The Long Haul

by Leni

Summary

AR. In a world where Rumpelstiltskin introduced his student to his maid..

(One-shot collection.)
Link to Masterlist: Tumblr (in chronological order).

61. The Dance, Snow and Charming's wedding.
62. Of Unlikely Friendships, Belle learns about Rumpelstiltskin's newest deal.
63. Practical Lessons, De-ratting Killian. Or trying to.
64. A New Arrangement, FTL. Rescuing Belle from her rescuer.
65. Operation: Missing Piece, S3. Henry's approach to completing the puzzle that is his family.

Notes

If you have just started reading this, then here's a few things you should know:

- All these one-shots belong to the same 'verse.
- Chapters have now been arranged in a linear timeline. However, new chapters will fit anywhere within it.
- Shorter stories are found at http://archiveofourown.org/works/4249161?
- Got a question? Ask it! ;)

Masterlist (in chronological order): LiveJournal, Tumblr

Have fun! (I know I already do ;D )
First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Belle and Regina meet each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the most uncomfortable first meeting Belle had ever lived through, and that included the night a dark wizard had pointed at her, changed her life within five minutes, and shoved her into a dungeon by the end of it.

At least then she'd gone willingly, relieved that her people would be safe.

Now she wanted to smash a plate against Rumpelstiltskin's head for insisting that she sat down at the table and share dinner with him and his guest.

Demurral was never an option when he was being stubborn. With that playful glint in his eye as he'd called her down to introduce her to a former student, Belle had known better than to try.

She should have risked it anyway.

Perhaps she would be back in her old cell, counting the familiar water stains in the walls. But at least she wouldn't be sitting to Rumpelstiltskin's right, aware that all rules of precedence were being ignored when the person on his other side was royalty.

Queen Regina did not seem amused.

Belle would have commiserated. Being dragged into one of Rumpelstiltskin's games was never pleasant when one didn't have the slightest hint as to the rules. But the queen had shifted her glares to her, and Belle's pride allowed for nothing but to keep her head held high and pretend she dined at the Dark One's table every night.

Their meeting had started off the wrong foot the moment Queen Regina had wrinkled her nose at Belle's dress, and demanded to know why she was being presented to the help and expected to behave as if it were a meeting among equals.

"Now, now, dearie," Rumpelstiltskin had tutted, raising an eyebrow until the queen's haughty smirk disappeared into an uncertain expression. "Such airs for someone who's only a step away from the mills. Or must I remind you of your roots?"

There must be quite a story, but Belle hadn't learned the details.

The queen had given a tight head shake and sat herself at the spot Rumpelstiltskin had designated - and spent the rest of the evening glaring at Belle across the table.

Meanwhile, Belle had come to the conclusion that Queen Regina was the kind of person who made life in the Dark Castle a delightful experience in comparison to her years at court.
A sudden clap from the head of the table made her jump a little.

To her chagrin, the queen only reacted with a bored glance.

"Well," Rumpelstiltskin said cheerily, giving each of them a toothy grin as he leaned back on his chair. He was the only one with a smile on his face. "Isn't this nice?"

Belle shoved a big bite of potato into her mouth to avoid a snort.

Rumpelstiltskin's grin grew at her enthusiastic chewing, but he didn't call her on it. Instead he turned toward the queen with an expectant glance.

The thin line across Queen Regina's lips gave a reluctant curl at one corner. "Just charming," she drawled, insincerity thick in each syllable and highlighted by the poisonous glare she threw Belle's way.

Belle met it and set her shoulders straighter, unwilling to cow before the other woman even if she had power and magic on her side. She had yet to cringe away from the Dark One; a peeved witch just didn't scare her.

Queen Regina arched an eyebrow, though there was a hint of approval in the gesture. "So there's something beyond the pretty face. What a strange creature," she mused. "Fitting for your collection, Rumple."

Belle bristled at the notion that she was one of Rumpelstiltskin's oddities.

"I do enjoy my rare finds," Rumpelstiltskin said before she could think of an appropriately scathing reply. His hand waved around the room and its contents as he continued, "What would be of the Dark Castle without its treasures, huh? Think of my reputation, Your Majesty!"

Then he let out a giggle while Belle deliberated whether she was mollified by the turn his words had given to the queen's snide remark. He waited a few seconds, and when he got no better answer from the queen than a scowl, he turned to Belle.

"And what about you, Belle?" he asked. "Still complaining that you never get to socialize?"

Belle knew he was trying to get a rise out of her. Making mischief was his favorite pastime when he was outside his laboratory, and Belle had yet to see a sore point at which he didn't enjoy to poke.

Her discontent at her enforced solitude, for example.

But now his gaze was more playful than mocking, the lilt of his question almost inviting. It took Belle a second to understand that he was including her in the jest this time, making her something of an ally rather than the butt of his little jokes.

If the queen had been nicer, Belle would have fought the temptation.

Instead she gave her sweetest smile. "Oh no! I don't think I'll complain again," she told Rumpelstiltskin, ignoring the queen's seething expression and facing away from the other woman in clear dismissal. She shoved down the thought that her recklessness was dangerous; if she couldn't snub an unpleasant woman while under the Dark One's protection, then her life would be hell indeed. "I just don't have your taste for... company... after all."

Rumpelstiltskin let out a shout of laughter.
"Well, I never!" the queen protested.

"Oh hush, Regina," Rumpelstiltskin said, giving her a pointed look that had her settling back in her seat despite her mulish look. "And you, dearie," he told Belle, lifting a finger in the air and slowly bringing it down in her direction, "should already know that beggars can't be choosers. Isn't that what got me called to your little town after all?"

"I don't think you can compare---"

"How dare you compare---!"

Maid and queen closed their mouths and stared at each other, shocked that they agreed on anything.

Rumpelstiltskin twittered in pleasure. "I knew it!" he said, giving each of them a measuring look and leaning back with an air of satisfaction. "You two are going to be the best of friends!"

The End
11/06/16

Chapter End Notes

_The Long Haul_ will be a year old on Wednesday! I really hope you have enjoyed reading these one-shots as much as I've loved writing them. *HUGS*
Belle’s curiosity couldn’t keep her out of the main hall for long, after the last visitors left. She wielded a broom in her hands, but Rumpelstiltskin knew the look of her when she actually intended to work and when, as right now, the broom was only a prop to excuse her presence.

“Oh, hi!” the girl said, as if surprised to find him at his spinning wheel. “I didn’t know whether you’d left with... um.”

Rumpelstiltskin raised his head. He had discovered that where spinning did still keep the more unwelcome musings away, conversing with his maid actually distracted him by replacing those thoughts with her little observations and the memory of her quick laughter.

It was impossible to stew in darkness, when Belle’s kindness shone so bright.

Didn’t mean he had to answer her unasked question, though. “Not at all, dearie,” he told her, ignoring her curiosity. “There’s no escape preparing dinner for two tonight. And no mixing up the boiled eggs with the raw ones this time!”

Belle bit her lower lip. “That was the one time,” she muttered, then a little louder, “and I did apologize.”

“Hmph. Apologies don’t clean yoke off silk.”

She raised her head proudly at that. “No. I do.”

Rumpelstiltskin tittered. He couldn’t help himself. Her spike of anger reminded him of a kitten taking its first swipe at a nearby dog. Utterly useless, yet intrinsically adorable.

The idea of his helpless maid standing up to the Dark One always filled him with amusement. Clever girl otherwise, or he’d have bored of her stubbornness long ago; but not so clever as to realize that his boredom would have been her ticket back to Avonlea and her tall suitor’s arms... or perhaps into a more advantageous marriage, if she showed an interest in that.

But instead Belle was interested in tales of his travels and everything he’d seen in his long life, and her questions would sometimes open his eyes to some detail he hadn’t considered before.
As long as she kept him entertained, Rumpelstiltskin pushed off the day he would find an excuse to get rid of her.

“Oh ho! Keeping track of your victories with the household chores, are we? I admit. I’ve seen worse jobs at handling delicate fabrics.”

Belle eyed him with distrust at the praise.

See? Smart.

“Well---” Rumpelstiltskin rose from the bench, rubbing his hands together. “Since you’re set to remind me what a hardworking caretaker I have employed, why don’t you do your job and deal with that thing?”

Belle’s eyes followed his pointed finger to the end of the table. Her head tilted in confusion at the sight of the mass of cowskin and reed tubes, and she frowned when a moment passed and she still couldn’t recognize it. “What in the world is that?”

Rumpelstiltskin laughed. “Well, what else. The price for a deal, of course! Not quite as pretty as the other one present in this room-” he made a short bow of acknowledgement in her direction “-but let’s not judge its worth by its appearance, shall we?”

Belle gave a distracted nod. “Is it magical?”

“Nope.”

Her eyebrow jumped in surprise, and she ventured closer to examine the rare object. “It’s from another world, then?” she chirped hopefully. “Like what Jefferson brings you?”

Rumpelstiltskin snorted. “Oh no. It’s quite common in the isles to the north of the Enchanted Forest. I’m shocked you don’t know them, dearie. Next in line for the throne of a port city, and you show such ignorance!”

“I’m not ignorant,” Belle protested. At his raised eyebrow, she explained, “We just didn’t truck often with Northerners. Papa said...” Abruptly, she cut herself off, glanced off to the wall before facing Rumpelstiltskin again. “I mean, Papa decreed there was too much risk involved.”

“Called them beasts, didn’t he?” Rumpelstiltskin’s eyes burned black for a moment, but then he shrugged and the dangerous edge dropped from his expression. “And then he wonders why no one comes defend him from the ogres!”

His laughter made Belle grind her teeth.

Because he was right.

If Avonlea would have stayed in good relationships with her neighbors, instead of treating them publicly as barbarians, they would have sent support, experienced soldiers above all. They might not have needed to call on the Dark One when their own resources failed.

She never would have met him. Never come to live in the Dark Castle. Never witnessed such feats of magic that she doubted had been seen by other human eyes. Never would have broken her betrothal to Sir Gaston.

She would be a wife already!
Belle let out a nervous laugh. If she was meant to regret the chain of events that had brought her to work for the Dark One instead of marrying a hero of the people, Belle couldn’t find it in herself. She could only answer for her own choices, and her conscience was clean.

“You still haven’t told me what this is,” she reminded Rumpelstiltskin, brushing a finger against the pipe closest to her.

“A heirloom, of course!” Rumpelstiltskin practically vibrated with enthusiasm. “Very old. Very precious!”

Belle eyed the condition of the... well, the heirloom, for lack of another name. After her months in the Dark Castle, she recognized a layer of dust across the room, and that was no layer. That was a thick cover, and it would have gotten into every crevice too. Her only description for Rumpelstiltskin’s ‘precious’ acquisition was grimy.

Compared to the treasures displayed around the castle, it made for a poor addition to the Dark One’s famed collection.

“What does it do?” she asked, thinking it might hide its value under that unimpressive appearance.

Rumpelstiltskin lifted a finger into the air. “Music!”

Belle did brighten at that word. It seemed like ages since she had heard a song that didn’t come from her own lips or the cursed harp stashed in one of the upper rooms. “Oh! Can I listen to it, please?”

A snicker was her answer. “Oh sure,” he told her, “as soon as you learn to play it.”

Her eagerness deflated. “I see,” she said, brow furrowing at the notion, trying to picture how the strange object might function as a musical instrument. “Is it really that good?”

Rumpelstiltskin lifted his shoulders in a careless gesture.

“Then why did you deal for it?” Belle pressed, curious again.

He gave a short laugh, twirling his hands in the air. “An old treasure, long past its prime. Once beloved but now forgotten because a lung sickness demanded that its owner left it aside. Fitting price to buy a few more weeks for the old man, don’t you think?”

It was indeed an old and dusty instrument. However, upon closer inspection, it revealed years of tender care, with several stitches and small repairs done to it.

“And it was left here,” she asked, suddenly sad (what would it be like, to be so cherished and then tossed aside?), “in exchange for a few weeks?”

Rumpelstiltskin’s eyes turned graver. “The man is dying, Belle. Got here carried on the shoulders of his youngest grandson.” He had come closer, and now flicked a black fingernail against the tip of one of the pipes. “Even I can stretch life only so far.”

“He might have been more at peace with an old friend at his side,” Belle protested, touching the soft bag-shaped cowskin.

“But he didn’t want peace, dearie.” Rumpelstiltskin tutted in a scolding sing-song. “He wanted to see his first great-grandchild born. He has a chance now.”
“Oh.”

Belle considered that. The Dark One was known for demanding a high price for his potions and spells, and they did most often take the form of priceless objects. But sometimes, out of whim or a method Belle thought she might be knitting together, he asked instead for something dear to the supplicant’s heart.

An unused baby blanket, in exchange for a goat that would give milk in stead of a dead mother. A tiny locket, to show a girl where her sweetheart was buried in the battlefield. A copper wedding ring, to take away a mother’s memory of watching her son trampled under a cart. Bittersweet wishes, all of them. The chance to mourn properly without additional stressors.

Or to take along a last lovely memory to the underworld,

“Does his choice meet your approval now?”

Her cheeks heated. “…I didn’t know.”

“No. You assumed.”

Belle refused to apologize when Rumpelstiltskin hadn’t explained the facts from the start. What else had she been left to do, but to assume? “Did he give you his thanks?” she asked instead.

His huff reminded her that no one thanked the Dark One for making them a deal. In most cases, Belle sided with the petitioners; Rumpelstiltskin took as much as he gave, and did it with a smile on his face.

But in this case...

Belle thought of a man who had lived for decades, yet might have been forced to miss the start of a new generation by a few days.

Before she could dissuade herself, she had come to Rumpelstiltskin’s side, lifting to her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Thank you, Rumple.”

His wide eyes stared at her for a long moment, then blinked rapidly. “Whatever,” he said, retreating back to his post at the spinning wheel. “Just take that thing away and find some place for it.”

“Next to the golden harp?” she asked cheekily, thinking of the contrast this would make against the elegant piece of art that sometimes played by itself - just to come to a halt if Belle came to watch. It would be fun to see its reaction to a roommate of so much humbler origins.

“Might take her down a notch or two,” Rumpelstiltskin agreed, mirroring her smirk.

The joke was on them.

Harp and bagpipe - Belle had finally found the name in an encyclopedia - started to practice their duets at three in the morning, and wouldn’t stop until someone had clambered down to the music room and clapped.

“You said it wasn’t magical!” Belle complained at breakfast after the third night, handing him a quick toast and a jar of preserves. If Rumpelstiltskin wanted something more elaborate, he should have made sure his maid had a full night’s sleep. “But I certainly didn’t wake up in the middle of the night to play it, and neither did you!”
Rumpelstiltskin tapped his fingers against the table. “So it was old enough to absorb the castle’s magic…” He grinned. “Such a great deal I made. Sometimes I amaze myself!”

Belle narrowed her eyes. “Can’t you do anything?”

Rumpelstiltskin didn’t seem affected, of course. Belle had started to doubt that the man needed sleep at all. He looked at her curiously.

“The concert at night! Can you stop them?”

He deliberated for a moment. One hand came up, then the other, both held as apart as his body allowed. “Yes and no, dearie.”

Belle blinked.

“Yes, I can send them away. Banish them to the Infinite Forest, for one.”

“And how long would they last without someone caring for them?” Belle asked, shaking her head. “Keeping gold clean is not easy, you know, and I want them silent, not broken.”

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. “Then give them what they want: an audience! But do it on your terms.”

“With scheduled visits?”

“For example.”

Belle followed his advice, promising to come to the music room three times a week. “And I’m not coming always by myself,” she promised herself. Rumpelstiltskin might not know it yet, but he was on his way to becoming a true connoisseur of music in the Northern Islands.

“What has you grinning so, girl?” he asked now. “I thought you and that harp disliked each other.”

“But now we have a friend in common,” Belle explained. The bagpipe might not be completely sentient, but it did play soft tunes for her after she had finished cleaning it. “That makes us friends too.”

Rumpelstiltskin scrunched his nose at that thought. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

Asking how he would know was a low shot, so Belle saved it for a more suitable occasion. Instead she drew herself straight. “Watch me and learn,” she said.

And had to blink when she did feel his eyes follow her.

The End
14/03/17

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love! Please leave a comment!
Regina has an idea. Rumpelstiltskin has a great time turning her down.

Regina passed her finger across the surface of the table in the great hall, lifting an eyebrow when it did come up clean. "So the girl hasn't run away yet. Have her chained in the dungeons, Rumple?"

"Not chained," he laughed.

"Really." Her curiosity at the idea of anyone staying this long in the Dark Castle showed in the tilt of her head. "Don't tell me you did away with her heart. And there you were always chiding me for doing the same."

