dark promise and bare skin, planes and angles dappled with light and hidden in shadow. Sometimes she fell for it and went over to his place, most of the time she was able to resist. Modern English and slang words like "booty call" and "dick pic" would give way to the old, familiar Latin as day slipped into night.
Are you still there, damnate?

I'm still here, beata.

Quam diu?
(For how long?)

In aeternum.
(For eternity)

Emma knew he wasn't faithful and never had been. He was a demon, it wasn't in his nature to be true to one and one only. Still, she had felt that strange, hollow sensation in her chest again when she realized he'd been sleeping with the woman who bore his mark branded into her skin. An emotion she refused to name, one that she wasn't supposed to feel at all. But he'd always been there, whenever she'd needed him over the years, in France, in Tortola, in Boston and in Belgium, upholding his end of the offer he'd made to always give his assistance when it was in his power to do so and to ask nothing from her in return. A promise he'd kept, even when the whole world seemed to burn around them and he could have had the one thing he always wanted.

"Is this the price he demands of you?"

"No, he doesn't ask for this. He never did."

Everything around her was proof of that, he was their largest single donor, the anonymous benefactor behind Shared Blessings, funding the soup kitchen and the after school programs for at-risk youth and the job training grants that had all helped countless people over the years. Not only that, he was also their landlord, something David and Mary Margaret didn't even know. No one knew, except her.

And Him, He knew as he knew all and saw all, but He was utterly silent on the subject of Killian Jones, Damnate Infernum. Corrupter of the innocent, and an angel's deadly sin.

Invidia. Jealousy. She had been jealous of Caroline Spencer and their relationship, jealous and fearful that everything Killian had ever told her was a lie. Pretty, empty words, a practiced seduction, and nothing more. Even though they'd already slept together, she hadn't succumbed to him fully and she didn't know if he really would be there for eternity if she did. Eternity, after all, was a very long time. The sin of jealousy had twisted itself into ira, wrath, growing to fill all the hollow spaces inside, an anger that had blinded her senses to everything except her rage at her unfaithful lover and clouded her from the real threat still lurking out there unseen in the shadows. If this other demon known as the Dark One really was targeting him, then all he had done for her only put him even more at risk.

David had a filing cabinet in his office, filled with the charity's most important paperwork. As such it was normally kept locked and he had the key, but with a wave of her hand the drawers sprung open with a screech of metal that broke the silence. A lot was handled electronically these days, but there was still hard copies of certain records, like their bank accounts and the forms that confirmed their status as a non-profit (fast-tracked, thanks to a small miracle down at City Hall to get all the necessary boxes ticked) and the tax receipts David insisted they issue every year in case their benefactor ever wanted to step out of the shadows and be acknowledged for his or her generosity publicly at last, all neatly organized and labelled in cheery yellow folders.

Another wave of her hand and all that remained were blank pages fluttering in a neat pile, as every trace of Killian was wiped away. He would never be able to take those tax deductions now, but since
he didn't even pay taxes anyway, she didn't think he'd have a problem with it. Any scrap of information that could potentially lead back to him vanished, including the most damning piece of evidence (literally), the lease. It was the last to fade, words melting and dissolving away until all that was left was the two signature lines at the end.

JS Limited had rented the office suite to Shared Blessings and like most rental agreements, it had been sealed with a lease to bind both landlord and tenant to the terms of the deal. The lease itself was a standard template, nothing out of the ordinary, the kind that was available in office supply stores with blanks where the address and the rent (way below market) and other details had been filled in, including the names of the representatives from each side who had agreed to the contract, Killian Jones and Emma Swan. They were laid out side by side on the page, Damnate Infernum, Demon of Hell, and Angela Caleum, Angel of Heaven, the damned and the blessed connected as they had been since that night in Rome when he'd given a courtly bow outside the ruins of a church and first asked her name. She knew what he really was underneath that beguiling facade and seductive smile and yet she'd answered him anyway, just as he'd offered up his own true identity without hesitation and told her to remember it.

What's in a name?

Shakespeare, not the Gospels, but the Bard had received more than a little divine inspiration when he was bent over his quill and parchment and first laid down the famous question in gleaming black ink, words that were still quoted to this day. Names were very powerful things, a demon could be summoned to appear by their name, willing or not. It was one of the reasons why she had never saved anything else with Killian's actual name on it, even in her now-broken phone, he was 'K. Jones' and not 'Killian'. Never 'Killian". To Mary Margaret and David he was their mysterious anonymous benefactor, he'd been Captain Hook in the Virgin Islands and Mounsier St. Jean in New Orleans and Lord MacSeoin in Paris once upon a time, a legend and a myth hinted at in old, forgotten texts and tales. Strikingly handsome of both face and form, silver-tongued devil who even tried to turn an angel and came dangerously close to succeeding on a dark night when the line between sin and salvation was thinner than gossamer and the lure of the crimson flames beckoned from behind Marian blue eyes.

Both signatures disappeared and left only an empty page behind. If either one of them had actually signed the lease then it would have been impossible for even Emma to make it vanish, a true contract with a demon was unbreakable. It had to be seen through to the end, no matter what the cost. Killian had given her the office space and the seed money to share her divine blessing without asking for anything in return, the lease was only for show. To sit quietly in a filing cabinet, in between the papers for their insurance policy (which ironically enough didn't cover Acts of God, another boilerplate phrase with a much deeper meaning) and the list of emergency contacts for their staff and volunteers. David was a stickler for keeping up-to-date records.

One of the other folders caught Emma's eye before she closed the cabinet. Nothing had come out of it when she pulled everything that pertained to Killian with a holy command, so it didn't hold anything to do with him, but it had drawn her attention now because it was green instead of yellow like the rest. Even with Killian's generous financial support they had a strict budget for office supplies, and green folders were probably on sale when David had run out of yellow ones. He'd always been on the frugal side.

Inside there was a page in David's handwriting paperclipped at the front of the file, with a list of dates and a dollar figure written next to each. Three hundred, two seventy five, four fifty, they went up and down but the last was the highest, one thousand and sixty dollars, dated only a few days prior. Emma felt herself frown, flipping the page and finding deposit slips from their bank, showing a cash deposit into the charity's operating account that matched each one.
It wasn't unusual for them to receive cash donations, but they were mostly small amounts, ten dollars here, twenty dollars there. Kids donated part of their birthday or Christmas money, former clients would stop by the soup kitchen once they were back on their feet and slip some bills across the counter, that sort of thing. Thousands of dollars in cash was something else entirely, even Killian made wire transfers directly into their account nowadays instead of bothering with cash. Although he'd once given her an old gold doubloon, making it appear between his fingers on the anniversary of that night in 1802 with a smirk that only deepened when she'd rolled her eyes and called him Captain before rolling him onto his back and giving him something else to do with his mouth instead.

From the file it was clear that David had been keeping careful track of every penny as the one in charge of the day-to-day financials and good honest soul that he was, jotting down a question in the margins of the lists of dates and amounts. "New anonymous donor? Money dropped off in envelope with no name or return address, just GEN 1420 (?) written on front."

GEN 1420.

David was a good Catholic who faithfully attended Mass at least once a week with Mary Margaret, but he wasn't a theologian and clearly hadn't understood the reference. Emma was an angel, Scripture was second nature to her and she knew what it meant immediately.

The Book of Genesis, chapter 14, verse 20.

*And he blessed him and said,*

*Blessed be Abram by God Most High,*

*Possessor of heaven and earth;*

*and blessed be God Most High,*

*who has delivered your enemies into your hand!*

*And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*

It was the first reference to tithing in the Book, the ancient custom of giving a tenth of one's livestock or crops to the church as thanks for the glory of God. While most parishioners would put at least some money in the collection plate at Mass every Sunday, only the most devout of souls actually gave a full ten percent of their income these days. If the line of figures each represented ten percent then the totals were significant amounts, three thousand dollars, two thousand and five hundred dollars, to nearly eleven thousand dollars. The first date on the list was only a few months ago, right after Regina Mills's annual fundraising gala, to be exact. Killian's presence at it had been a bit of a distraction, his temptation beckoning her to finally join him fully in the shadows where the only voice she could hear was his. But she had resisted his pull and interacted with any number of wealthy men and women that night who all had the means to anonymously drop off an envelope full of cash. Perhaps one of them had been inspired to give the old-fashioned way after an encounter with the divine, even unknowingly, but the mystery of who it was would have to wait. Emma had another nameless figure to deal with first.

The Dark One.

A powerful demon who she had glimpsed once, perched high on a rooftop in Paris with a walking stick in his hand and his face hidden in the smoky, pre-dawn haze. Even at a distance had Emma felt the malevolence that emanated from him, different than the lusty chaos that came from the cackling succubus in emerald green. It was deeper, darker, and far more ancient. More than deadly, it
Original sin, the Fall of Man, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit and were driven from the Garden by an angel with a flaming sword as punishment. He was old, old enough that he had probably crossed paths with the oldest angels, the ones who were known now as the Archangels, the highest of the holy. Their names were well known, not just chronicled in the Book but also inscribed on statues and art throughout history.

She needed the name. If she had the Dark One's true name then she could try to bind him, cast him out of the city and prevent him from returning with a holy barrier he couldn't cross. If he was as powerful as she suspected it would take a lot of her divine grace, the shining radiance that she'd revealed to the handsome sinner Arthur in the basement of that dingy pub was nothing compared to the holy light she'd have to channel against such a demon. Darkness always sought to snuff out the light, and this particular stormcloud had already touched too many, the red haired dancer, all the people on Elsa's list of overdoses from the hospital, Caroline Spencer. She wasn't an Archangel, her deeds weren't written in any book, holy or not, but Emma couldn't sit back and do nothing, not when there were so many people she cared about who could be caught unaware in the Dark One's path, Elsa, David and Mary Margaret and their baby, Father Hopper and Sister Astrid, their dedicated group of volunteers at the soup kitchen, Aurora and her mother, Rose, John and Michael Darling…. …and Killian.

The one she cared about more than she'd admitted to even herself.

She would find a way to save him. After the Dark One was banished and gone, she'd pull him into the light and keep him there. There had to be a way, there just had to be. It would be a hell of a miracle, but that's what they were, after all. Angel and Demon, the damned and the blessed, Heaven and Hell. She had faith that it was possible, just as she'd once had faith that she could touch him skin to skin and not be burned.

The green file folder with the list of donations was put back in the cabinet and the drawer slid back into place with a flick of her wrist, securely locked again with an audible click. Resolve settled on her shoulders, rolling back with the feel of her wings readying themselves to unfurl. The rustling sound was accompanied by light that filled David's small office, chasing away the shadows and reflecting off the framed photos of him and Mary Margaret that sat on the desk until their smiling faces both disappeared completely under the pure radiance that shone from under Emma's skin. It reflected off the glass in beams that criss-crossed the room and spilled through the door, spreading through the kitchenette, the other offices, the conference room and reception area until the whole suite was illuminated by heavenly light. Anyone passing by outside would certainly do a double-take if they happened to glance up at the windows, it was brighter than any lamp, any fixture, golden as the sunrise and incandescent as a star. The light continued to spread through the entire building, up and the dingy halls and into the empty stairwells, finding every last forgotten nook and cranny and filling it up until there was nothing but light. Killian's largesse hadn't just helped her charity, all the small businesses in the building had benefited from his ownership as the gentrification that had seen sharpie rising rents and other, similar places in the area sold to developers to be demolished for condos and corporate flagships, had been stymied by his refusal to do the same. It truly was a shared blessing from the unlikeliest of sources. Even Regina Mills had been thwarted once, forced to abandon a proposed "revitalization" project for the entire block that definitely would have seen them all forced out under the guise of the greater good for the city, but which Mary Margaret's contacts at City Hall from her social worker days had whispered would benefit the mayor first and several silent investors second with the city a distant third at most.