"I don't 'chide', Your Majesty. I show my utter contempt at your little pastime." He wrinkled his nose. "You waste great magic just to keep your sorry puppets pliable. But then, I guess that like mother, like-"

"It's not the same," Regina snapped, scowling at the mention of her mother. Then she narrowed her eyes at his grin, a silent acknowledgement that his hit had struck. "It's an useful trick," she countered in a milder voice, drawing herself straight until she had the satisfaction to see Rumpelstiltskin need to crane up his neck to look at her. "Killing those who can serve is the real waste."

Rumpelstiltskin leaned in, whispering gleefully, "Leaving them alive to hate you instead. Oh yes, I can see how smart your plan is." He wagged his finger so close to her nose that Regina drew back in surprise. "Please don't forget to invite me when the mob runs in to burn you at the stake. I so love a party!"

Regina clenched her jaw, but glanced away, unable to protest that her people loved her.

"Now, now. Don't look so, dearie." Rumpelstiltskin plopped back in his chair, eyeing her carefully. "You came for a reason. What about we attend to it?"

"It's about Snow White."

He giggled. "Of course it is."

"It came to my mind that if you wanted to see a princess turned into a maid so badly, you should have come to me first." Her lips curved into a smile. "But it's not too late."

His eyes widened in mock-gratefulness. "My, how generous of you! Except..." He gave her a knowing look. "I really wouldn't be able to stand aside as you tried to murder my staff. Got a responsibility to those under my service, you see."

"Just serving you might be punishment enough for that brat."

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. "Now, now. No need for compliments, my dear." He crooked a finger to beckon her closer, and as a part of her would always be the student to his mentoring, Regina
followed the silent bidding. "Besides," he crooned, "we both know you're lying. A life here, when your dashing stable boy lies six feet under? Tell me, Regina, would it really be enough?"

Their eyes met. Hers, torn between rage and grief. His, all eager acceptance of her answer.

"No," she hissed, tearing herself away from that gaze.

Rumpelstiltskin smiled, pleased, and stapled his fingers together, tapping the tips against each other in satisfaction. "See? Better that your beloved stepdaughter is wandering the woods, unprotected and, well, mostly alone; instead of here where any attempt against her would need to be answered in kind."

Regina sneered at that, but after a moment her eyes lit with understanding. "Why, Rumple. That sounds like a warning."

"Oh no! You are welcome to ruin Snow White's life, Your Majesty."

"Don't play word games. You know what I mean." She studied him. He looked politely interested, not at all as if he'd just threatened her if she ever raised a finger against his 'staff'. "Come, Rumple. You can't believe I mean any ill to that pretty thing you've got running down your hallways. What is it to me, if the child stays or leaves?"

"That's what you need to understand, Regina." His tone turned stern - a teacher trying to impress a crucial fact upon a pupil. "The 'child', as you call her, will never leave. That's the deal, and believe it or not, some people are still honorable enough not to try to squeeze their way out of a promise."

"I'm-"

"Love, honor, and obey," he cut off her protest at the implication, raising both eyebrows. "How did those vows work for you?"

Regina's nostrils flared. "What I meant to say," she grit out, "is that I wouldn't interfere with someone in your employ. If she stays, then she must enjoy her new situation." She glanced around the dark room, the heavy curtains blocking any natural light, the old relics standing in gloomy guard in every corner, and finishing with a pointed look at her old teacher. "But then," she said too sweetly, "with the warm surroundings and amiable company, who could blame her! After all, isn't it the fondest wish of every young lady to be whisked away to a grand castle?"

Rumpelstiltskin nodded agreeably enough, but his eyes danced with amusement. If she wanted to poke at a perceived weakness, she should have remembered he knew hers better. "Of course," he acknowledged, then smirked. "I remember you could hardly wait, dearie."

Regina paled, then pivoted around in a swirl of black skirts, and closed her eyes against the memory of those days. Married to a king, crowned and bejeweled from head to toes, and she'd wished every night to be far away in Daniel's arms instead.

The laughter at her back made her clench her fists.

"I didn't come to speak of the past," she told him after she'd made sure no treacherous tears would spring. Rumpelstiltskin would only take delight in the sight, his pitiless heart numb to true grief. Damn him! Damn him for playing her too well! One day she'd have her revenge.

One day, Dark One or not, Rumpelstiltskin would suffer just as much.

"Oh right," he said brightly, urging her on with a wave of his hand. "You came to help about my
housekeeping arrangements, and I have told you that one maid is enough. I'm afraid your princess will have to settle for another position - which is just as well since she makes a decent bandit, and who would have a thief in their household?" he said primly, as if the Dark Castle wasn't witness to worse deeds than thievery. "Anything else?"

Aware that she wouldn't change his mind, Regina shook her head. It had been a wild shot, anyway, born after too many weeks with no news of Snow's location. If she could pin her down to one place - like, say, an isolated castle in the middle of the snow mountains... But Rumpelstiltskin was right; even a life of drudgery was too good for the wretched girl.

"Guess not," Rumpelstiltskin said. Then he waved toward the door. "Off with you, then. Your frowns are ruining my appetite, and it's almost tea time."

Regina blinked. In all these years, she had never heard him show any eagerness for food. Her curiosity aroused, she sidled closer to the table. "Well, the ride here was quite long. Maybe I can-"

"No, you cannot." With a twirl of his index finger, the doors flew open, and a louder sound announced that even the main doors had been unlocked and were awaiting her exit. When Rumpelstiltskin looked at her, all the playfulness was gone, replaced by moody impatience. "No time for idleness, dearie. If you didn't want to burden yourself with the running of a kingdom, you shouldn't have dealt with the rightful ruler and run off his heir." He grinned at her lack of denial, but motioned her sharply to the door. "Now, shoo! Go add a few more hearts to your collection."

Regina pursed her lips, but knew that one click of those curled claws would deposit her outside the castle and shut the doors against her. Better to leave under her own power, dignity intact. "I'll come at a better time, then," she told him, nodding in polite farewell.

The gesture was wasted in Rumpelstiltskin, who only eyed her expectantly.

With a soft huff, she strode around his chair and away.

The doors didn't close behind her, and so she heard the girl's voice drift into the entrance hall...

"Here is your - Oh? I thought you had a guest. I brought enough for two."

And Rumpelstiltskin's answer, "She needed to leave. Laws to make, taxes to raise. The whole fuss... But you're right, that's too much for one person. Hm. Wouldn't want to be wasteful, was just saying that a moment ago. What about-?"

The doors slapped closed then, leaving Regina with nothing to do except walk to her carriage.

And wonder what exactly had been going on at the Dark Castle since that girl's arrival.

The End
26/07/16
FTL. Rumpelstiltskin. For Now

Chapter Summary

Rumpelstiltskin has sent his maid away. He's not expecting her back. He isn’t.

Chapter Notes

Prompt 3/500: flashes of euphoria

Rumpelstiltskin gave up his post at the tower window after sunset, both his eyes and the wards around the castle telling him that the road from the town to his castle was empty.

Of course the girl wouldn't return. It had been foolishness to think that her tender heart would drive her to turn back and give him a proper goodbye instead of the sham they'd enacted. He'd held out his watch over the last few hours on the conviction that Belle was a practical girl, that she'd think it a waste to leave what little treasures she'd collected over the last year in a room that would only collect dust in her absence.

But not even the lure of the jeweled comb he'd presented to her on a whim, or the book she'd left with a bit of golden thread marking her place, were enough to make her risk coming back under his power. Better to face the world with an old cloak, and empty basket, and the few coins that would have bought his straw.

Not surprising at all.

With a thought, the gates of his castle shut and locked. Rumpelstiltskin couldn't even remember how he'd convinced himself to leave them open.

Fool!

Next he stepped back from the window, snapped the curtain shut. Turned his back on the moonless night outside and instead studied the insides of his world. His tower. His laboratory. The heart of his work, for all his work involved two worlds. It was all shrouded in darkness. Pitch black, night time and not even a candle in the room. He could remedy that with a flicker of power, but there was no point without a girl who would come in and trip against the first piece of furniture in her way.

He hissed at the thought, and there was nothing to take note of his mood.

Only silence. The silence that had been his companion for so many decades, the half-done potions he’d attempted since that morning waiting for his attention. He could pick up his work without any interruption. No steps up the stairs. No sweet voice breaking his concentration to announce that supper was ready.

That was good.
The need to focus would only grow in the coming months. Snow White had to be coaxed out of hiding, and into open war against Regina. A war Regina must lose. For now, the little princess was fleeing through the forest, and her True Love was still playing George's heir, but soon fate would reunite them again and it'd be up to Rumpelstiltskin that the couple played their part as he intended them to.

He couldn't afford a distraction.

He couldn't afford bright conversation and a curious face whenever she got a glimpse of his personal stash of books.

Letting Belle go had been the only option left.

And gone, she was now.

With slow steps, Rumpelstiltskin made his way to the worktable, and after a slight hesitation, passed by it and sat down heavily on the stool next to the spinning wheel that had appeared at a thought.

A simple gesture brought a full basket to his feet. Different than the one that had lain there for at least a year; bigger, heavier. It held enough straw to last him through several hours. Didn't need a maid to come up every day after breakfast to fill it, and often again before dinnertime.

(Didn't need anyone at all.)

Why do you spin so much?

In time he'd forget about that, too.

But for now Rumpelstiltskin thought of her making her way past his lands. It was a long trek to Avonlea; she'd enjoy every moment out in the open air. Perhaps she'd spare him a kind thought, for having granted her freedom. He imagined Belle's disbelieving expression when she had understood his meaning; yes, she would sing all the way back home.

He caught himself in a quiet chuckle at the thought.

Her happy humming had never belonged here. It was only right that the Dark Castle held only himself, the Dark One. There had never been a place for a bright-eyed girl within these walls.

Yes, yes. Better that Belle was gone.

Better that she took her good mood and concerned gazes elsewhere. Better that she went back among the people who still remembered how to return her kindnesses. Better that she would never have to be so needy for company that she'd address her smiles at a monster.

Rumpelstiltskin could live with this one good deed on his conscience. A bit of selflessness to fan what little light survived in his heart.

A good deal, come to think of it.

He reached for the first strands of straw, feeding them to the wheel as he started the familiar motions of arms and feet. He pulled on the new gold with a well-rehearsed touch, slowly sinking his consciousness into the creaking of the old wood and the magic that passed through his fingers.

Dawn didn't make him break his reverie. The warning of his outer wards also went ignored, as he
did not wish for visitors.

It was the sound of his name that made his head snap up, half-transformed straw flittering to his feet.

"Rumpelstiltskin!" Belle called again, followed by as loud a knock at his gate as her small fists could make.

He jumped to his feet, caught between incredulity and laughter. He'd felt this punch to the gut before, the shock of the impossible staring him in the face. But it had always brought sorrow and guilt, the bitter darkness burrowing deeper into his soul.

The sound of her voice grabbed him and pulled.

The labor of a whole night abandoned, Rumpelstiltskin raced across the room and down the stairs. He ignored his reasoning of the day before. Snarled at the thought that she'd just ask permission to grab her things and leave again.

But no smart person risked an interview with the Dark One over a few pretty baubles, and Belle was smarter than most.

He came to a halt at the threshold of the entrance hall, fighting down the hard knot in his throat. But this wasn't the anger he was used to taming; where his instincts usually growled and snapped, always in tune with the darkness he carried inside, now there was a shiver of euphoria. Like a whisper of the man he'd once been, before the war and the lost child. Like another step accomplished on his way to Bae.

Suspiciously, incredibly, like hope.

That stopped him cold.

He took a deep breath, then another. Belle was not part of his plan. She had nothing to do with his son, with his future.

(Belle didn't belong here! The Dark Castle was no place for her!)

But she'd still come back.

Unsettled, he almost startled at the renewed knocking.

"Rumpelstiltskin!" Belle called again, so unafraid to yell out the Dark One's name.

It almost sounded as if she....

Could she?

"Coming, dearie!" he sang out, shoving down his foolish, foolish thoughts. There were so many things rotten inside him, long dead and dry. It came as a little surprise that the like of this hadn't been yanked off at the root already.

Belle was back.

Perhaps there was a reason she couldn't go back home.

Perhaps she'd stay a while longer.
(and interrupt him, yes. and fill his castle with noise, yes, yes! What was the rattling of one girl, when one lived with a roaring demon in his soul?)

Belle would have come to stay.

For now.

But even as he moved to open the door and let her in, Rumpelstiltskin knew better than to expect her to stay for good.

The End
20/05/16
Written for alwaysdearie. Prompt: sympathy

Busy clearing the table, Belle cringed at the hate in the queen's voice.

"I want that little mermaid finished, Rumple."

Rumpelstiltskin waved Belle away when she would have collected his teacup, instead motioning to be poured some more. He didn't respond to Regina in any way, except to glance at her over the rim of the cup as he took a slow sip.

By now Belle had learned to calibrate the queen's well of patience - a shallow current in the best case - and hurried to step away from the path between Regina and Rumpelstiltskin before any fireballs could be tossed around in a bid to engage the impossible man.

Rumpelstiltskin, of course, only blinked and set down his tea once Regina's fingers started twitching. "Is that so?"

Despite Regina's annoyed huff, Belle held a sigh of relief when the other woman sat back and nodded. No scorch marks to varnish away today. That was always a welcome outcome after the queen stopped for a visit.

"She is a nuisance," Regina sneered. "Just an ignorant girl who needs to learn her place."

"And yet you will lower yourself to teach her a lesson." Rumpelstiltskin gave a disappointed shake of his head. "Let me guess. Now that she’s gone about befriending your stepdaughter, you can’t bear the thought of it. A foul offense, indeed.” He sniggered. “So you want her to suffer for her crime. Not kill. Not dismember. Not cut her pretty little head off! Tsk. Death isn't punishment enough, dearie?"

Belle shuddered. She knew that the power of a queen over the peasants she ran into - be they her subjects or not - was infinite, but it couldn't be right to go to such extremes.

"Dying is easy," Regina responded, giving a shrug.

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. "Yet impossible to return from... as you well know."

The queen's eyes flashed with something that wasn't anger for an instant, but it disappeared within a blink. "Can you help me or not?" she snapped, reclining against the back of the chair, tilting her head to a side as she taunted, "Of course, if it's too much for you..."

Rumple dismissed the weak bait with a shrug. "On the contrary, Your Majesty. It's your skill I doubt. Forgive the indelicacy of bringing this up," he said, the grin on his face belying any hesitance, "but you have such a... disappointing track record when it comes to running down teenage girls you've taken a dislike to. I'm not interested in wasting my magic, you see."

Belle took another step back.
The whoosh of fire missed her by several feet, but it still startled her.

Belle bit her lower lip to contain a yelp. Calling attention to herself would not help the situation. On the contrary, her master would grow angrier at Regina for upsetting her, and then grow more agitated as he would never name the cause, and Regina would respond with haughty bravado in order to avoid that even a maid believed she would cower from the Dark One.

"I have magic enough," Regina was saying, now on her feet. Her eyebrows formed a confident arch, and she didn't waver even when Rumpelstiltskin growled at her. "I'm not one of your pathetic little clients, Rumple. I'm not begging for some spell, I'm just-" She lifted a shoulder, then gave him a conspiring look. "-looking for ideas."

Rumpelstiltskin took a hard look at her.

And then laughed.

Belle stared at him, yet again bewildered by his abrupt change of moods.

"My idea, dearie, is to provide one of the towns you've burned through with fresh filet." He mimed making long cuts. Belle inwardly swore to serve nothing but vegetables for the next month, in thanks for the unwelcome imagery. Rumpelstiltskin, of course, made no note of her discomfort, gazing instead at Regina with mocking eyes. "It's the least a beloved queen would do."

This time he made a cupping motion, halting the new fireball before it moved more than a couple inches away from Regina's hand. A flick of his fingers, and it shrunk and disappeared.

Belle narrowed her eyes.

If he could always halt the queen's temper tantrums before they destroyed something, then he could take care to bring it back to rights instead of having her clean after them.

Unaware of his maid's realization, Rumpelstiltskin faced the queen, sniggering quietly. "No? Then, if you don't like my advice, go burn something else until a better idea comes your way."

Regina scowled, but drew herself upright. "I can do this without you, Rumpelstiltskin."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Then what are you doing here?"

The queen made an angry noise, but didn't insist. With a final glare, she turned on her heel and marched out of the room, not once bothering to acknowledge the third person in the room.

Once the doors slammed behind her, Rumpelstiltskin turned to Belle, giving a few long strides in order to stand right before her. His expression was pinched in concern, though it rapidly became a mask of annoyance. "Why wouldn't you leave, you silly girl?"

Belle blinked in surprise. "Leave? Why?"

He gave an exasperated huff. Waved at the chair the queen had vacated, then made a gesture into the air. "Why? Because there's no place for little maids in the same room as a witch and the Dark One, that's why!"

The queen might not have backed down from Rumpelstiltskin, but his maid actually leaned forward, hands akimbo at her waist. "Was I in danger?" she asked pointedly, though she was sure of the answer.
Rumpelstiltskin glared down at her, but looked away first. "That's not the issue."

That was very much the issue, Belle thought. But if she insisted that she had never doubted her safety, he would berate her for her naivete. "You had a guest," she said instead. "Guests are owed hospitality. Even a single-woman household gets to take care of that." She gave a little smile, inviting him to join in the joke of a maid reminding her master what she'd been brought for. "It's my job, Rumple."

The shortened name had brought no reaction when the queen used it. Now Rumpelstiltskin dropped his shoulders in silent concession.

"My best tea," he lamented anyway, choosing a different tack. "Doled out to a woman who drowns it in sugar."

Belle let out a snicker. "She's royalty. She does as she wills."

He raised his head at that. Gazed at her searchingly. "She does," he said, his tone grown somber. "Including running her late husband's kingdom to the ground in her search for his daughter. You do understand she isn't searching for Snow White in order to invite her to tea and conversation, much less to restore the young princess to her throne."

Belle had studied too many history books to feel sorry about Snow's fate. "If the people believe in Snow White, they will fight for her."

"Against trained soldiers?"

People in Avonlea had taken on the ogres, even though the odds of survival - never mind victory - were too slim to be considered even a possibility. They had plead for the Dark One's aid only when their numbers were too pitiful to even keep the unarmed population safe. "If that's the right thing to do," she said with conviction.

Rumpelstiltskin quirked his lips into a smile. "Sometimes I'm tempted to let you out into the real world, my girl," he said softly, "and this time bar my doors against your return."

Belle grinned. "But then who'd bring tea to your guests?"

"And who would chat with them until I come to see them, is that it?" Rumpelstiltskin chuckled, tapping her cheek playfully. "Save your conversation for your knights and the curious rabble, dearie. Her Majesty does fine waiting by herself."

"I believe that everybody needs a friendly ear," Belle reasoned.

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head sharply. "Not Regina."

"But."

His face, which had projected amusement and a streak of fondness, hardened. Night-black eyes fixed her in place, and Belle gulped back her protest. "Listen to me, Belle," he said, the use of her given name giving credence to his earnestness. "Don't waste your sympathy on Regina. She won't thank you for it. Rather the contrary, I'd say. She has chosen her path, and she won't welcome distractions."

Belle licked her lips.

She could tell him that he wouldn't understand how it felt to be torn from her home and a beloved
father, to be whisked into a lonely life next to a man she didn't know or trust. She could try to explain the helplessness of trying to do the best for your people, and instead bringing more sorrow to them. Regina might have ousted some silly princess - who'd been too quick to run away, in Belle's opinion - and been exaggeratedly harsh in her punishments against those who opposed her, but she had not brought an army of ogres to their doorstep.

But Rumpelstiltskin would only laugh at the notion that some sheltered princess could understand his former pupil.

"So you're saying to leave her alone," she said, keeping her voice as soft as she could. "Let her stew in her own darkness?"

Rumpelstiltskin nodded.

Belle met his gaze, then humphed and poked his chest. "You silly man," she bit out while he stared at her in surprise, "don't you see that she gives me the same advice about you!"

The End
09/11/16
**Belle & Rumpelstiltskin: A Chair**

Chapter Summary

A step in the right direction - even if Rumpelstiltskin refuses to admit he's on the same road. (pre-curse)

Chapter Notes

*sigh* This prompt has taken over my life, these last three days. And I still cannot pack it into six sentences! Oh well, hope you're enjoying the results anyway.

The thumping noises up the stairs finally became loud enough to distract Rumpelstiltskin from his latest experiment. He swiveled toward the door, annoyed at the interruption, but the angry shout died in his throat when he discovered his maid struggling to haul a chair bigger than her past the doorstep.

"A bit of help?" Belle gasped.

At his blinking look of disbelief, she huffed and pulled harder on the heavy piece of furniture, and she stopped only when she'd placed it in the corner close to the fire, circled around it to make sure it was up to some unfathomable standards, and planted herself down on the cushioned seat. Then she produced a book from the pockets of her skirts - pockets he'd added in the expectation that housekeepers needed to carry around far more useful things! - and, without another word, proceeded to start her trip into yet another tale.

Rumpelstiltskin stared at her.

Belle turned a page.

"What *are* you doing, dearie?"

The girl looked up, giving him an exasperated look, one that silently chided *him* for interrupting *her*, and waved the book at him.

"Yes, yes. I can see you're reading. Hardly surprising, considering."

Her eyes narrowed, so he didn't elaborate.

It wasn't as if he had any actual complaint; Belle did manage the cleaning of the castle well enough, and if she liked to lose herself in a book every other day (or hour), Rumpelstiltskin had figured that out from the start and he'd still given her that library, hadn't he?

"But - the chair?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Should I sit on the floor instead?"
Rumpelstiltskin had the feeling he was being... teased. He took a deep breath to dispel the amusement that thought brought along, and stretched his patience to find another angle to probe at this new development.

Two years ago, when Belle had first arrived, he had made clear that, while she was free to enter any room in the Dark Castle and try her best at making it presentable, she wouldn't be welcome in his workroom. As time passed, the girl had found excuses to come anyway: the straw needed to be changed, dinner was ready and waiting, she was curious about the view from the window during a storm... "Why would you think to come here, girl? Didn't I tell you-"

"That I shouldn't clean in here? Yes." She looked around and wrinkled her nose a little. "But don't fear; I'm taking a break. Your poisons are safe from my duster for another day."

His poisons could steal her life if she breathed wrong. He now kept them in the highest cabinet, under triple warding, when he wasn't in the room.

"A break."

He made sure to infuse those two words with the deepest perplexity.

The longer this girl stayed with him, the less she made sense.

Belle nodded and placed her pinkie as a bookmark, apparently choosing to pay her full attention to the conversation. "Yes. The curtains are washed and drying as we speak, and dinner is in the oven - you're all right with mutton, right?"

It always came out stringy when she prepared it, but Rumpelstiltskin just gave a grunt.

"I'll take that as a yes," she told him, a little tartly, then added with more confidence, "I fiddled with the recipe a bit this time. I'm sure it's my best yet."

He'd heard those words before. They usually were followed by a meal with potatoes that were hard as rocks and eggs that dripped all over them. If the Dark One required food as sustenance, he'd be in trouble indeed. "Shouldn't you be closer to the kitchen, then?"

Belle shook her head. "I have everything under control. Don't fret, Rumpelstiltskin."

He didn't fret.

(He also didn't have everything under control. The fate of kingdoms and worlds, yes, of course. One blue-eyed young woman who bewailed him with her inexplicable behavior, no, not at all.)

"You don't mind if I make myself comfortable in here, do you?" Trust Belle to address the subject directly while he'd been trying to nudge it forward. "I won't be a bother, I promise. I just wanted a quiet place to relax."

His mind whirled at the idea of anyone relaxing in such close proximity to the Dark One. "The library is quiet," he managed.

"Too quiet."

Rumpelstiltskin resisted the urge to put his fingers to his forehead to stall a headache. He didn't get headaches. "The gardens, then. You're always in rhapsody about the noises of nature."

He tilted his head to the side, trying to understand. "Do you... want a bigger fireplace?"

An odd expression flashed on her face, one Rumpelstiltskin had seen on soldiers ready to face a much larger army the next day. And just like that, it was gone, leaving a girl who was biting nervously at her lower lip.

"I see," she said slowly. Her thumb rubbed the cover of her book in tight little circles, as if expecting be told to take it and get back downstairs. "I thought... Never mind."

With a heavy sigh, she slipped the book back into her pocket and rose to her feet. When she grabbed onto the back of the chair, to pull it behind her, Rumpelstiltskin decided he couldn't afford any more distractions.

"No," he snapped. "Leave that here."

Belle glanced at him questioningly.

"It made such a racket," he complained. "It'll only do it again on its way down."

"You could-" she made a swirling gesture with her hand "-take care of that."

Rumpelstiltskin raised an eyebrow. "When it was you who brought it here, and without my permission? I don't think so, dearie."

Belle eyed him and, against all odds, her lips lifted in a smile. "I guess the chair stays, then."

"For now," he agreed.

"And, maybe, I can stay as well?"

Rumpelstiltskin wanted to say no, to offer to cast a warming spell on the library, if it was that much colder. But it was getting late - what if he wanted a cup of tea and had to go all the way across his castle to search for her? At worst, she'd have to leave to check on their dinner soon enough.

She was such a tiny thing. He would hardly notice her if he concentrated on his potions instead.

"Do as you will," he grumbled, turning around.

He heard her settle back down and, a few seconds later, the rustle of pages. Despite himself, he looked over his shoulder for a peek. She did look relaxed, against every expectation, and her face now wore a sweet dreamy expression as she read her tale. Another romance novel, probably.

He dragged his attention back to the careful measurement of ingredients, but before he delved too deeply in the craft, he spared a second to stoke the fire with a simple spell.

Just in case.

The End
30/06/15
Chapter Summary

Regina plots. Belle deflects.

And Rumpelstiltskin has perfect timing.

Chapter Notes

I just want to take a minute to thank the people who keep this 'verse alive with their comments. It's wonderful to hear from you! :D

Regina set her cup down with enough force that the sound startled Belle, making her grab onto the shelf closest to her so as not to tumble off the chair she'd climbed on to dust the tall cabinet. Unlike Rumpelstiltskin, the queen wouldn't step in to catch her if she fell down. "Your Majesty?" she inquired, wondering if she had forgotten to place the apple conserves the queen liked so much.

It paid to keep Regina in a good mood when Rumpelstiltskin wasn't home.

"If you're not going to have tea with me, at least try not to raise such unholy dust." The queen wrinkled her nose. She went as far as to make a show of shaking her skirts, as if Belle had been flinging the dirt at her.

Belle made a mental note to sweep the grand hall the next time Regina visited; perhaps she'd even request that the queen lifted her feet to pass the broom over that spot. The thought kept her smiling.
"I'll be more careful," she said, and she would be. Careful not to antagonize a powerful witch without Rumpelstiltskin close by to dissuade the queen from throwing a spell at her.

Regina seemed mollified, and she deigned to give her a condescending smile. "I guess you need something to keep yourself busy." The glance she gave to the duster in Belle's hand spoke of her contempt better than any words would have. "It's not like you are awash in options, shut in here as you are."

Belle was forced to nod at that. "I manage," she said, carefully stepping back down onto the floor. By now she knew the signs of someone who would not admit they wanted her company, but still wouldn't allow her to turn her attention elsewhere. "It's a big castle," she explained, "so there's always something that needs be done."

Regina glanced around, her gaze stopping briefly at the windows with their unimpeded view of the outside world. They rarely drew in the curtains anymore. "There have been improvements," the queen admitted at last. "I never thought I'd see the day Rumple allowed anyone in his castle when he wasn't there. Why, I believe the grounds have been cleared off all the death traps there to catch the unwelcome." She gave Belle a knowing look. "Fond of a walk in the garden, aren't you?"

Belle felt herself pale, but she took a deep breath so she wouldn't shudder at the thought of the beautiful flowerbeds luring someone to their doom. "I've never seen any traps," she said, telling herself that Regina lied. 'Don't listen to the queen, dearie,' Rumpelstiltskin had warned her more than once, 'she will be smiles and sensible advice, and push you down a cliff in the same breath.' "He wouldn't need them. The Dark Castle has its master's reputation to scare most people away."

The smarter people, Belle thought but didn't say out loud.

"People are such frightened sheep," Regina scoffed, waving her hand as if disregarding those who wouldn't dare intrude on the Dark One without an invitation. "But you, my dear." Her lips curled into a cruel smile. "Traded like chattel into a man's keeping, and not even into a respectable marriage. But you are not sheep, are you?"

Belle's chin tilted up. The deal that had brought her into the Dark Castle had been honorable enough, and in hindsight, more of her liking. Gaston had required much more than her housekeeping skills before committing himself and his men in their aid.

"I see you aren't," Regina answered her own question, still smiling. "I bet your master has a hard time keeping you under his thumb. A nasty beast, our Rumple, but he can be quite lenient with those that amuse him."

"I've noticed that as well," Belle said quickly, and before the queen had done more than narrow her eyes at the swift return of the covert insult, she continued, "He does like to surround himself with interesting people."

Regina shot her a glare, but was obliged to nod. "It must be difficult," she said at length, giving Belle a pitying look, "to stay interesting when shut within these four walls. I must remind Rumple to let you out from time to time."

The implication that she was a pet in need of a walk galled Belle. Telling the smug queen that Rumpelstiltskin allowed her to visit the closest town would only prompt the hateful woman to comment how glad she was that Belle was being taken care of. "No need to worry," she said, dragging the corners of her lips upwards into what she hoped passed as a grateful smile, "but thank you for your concern, Your Majesty." She searched for a way to phrase the truth - the deference Rumpelstiltskin showed for her, the companionship they found in each other when left to
themselves - in such a way that she didn't reveal how diametrically different from Regina's conception her life was. "I am content with my lot," she finally said, keeping her voice level as if in resignation.

The queen's eyes brightened. "Poor girl," she whispered, but Belle had lived in court enough to hear the glee at someone else's misfortune. "Dark One or not, someone should speak to that man on your behalf."

And be in Regina's debt for the rest of her life? Belle shook her head. "I'm sure Rumpelstiltskin is satisfied with our arrangement as well," she said, still keeping to the truth and still presenting it under the opposite impression. Rumpelstiltskin would applaud at her deflection, she thought. "He wouldn't change a thing."

"Well, why would he!" This time the queen's indignation sounded genuine. "He always holds all the cards, doesn't he. There's no advantage to be gained, and believe me," she said, glancing at Belle with an intense look before shaking her head, "I've searched for one."

Belle didn't comment.

It had always been obvious that Rumpelstiltskin and the queen were locked in a struggle for power. But Belle had seen Rumpelstiltskin face three witches at once, each of them at least as skilled as Regina, and he had handled them with barely any effort. Regina had to know that she couldn't hope to compete against the Dark One's power, but she still acted as if they were on equal standing. Most mystifying of all, Rumpelstiltskin allowed her the delusion.

'Great magic can only be achieved by those who believe in their own greatness,' he had told her the one time Belle raised the subject.

'Is Regina one of the great, then?'

He had shrugged. 'Might be, might not.' Then he'd winked and laughed. 'But I don't have to care about that, do I?'

Belle often wondered what feat of greatness Rumpelstiltskin was expecting from the queen, but wasn't sure she wanted to know if it was something the Dark One had slotted as someone else's task.

"Perhaps...." Regina said now, interrupting Belle's musings. Her expression was clear off irritation, and if it were their first meeting, Belle would have mistaken the softer look for kindness. "Perhaps I can help you after all, my dear. I cannot in good conscience see a good girl like you here and not do something. I can take you away."

But Belle was already shaking her head.

"I know you're afraid of him, but you would be under my protection." The queen's voice was so sweet, the words tempting to someone who didn't know that Regina always lied. "I could hide you," Regina promised, "somewhere even the Dark One would never find you."

"Careful, dearie," came Rumpelstiltskin's hard voice, appearing in the middle of them, his back to Regina as he studied Belle's expression for an instant before he relaxed his stance and smiled. The smile didn't bode well for the queen. "I'm sure there's some cell in the bottom of those dungeons our lady queen loves to keep filled to the brim that even I couldn't peek into without crashing her castle around her ears, but let's not tempt me into doing more damage than I absolutely must, shall we?" He turned around as he spoke, until the last sentence was a hiss as he glared at Regina. "Don't
poach the help, Regina. It's not polite."

"Rumpelstiltskin...."

He grinned at the sound of his full name. Regina never called him that unless out of anger. Or fear.

"I wasn't....."

His smile sharpened. "Of course you weren't," he said, moving so Belle stayed behind him, outside the view and reach of his former pupil. "You are smart enough to remember that my deals are unbreakable - and the one Belle signed? It's for-e-ver." He nearly chanted the word, giving each syllable a delighted turn. "Belle goes without my leave, and my magic will trace her. And you wouldn't want me to follow her trail anywhere within you kingdom, would you?" He waited until Regina gave a tight shake of her head. "Thought so." He grinned more fully, teeth showing to the gum, and then took an advisory tone, "and believe me, you don't want to tuck her into any old cell. She is noisy when she's unhappy."

Belle had to giggle at that, those first days so far behind that it was funny to think on how bewildered he must have been to find himself actually sharing a roof with a girl. "Very bad for a wizard's - or a witch's - concentration," she agreed, stepping forward until she was almost side-to-side with Rumpelstiltskin. Regina wouldn't dare harm her as long as he was present. "I'm sure you meant no harm, Your Majesty," she said, ignoring Rumpelstiltskin's scoff, "but a deal is a deal."

Regina glanced between them, a calculating look in her eyes, before her gaze settled on Belle. "You fool," she laughed, "you don't hate him at all, do you?"