A single phone call to Killian, and the whole deal was killed before it even began while the failure of her much-hyped pet project had been seen as a crack in Regina's elegant facade, a chink in her normally impeccable armour that had allowed Albert Spencer to become the first serious contender to
unseat her from her throne.

Emma felt the echo of them all as her light spread, the imprints their souls had left behind, the faint, thankful impressions of the people who had come to them for help, the stronger presence of the other tenants humming away in the background, working hard to feed their families and keep a roof over their heads, and faintest and most indistinct of all, she felt him here too. Killian had visited the building in person at least once and had left the barest trace of himself that lingered on, unnoticed and unseen by everyone except her. With her golden light shining directly on it, the shadowed form showed not the shape and figure of his human face, the handsome and refined Mr. K. Jones, but of what lay underneath. The demon within, dark and menacing, a silent wolf among bleating sheep. Most would never see it, couldn't see it, save for the few born with the ability to see past the veil like the saints of old, but Emma had always known it was there.

It seemed to look at her for a moment and then it was gone, dissipating like smoke and leaving only what had felt like the faintest brush of a hand to her cheek. It was warm, so warm in the nighttime chill, but it didn't burn.

"Damnate," she whispered aloud to the empty room. *Infernal one.*

Killian had called her a swan, a beautiful feathered creature as she also was, physical beauty that was His gift to His angels, with great feathered wings that could soar high above the Earth and fly everywhere and anywhere. Names held meaning, though her wings remained concealed more often than not now, she still carried the suggestion of them in the name Swan, her true, angelic identity hidden in plain sight.

Killian had not told her the Dark One's real name but she knew someone else who might know what it was. Someone she hadn't seen or spoken to in many years, but she knew would answer her call in a heartbeat. She left her broken phone behind on her desk when she left the building and climbed back into her Bug, the engine coming to life on the first turn of the key and the headlights pointing the way down the empty streets in twin beams and illuminating the path ahead along the dark ribbon of asphalt that glittered under the light. She didn't need the phone, it wasn't that kind of call she was going to make.

And afterwards, she would share her blessing with her demon lover and save him, faithful or not, he was hers in a way that no one else had ever been, the one voice who only she heard and she would split her own divinity clear in two to redeem him if she had to. Her light had healed him once, it could do so again, only this time it wouldn't just heal.

It would atone.

A single white feather fluttered above the pavement as Emma drove away, dancing without breeze and slipping to and fro from the deep gloom of the dark night to the misty yellow glow of the streetlights, dipping low on each pass but never quite touching the ground. It shimmered gold along the edges, rippling like the sun rippled on the water and circled around some unseen force, an invisible tide that held it in place from somewhere underground, below the street, below the earth, below Heaven above in the diamond-bright stars that moved imperceptibly across a black velvet sky. Never descending fully and yet never taking full flight, it continued to spin and twirl, caught between up and down, light and dark, and giving no sign of which way it would go. But it couldn't remain suspended forever in the strange limbo from which it found itself, it would eventually have to fall or ascend.

It was only a matter of time.
Chapter 23

On any other evening the Jolly Roger would be in full swing by now, the lights turned down low and the music turned up, a sensual beat that made the blood rise and the pulse quicken. The liquor would be flowing in intoxicating rivers enough to drown a man and the dancers would be gyrating, all lithe, bare limbs and come-hither looks. It was a decadent playground of the rich and beautiful all watched over from above by a lone demon who was the sole captain of the ship, steering them on their pleasure cruise straight down to Hell while they partied on in blissful ignorance, unaware and heedless of the danger that lurked just below every polished surface.

They never saw what was truly coming until it was too late.

But tonight the club was virtually unrecognizable. All of the tables and chairs where the vastly overpaid bankers and stockbrokers sat and drank vastly overpriced cocktails with women young enough to be their daughters and granddaughters had been removed, leaving a large, empty space in the middle of the floor and revealing the symbol that was etched into the wood, normally concealed by the furniture. Not that anyone would have noticed it anyway, mortals were, for the most part, utterly blind to what was right in front of their own damn noses. There was no overlooking it now, the carved lines were stark under the overhead lights, turned up to full brightness and revealing everything that normally lay hidden for the first time, as harsh as the midday sun in the middle of the desert.

Killian stood with his arms folded across his chest and surveyed the room for a moment with a critical eye before giving a tiny nod. It wasn't ideal, but it would do. The Jolly Roger was much more than just a high-end strip club, it was the central hub of his operation in the city, the root from which everything else had grown. Illegal backroom casinos and sports betting, corrupt cops who answered to him and not the mayor's favourite pet, the chief of police, industrial espionage and blackmail, even a bit of his old, lucrative sideline, smuggling, this time in the form of knockoff sneakers and fake designer handbags that were sold out of the backs of nail shops and tattoo parlours. Captain Hook was long gone, just another forgotten legend in a dusty book, but Killian Jones was still that ruthless, cutthroat pirate at heart underneath his elegant, bespoke suits and perfectly pressed shirts.