Belle blinked, the question too unexpected for a quick answer.

Instead Rumpelstiltskin gave one of his trilling laughs. "But on the bright side, she doesn't even dislike you either!"

At least he didn't call her a fool.

Were they average human beings, Belle would have stepped between them, but she was sensible enough to only sidle closer to Rumpelstiltskin until he broke off the glaring contest with the queen and turned to her. "What," he asked, "you don't!"

Hate served no purpose except to add misery to her own life and darken her heart, but she doubted that either Rumpelstiltskin or Regina would agree with her. Instead she addressed Rumpelstiltskin. "Her Majesty has come to see you," she told him, fighting down the habit to smile at him in welcome. She would make him one of favorite meals, she decided, since she felt confident the queen wouldn't stay for dinner. "And I'm only distracting the two of you. Why don't I better go and leave you to-" snarl at each other without me caught in the middle "-finish your business."

Regina was still scowling, but Rumpelstiltskin nodded easily enough. "Yes, yes, you go," he said, practically waving her away, "and work on the library first. I passed through it on my way here, and I could tell nobody's been there to clean."

Not to clean, no.

"Yes, sir," Belle replied, dropping a quick curtsey and turning before Regina could catch her smile. She left them glaring at each other, hurrying across the hall and up the stairs.

Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't have made such a pointed mention of the library if he hadn't left
something for her there. He did like to bring back little gifts when he had a successful trip (and the Dark One never moved a finger if he wasn’t assured of his success), so she had a small collection of trinkets from far away places and shelves full of the books he kept adding to 'his' collection.

The only way Regina could pry her away from her home - and her library! - was with the use of force.

And as long as Rumpelstiltskin wanted her in the Dark Castle, no one was powerful enough to take Belle away.

The End
17/07/16

Chapter End Notes

Still fumbling my way through Tumblr. But just in case: http://leni-ba.tumblr.com/
Curiosity

Chapter Notes

Prompt: *The vacuum of time.*

"Are you really older than these mountains?"

Rumpelstiltskin could pinpoint down to a shelf, and sometimes the exact tome, which book his maid had taken to her bedside that week, only by the questions that would burst from her during the hours they shared a room.

But this surprised him.

None of the books in her library spoke about the Dark One. He'd purged even the folk tales and silly legends, once he realized that Belle only needed one thread of truth to unravel the whole story.

Oh, she'd asked enough questions during her first year in the Dark Castle. Where he was from, who'd named him, were there others like him, and if not, why was he so different from other magic users? But her curiosity hadn't lasted long against the impossible riddles he'd put before her when the question was harmless enough, and the flat silence that had answered her more insightful assertions.

She was clever, this girl.

Too clever, sometimes.

"I don't believe anything can harm you, Rumpelstiltskin,' she'd said once, after he teased her again about trying to root out his weakness. 'Your magic is the most powerful in the land, so the only weapon that could hurt you would have to be linked to it. And that just means that it belongs to you already, doesn't it?"

Once, he had cut out the tongues of men who'd guessed even less about his truth - and then he'd crumbled their hearts to dust for good measure.

But Belle hadn't even been paying attention to him, focused on the day's mending instead, not one sign that she was searching for a hint that her words had struck true. She hadn't protested when he changed the subject with a quick reference about his latest grand acquisition, if she was that interested in the Dark One's belongings, and they'd carried the conversation from there.

Rumpelstiltskin had been tempted to peel even that scrap of information from her memory, had sequestered himself in his laboratory to make the potion. A drop in her tea, tasteless but effective, and...

...and she would come to the same conclusion, a few months away.

She had already sidled up to his greatest secret with nothing but her own observations. What would she do with the actual details?

Rumpelstiltskin gave a few slow turns to the wheel, glancing sideways at the girl on the chair she'd
dragged in months ago and he had yet to return to its proper place. "You ask my age? Tsk. How impolite, dearie." He turned his lips into a pout of mock-disappointment. "I can't think where you've caught such bad manners."

As expected, that got a giggle out of her. "I'm sure you cannot, Rumple," she said, biting down a little smile, and then she raised an eyebrow. "I'm also sure that's not an answer."

That was the perfect lead into a question of his own: "What brings this up?"

Belle threaded her needle through a bit of cloth and laid the shirt on her lap. "Just something I heard in town."

"Gossiping about your lord and master, are we?"

Her lips tugged upwards, but her voice was deferent enough. "Of course not."

She was as obedient a servant as he was a benevolent wizard, but they could play the role if the situation demanded it or, like now, the mood struck them.

"Then...?" he prompted.

"A children's song." She picked back her work, though she didn't do more than to straighten her thread and frown at the tear she was stitching back together. "Heard some boys while they played next to the road - just before they fled back home at the sight of me," she added with a resigned sigh.

Rumpelstiltskin sniggered at the idea of running away from his maid. But the townsfolk couldn't be too afraid of her, if they let the children stay outside when it was known she visited the market every three weeks. "Children always make light of that which scares them," he told her. Even Bae had come home humming about battling the ogres. "Just one more way to terrify their parents, I guess."

As if he hadn't been terrified enough.

He dispelled the memory with a wave of his hand, swiftly turned into a motion for her to continue.

Belle gazed at him. "That's it. I wondered whether there was more to that line than imagination."

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. "Mountains are young, compared to what I am."

Her head tilted in thought.

Too late Rumpelstiltskin remembered that she'd seen a knight turned into a rose, and heard several of his favorite tales where some fool kissed the face of their true love and ended up dragged to the bottom of a lake or spirited into the Endless Forest for their trouble.

And she believed that there was a man beneath the monster.

Not that she was right, but it showed that she had enough of an understanding that, in the world of magic, what something appeared like rarely reflected their true form.

"But are you their elder?"

He was tempted to smile.

Clever. Too clever.
"Old enough, girl," he said, adding enough steel to his voice to let her know the subject was closed. It wouldn't work if it was important to her, but it should be enough to deter simple curiosity.

Belle wasn't the only one who learned about the other, as the months passed.

But perhaps she understood too much. "That's too long to have lived alone," she murmured, head already bent to her work, voice low enough that he could have ignored it.

He could have countered that loneliness was not an undesirable state of being, especially when the option was a girl who tripped over her own shadow and never kept quiet.

But that girl was sitting in the room, and he still hadn't vanished her chair where it belonged.

He could have sneered at the thought that he'd ever wanted for company, laughed at this absurd fixation of hers.

But Rumpelstiltskin returned to his wheel and said nothing.

Her presence already spoke the loudest.

The End
26/12/15
"Will come back soon, he says," Belle mutters as she sweeps around the large table of Rumpelstiltskin's laboratory, beating the dust away as she wishes she could do with the wizard who usually paces this floor. "Soon!"

For a man who's made words an art form, Rumpelstiltskin can be exasperatingly vague. Three weeks! It's been three weeks since her master departed, destination unknown, and for all she knows he's finally angered the wrong ogre and is now being used as a toothpick somewhere.

That's her bad mood talking, she knows. He's terrible company at the dinner table; he'd make a dreadful nuisance of himself as the main dish.

Who'd want him?

(At dinner time, she does.)

Oh right, after being chased out of Avonlea almost two years ago, the ogres are still terrified of the Dark One.

A giant then?

Yes, sure, Belle's heard they're a peaceful lot, up in their lands above the clouds. But Rumpelstiltskin would try the patience of a saint.

"Serves him well if he's up there, being roasted over a fire," she grumbles, now passing a rag over the flasks he's left within her reach. "See if I worry one second about him!"

He will come back, of course.

The moment she least expects it, he will be hollering for his breakfast, or demanding to know why his basket doesn't have enough fresh straw. This time he will even shout at her for cleaning his laboratory without his express command, and then pretend it was perfectly acceptable to have the dust rising while the cobwebs dangled almost to the floor during his absence.

Her work is so underappreciated!

He will be full of anecdotes, of course, and he might even share some of them once he's decided to
forgive her penchant for cleanliness. There will be some new trinket in his hands, too, and it will catch Rumpelstiltskin's interest for an hour before he abandons it for her to find and dust. Or, as he's started to do lately, he will wave a signed document before Belle's nose, and challenge her to find the trick he's tucked into the phrasing, just so he can preen over his own astuteness.

It usually spells disaster for the other party, should they try to back out of their deal.

(Like a hundred-year curse on a land already ravaged by the ogres - no harvests, no clean rivers, no grass for the cattle - if a girl tries to slip out of a castle. Belle likes to think she has smarts of her own, so she read every word before she signed.)

It's all about insurance, he's fond of saying. The world is full of fools, and none more foolish than the ones who believe they might take advantage of the Dark One.

Belle agrees.

But even fools can be dangerous, and none more than those with no hope left.

Rumpelstiltskin had laughed darkly when she'd pointed that out.

"Oh, I'm aware," he'd said. Then he had chuckled. "They're welcome to try their worst."

And now it's been three weeks, and not one sign from him.

Yes, Belle worries.

It irks her, when she's aware Rumpelstiltskin will come to no harm, and she scrubs with more force. The brusque movement tips over one of the metal containers, a blue gooey liquid splashing over her hand. Two years ago, Belle would have been shrieking in fear, afraid for her life. Now she doesn't react, except to groan in distaste.

Rumpelstiltskin has learned not to leave out anything dangerous when he's not present to oversee the cleaning, and she's learned not to touch his implements while he's at work.

Now if they only could work out this little matter of their different perceptions of time.... Obviously, the immortal Dark One thinks nothing of nearly a month gone by!

"It shouldn't matter," she admits to the tall window as she considers whether it needs another washing already. "I did say 'forever', after all."

Without a wizard who needs the best illumination to measure his ingredients, the window can stand another day as is, she decides. Next Belle turns to her favorite task in this room, and faces the large bookshelf along the side wall, softening a little at the sight of its contents.

The library he gave her was similar, though it's grown in the years since her arrival. She should welcome her master's absence, with so many stories to keep her attention. But reading is not as great an adventure without intelligent discussion about the things she discovers.

Or, in Rumpelstiltskin's case, the caustic remarks about the holes in her knowledge a noblewoman's upbringing has afflicted on her, and then arranging for the proper tomes to appear in another new shelf.

She must be the most learned maid in the Enchanted Forest.

"Forever," she repeats, sighing, as she traces the back of one of the thicker books. Then she scoffs,
"But forever with him, that was the deal. Rumpelstiltskin, the deal-maker, yes. But some deal-keeper he is!"

"Ehem."

After three weeks of silence, the cough at her back makes her heart jump in her chest.

It also brings a grin to her lips.

"Now, dearie," he says, without waiting for her to turn around, "did no one teach you not to say my name?"

Belle bends her head to hide a smile. She's said his name dozens of times since she arrived at the Dark Castle - though she had to force herself to whisper the mouthful, that first time, but she had to know if the rumor was true. Whether it's one more mistaken myth about the Dark One, or because he knows that she's in his castle and therefore safe from harm, he's never come to the call.

He must have been watching her, then.

Listening to her little rants too.

Well, he deserved every word.

"I wasn't talking to you, was I? I don't think that counts."

"Talking to yourself, then?" He titters. "Careful, they make asylums for people who confess to less than that."

"Well, it's not as if I had a choice," she tells him, annoyed now.

It's so easy for him to mock her loneliness, when he can go anywhere in the world at a whim, and meet with people other than the few brave enough - or desperate enough - to demand entrance into the Dark Castle. She hates his callousness, especially when she knows he can be attentive when he puts his mind to it.

The feeling will pass, it always does, but for now it fuels her to admit, "I don't like staying by myself for so long."

She expects disinterest. A dismissal. Perhaps ever a sharp reminder that she's a maid, a stolen prize at best, and his work is more important.

Instead, she gets thoughtful silence.

Intrigued, she turns to face him, a little surprised to discover that he's still standing no more than three steps away from her. Usually he pops up at her shoulder to scare her and, his mischief satisfied, then retreats halfway across a room.

It's still unnerving, to be the focus of that gaze, but Belle has learned to bear it well. "Three weeks, Rumpelstiltskin. I'd rather be making your meals in the middle of the forest, rather than rattle here with the brooms and the mice," she explains, though she's not sure he will understand, he who has lived alone in this castle for years and years before he carted her in. "I had nothing but the sound of my own voice. I tired of it pretty quickly."

She almost chuckles, already hearing his retort. He spent months threatening to store her tongue somewhere else if she kept up the chattering.
Instead he stares at her, and by now Belle knows the look in his face.

He is wondering whether she could possibly mean what she's saying.

(For someone who calls himself a monster, Rumpelstiltskin is as stubborn as any man she's ever met.)

"Bad for business," he says at last, but very slowly, as if he's still deliberating as he speaks, "to let someone tag along. Might scare off the clients."

Because having the Dark One in their homes wouldn't scare the soul out of a body, whether he'd been summoned by choice or not.

Belle has experience there.

"And you!" he continues, pitching his voice higher, "you'd try to talk them out of agreeing with my terms!"

Possibly, yes.

She still has nightmares about her last night in Avonlea. Poor Papa, the horror in his eyes when Rumpelstiltskin laid out his one condition in exchange for his help, and demanded Papa's only child in payment.

He is a man. But he can be a cruel man, when the mood strikes him.

"I don't need to leave," she tells him, always the one to look for the middle ground. He's all grand gestures and bewildering gifts, where Belle only needs a little company. "You could come back in the evenings, at least every few days," and then adds, only half-joking, "My cooking will never improve if I don't practice."

As expected, Rumpelstiltskin makes a face at that.

For someone who complains about her over-salting his soup or burning his biscuits, he digs into them contentedly enough. Whether he admits it or not, he must like the idea of having someone at least try to make his favorite dishes - or what Belle suspects them to be, going only by what returns to the kitchen untouched, and what he's made an effort to eat.

When she's by herself, she can go for days on buttered toast, fruit, and milk.

"I suppose," he says at last.

Belle smothers a grin. "And perhaps," she tells him, taking advantage of his good mood, "if you need to go far, you could be a little more specific about how long it will take before you return?"

Rumpelstiltskin frowns at that. "But I did tell you, didn't I?"

"Soon, you said."

He stares at her uncomprehendingly.

Belle sighs. "Never mind."

They still have a long way to go.
The End
26/09/15
Distraction

Chapter Notes

Comments are welcome. Feel free to ignore the rant in the end notes. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once more, the yellow-tinged potion turned to orange, fizzing out into another complete waste of time.

With a loud expletive, Rumpelstiltskin snatched the vial he'd been working on for the last hour and tossed it across the room. Then he passed a hand over the carefully measured ingredients and, with a snarl that showed all his teeth, made them burn into smoke and ashes.

The annoyed growl that followed made the whole room tremble.

Belle flinched as her chair wobbled in place, but then shook her head and tried to focus back on her reading.

But she must have made some noise, because in the next instant the book was wrenched from her hand and flying over her head to join the broken vial in its corner of shame.

Gasping, Belle shifted to stare at Rumpelstiltskin, finding his straight figure glowering darkly over his failed experiment.

"Hey!"

His gaze snapped to her. The dilated pupils, the hawk-like stare that brought a shiver down to the bones for those caught in it for the first time. Belle herself fought the instinct to avert her eyes and hide from the inhuman stare. If she did, he'd cackle now and then spend days avoiding her, unable to apologize for having scared her.

And she'd spend those days with no one to talk to. If Belle wanted time alone at the Dark Castle, she would keep to her library instead of seeking company in his tower room.

"My book, please," she said, holding out her hand.

His head tilted, eyes fixed now on the palm of her stretched hand. The corner of his lips lifted at her demanding gesture.

Belle hid a smile of her own. It had been a gamble. Challenging Rumpelstiltskin meant that she'd either find herself locked in her room for a few hours for her presumption, or that his askew sense of humor would assert itself over his temper.

Luckily, more often it was the latter.

But baiting him out of a bad mood had its own drawbacks. Namely, that she'd be the object of his newfound playfulness.

"Excuuuuse me, dearie," he drawled, shedding off the stiffness of the thwarted sorcerer as he left
his spot at the table and ambled his way toward her. "Am I bothering you?"

The question teetered on a mocking giggle, black teeth showcasing his nasty grin. He came until his legs brushed against her skirts, looking so much taller when she was at such disadvantageous position, and leaned in slightly to hover over her. "Hm?"

If anyone had asked, Belle would have said truthfully that she wasn't afraid of Rumpelstiltskin. Not for her own sake. But there was no one to ask, and Rumpelstiltskin himself just assumed that she was terrified of him at the slightest provocation.

Belle shook her head both at the question and the attempt to intimidate her.

"Oh really?" He caught her chin with a single finger, then lifted up her face until their eyes met fully. "I hear one thing, and what do I see? A crease on the forehead and a storm in these pretty blues." His other hand brushed against her temple and down her cheeks as he said that. His annoyance must run deep, to push him into breaking the invisible distance he'd imposed between master and maid.