A pirate with a secret treasure that must be kept hidden and protected at all costs.

His club served a dual purpose, it was a business, and a highly profitable one at that, he could have lived like a king on the revenue from it alone and not wanted for anything (except the one thing he wanted more than everything else, the one thing no amount of money would buy or he would have already spent every last cent of it to obtain his heart's desire and done so gladly) but it was also a literal den of sin, where countless men and women had all given in to temptation and damned their immortal souls forever under his corrupting influence. Lust, greed, wrath, gluttony, pride, they had all left their mark behind just as he marked the ones who fell with his demonic brand and the sins permeated everything around him as if the building itself had been soaked in gasoline, ready to alight with just a single spark. His power was strongest at the Jolly Roger, where the deep leather banquets served as the pews facing the altar of the stage, the raised DJ booth housed the choir, and an unholy Communion of body and blood was served nightly in the nubile flesh of the dancers and the liquor poured from behind the bar to those who came to worship in his name instead of His.

Killian could feel it under his skin, moving through his veins quicker than any drug with a burn that was a dark, addictive ecstasy. He cracked his neck, the pop and hiss echoing loud in the silent room while pleasure and pain coiled and twisted along every nerve, making the cords stand out as he drank deep from the unseen chalice and drew on the reserve of wickedness and vice. The one thing he'd always had was time, centuries to carefully plot and plan, but the ticking clock was now his enemy
and he needed to be at full strength as fast as possible before facing him.

**Rumpelstiltskin**

Killian hadn't told Emma the full truth, that he'd tangled with the Dark One more than once in the past and long after their encounter in Paris. The animosity between them ran deep, and no one could hold a grudge longer than a demon, immortal and immoral as they were. Years had passed, decades, but it was no matter. They would face each other again, and this time only one of them would walk away, Killian was certain of that.

He still had his old iron knife, the same one that had spilled the cackling succubus Zelena's infernal blood onto the Parisian cobblestones when she'd learned his secret and dared to threaten his angel. Iron could both repel and harm demons, hence the old custom of nailing an iron horseshoe over a doorway. It wasn't originally done for luck, it was to prevent malevolent creatures from entering the house and gaining a foothold among the souls. Freshly sharpened, the blade was pitch-black without a speck of tarnish and gleamed like a pool of oil. A few other supplies were ready and waiting, both esoteric and humble in nature, but he didn't need much. Killian couldn't summon Rumpelstiltskin directly himself, their master could as he could with all demons, but he wasn't going to bring the Fallen One into this squabble to play mediator. If anyone would recognize the faintest whiff of the divine about him, it would be Lucifer, born of Heaven before he was bound to Hell. He needed a sinner to do the summoning for him and for that he had Jacqueline, the thieving bartender who was about to learn exactly what the "perform other duties as needed" clause in her employment contract really meant. The summoning itself would be done at the Jolly Roger, his own private house of worship to the many vices of man. Emma would remain safely removed from the whole event, and once Rumpelstiltskin was dealt with there would be nothing keeping them apart and Killian could resume his seduction, finish what had begun the night he'd first caught a glimpse of that single light in the midst of the darkness.

The harsh, artificial light that filled his club now was a miracle of science but it was nothing compared to that golden glow, mesmerizing enough to tempt even one who knew better than to fall for something shiny to get closer and try to get a better look.

Funny that. He was the corruptor, the one who offered the poisoned apple, so sweet and juicy and irresistible, and yet she had drawn him in first and before he could stop himself he was turning his back on the delights of a rampaging army let loose like a swarm of locusts to destroy and defile everything in their path and heading away from the delectable feast instead with an angel and a group of frightened nuns all following behind that reminded him later of a regal, unruffled swan leading a clutch of confused, orphaned ducklings. Their innocence grated on him during the whole of the brief journey, pure souls that were too naive, too trusting. So trusting that they had all placed their faith in him to see them to safety, even as they visibly shied away from what they glimpsed behind his eyes.

Except her.

His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. The one he'd thrown against the wall in a rage had been completely destroyed but he had backups stashed in his office, just in case. It wasn't the first time his literally demonic temper had gotten the better of him and the cost of a few spare phones kept in a drawer along with all the jewelry Emma wouldn't accept from him was nothing. Killian's heart leapt into his throat as he fumbled in his pocket with uncharacteristic clumsiness, hoping against hope that it was Emma calling him again, despite the risk. If he had the chance to explain why he had taken up with Caroline Spencer when he was supposed to be dealing with the Dark One and made it look like he was more interested in sporting with a married woman and satisfying his lust than in doing what he'd promised then maybe she would forgive him for his infidelity and he would offer her anything
she wanted, *anything*. But it was Jefferson's number that popped up on the screen instead and he grit his teeth in frustration. Still, the dealer wouldn't be calling him unless he had something important to share, he knew better than to bother his best customer, the infamous Mr. Jones with anything inconsequential and Killian needed all the information he could get so he answered on the second ring.

"Jefferson. What have you found out?"

"This shit is seriously fucked up."

He'd sent a sample of the Heaven's Gate heroin to Jefferson for testing and analysis since he wasn't just some low-level dealer, he was a brilliant chemist who had funded his entire degree at a prestigious, pricey college by selling his illegal concoctions in the dorms to his well-to-do classmates living it up on mom and dad's dime. Jefferson had been courted by several large pharmaceutical companies even before graduation and could have had a storied career developing new treatments for modern plagues like HIV, Zika, bird flu, but he had fallen down a rabbit hole of uppers and downers and now made colourful pills with "Eat Me" inscribed on them instead. He hadn't completely fried his Ivy League brain though and he sounded dead serious.