It felt strange, to have his touch on her skin. Their only direct contact was usually through layers of clothes, the few times he grabbed her elbow to guide her somewhere, or the even rarer occasions when she was allowed a show of affection or gratitude by hugging him. Belle wasn't sure whether she wanted to lean in or away before it was gone.

"What's the truth, madame," he continued, still staring down at her, "when you're looking so... endearingly... upset? Will you claim now that the dreaded one is good company?"

"You were," she said, catching the blink of surprise before he snorted in disbelief. "Until you interrupted me in the middle of a good story."

He chuckled.

A snap of fingers by her ear, and his other hand now held her book. He studied the cover, and smiled in recognition. "I see. Why don't you tell me of it, then. I always love a good tale!"

It was a love story, which in her experience was embarrassing enough a confession to make to any of the male variation. But this particular book had several scenes that gave detailed description into more than the courtly romances that featured in her books.

From the look on Rumpelstiltskin's face, he was well aware that a good quarter of the story was spent in the heroine's bedroom.

If she demurred, he would tease her for it. And if she did as he asked, he would tease as well.

Caught between embarrassment and a flash of annoyance, she crossed her arms over her chest. Avoidance didn't come easily to her, always one to charge ahead first and think of consequences later, but she'd watched Rumpelstiltskin squeeze his way out from answering uncomfortable questions for years.

It wasn't always about zapping the other person into a different room. Or ignoring them until they were sick of the silent treatment and pretended there had never been a question at all.

It could also be about placing a high enough price on the answer.

"Maybe I will." She lifted her chin toward the remnants of his work at the table, and didn't miss his frown at the reminder of his failure. "If you tell me what went wrong with that spell."
He scowled. "I don't think so."

"Then I don't think so either," she said calmly.

His eyes narrowed. "I asked first."

Belle gave him an innocent look. "You don't expect the Dark One's maid to give anything up without making a deal for it beforehand, do you?"

His lips trembled, but he managed to hold back a laugh. "Damned peasants are putting ideas in your head, dearie. I know you'd gladly take your cloak off your own shoulders and not expect so much as a thanks in return."

"But you're not cold or needy, Rumple," she pointed out, still smiling. "Now pay up, or leave me be."

He sneered. "As if you'd understand the details of my magic if I tried to explain it."

Belle lifted her shoulders. "Is that another way to tell me that you don't know?"

"Of course not!"

"Then...?"

He huffed. "I obviously need less distraction." With a flourish, he showed her the book and presented it to her. Belle made to grab it, but before her fingers could touch it, it vanished in a swirl of purple smoke. "Off to the library, my girl. Or better yet, make yourself useful in the kitchen. I need to concentrate if I want this done before dinner time!"

He was tossing her away. But he was also promising to join her for a meal later.

Belle smiled and didn't hide it when his eyebrow rose in disapproval. "I understand," she told him, getting to her feet, and then, because it needed to be said if she was ever to break through the high walls he kept around him, "I wouldn't have laughed, you know."

Rumpelstiltskin looked confused.

"If you told me something you thought was embarrassing," she explained. "I wouldn't laugh."

*Friends don't make fun of each other,* she wanted to add.

But if Belle said that, Rumpelstiltskin would snap at her as he did every time she brought up the subject of friendship as applied to him.

Even now he gave a wry smile at her words. "Of course you wouldn't. You're too smart for that. And beeeeeesides..." His voice climbed as he spoke, finishing in a playful sing-song that was belied by the stiff posture. He was leagues away already, for all they stood in the same room. "You're the maid, dearie," he reminded her, "and I'm... your master!"

"That's not why," she insisted.

But he was already turning around, back to his work and his magic.

The Dark One's power never rested. There was always a new artifact to study, a new spell to conjure to perfection and then bend into something more devastating still. He could reign over the Enchanted Forest, if he wished it, but Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't stand still long enough to savor
His time was devoted into feeding his power. Compared to that, a maid was indeed a welcome distraction at best.

Belle closed her hands into fists, telling herself that to wish otherwise was to set herself up for disappointment. But it still hurt, whenever he dismissed her and shut himself out so her words would only fall onto deaf ears.

So she took a deep breath and, even though he wouldn't see it, summoned a smile.

"I'll see about dinner," she said, though she didn't expect a sign that he was listening anymore.

Indeed, there wasn't even a quiet hum of acknowledgement.

But see if Rumpelstiltskin would still ignore her later, when she came up with a steaming plate of baked potatoes with melted cheese and bits of bacon on top.

Words, he could call them lies and the pretty delusions of a lonely girl.

But his favorite dinner - well, the one simple enough that even she couldn't ruin it - was tangible proof that... that she... that she paid attention, yes.

Friends paid attention to each other, didn't they?

The End
21/04/16

Chapter End Notes

AUTHOR'S RANT:

As an aside...

The original version of 'The Long Haul' had Belle falling under a sleeping curse (while still in the Enchanted Forest, pre-Regina's curse), and Rumpelstiltskin taking her back to Avonlea to her father because he wouldn't even consider that he could give a True Love's Kiss.

But I've been putting off writing that in because, really, it felt cliché and lazy, in a world where almost every other major character has been under that curse. I wanted something new, an exciting plot twist...

Joke's on me.

At least now I know for sure I need to go in a different direction? lol
Chapter Summary

Every year, on his son's birthday, Rumpelstiltskin lights a candle in remembrance.

This day never got any easier, but after three hundred years, Rumpelstiltskin had learned to channel his grief into those hours in the afternoon where he allowed himself to remember Baelfire without running to his spinning wheel to smooth those bittersweet memories away. He would retire to his workroom, dispense with all lights except that which came from the window, and light a remembrance candle.

The light was supposed to symbolize the eternal reward of those departed, and peace for their loved ones who'd been left behind. If pressed, Rumpelstiltskin could murmur the old prayers his aunts had once taught him, but he never completed that little ritual. If they even existed, the gods had long abandoned the likes of him, as the Dark One's mere existence spit in their face. No, he lit the candle because even that action was a connection to his old life, to all the times when he and Baelfire had prayed for Milah's soul (Time wasted, as he now knew! A liar, a thousand times over, and he hoped her soul burned in hell for her betrayal). But he'd started his solitary tradition because he hadn't known any other, and as the years passed, the routine of it gave him something of a link to his son.

No, the light of the candle didn't soothe him - nothing could, for as long as he was stuck in this world! - but it gave him focus. For as long as the flame burned, he could retrace those fourteen years spent with his son; the baby he'd first met the night he arrived home after that cursed battlefield; the sweet toddler he'd raised while Milah drifted further and further away from their little family, the boy who'd been ready to march off to a hopeless war... The son he'd let fall into an unknown world.

Rumpelstiltskin took a deep breath.

This was not the time for regrets, but instead to renew his oath to reunite with his son. The trip to the World Without Magic was nearing, and soon he would have no need for candles and quiet moments. He would see Baelfire, and he would beg for forgiveness and trade the world for a second chance. And if he couldn't make up for having betrayed his boy, then he would at least spend the rest of his life making amends.

Yes, this was his moment to be a father, when he allowed himself to soften at the thought of seeing his son again.

It was a private time.

Or at least it had been so for centuries, until that girl had intruded into the room during her first year in the castle.

The second year, Belle had knocked on the door, asking if she may join him. Well, she may not! Casting her back to her old dungeon cell - with all the doors open and the hallways safe, of course, since it was only a warning - seemed to have gotten his point across and she hadn't returned that day, instead contenting herself to serve him gooey eggs for a week in retaliation.
Not a woman that let her opinions go unremarked, that Belle.

This year Rumpelstiltskin had expected her to barge in again, already aware that the stubborn creature had the strangest whims. He'd stood in the middle of the room for half an hour at least, waiting for her light steps upon the staircase... but she had not come.

He felt relieved, of course.

The sun had sunk in the horizon when Rumpelstiltskin let the little flame be smothered and, with a last thought of Baelfire laughing at something his father had said, stepped away and around his work table, heading to the stair and down to the main hall.

He had not expected to find Belle shooting up to her feet as soon as he stepped into the room.

"Rumple!" She marched toward him and made to grab his wrist. He drew his arm in, causing her to miss. She didn't even blink, but looked up and gave what he now termed her 'entreating' smile.
"Please, come," she asked. "I promise, you can leave if you really don't like it, but give it a chance first?"

Curious, he nodded slowly, busy trying to divine what his maid could have gotten up to in the hours he hadn't been paying attention.

Of all things, she led him down the service passages, turning this way and that in what Rumpelstiltskin recognized as a shortcut to the kitchen. "I already had dinner," he lied, because weariness was already settling on his shoulders. The time dedicated to his son's memory exhausted him as no spell ever could.

Magic could be recovered and hoarded. Memories seemed to slip away unless one grabbed onto them with both hands.

"It's okay," Belle said. "It'll keep if we don't finish it now."

His eyebrows climbed up, and he would have questioned her if she hadn't brought them to a stop inside the kitchen and smiled up at him nervously. "Please say this is all right?"

Rumpelstiltskin blinked. His cleverness was a known fact across the realm, but he was lost as to his maid's intentions. He looked around, searching for clues so he didn't seem as confused as he felt, but nothing seemed out of order. His mood, which was never kind on this date, dove quickly into annoyance, and he rounded on the girl, fixing her with an impatient scowl. "What is 'this'?" he asked slowly, holding onto his temper by a thread.

Contrary to the example of battle-ready knights and wiser people, Belle didn't jump away or at least try to avoid his gaze and anxiously look for the closest exit.

Instead the girl gave him another hesitant smile. "I baked a cake," she announced, waving at the raised platter in the middle of the table, which upon closer inspection, did carry something in the vague shape of a cake.

He stared in disbelief. "That's it?"

"No! Um... yes?" Belle sighed. "I thought... well. You have your ways to commemorate your son's birthday, and I respect them, I do. But - maybe I can join in this year?" That last part was said in a rush, and he noticed that she was wringing her hands together as she continued speaking. "It's not as if I get to do it for anyone else, and even if I don't know his name, it feels like something I should do for a friend's child. If you like?"
His nose had been twitching against the instinct to bare his teeth at her presumption, but her last words deflated his anger. Nobody called him a friend, not in earnest. Not without expecting something in return.

A part of him wanted to grab her and demand what she wanted - riches, power, freedom? Another part shrunk at the thought that she'd have an answer.

Instead he asked something else, comfortable to avoid the difficult issues. "You do this in your land?"

Belle nodded. "The first year is for mourning, of course. But after that...." She shrugged. "We choose to celebrate the time we had with our loved ones. Actually-" she looked embarrassed. "-there should be a feast. Maybe a dance." She laughed a little, and Rumpelstiltskin had the feeling it was at his reaction. "But since it's only the two of us, I thought we'd try something small."

"My son is not dead," he snapped.

"I know," she said, though her tone betrayed that she still didn't understand. Then she brightened. "I figured that'd be one more reason to have cake."

Unexpectedly, her matter-of-fact logic tickled his sense of humor. The girl could see the silver lining in any given cloud.

Bae would have liked her, Rumpelstiltskin thought. That made him soften his voice.

"Say I agree, my girl. Is this-" he pointed at what must be her best attempt at baking since her arrival in the Dark Castle. At least it looked edible, with no egg shells sticking from the surface and no burnt smell wafting out. "-something that will happen every year?"

"Oh yes."

"Hm."

He pursed his lips, but it was more in consideration than outright distaste.

Belle must have sensed that, because she reached into a drawer and took out two small dishes, looking at him hopefully. "So it's all right? You really don't have to do anything. Just sit - or, um, stand and stare - and think of the good times."

"And what will you do?"

"Well, usually I'd listen to you and share stories of my own, but I can also just sit in this other chair and keep you company." She leaned in, bumping her elbow into his. "You don't need to be alone today, Rumpelstiltskin."

Habit made him sneer a little at that - he liked being alone! - but Belle only smiled. "Is that a yes?"

Rumpelstiltskin tapped his fingers against his chest. He'd spent the daylight hours remembering his son, but it had never crossed his mind that someone would want to share in the moment if not to intrude in his privacy. But Belle had given him every chance to walk away, and on this day where the memory of Baelfire was so fresh, he knew what his boy would ask him to do. "Well... Bae did love dessert. He'd hate seeing all this work go to waste."
Her eyes shone. "Bae," she repeated, looking as sweetly grateful as if he'd given her a room full of spun gold instead of a boy's name.

Rumpelstiltskin looked away.

Belle was still smiling as she cut and served thick slices. "Here," she said, pouring a line of melted sugar on top. "Because I happen to know who your boy took after, regarding that sweet tooth."

That surprised a true grin out of him. People had often remarked on the differences between him and Baelfire, never the similarities. Yes, of course the boy had been braver and kinder, such a better person at his young age than Rumpelstiltskin had ever been. But the reminder of something the two of them shared made him feel warm inside.

A first, on a date like this.

"Oh, he was worse!" he confided before he could tell himself to stop, laughing quietly at the memory. He had always hoarded the memories of Baelfire, keeping them as close as his oath to never break another deal, but had anyone ever cared to ask him to share one? "He could have a whole berry tart for lunch, and still ask for more at dinnertime!"

Belle laughed too, but she was shaking her head. 'I'd have to see it to believe it.'

His good mood dimmed at the unlikelihood of that. The Dark Curse seemed so far away yet, and even if somehow Belle stayed with him until it was cast, she would be free in the other land. "Perhaps you will," he said noncommittally, wondering whether Belle would visit once he'd recovered his child, if only out of curiosity to meet him.

She might, he thought. In fact, she probably would.

"You're smiling," Belle said, cutting into his thoughts. "I hoped this would make you feel better, but I wasn't sure--- I mean, I'm glad it worked!" Rumpelstiltskin was startled to realize she was right, but she looked so satisfied with her success that he didn't wipe out the expression in sheer contrariness.

"The cake isn't all that bad," he responded with a shrug, taking a bigger bite to prove it was the reason for his lifted mood.

Belle glanced at him knowingly, but didn't press him to admit the whole truth. "So we can do this again?" she asked instead.

He didn't look at her, suddenly busy staring at his plate. He shrugged both shoulders, and since there was no head shake to accompany the gesture, Belle knew to take it as approval.

"Perfect!" she cried out. "You won't regret this, Rumpelstiltskin."

And the strangest thing was, he believed her.

The End
16/07/16
The Way Back Home

Chapter Summary

FTL. Rumpelstiltskin has a new task for his maid.

Chapter Notes

Written at Comment Fic for WithaSmile7. Prompt: lost in the woods,

Collecting mushrooms from the depths of the forest is her new task for the day. Potions to make, dearie, Rumpelstiltskin had said as he collected her from the library, grinning too widely as he proposed a field trip, and didn't you mention you were in need of some air?

Belle had leaped out of her chair, weary to the bone of being shut in within the castle for several weeks.

She expected to be sent to roam the grounds close to the castle, but instead Rumpelstiltskin has brought her to a site she doesn't recognize. The trees are thick over their heads, letting in enough light to search the ground, but no matter how she strains, Belle cannot catch sight of even the tallest tower of the Dark Castle.

Most of her attention is on his description of the specimen he needs, but as soon as Rumpelstiltskin looks ready to make the jump back to the castle, Belle reaches out and touches her fingertips to his wrist. "Rumple, wait," she tells him, squeezing the edge of his sleeve between thumb and forefinger, futile as it is to believe that her grasp could keep him in place.

He does stand still, though, glancing at her expectantly. "A problem, dearie?"

"Well, yes," she says. She hesitates for a moment, not sure how he could have missed it. Then she sighs and points around them. "You can't just bring me with magic somewhere I've never seen and expect me to guess the way back!"

Rumpelstiltskin stares at her. "Well, you're a smart girl. There's a road close enough, and a town not an hour away. I'm sure you can get to it with no trouble."

"So, instead of being lost in the woods, I'll be lost in a town I don't know?"

Sometimes, for such a clever man, he manages to act in ways that make no sense to Belle. The way his eyes dart to her for a moment, almost uncertainly, is another example. But the strange mood passes instantly, and then he's smirking at her, giving her one of those bows that Belle is fairly certain are sincere enough - certainly more sincere than those she's seen him address to Queen Regina or the other royals that make his way to his doors.

"Well! I guess we can't have you wandering around without direction," he says, with such cheer that Belle wonders if it's forced. But he's grinning again before she can worry. "Isn't it lucky that I
brought... this.... along?" Out of thin air, a ball of golden thread appears on his outstretched palm. He offers it to her, looking solemn as it passes onto her keeping. "Place it on the ground, and let it roll," he instructs. "It will lead you home."

Belle studies it, admiring his work. The thread is so fine, a seamstress would weep in joy to be able to use it. "It's beautiful," she says, always amazed by the perfection of his work at the spinning wheel. It's not only that he can turn straw into gold, but that he can also make something useful out of it. "I wish I knew how it worked."

"Isn't it obvious?" he laughs. "It knows where you want to go the most."

Belle has lived with him for too long, for the notion of an inanimate object reading her thoughts - or her emotions? - doesn't faze her anymore. She is still curious, of course, but now is not the moment to ask for details. Rumpelstiltskin has brought her here because his own time is too short, after all.

"Thank you. I'll try to finish soon and hurry back," she promises, ignoring the way he blinks at her grateful smile. She has come to understand that kindness puzzles him more deeply than any riddle.

His expression sobered. "Yes. Of course. Just follow where the gold leads, Belle." He pauses, then reaches out to play with the loose end, tugging at it until he has wrapped it around her thumb. "It doesn't make mistakes."

Belle is still nodding when there's only a puff of smoke in his place.

The mushrooms are easy enough to spot, and a couple of hours is all she needs to fill her basket. With a thought of regret at having no time to visit the town Rumpelstiltskin had talked about - and its tavern - Belle sets to return.

"You are back," Rumpelstiltskin says as she enters the main hall, staring at her for a moment too long before shaking his head. "Didn't you use my gift at all, girl?"

Belle frowns. "Of course I did," and she hands him the little ball of gold, a little smudged with mud and grass from its travel across the ground but coming to shine as if new once it passes into his keeping. "Really, Rumple. You left me so far away I never would have found the way on my own!"

"But you are back," he repeats, as if needing to clarify that point.

"It does seem so," Belle says, keeping her voice short from an impatient snap. The truth is, all she wants is a long warm bath and to get into bed. She can try to unravel this incomprehensible man at some other time. Her arm is sore after carrying the heavy basket, and no matter how comfortable are the shoes Rumpelstiltskin has given to her, her feet still hurt after the long trek. "And too late to make dinner, too. If you'd told me this errand would take this long, I'd have prepared something before we left."

Rumpelstiltskin sniffs. "I did live without a maid before," he reminds her. "I'm not completely helpless."

Belle smiles hopefully. "So you did make something?"

She would have settled for bread and cheese, but if Rumpelstiltskin has bothered to entertain himself at the stove, it's a very promising prospect. He's as good with a stew as he is with his potions - which don't seem to have required as much of his time as he'd given to understand that morning.
"Yes, of course! I thought-" He catches himself. Clears his throat. "I thought you might be hungry," he says at last, though Belle can tell it's not what he intended to say at first.

But the thought of a nice, warm meal, is stronger than her curiosity, and her stomach decides to announce its urgency with a growl.

Rumpelstiltskin smirks. "As the lady demands," he thrills, as if Belle had made a polite inquiry, and waving his hand toward the table, calls up a few dishes still steaming.

Belle sighs in delight. The smell alone is heaven. "Thank you, Rumpelstiltskin," she says, trying for a sedate walk to her meal and sure she isn't managing it.

"Ah, no. Thank you, dearie."

"It was no trouble," she says as she seats herself, already licking her lips in anticipation. "You can send me to pick mushrooms any day, if I come home to this."

He has placed her seat so her back is to him, and so she doesn't see the change in his expression. "Right, the mushrooms. Yes, of course." He pauses, and his voice softens. "That too."

The End
16/06/16
“What do you mean, ‘never been kissed’?”

Regina widened her eyes, pretending shock at his ignorance. "Come, Rumple. That pretty young thing blushes whenever someone mentions as much as a couple courting in public. You really believe she's experienced anything more?"

She enjoyed the awkward shift of his body, the furrow of his nose as he contemplated the apparently heretofore unexplored thought of his maid's personal life.

"She had a fiancé," he grumbled.

"Ah, yes. The knight." Regina hummed in absent approval. "Strapping boy. Very well formed. Would have done well as a captain in my guard."

Rumpelstiltskin's gaze suddenly narrowed. "You know him."

"My, my, Rumple. Is it a crime to interview a man?" She twirled her spoon in her tea, and made a slow show of lifting a sip to her lips to test the flavor. When she looked at Rumpelstiltskin again, he was glaring at her. "I'll remind you that I do travel regularly, if only to visit my ungrateful old teacher. It's smart to surround myself with strong - and deliciously handsome - men." She gave him a significant glance. "I do have to compensate, you know."

He didn't even seem to pick on the insult. "Why this particular man, Your Majesty?"

Her lips arranged themselves into a pout. "Can't I want someone pretty to look at?"

Sharp talons tapped the table impatiently. Rumpelstiltskin said nothing, but it was clear from his expression that he demanded a more credible explanation. They both knew that Regina wasn't that shallow.

"All right. I was curious about the kind of man you'd let threaten you at your own doorstep and still allow to walk away," Regina confessed. "Then I realized he was not worth being considered a
threat, with so little between his ears. Obviously not the kind of man over whom a smart girl would risk her reputation."

Rumpelstiltskin seemed mollified with that.

Regina took another sip of her tea, relieved that her claim to curiosity had been enough to explain why she had arranged to meet Sir Gaston. The meeting really had been a waste of time. The knight had no important information on either the months he'd spent in the Dark Castle, or any juicy tidbits that could be used to blackmail or at least pressure Belle to betray her master.

"It was a disappointing encounter," Regina sighed now.

Sir Gaston had not only been uninterested in her offer. He had been horrified by the thought of serving the woman he knew was an intimate of the Dark One and a frequent guest in his castle. He had barely kept his answers within the bounds of courtesy owed to a queen, and he had escaped as fast as politely possible.

Even if the offer had been made only for the chance to discomfit Belle with the presence of a former and now unreachable lover (which, sadly, Sir Gaston appeared not to be) and, through her, upset the peaceful routine Rumpelstiltskin had grown fond of, it had still annoyed her to have her request denied.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned, reading her flash of temper accurately. "Told you no, didn't he?"

"Seems he didn't want to risk running into you again," Regina told him. "You must have made quite the impression on the boy."

Rumpelstiltskin sat up straighter and twittered, pleased with her words. He did delight in terrorizing those foolish enough to cross him.

Taking advantage of his good mood, Regina returned to their original subject. "You really cannot think that silly boy could give a woman a true taste of romance. It's just not fair that such a pretty thing as Belle has nothing to dream about, or even a memory of a stolen kiss to tide her over while she stays here."

"Look at you, Your Majesty. Taking my maid under your wing. How... altruistic."

Regina chose not to pay attention to the sarcasm in that last word. "I know you don't dislike that girl enough to actually keep her shut in here for the whole of her life... Why not give her a chance to make a life somewhere else while she's young enough to have her choice of beaus?"

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head, giving a dark chuckle. "A new life? Perhaps as your attendant, Your Majesty? Among the same old men who still praise their good king for his good taste and his quickness to snap up a 'pretty young thing'? Tell me, have they even bothered to make you feel welcome since your arrival, or at least wondered why you'd consent to marry a man thrice your age? Oh wait! Did you, dearie?" Rumpelstiltskin's voice dropped to a hiss when she spluttered in protest. "Please remind me of how eager you were to become Leopold's wife, Your Majesty, and then tell me again to send an innocent girl to his court."

"She'd be under my protection!"

"In a kingdom where unwilling girls are led to the altar and then everyone watches as they're ignored by their husband? Bah!"

Regina ground her teeth in sudden fury. "I'm not here to talk about my marriage."
"Odious subject, I agree," Rumpelstiltskin said airily, his anger evaporated as soon as it had come now that he had given his answer.

Regina eyed him, but he only looked back in amusement.

"Anything else, dearie?"

She gave a reluctant shake of her head.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned - "Good!" - and returned to his tea as if he hadn't accused a beloved king and the key members of his retinue of the unspeakable.

It was rare to see the Dark One work himself up over those who had no chance of harming him - and Leopold had been a harmless fool beneath it all. Usually Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't give any thought to her husband unless it was to needle her with the reminder of his existence. He didn't care for politics, and treated those born to royalty with the same carelessness he did the lowest peasant.

King and a respected man across the Enchanted Forest, Leopold remained a brief footnote in the Dark One's world... Regina took a deep breath at that thought, and eventually allowed herself a small smile.

Kings were dust compared to real power.

And men's lusts would always lead to their downfall.

Her smile made Rumpelstiltskin's look turn suspicious. "The answer is no, if you're still wondering. Belle stays here."

Regina shrugged.

Maybe not today. Maybe not this year. But eventually that bright-eyed girl would be the cause for Rumpelstiltskin's defeat.

"If you say so, Rumple," she said with the right amount of meekness.

Rumpelstiltskin looked at her with distrust, but let the matter drop. "Now, dearie, let's talk about something else. Visited Midas lately?"

The End
05/02/17

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love!
A Rose

The second time Rumpelstiltskin presents her with a rose, Belle makes a show of leaning in to inspect the offering. It seems fresh off the bush, bright red and with a few clear dewdrops hanging off the tips of the petals. It looks innocent in its beauty - but then, so did the last one.

That last time, she assumed that Rumpelstiltskin had summoned it with magic, and she'd kept quiet because her master liked his reputation as the Dark One enough to scorn having his kindnesses remarked upon. But now Belle also understands that he's pleased when she catches onto one of his tricks, so she makes a silent point out of giving a quick glance at the window - and the snow falling outside.

"Another old woman?" she queries, eyeing him from beneath an arched eyebrow.

"Peasants are far hardier in these parts," he says airily.

It takes some effort to keep back a smile. "Hm. I see." But when he tilts the rose in her direction, she crosses her arms over her chest and shakes her head. "Not yet."

"Such distrust!" he exclaims, but he sounds more amused than offended. And perhaps a bit proud that she will challenge him. "Won't you have it, then?"

"It depends," she tells him, stepping even closer for a better look. Surprisingly, Rumpelstiltskin stays in place instead of dancing away from her, though she can feel his eyes measuring the space between them to the inch. A little at a loss, for she expected to make a small game out of pursuing her offered gift across the room, Belle lifts her hand to brush against the outer petals. "Feels real enough," she decides, then commands her lips not to quirk into a smile at her next words, "but will it also yell at me for trimming off the stem?"

Rumpelstiltskin giggles, unrepentant to the last. "We'll see if you can teach it better manners, dearie." He smirks. "Can't have the greenery running all over you again."

Exasperating man!

"The greenery," she retorts, stressing the word with a poke against the wrist that holds the rose, "was more interested in running you through."

A roll of his eyes is his answer.

She can't even fault him for his easy dismissal of the efforts of a seasoned soldier; she's seen him scoff impatiently at an arrow sticking from his chest. The Dark One needs not concern himself with such things.

"Poor Gaston," she adds, remembering the expression on his face as she said her goodbyes. "Played the hero and got stuck in a vase for his trouble, and still he was most shocked at my refusal to go with him."

Both of them chuckle at that. In the end it had been a combined effort, to get rid of that particular guest.

It's easy to make light of Gaston's plight now, when Belle had been livid all those months ago. According to her father's letters, her former betrothed has formally dropped his suit and taken up service under a different lord. But her father has no more clue as the rest of the world, regarding
where Sir Gaston spent the last summer and why he was lucky to leave the Dark Castle on his own two feet.

Such a tale would hurt a knight's reputation.

Rumpelstiltskin's too, for setting him free.

Better that it's known only to the three of them.

"He had it coming," Rumpelstiltskin says, furrowing his nose. "Wave a sword at me, indeed!"

"You did steal his promised from under his nose," Belle reminds him. Suddenly aware that her words make it sound as if Rumpelstiltskin was looking for a bride of his own, she hurries through her next sentence. "I only wonder that he took so long."

"There are benefits to living at the top of the mountains."

She gives him a look. "And I'm sure the tales of your temper had nothing to do with it."

Of course, he preens as he hears that. "I am rather fearsome."

Belle laughs, amused at his silliness, and keeps grinning even as he scowls at her. He might frighten the whole world, outside these walls, but with her he's becoming a man she'd be glad to call a friend. "Keep that up, oh Dark One," she tells him, smiling to show that she's teasing only, "and perhaps I will leave when the next hero comes knocking."

He pulls a face at the idea. "Keep this up," he says, waving the rose so a sweet whiff teases Belle's senses and then snatching it back, "and you will be without a gift, missy."

Belle pretends to make a grab for it, but as he pulls it higher, she catches his sleeve instead. Satisfied with her prize, she smiles up at him. "Just tell me it's not another heroic knight I'll have to disappoint. Or," she adds as his teeth flash in a playful grin, "any other manner of person. Or sentient being."

It pays to be specific, with him.

For all that Rumpelstiltskin never lies to her - and why should he, when he's the master and she's his maid? - he will often arrange the truth to his whims. Belle used to be too trusting, taking his word at face value; now she knows that Rumpelstiltskin's best illusions are made of words and not magic.

Herding him toward a straightforward answer is a tricky task, and she's aware that she's still unequal to it. That doesn't stop her from trying. Someone needs to keep him honest, and there's no one else to try.

Again, he looks proud. Perhaps because the rest of the world is too scared to even attempt it. "Yes, yes. This one came from a rosebush, which came from a seed, which came from some other flower in some other bush. Happy now?"

As he speaks, he lets her pull his arm down, and their fingers brush as the rose is transferred from one hand to the other. Belle takes it gingerly at first, until she determines that there are no thorns whatsoever to prick her fingers. "Thank you," she tells him, and in the second it takes her to deliberate how to approach him for a hug, he's scampered away from her.

"Does this mean you like it?"
Belle makes a point of burying her nose into the bloom and making a happy noise.

"Good!"

The giddy note in that word makes her look up, instantly suspicious of it. But he's only looking at her, something like fondness in his gaze; the expression flees away as soon as he knows himself watched. "It's lovely," she says, feeling her cheeks heat without good reason.

He gives one nod, already turning away. "Good," he repeats, and then throws over his shoulder, as if absentminded, "Just make sure it won't interfere with your usual chores."

"...Interfere?"

"Oh. Didn't I mention?" She doesn't need to see his face to picture the mischievousness. She knew there was a catch! "You should get outside, my girl, and see to the grounds. I hope you're a better gardener than you're a cook."

To call the wild growth around the castle a garden would be a kindness - or an impressive show of magic. Her practical side wakes up. "But - it's snowing!"

"Ah, yes." His fingers click together. "That."

A yelp escapes her when the rose in her hand becomes cold metal - a brass key with the flower etched beautifully on one end.

"For the hothouse," he explains.

Oh, the exasperating, wonderful man!

She presses the key to her chest, already listing the books she will need to bring down to brush up her knowledge of flowers and plants, and the people she'll visit for the seeds and saplings she wants - could she get some from the coast, perhaps? When Belle mentioned the idea, she hadn't expected Rumpelstiltskin to follow through, and definitely not before the next year at least!

He's put some space between them, enough that it should keep him safe from her impulsive need to hug when he's done something nice; but this time a little distance won't deter her. "Thank you," she says feelingly, simultaneously dropping her new key into her pocket and rushing up to wrap her arms around him from behind. With his back to her, he can pretend all he wants that he's unmoved by her effusive show of gratefulness. "You won't regret this, Rumpelstiltskin."

"See that I don't," he says, trying for a snap. But his hands brush hers before they dislodge her grasp from his person, and their fingers lace together for the space of a breath before he lets go and takes a long step away. "Remember. No dawdling on the job, my dear."

Belle nods, all obedience.

At times like this, she can't imagine ever having distrusted him.

She could follow this man forever, she thinks fondly, even if she hadn't already sworn to it in the same breath she'd boldly announced she was choosing her own fate.

The Dark Castle is supposed to be a place as unapproachable as its master, resting ominously at the corner of the world where winter lingers the longest. Yet Rumpelstiltskin has just brought a bit of spring into it. Made it a little more her home, as well as his.
Yes, Belle could stay with him forever. And, she hopes, perhaps grow happy with her choice.

The End

30/07/15
Belle & Sir Maurice: A Visit Home

Chapter Notes

This is *not* the story I had planned. The story I planned was heavy on the Belle & Rumpel, and actually took place in the Dark Castle. But in the middle of the first sentence, this other story came to me and... *shrug* Here it is.

Belle gathered her breath to answer the exasperating man, ready to let him know that his wasn't the only opinion that counted in the world, and he was wrong, anyway! - but a swirl of purple smoke made her cough. *Oh no, you didn't,* she thought in a wave of irritation when the fit passed, expecting to find herself back in the library, surrounded by the one thing Rumpelstiltskin was decently sure might distract her.

If she had a shelf to collect every book that had appeared next to her in stead of a verbal apology... Oh wait. She did.

But *this* time---

"Belle?"

It wasn't the library.

Belle took in her surroundings, so familiar despite the time that had passed since she'd last stepped foot in this great room. "Papa?" she whispered, turning toward the voice.

She gave only a passing thought to how small her father's keep looked, compared to the Dark Castle, or to the fact that she'd appeared in the middle of it by herself. She forgot that she'd been ready to hurl a book at Rumpelstiltskin a second before, and that said book was no longer in her grasp.