"Explain," Killian demanded.

Jefferson immediately launched into what sounded like a textbook description of heroin, dry and clinical and peppered with very long words that Killian mostly recognized for their Latin origins and not for whatever the hell it was Jefferson was actually trying to say.

"Spare me the chemistry lecture," he interrupted when he could finally get a word in edgewise, "And get to the bloody point, Jefferson."

There was a loud huff on the other end. "Okay, okay...look, you know where heroin actually comes from, right?"

That he did know. "Poppies."

The bright red flowers had been used since antiquity to produce medicines and narcotics, it was the origin of both morphine, a miracle drug for pain relief to untold multitudes, and heroin, a hellaciously addicting destroyer of lives. As the forbidden fruit in the Garden contained the knowledge of both Good and Evil linked together in a single bite, so too did the poppy flower contain two opposing forces locked together for eternity in their innocuous-looking seeds. Killian had sent Emma many different flowers over the years, endless bouquets of roses, tulips, buttercups, forget-me-nots, orchids, gardenias, but he had never sent her poppies. As beautiful as they were, they meant death, the eternal sleep, and while he wanted eternity with a burning desire that had never abated, he didn't mean it like that.

"That's right," Jefferson agreed, and Killian could practically see him nodding over the phone. "Poppies, mostly from Afghanistan, but also China, Mexico, Columbia and Burma."

The mention of Burma reminded Killian of something else, but he pushed the thought away. Now was not the time for that.

"Usually the country of origin doesn't really matter, though, they're all the same flower anyway."

Killian picked up on that immediately and his tone sharpened, "Usually doesn't matter. But this strain is different, isn't it?"
"Yes," Jefferson sighed. "Heroin comes from the *Papaver somniferum* variety of poppy, the opium poppy. But poppies are like any other plant, there's more than just one kind. Most of the others are inert, they can't be used to produce opium and therefore heroin, but there's a few, rare subspecies of the common opium poppy that yield a stronger, more potent product. They've never been cultivated to the same degree because they're much more temperamental, difficult to grow, harder to refine and your average illiterate Afghani poppy farmer isn't going to bother with it, if he could even get enough seeds to try, which he probably couldn't, not to turn a profit, at least. But if someone figured out a way to get a viable crop from one of these subspecies, then, well."

He thought of the list of names given to Emma by the Angel of Death herself, dozens of fatal overdoses fallen victim to a drug that promised Heaven and delivered Hell.

"And that's where the Heaven's Gate heroin comes from? One of these rare subspecies?"

Pieces were starting to click into place, a more potent strain explained why the high from the drug was reported to be much stronger and why it was so much easier to OD on it.

"I believe so, yes. But the real question is how. When I say these subspecies are rare, I don't mean they're unusual, I mean rare. They're nearly impossible to get outside of a few specimens in botanical gardens and university collections, it must have cost a fortune to establish, there's no supply chain in place, the usual importers have been completely bypassed, none of my contacts can even get their hands on a full brick. No one's wholesaling, which makes no goddamn sense, it's like it just appeared out of thin air one day already on the streets."

Killian gripped the phone a little tighter. Nothing Jefferson had said contradicted his theory that Rumpelstiltskin was somehow behind the trendy new drug, but neither was it definitive proof. The imp still chained up in his basement could have gotten it from someone else, they were naturally attracted to chaos, after all.

"Was there anything else? Anything at all, no matter how far fetched it might seem?"

There was a pause on the other end that told Killian there was something, his own instincts sensing that the dealer was holding back information. He felt his eyes flash crimson and when he spoke his voice was a dark, slithering growl.

"Tell me."

Jefferson answered with clear hesitation, "It's probably nothing, I mean, it's just something I found when I was doing a bit of research, trying to trace it back to the origin. Apparently the Nazis did some experiments with opium poppies, hell, the Germans were the ones who basically invented heroin in the first place anyway. Afghanistan and Germany had close ties even before the war, and I found some references to diplomats bringing poppy plants back to Berlin, including the rare varieties that the Nazis later used to try to crossbreed with the common opium poppy to create a hybrid strain that had the heightened potency combined with the ease of cultivation. They called it *Himmelstür*, which means-"

"Heaven's Door," Killian interrupted. He hadn't spoken German in years, but he was still as fluent in the language as he was in English and he knew what the word meant as soon as Jefferson said it. Heaven's Gate and Heaven's Door, the names were too similar for it to be a coincidence. Not to mention that the last time he had seen the Dark One in person had been right smack dab in the thick of World War II. As in all times of chaos and sin, the damned of Hell were there to enjoy the feast and the war that had engulfed the entire globe had practically been an all you can eat buffet.

"I know, I noticed it too. But that was what, seventy years ago? Anyway, the estate in Bavaria where
they were actually growing the hybrids was bombed by the Allies near the end of the war and the plants themselves were all destroyed.

Seventy years was a long time to a mortal who could live out his entire lifespan in less than that, but to a demon, it was a blink of the eye. Heroin usage was rampant in the German army during the war and now it was on the rise again, had the Dark One planted seeds more than seventy years ago that were now bearing new fruit? Killian had been too focused on his own interests back then to pay much attention to what Rumpelstiltskin was up to, especially when he had come so close to…

"Mr. Jones?"

Jefferson's voice pulled him back to the present. "Right," Killian said, trying to put all the pieces together even though some were still missing. "A hybrid strain, possibly the same one the Nazis cultivated, but there's no proof, and no leads on who's behind it. Anything else?"

"No, at least, not about that. Look, if you take over the business I can definitely run the distribution for you and probably triple what it's doing now within six months, there'd be no competition for this and with my network already in place, you'd make a fucking fortune."