"Papa!"

Her father was already hurrying toward her, his arms bringing her into a tight hug. *Oh, Belle, my girl!" His voice cracked a bit at the last, and his grip shifted to her shoulders as he took a long look at her, as if to make certain her presence wasn't a trick. *You're here, my Belle. You're back!"

Before Belle could say a word, she was swept back into his embrace.

But this time she was more alert as to her surroundings. It wasn't only her father in the room, of course not. His advisers would be with him, the guards, perhaps even a few petitioners. It must be an audience day. The shocked gasps had given way to whispers, and by now several voices had risen in the background.

Some cursed the Dark One's name in the same breath they blessed her return.

Some others wondered whether her presence meant that her master was displeased with her - and by extension, the whole of them.

A few - the louder ones - questioned her identity.
Unused now to such noisy surroundings, Belle took a deep breath and tried to speak through the knot of emotions caught in her throat.

Her father, either mindful of the others or aware of her discomfort, straightened and gave her some space. He glanced at her, taking in her simple clothes and the artless manner of her hair, and his giddiness turned into a scowl. "He dared mistreat you," he hissed, sounding so angry she barely recognized his voice. "My daughter, a servant!"

Belle blinked.

During the course of her stay with Rumpelstiltskin, she had grown used to several reactions when people met her: was the Dark One's maid tainted by his dark power? Had his magic made her as inhuman on the inside as he was on the outside? Was she just as evil, to be able to endure his company for so many seasons?

Never had anyone bothered to be indignant on her behalf.

But then, none of the others had raised her as the heir of their land. Her father had expected Belle to rise as their people's leader after he passed, and to be honored as the highest lady in their court. She was to be covered in fine silks and offered the best delicacies their economy could offer.

And instead, Belle had come dressed in thick cotton and with callused hands.

His dignity must be smarting, she thought not unkindly. As for herself... Well. If she'd ever held onto her pride of such things, it would have suffered a severe beating under Rumpelstiltskin's utter disregard for it.

...and her father didn't even know that she'd spent months with a dungeon as her lodgings.

"I'm well, father," she said, dredging up a smile from the confusion she felt. Later, when she was by herself, she would give in and decide how she felt about Rumpelstiltskin sending her to Avonlea without any warning - and all to avoid an argument! That foolish man probably believed this was a boon, and that she'd be grateful for it. And... she was. She'd missed her father so much! "Truly," she tried to reassure him further when he looked unconvinced. "I mean, we did have an argument, but-"

A chorus of scared gasps from the crows behind her interrupted her. There were even a few shrieks.

Belle guessed that the people wouldn't be as terrified if they knew that the great Dark One refused to acknowledge he was in the wrong, and that his solution had been to whisk her away from his sight.

They would definitely be bored if she explained that their argument had escalated from a simple difference of opinion about a work of philosophy she'd discovered earlier that week in an abandoned room. It could have stayed that simple, just another conversation to pass the time between his deals and her chores, if Belle hadn't questioned his reason for not adding the book to the collection in the library.

That had led to him roaring that it was still his castle, and he did as he wished. The look on his face when she'd pointed out that he'd given up the library to her... No one here would understand why she'd laugh at such a time. They probably imagined that anyone facing Rumpelstiltskin's anger would end up dead on the spot.

They were wrong, of course.
It was more likely that Rumpelstiltskin enemies would kill each other, or escape wishing that he'd have been content to walk away with just their lives. It took far more than anger to turn his flickering mood into an outright lethal temper.

(A particular situation arose in her memory, but Belle stamped it down.)

For the most part, he became annoyed at the little setbacks of everyday life. Annoyance tended to make him petulant, and petulance made him rash.

Which was how she had ended halfway across the world, back in her father's home.

Her worried father, now that she'd confessed to having quarreled with the Dark One.

"Belle..."

She shook her head. "It was nothing, really." She took his arm and gave a small tug in the direction that would eventually lead to the gardens. She liked the grounds at the Dark Castle well enough, but she'd missed the flowers that grew closer to the coast and warmer climates. When her father didn't move, she leaned briefly against him and tapped his wrist. If nothing else, her time in the Dark Castle had taught her that a small touch went a great way in shifting a man's attention away from his worries. "Let us take advantage of this time together, shall we?"

Her father didn't stare at her in confusion at her nearness. Nor did he grumble in fake reluctance. Belle had to remind herself that it wasn't necessary to prod him further.

"You're right, dear," he said.

He turned toward the table he'd left to welcome her, and nodded at Sir Eustace - his closest aide - who eyed her for a long moment before he nodded back and bid everyone to silence.

They left with slow steps, to give everyone time to acknowledge that it was their lord's daughter on his arm and not some cruel trick for the Dark One's amusement. A few made a sign to ward off evil, but Belle pretended not to notice. People's ignorance saddened more than offended her, and it had been months since she'd been shocked by it. It happened often enough when it was Rumpelstiltskin at her side, and those people were lucky that such useless gestures tickled Rumpelstiltskin's delight in the absurd.

Now she looked around herself as they went, noting the small differences in the years since. It amused her to notice that she took everything in not only as the pampered lady of the house she had been, who was well aware that every detail from curtains to polished floors must give the right impression to visitors and guests; now she also looked at her old home with an eye to how much physical work it would take to keep everything in place.

She didn't share her observation with her father, who would only fret again at the fall of her status. Little did he know that the maid of the Dark One, with a master who was fond of her, was ten times more powerful than the ruler of Avonlea.

Even Queen Regina tread carefully around her.

She would wait until she was back in the Dark Castle, and tell Rumpelstiltskin instead. He would tease her, and crow that she'd learned something useful at the Dark Castle. His smirk would only make Belle roll her eyes and remind him that he'd given her an entire library to learn from - or wasn't that as useful?
He would stubbornly insist that it was not.

She would argue that it was.

"You look..." Her father left off the next word, looking puzzled. "You're smiling, Belle. I thought - you're truly doing well?"

Belle nodded, setting aside her silly daydream, and grasped for a different reason for her good mood. "I've missed Avonlea. It's wonderful to be back."

"Will you be staying?" Her expression must have showed something, because her father continued. "Of course not. He did say forever, didn't he?"

Belle cast her mind back to the night. Hadn't she been the first to promise forever? Her memories of that first meeting grew dimmer as time went by, which seemed impossible considering how those few minutes had changed her life. If she asked Rumpelstiltskin, he would tell her every detail, down to the expression and tone of every person in the room. He was like that; he spun and spun, but he never forgot anything.

"He does keep his deals," she answered vaguely.

They arrived at the gardens, and Belle grinned at the sight. It had been so long since she'd seen so much color in one place: yellow and white daffodils, pink and orange blossoms hanging from the trellis, a few paler ones peeking from between the foliage of fruit trees...

"Oh!" she said, looking around herself in wonder. "It's so lovely!"

High up in the mountains, even in her hothouse, only the most resilient species survived - and a single rosebush she'd wheedled Rumpelstiltskin into using his magic to keep it alive. Fair trade for having to give up her rose, she'd decided after sending a bruised Gaston back home.

She thought to ask about her former fiancé, but the memory of how he'd locked her in the kitchen and gone hunting for Rumpelstiltskin still made her angry. He'd been lucky to have lost consciousness after being thrown against the stone walls that first time, and luckier that Rumpelstiltskin had been more worried about her than about terminating a threat.

"I'm so glad it's spring," she said now, turning her thoughts to the beauty before her instead. "It's more beautiful than I remembered."

"I'm glad you're here, too. But, Belle..." Her father paused, looking around to make sure they were out of earshot. There would be guards following them at some distance, of course. Belle wasn't fool enough not to understand they suspected foul play from anyone associated with the Dark One. "None of your letters mentioned you'd be able to visit."

It had taken her over two years to gather the courage to ask Rumpelstiltskin to allow her to write to her father. He'd bristled at the notion, arguing that his reputation would suffer if he was seen to be doing a kindness. The deal they'd made was to have her spirited away, and spirited away she would stay. Belle still remembered being close to tears, as she'd convinced herself that they'd grown friendly enough that he'd grant her this wish, and whispering that she missed her father so much, and he must be missing her as well - couldn't he find some pity for a childless father?

Belle still had no idea whether it'd been her tears or her argument that had gained her a compromise: she could write, but the letters must stay a secret between the three of them. The moment someone else heard of their communication would be the end of it, and her father would be punished for his loose tongue.
Then he'd brightened and announced he'd visit Avonlea himself to give the news in person - and ask what deal her father was willing to make to be able to send back a response.

Belle had protested in outrage, tears forgotten, and Rumpelstiltskin had laughed. *So long with me, dearie, and you still haven't learned to take care of every word in a new deal?*

She had gotten better, after that.

Perhaps so much better that she could wring more visits to Avonlea from him?

"I... I wasn't expecting to come," she answered her father's query.

He stayed silent, but it was obvious he expected some explanation. Rumpelstiltskin wasn't known for returning an item he'd dealt for, be it heirlooms, newborn babes, or the one grown girl he'd claimed as his prize three years before.

Blushing a little, Belle admitted, "It came on the spur of the moment. I'm afraid that, eh... Perhaps Rumpelstiltskin needed some time to himself?"

Her father's eyebrows rose. "I see."

Belle had the feeling he understood the situation too well. She had been raised to lead, not to follow, and those who expected her to bend because of her gender had quickly found that Sir Maurice's daughter would argue her case until her opponent either saw the light or dropped the match.

Her father, who was as stubborn if the occasion arose, had just shaken his head (fondly) and commented (happily) that Belle was too much her mother's daughter.

If it had been anyone except the Dark One, he probably would be chuckling at her ability to try a man's patience to the snapping point. Her father had always chastised her in private when her tutors would come to him with their complaints, but in public he had wondered out loud how an opinionated little girl could make grown men behave like tattletales.

"He started it," Belle grumbled, feeling like a tattletale herself. But it had been so long since she could count on someone to take her side! The queen had her own victories to win over her teacher, she said, and no one else would be drawn into the middle of an argument against Rumpelstiltskin. "He was being stubborn. Again."

"I see," her father repeated, and this time his lips twitched a little before he sobered. "So he sent you here. Good." He looked relieved. "I was afraid you'd made a new deal with him."

Belle frowned at that. She would often deal for little comforts, and sometimes appeal to Rumpelstiltskin's better nature to avoid violence. In exchange she had her improved skills as a housekeeper, and a threat to start experimenting in the kitchen again would earn her a new set of candles for when she used up her supply by staying reading late into the night.

But those were little things, and she was aware that he wouldn't give in if he didn't feel a little fondness for her. Even if she was brave enough to propose that he allowed her to visit her father, it would be done in the name of kindness rather than any collateral she could trade in.

"A deal rests upon two people who have something the other wants," she repeated one of the first lessons learned at the Dark Castle. And then, thinking that she shouldn't give her father any false hopes, she added honestly, "and I don't have anything he'd want."
He gave her a strange look. "You're wrong, my Belle," he said at last, and shook his head when she would have wondered about his meaning, "but I'll be glad not to fight you on that."

Belle almost insisted, but he avoided her gaze. Upon a moment's reflection, Belle felt her cheeks blaze as she realized he'd meant... what everybody assumed when they heard of a woman living alone with a man - even a man they were happy to label a beast.

Telling her father that the idea had crossed her mind was out of the question.

Admitting that it didn't alarm her as much as it should...

"Perhaps I can collect some flowers? For mother's grave?"

Her father looked glad for the change of subject. "Of course, of course."

They continued like that, their conversation light with the news they hadn't yet put to paper. Her father talked about the growing commerce in town, about opening another plaza as a marketplace. Belle told him of the more harmless visitors she'd entertained at the Dark Castle, and of the latest curiosity that Rumpelstiltskin had brought from his travels. She described the last novel she'd read, and he nodded as if it interested him; then she turned the conversation to the older trade agreements between the kingdoms, some far across the sea and others she'd never heard outside of those documents, and this time her father perked up and picked her brain for ideas on how to improve the current ones.

Dinner came and went, with her father escorting her in and seating her to his right. He had sent for a maid and one of her old dresses, and he smiled in deep satisfaction as she appeared clad in blue silk and hair done up in a simple yet elegant knot.

The other men at the table gave her odd looks, and one or two dared cross words with her. Most looked around the room, as if wondering when her master would appear to snatch her back to his lair.

They were to be disappointed.

Rumpelstiltskin didn't come until she was snug in bed - in a guest room, since her old room would never have been properly aired with such short notice. A couple of candles were lit on the bedside, and she considered lighting a third one as they provided a poorer light than what she had grown used to. The book in her hands was one she had already read, but her father had presented it with such pride at the rare find that Belle hadn't the heart to tell him it had been in her library from the moment it left the printer's.

"I can't believe you're reading that trite thing again," said a familiar voice from the shadows. "You cried your way through the whole of it the first time!"

Belle gave a small sniffle - she'd just reached the chapter where the lovers were parted and thought each other dead - and raised her head toward Rumpelstiltskin. She didn't chide him for appearing in a lady's room unannounced; ever since he'd barged into her dungeon cell to complain about her sobbing it'd been obvious that her privacy depended on his whim. But he had never abused his power, so Belle had eventually stopped worrying about it. "Is it midnight already?"

The clocks started chiming the hour before she'd finished the sentence.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned. "It is now."

She smiled. With his love for theatrics, he wouldn't have made his apparition at any other time.
"You've come to take me back, then." She rose, securing the robe she'd worn to bed around her, and picked the set of clothes she'd left close by. Her father had already been warned that it was unlikely he would see her in the morning. "I'm ready."

When she turned back, she found Rumpelstiltskin peering at her. "Oh, I don't know," he said, waving at her, "but aren't you supposed to be a little more... unwilling? Perhaps beg to stay?" His grin turned into a taunting smirk. "You might find me in a good mood."

Belle narrowed her eyes. Had he thought that, after a taste of her old home, she would try to break their deal? Had he hoped for it? The next morning, she would be shocked that she hadn't even considered it. But at that moment, tired of hours being scrutinized by Avonlea's leading men and of pretending for her father's sake that she could still fit in a world without the strangeness of magic and secrets, Belle just snapped a curt, "No."

For a fleeting second, he looked arrested. But he quickly recovered and made a flowery bow to her. "As the lady wishes."

Robe and all, she curtsied back.

As they straightened, she caught a cautious smile on his face.

Belle decided at that moment to forget about the silly argument that had started this all. It had ended with a visit home, after all, and... well. She and Rumpelstiltskin would be at odds again soon enough.

"Take me home, Rumpelstiltskin," she said firmly.

That surprised a wider grin out of him.

And with a flourish of his hand, he did.

The End
28/06/15
Belle & Rumpelstiltskin: Mirror, mirror

Chapter Summary

FTL. Belle gets a gift.

Chapter Notes

Prompt: 1/500 - the vacuum of time

Any woman would have been impressed by such a grand gesture. Looking glasses of such high quality were worth a small fortune, and certainly not to be delivered to the chamber of a serving maid. Even as the daughter of a landed lord, she'd had a smudged, darker surface to aid her through her toilette.

But it wasn't its monetary value that took her breath away.

After all, Belle had learned on the night she met Rumpelstiltskin that riches were meaningless to a man who made his own gold.

If she appreciated the gift, it was because it was the first uncovered mirror she'd seen in the Dark Castle - the first Rumpelstiltskin had taken the effort to protect against unwanted spies, when he always claimed that all magic had a price - and it was meant for her personal use at no cost to her.

"Thank you," she breathed, trying not to bounce on her feet in sheer glee.

It was a rare occasion, when Rumpelstiltskin gave her tangible proof that he cared. That he listened, even when her conversation touched on the inconvenience of tying up the back of the more formal dresses she wore in the outside world without even a reflection to help her along.

Belle grinned. "It's lovely."

To her, it was the dearest treasure in Rumpelstiltskin's possession. The replicated image was perfect. She brought her palm against the glass, and giggled a little when she met the cool surface instead of the other hand she could see behind it.

Then her gaze snapped up when her reflection was joined by Rumpelstiltskin.

"You like it," he said dryly, searching the image of her face for any hint of a lie.

Belle nodded with enthusiasm.

"Well, good. Now, do make sure not to break it." His forefinger wagged at her in warning. "Too much trouble."

"Is it really bad luck?"
He laughed. "No, no. Seven years and all that? Nothing to worry, when one's cursed for eternity - and the other is stuck here for life."

"Yes," Belle answered calmly. She still took the terms of their deal in stride; it was he who seemed more uncomfortable with it as the years passed. "Stuck here, with rooms full of magical artifacts that need little to come to life and try to take a bite out of me. And now one in my own room." She motioned to the mirror and arched an eyebrow. "Can I worry about that, at least?"

"No."