Killian had more money now than he could even spend despite his very expensive tastes and his secret contributions to Emma's charity, but that had never stopped him from greedily wanting more and he felt a surge at the prospect of doing exactly what Jefferson proposed. Cut the Dark One down and take everything for himself, make it his. It was a tempting idea, very tempting, he could even revive his old Hook persona and keep the drugs separate from his other business, just as he'd done with smuggling rum and other spirits as a pirate once upon a time.

"And…" Jefferson added, sounding a bit hesitant for a moment before he plowed on. "I just wanted to thank you for whatever strings you pulled with CPS, I get to see Grace twice a week now unsupervised and they said I can start overnight visits next month so long as my next two tests come back clean, I've already rented another house so there's no chance of her getting anywhere near anything again, it's even in a gated community and everything. I'm getting my daughter back, and I owe it all to you Mr. Jones, so if there's anything else you need-"

"I'll call you if there is."

Killian hung up, not bothering with goodbyes. The reminder that he'd done more than he was strictly obligated to under his deal with Jefferson made his shoulders tight and he grimaced as he dropped the phone back down on the bar. He'd only promised the dealer one afternoon with his beloved daughter, but it had been easy enough to get the paperwork approved for ongoing visits with a few well-chosen bribes and a bit of blackmail (everyone had skeletons in the closet, even social workers) and it kept Jefferson both compliant and in his debt. At least that's what Killian told himself.

He ignored the fact that there were other ways he could have made Jefferson much more permanently beholden to him that had nothing to do with the man's only child and focused on the new bits of information instead. Heaven's Gate and Heaven's Door. On the streets it was said that the name came from the euphoric high the drug produced, but Killian wasn't so certain now. He understood the "heaven" part, but the reference to gates and doors gave him pause. Both were barriers, boundaries, where one could go no further unless passage was granted. A damned sinner could reach the Gates of Paradise, but they would never open and grant admittance to what lay beyond, pure heavenly ecstasy unlike anything else.

Killian had a sense of what that was like. It was why he had never bothered trying the heroin himself, why he had told the succubus Zelena all those centuries ago when she tried to tempt him with Emma's face that he wouldn't settle for a false idol. Everything else was nothing but a pale
imitation of what he really wanted, and he was far too greedy to stop trying to obtain the one thing he coveted above all else. It had taken years, but he had carefully arranged an almost perfect situation to bide his time until Emma fell at last. Her charity bound her to the city, giving her more incentive to stay and nurture it like a garden, not just answering individual prayers, but overseeing the soup kitchen and food pantry and other programs that his money went to fund every month. Her apartment and his condo were only a short drive apart, perfect for late night trysts and in an increasingly secular world there were very few gates left to bar him entry, no doors shut in his face as Damnate Infernum, Demon of Hell. Heaven was so close that he could touch it.

"Just let go and fall right into my arms, I'll be there to catch you, Emma, you know I will."

He couldn't afford any more indulgences now like Jefferson's daughter or the night he could have had everything but hesitated at the last second, unwilling to press his advantage and take what she was so close to offering at last. All she'd needed was the tiniest push...

Emma might forgive him for his other sins, but he couldn't be sure she would have forgiven him for that.

Killian wasn't sure if he would have forgiven himself for it.

The phone buzzed again an hour or so later, after he'd relived that night in his mind again a dozen times or more, cursing himself for his moment of weakness. It lit up on the bar, flashing like a beacon and he crossed the empty room faster than mortal eyes would have been able to follow to snatch it up. He moved like a shadow, casting himself in a whirl that briefly revealed his true form in his haste before it was hidden back under the handsome face and sea-blue eyes once more. A quick glance at the screen showed it was Scarlet calling now, hopefully with useful information or Killian was probably going to end up destroying another phone. He hadn't bothered to personalize the settings yet and with the way his night was going he didn't expect he was going to be setting the wallpaper or assigning ringtones anytime soon.

"Uh, Mr. Jones?"

Scarlet had found something, Killian could sense it with demonic instinct, keen as the blade on his iron knife. He rested his free hand on one of the tables shoved next to the bar, ruby ring as dark as a drop of blood heavy on his finger.

Dark as a demon's blood at least. Angelic blood was gold.

"William Scarlet," Killian drawled, slow and deliberate. Names were as important as the soul within the mortal vessel. Names, true names, were power, the only thing he had ever asked of Emma in exchange for his assistance was her name, something that, once given, could never be taken back. His invocation of Scarlet's name was followed by a single command, "Tell me what you know."

If Scarlet's soul had been his then it would have been impossible for the man not to answer, he would have been literally hellbound to obey. But while Scarlet was a sinner like everyone else who worked for him, he hadn't completely signed away that most valuable part of himself and there was no immediate reply to Killian's order.

"Okay look," Scarlet breathed, clearly flustered by what to him probably felt like a sudden compulsion to spill his guts. "I went to the hotel like you said and poked around, and I've got something, something pretty major, but before I tell you what it is I have one condition."

Killian's eyebrows raised at Scarlet's daring while the demon within began to salivate, awakened even more by a word that could only mean one thing. "You think you're in any position right now to
impose conditions on me, Scarlet? You want to make a deal?"

The offer was like a stone dropped in a still pond, rippling out in waves much further than the initial fall. A single, seemingly small act, appearing no more significant than biting into an apple had, once upon a time, but everything came with a price. Killian wondered what it was that Scarlet wanted, money, probably. He was a thief, although he wasn't as stupid and reckless as Jacqueline and had never stolen anything from Killian directly like she had, or he might have been the one locked up in the basement.

"Yeah, I guess, just...no matter what happens, Anastasia is out. Completely. She walks away from the club, from everything and you guarantee that you won't go after her in any way, she's a hundred percent off limits. Deal?"

So it wasn't money, it was sex. He knew Scarlet's jealousy when it came to Anastasia would get the best of him eventually in the sadistic game Killian had been playing with the both of them, playing off Ana's lust for jewelry and designer clothes against Scarlet's white knight fantasies and there was a swell of dark satisfaction that made the air around him seem to shimmer with a smoky haze. "You want to make a deal for her? Your own private dancer, is that it? She only sucks your dick from now on?"

He was being deliberately crude because he wanted to hear Scarlet say it, to admit that he really wanted to own Anastasia and was giving in to his most selfish desires to acquire her, that deep down he was no different than the other men who came to the Jolly Roger and thought that their money could buy them not just a dance or a fuck, but that it gave them possession over the girls to use and abuse however they wanted.

"There is no greater sin than this."

"No, that's not-" Scarlet's voice rose with anger that only fueled Killian's glee even more, he relished these moments when the sinner finally gave into temptation and fell over the edge. Greed, lust and wrath, it was all oh so predictable but it didn't lessen the delightful anticipation of the damning confession that was about to come. There was a sound of a deep breath over the line as he clearly tried to get himself back under control and then he continued, sounding like he was talking through gritted teeth. "Look, I'm not asking you to give her to me like she's some kind of fucking trophy or prize, she's not, it's not like that, OK? I just...I just need her to be free of all this bullshit, she doesn't have to be with me. I know I fucked that up and it's my own fault."

Demonic glee was replaced by surprise, he hadn't expected that. Still, he recovered quickly, Anastasia must have promised Scarlet something, manipulated him into asking, wrapped him neatly back around her manicured finger. He let out an annoyed huff, he didn't really have time for this but he was still a corruptor of mortal souls and that side of him would not be so easily dissuaded from teasing out the real reason behind Scarlet's request. "That's what you want in exchange for this supposedly valuable information that you owe me anyway? Why?"

He could hear the discomfort in Scarlet's voice when he answered. "Does it matter?"

It did, but not for a reason Killian was about to explain to the man. He tapped his finger against the tabletop, making the ruby flash like a tiny flame. "If you want to make a deal with me, Mr. Scarlet, then you'll answer my question and tell my why Anastasia Tremaine's well-being is suddenly so damn important to you."

There was a long beat before he answered, mere seconds passed, but it was an eternity when standing on that precipice, the space between the decision to jump and the fall itself.
Scarlet decided to jump.

"Fine. Because I love her. That's why it's so damn important."

Killian literally pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it in utter disbelief. Scarlet was in love with Anastasia? And more than that, he was willing to make a deal for her? For a woman who had flaunted and fucked other men right under his nose and by Scarlet's own admission, was unwilling to take him back?

"You love her," Killian repeated his voice practically dripping with his contempt. "Really. Under that thin veneer of elegance and class you know exactly what she really is by now, don't you, Scarlet? She's a cold-hearted bitch, a grasping, gold-digging slut who only cares about one thing you don't have, money, no matter what convincing lies she's spun to tell you otherwise. Do you think she's capable of being just your girlfriend or your wife or is she going to drop you like a hot potato the second she gets what she wants from you and go running after the next CEO who walks through the Jolly Roger's door? You can't rescue her from the life she chose, you can't save her, she's...she's not worth it! That pretty face might be nice to look at but underneath it all is nothing good, nothing but the ugly truth that she'll never be more than an albatross around your neck, dragging you down to her level and mark my words, you'll end up despising her for it. How can you possibly claim to love...someone...like...that?"

He was breathing hard by the time he was finished, nostrils flaring and the temperature rising with each exhale as the hot puffs of air filled the room. Unseen flames licked down his spine and he was hot enough to scorch, to burn, to brand. The words had spilled out of their own accord, cracking like the lash of a whip and ready to leave scars.

"Yeah, well," Scarlet sighed, sounding resigned instead of angry, all of his wrath had leaked away. "Never said it made sense, did I? But I do love her, no matter what your opinion on the matter is, Mr. Jones. Do we have a deal or not?"

"It's going to cost you a lot more than just the information, which better be fucking good, by the way but yes, we have a deal."

There was another ripple in the air, pulsing like the beating of a heart as the word fell from his lips, sealing the agreement between them and fanning the fire even more. Scarlet was too stubborn for his own good, and his honourable streak would be his downfall in the end, just as it had for another man in another time, another place.

"Jones?"

"It was as good a name as any."

_Not quite a lie, but not yet the truth. She would hear his confession if he chose to make it, he knew, but what absolution could there be for the damned of Hell? There was no point in unburdening himself and he put the smile back on his face while he reached again for the rum._

"I found the heroin dealers."

Killian's surprise that Scarlet had somehow managed to pull that off melted into something far more sinister as the man continued in a fast clip, talking about someone named "R. Gold" from London and his associates, a woman and the dealers Killian had fruitlessly been combing the city for, two young, clean-cut looking men, one of whom was named Mike. He filed the name and the descriptions away in his mind and listened to the rest of Scarlet's report with growing alarm, that the dealers had some kind of arrangement with this R. Gold to take out both Caroline Spencer and
himself and he had unintentionally thwarted them by leaving the hotel early, not wanting to linger
after the adultery was done.

He felt a pang of something he couldn't place at the thought of Caroline left alone to get caught in the
crossfire of an ancient feud. She was a sinner, guilty of the crime of laying with a man not her
husband, but she wasn't past redemption and Killian preferred to fight his own battles head on, not
flee like a coward. If he had been there when the two dealers had come knocking...but he stopped
that train of thought right in its tracks once he heard Scarlet's next words.

"Phase two? Twice as pure?"

Jefferson's talk of Nazi experiments with crossbreeds and hybrids immediately sprung to mind, along
with the image of a pale, redhead dancer with a needle in her arm and two grinning imps, feeding
off the chaos they had caused and delighting in her overdose, one of many according to the Angel of
Death herself, Elsa.

Had that merely been phase one?

"They're going to flood the streets with it...and boss, these people are freaks. They want to cause
some serious damage with this stuff, deliberately and they think you're in their way."

Rumpelstiltskin must be smarting over the loss of his imp lackey, but leave it to the so called "Dark
One" to rely on others to do his dirty work for him. Always the unnamed figure in the shadows,
silently slipping between the pages of history and myth to sink back down unseen like a crocodile,
hiding just below the surface until his next victim wandered too close to the water.

Scarlet was still talking while Killian listened with half an ear, at least until he said something that
made him go still as a statue while the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

"And I think they're planning to kidnap some woman too, someone named Angela."

Angela.

Angela.

There was complete and utter silence for a moment, even his heart stopped beating and then started
again with a rush of blood that Killian heard as a loud roaring in his ears as if a bonfire had just
blazed to life. Only it was no ordinary fire, it was Hellfire, kindled in the very bowels of Infernum itself and fueled solely by his rapidly growing rage. If what he suspected was true...

"Angela," he repeated, pronouncing it the way Scarlet had, the modern name given to many women
who probably gave little thought to the actual origin of it. In Latin, the pronunciation was different,
the second syllable stressed slightly more than the first, the "G" sound was changed. A minor
difference, almost unnoticeable. Almost.

"Was it Angela...or Angela?"

Beata Angela

Blessed Angel

Emma

"Yeah, that was it," Scarlet said carelessly, unaware of the real meaning. "Angela. Said she'd be
theirs at last, their very own, blah blah blah. Like I said, freaks."
His eyes were no longer blue like the sea and the sky and his vision had gone completely red, as if everything around him was burning. Everything would burn, he’d turn the entire city right to ash to destroy the Dark One and damn the consequences.

"Boss?"

Scarlet was waiting for his orders. He would learn the full truth soon enough about just who Killian Jones was and what he had agreed to, for now he would remain in the dark. But he could still be of use this way.

"Find out everything else you can, I want names, pictures, license plates, addresses, everything. We have a deal, Anastasia is free to leave immediately. But you're not. Get me what I want, Scarlet or there will be literal Hell to pay."

It echoed in the room even after the call ended and stirred the curtains next to the stage while the empty glasses rattled with a loud clink that Killian scarcely heard. His shadow stretched and lengthened unnaturally across the floor, no longer the form of a man, hand snaking into the curved shape of a serpent. Or a hook. He slashed out violently with his arm and the shadow on the floor followed suit, scoring a line into the wood and completing the graven image that was etched there. Above him the lights flickered, liquor ignited into flame in their bottles behind the bar, the polished surfaces rippled like quicksilver and Killian stood in the middle of it all with his arms outstretched, letting it all soak in, every last sin that had been committed in the Jolly Roger, sins of adultery, greed, vanity, gluttony, theft and dozens more.

Rumpelstiltskin was R. Gold from London, the same city that the imp he had marked had immediately fled back to upon orders to deliver a message to its master. Rumpelstiltskin was behind the heroin, named for the impenetrable Gates of Paradise, through which a demon could never pass. Rumpelstiltskin would be responsible for untold misery if the next, more powerful batch was released on the streets, the cause of the inevitable violence and death that would follow and could turn the city from peaceful to a state of war practically overnight. He'd seen it happen dozens, hundreds of times before throughout history.

Rumpelstiltskin was after Emma.

Killian called her on his phone. It went straight to voicemail. He texted her. It stayed unread. There was one other surefire way he could reach her, but it was a method of last resort now. He couldn't risk her answering him in that way before he faced the Dark One, appearing in a blaze of heavenly light like she had in the Inquisition's prison. Zelena had tricked his secret out of him once and he wouldn't, couldn't, chance it happening again.

Unless….

The thought was as insidious as a spill of ink, sinking and spreading into every nook and cranny inside of him that it could find, a seductive whisper in his ear that was both terrible and wonderful at the same time. Pure sin coursed through his veins, not the ecstatic high promised by the drug he refused to touch but a siren's song he heard in her voice, trying to lure him towards the edge with a promise that he could finally have what he'd always wanted most of all.

Rumpelstiltskin coveted power, always had, he was drawn to talented souls full of potential like Maleficent's in Paris and he bargained and twisted and took that power for his own. Killian was not without his own abilities, but he knew he hadn't done nearly enough to reach the same level as the Dark One. The contract that lay ready and waiting with the silver pen for Scarlet to sign, the adultery with a married woman, the sins that took place in his club, it all served to enhance his true form and made him a more formidable opponent, but there was one thing that he could do and Rumpelstiltskin
never could that would utterly guarantee his victory. He had sworn that he wouldn't, he hadn't wanted to win this way...but with everything on the line, what choice did he have now?

Killian closed his eyes against the lights that continued to burn overhead, harsh and unyielding, the light that revealed what had been hidden away in the dark under the shiny gloss of decadence and excess. Her voice echoed from the past, a memory of a night when he'd made a choice that was coming back now to haunt him.

"Don't look into the light!"

She had said that she always heard him. Was she listening, now?

"Forgive me, angel."

"Forgive me."

So long as she forgave him then it didn't matter if he never forgave himself. But there was no answer and he stood alone in the middle of his empty nightclub, turned away from the light and contemplating the greatest of sins.

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