He accompanied the single word with a wave of his hand. "Perfect safe, as long as you're perfectly careful. Now, the magic I poured in the frame-" he reached out to touch it, the tip of his nails clicking on the gold. "-only the glass is keeping it in place. Break it, and not even I'm sure how the spell will react. Foreign magic, dearie," he explained before she could ask, "I can work it, but it's not familiar to me and it doesn't owe me any favors. Better tread lightly, is all I say."

Belle absorbed the information.

Until now, she'd seen only one other magical mirror, and that had broken in the end. The Dark Castle didn't have many mirrors at all, and the few she'd discovered - wrapped in cloths and most of them cracked in so many places that the image in them was unrecognizable - were common objects, powerful only if Queen Regina decided to use them.

"Where's the magic?" she asked, curious and already inspecting her gift. She found the carvings on the outer edge to the left before Rumpelstiltskin could show it to her, and the brief nod he made confirmed her instinct was correct. Belle peered at the markings, tilting her head one way and then the other. She could feel the rumble of laughter coming from the man at her back, always amused at her inquisitiveness when it wasn't addressed at his past or their future, but Belle ignored him. There was something familiar about the carvings, where had she seen such signs before?

Until she finally remembered.

"'You are not welcome,'" she read, passing her finger over the foreign language as she translated it. "'From this moment and to the end of... power'? 'Magic'?"

"'Life'," Rumpelstiltskin corrected. "But a genie would use the same word for all those concepts. Now, dearie, since when do the tutors of such a little province as yours care to teach their pupil the tongue of the hidden desert?"

Belle remembered her time in the schoolroom. It had bored her; dry accounts of wars and dynasties, coupled with several hours of the intricacies of life at court, and a smattering of science and numbers. It had always seemed so little, compared with the enormity of knowledge stored in her mother's library, but when she'd grown up she had discovered that she'd been lucky to be allowed that much.

Girls of her position weren't expected to know more than how to entertain guests with chatter and perhaps a few well-rehearsed songs. Even the management of their husband's house was supposed to be left to loyal servants.

In Belle's mind, her fate as Rumpelstiltskin's companion had been sealed the moment he showed her to a library and gave her free reign of it.

Her tutors would be shocked to discover that philosophy and history was a topic at the Dark One's table, and that Belle was more conversant in either than in how to mend a shirt with invisible
"They didn't," she said. He gestured at the foreign writing and then at her, a silent bid for an explanation, and she obliged. "There's a shelf of tales and documents from Agrabah, and several are translated from the original works, the ones written in the old tongue. I was lucky to find the older stories as well."

He stared at her for a long moment. Then blinked in what Belle could tell was honest surprise. "What a smart little gem I keep," he murmured, almost smiling, but then he tutted when she would have grinned in thanks to the compliment. "But lazy, lazy! Buried in books when she should be cleaning and mopping!"

Belle straightened. "I did my work; you can't say otherwise now when you didn't find fault then. I only studied after I was done."

"And took months to learn a few words, I bet." He lifted his chin as if to ask the heavens for patience, and then shook his head. "Dear girl, did it ever occur to you to ask for a dictionary?"

In fact, yes, it had. It would have made the process so much easier... and that had been the problem. "Then where would be the challenge?"

That brought Rumpelstiltskin up short. He peered at her, then turned to study her reflection as if for confirmation. "A challenge, hm? I see, I see. The lady sets her own goals, is that it?" His lips curved in amusement. "How delightfully impractical. I had no idea there was some of the stubborn fool in you."

But despite the words, his tone was one of approval, so Belle found it hard to take offense. "I had time," she said.

She had hours and hours, days and entire weeks with nothing more pressing than sweeping the great hall and cleaning the windows. Even when Rumpelstiltskin was home and he complained loudly about any sign of dust or demanded a full meal for his dinner or that she went to town for fresh straw (and a bit of conversation with other human beings, along with extra gold for whatever caught her fancy at the market), her duties still didn't take more of her time. He never said, and she followed his lead and didn't comment on it, but in the last year magic had slowly taken over the more onerous jobs.

Belle could spend time with him, and still have a whole morning to herself. Hours and hours, and days, and weeks...

It was too much of a vacuum, to fill it with the passivity of reading story after story. When she'd found the books in the unfamiliar language, she'd realized that there was a way to break the monotony of her free hours.

"You have nothing but time, dearie," Rumpelstiltskin echoed her thoughts. But the way he swept his gaze up and down her reflection and clicked his teeth reminded her that it was a literal statement. Not even the clothes she wore belonged to her. "You shouldn't waste it so."

Belle raised her chin. "Acquiring new knowledge is never a waste."

"But the inefficiency of your way around it." He shook his head. "You need to reconsider, you stubborn girl, or... why, I'll be forced to make some suggestions of. my. own."

He practically crooned the last words, all threat and mischief.
"And what would these suggestions be?"

She expected him to trill and send her to catalogue his vast collection of trinkets, jewels and rarities; or to copy down the text from the oldest, moldy tomes in his workroom if she preferred the written word.

But instead he looked thoughtful. "Well," he drawled out, sectioning the word into several syllables to build up the suspense. "You've done well enough, going and fetching for me. The puss in new boots mentioned what a charming, young girl you were."

"It tried to eat me!"

"What did you expect of a feral cat?" Rumpelstiltskin flashed her a smile. "But never mind your experience with less civilized beasts, we must try and find new errands for you. Give that busy brain of yours something new to fix about."

"You... want me to leave the castle?"

"Not leave! We've long crossed that road. Burned the bridge. Salted the earth. Gotten quite the undeserved earful, too. Never fear, dearie. I'll never try to do the right thing again." He still gave her a searching look, and pretended he'd not looked for her agreement before he continued. "But give you a little more responsibility around these parts, perhaps. Messages to carry, ingredients to buy other than straw, from farther off than a half hour away."

Belle thought of the possibilities. The details were kept between Rumpelstiltskin and those he dealt with, but she still knew that Rumpelstiltskin's schedule was a hectic one. It was rare to have him at home for longer than five days straight. If he really meant to send her off to a portion of those meetings.... His stories always included fantastical creatures or places beyond the Enchanted Forest; sometimes both. She wold finally be able to see some of those!

"I see you like the idea, missy."

She nodded, unable to tame the smile she could feel pulling at her lips. "And you..." she asked, even happier at what his offer meant, "you'll really trust me to come back?"

Rumpelstiltskin made a vague gesture, but his eyes remained on her. "No-o-o," he admitted slowly. Then he quirked a smile. "But I have the feeling you'll surprise me anyway."

"I will," she promised.

Something in his expression softened. "Yes, well. Just don't read the rest of my message to Regina's pet, will you? It was something between the genie and I, not meant for female eyes. If I'd known you could understand the language..."

Curiosity, of course, made her run her eyes over the remaining signs. It simply warned an intruder to return whence he came and never come back, and to tell his lady - no, his mistress, that...

"Rumple!"

He snickered.

Before Belle could demand that he erase the foul words, there was a swirl of purple, a high giggle...

...and Rumpelstiltskin was gone.
The End
23/04/16

Chapter End Notes

Wow. 25 one-shots in this world already. I honestly didn't think there would be so many when I started. It's been fun, and I want to thank everyone who's read and commented on this story. If not for you, I doubt this 'verse would be half as long.

Here's to the next 25! :)
FTL. Belle & Jefferson. Beyond Imagination

Chapter Summary

FTL. Jefferson hadn't believed the stories about Rumpelstiltskin taking a maid, but the proof is happily walking next to him now.

Belle lifted her hood and tilted her face up into the sunshine. Her smile turned into a delighted laugh, and she closed her eyes in bliss. "Isn't this wonderful?"

The man at her side took a moment to enjoy the view, tempted to throw some flirtatious line and see where it took them. Then he shook his head, reminding himself who her master was and what he would do if the girl had any complaints. The Dark One wasn't known for his understanding and mercy, and Jefferson did like to keep his head over his shoulders.

Instead he forced himself to ignore the fresh beauty of his companion, and settled on a friendly tone. "Missed the outside world, didn't you?"

Belle gave a soft smile. "It is hard to enjoy a walk in the garden, when everything is covered by snow."

Unlike the weather in the mountains where Rumpelstiltskin had made his home, this far to the south the winter had a kinder touch. Sunshine had warmed her skin, softening the pale looks of the girl he'd met early that morning until Jefferson could understand why she was still called the most beautiful girl of her land.

A doomed beauty, of course. Forced away by a monster and made to obey his every cruel whim. Jefferson snorted.

He had always taken care not to believe the rumors flying about the Dark One. Every few months, the people whispered that he had set a dragon on a neighboring kingdom, or cursed a crop out of spite. All nonsense, of course, spread by people who had never met the Dark One in person and couldn't understand that unless he was given personal insult, he didn't care to ruin anyone's life.

Jefferson knew better.

Rumpelstiltskin wasn't kind, or merciful, or even particularly nice; but he was fair. His fearsome reputation was based on the punishment he meted out against his enemies - and he made enemies so easily! - but not even once had Jefferson heard of someone claiming the Spinner had cheated them or asked for more payment than was owed.

A lifetime of service was too steep price for any of his usual deals, and to demand it from one who'd been born to be served was beyond the wildest imagination. There was nothing worth taking that offer... unless the stories exaggerated the girl's rank? Jefferson couldn't imagine any father who would allow his daughter to be taken in such a manner, but if it were a local leader who'd pressed a pretty girl into such a deal...

But how could anyone bear the life at the Dark Castle for so long, much less a young girl? The stories had already been months old when Jefferson heard it. What would be of Rumpelstiltskin's
maid by now? No. He just couldn’t picture it. Nobody would survive for long sharing a roof with the Dark One with their wits intact. Rumpelstiltskin just didn't have the patience to deal with some young girl without terrifying her into submission, nor the cruelty to enjoy the process, so the only likely option was that he’d avoid such a tangle.

For a long time, Jefferson had honestly believed that the tale of a girl snatched in a deal was just one more instance of groundless gossip.

The letter that had arrived the day before, summoning him to the Dark Castle, proved him wrong. He’d braced himself on the way there, reminding himself that acting as escort to Rumpelstiltskin's servant on an errand to a different kingdom was just another job. The company would be terrible, but he knew just how much to charge for the trouble. Trembling wretch or a soul just as twisted as her master, he was prepared for either of those.

The grinning brunette had been a shock.

That the Dark One doted on her had prompted Jefferson to check his hat to see that it hadn't dropped him in an alternate world when he hadn't been looking.

It was a good thing that he had given up on understanding Rumpelstiltskin a long time ago. The man was cold and ruthless with reigning royalty, no matter how young and pretty and soft-hearted (and, yes, Regina had been all three, once upon a time); but the girl who should have been another disregarded possession got the quietly appraising stares and the reluctant smiles.

And most surprising of all: the girl smiled back with genuine warmth.

She even showed no sign of dreading their return to the Dark Castle. Jefferson had spent the time between getting Rumpelstiltskin's note and turning up at the Dark Castle steeling himself against the pleas of some pitiful creature begging for passage out of the Enchanted Forest, and it had been a waste of time. Instead Belle had only suggested a detour through the local market, and Jefferson would swear that when she had stopped at the baker's, she had selected two pieces of the honey-based pastries and added them to her basket.

Jefferson had the feeling she didn't even contemplate sharing the treat with him.

"You're really not going to ask me for help, are you?" he asked, shaking his head in wonder.

All the worlds he had visited, and it took a young girl from one of the most boring provinces in his birth land to amaze him.

Belle knitted her brow. "Help with what?"

Jefferson couldn't help himself. He hooted a laugh at the honest puzzlement on her face. "You really don't know, little one?" he said when the mirth subsided enough to let him speak. "You are the Dark One's captive, bound and tied until death is a kind escape. The whole world whispers of what you must suffer, forced to submit under his every word if you're lucky - and under the rest of him if you're not."

She made a disgusted sound. "And you believed any of that? I thought you were Rumpelstiltskin's friend!"

That set him off again, almost making him double over.

"Stop! It's not funny!"
Jefferson knew that she was in earnest, but couldn't stop himself. "Friends with the Dark One!" he choked out, holding onto his belly. "He would snip away my tongue if I dared suggest something so foolish!"

"But..." She sounded so confused now. "He called for you. And you came the very next day."

He reached into his pocket and showed her the thick strand of gold he'd picked out from beside the spinning wheel that morning. "It's called a business relationship, my dear. He calls, he pays, and so I go where he says. A very nice deal." He eyed her with curiosity. "Payment aside, I thought you'd be familiar with that idea."

Belle frowned. "Deal-making can't be enough."

"Oh, but Rumpelstiltskin is quite happy with our arrangement, I assure you."

"People need friends," she said firmly.

Jefferson snickered. "Normal people, maybe," he said, widening his eyes when the girl looked about to protest. He hurried on. "But, really, do you believe your master wants any?"

That made her expression fall.

They walked in silence for another minute. Jefferson almost felt sorry for being so abrupt, and was casting about for a cheerier subject when Belle's expression perked up.

"I don't care," she said, blue eyes shining with confidence. "I need a friend, and he's the only one around."

From the stubborn set of her jaw, Jefferson had the feeling that Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't stand a chance. He chuckled, not bothering to point out that her life didn't seem to be confined to the Dark Castle anymore. Instead he nodded agreeably, and silently made the decision to lengthen his stay at the castle and drop by more often.

He would never forgive himself if he missed the moment the great Rumpelstiltskin discovered his maid planned to make a friend of him. Or when this girl realized that, if Rumpelstiltskin's behavior was anything to go by, then whatever was wanted of her wasn't friendship only.

It wasn't likely that Jefferson would get to see that drama unfold, but whatever piece of it he caught, it would be quite the amusing story to tell Grace once he returned home.

The End
22/07/16
Chapter Summary

Belle's pov.

Belle didn't know when it had become her little mid-afternoon ritual when she was alone, to come up to Rumpelstiltskin's tower and stand by the window.

There were better views from other points of the castle.

The windows at her bedroom showed a breathtaking sunrise, and Belle often rose early just to pull the curtains open and climb upon the windowsill to enjoy it. Her library faced the same side of the castle. Probably on design, so she wouldn't indulge in a late morning after staying awake late into the night. More than once she'd surfaced from sleep with a book still on her lap and daylight forcing her eyelids open.

It was a price worth paying, for one who had been so afraid she'd never see the sun except for the tiny window allotted to her dungeon cell.

It had taken a longer time to discover the beauty behind the curtains at the great hall. Time, and stubbornness. And a slip off a ladder. Belle might still feel awkward at the memory of that brief moment in Rumpelstiltskin's arms, but could be easily distracted by the view of the sunset outside. All her books had described the northern mountain range as too cold and dangerous, with nothing to recommend it, and that was probably true for the travelers who hurried across the area, haunted by the tales of the dark wizard in his castle.

But Belle knew the truth of the tales, and now that the windows were bare, she knew the truth of the mountains as well. It was beautiful, to watch as the sunlight changed its hues, painting the snow mountains from white to yellows and oranges and then a deep red right before the sun sank into dusk.

Even Rumpelstiltskin must agree that it made a better background than the heavy curtains, because they had only reappeared on the coldest nights of winter and would be gone with dawn.

Yes, the Dark Castle had beauty to offer, but those who rode up to it would be hard-pressed to find it. The road was rough and narrow, with hardly a spot of grass to soften it, curving up from the valley below and seemingly made to drag over every obstacle in sight - and a few that seemed sprung from a devil's mind (Rumpelstiltskin just snickered and preened when she'd pointed that out). A traveler would do well to keep all his wits upon his next step, instead of glancing around to enjoy their surroundings.

It was not the prettiest sight, the one that looked down from the window of Rumpelstiltskin's tower, and yet Belle often found herself staring down at that road, wondering who would be the next visitor who traveled on it. Queen Regina, with her sumptuous carriage and her stone-faced men at arms, or perhaps Jefferson, jumping up over the scragglier boulders and dusting off his hat at every bend with fastidious care? Better they than the other women and men who made their way here, those Rumpelstiltskin hadn't called or wanted, and who came to the castle gates to demand and beg for the Dark One's favor.
Belle could applaud every time she caught one such soul turn around and head back to their home. She didn't like to watch as Rumpelstiltskin played with their hopes - or punished their foolishness. And wasn't it foolishness, he'd say, to come looking for help with nothing of equal value to pay for it?

It was a hard task to believe in the kindness Rumpelstiltskin was capable of, when he was terrorizing those who didn't fit in whatever game board he liked to arrange.

Yes. Better that the road be so unwelcoming. Better that the sight of thick walls and great gates inspire fear in the hearts of strangers. Belle was privy to the truth of life in the Dark Castle, to the warmth and laughter, but everyone else was shown the monster, and Belle feared that one day the darkness wouldn't just be a role Rumpelstiltskin played with such easy flair, but that it would truly infect the deepest parts of his soul.

And wouldn't he mock her for such thoughts? He thought he was rotten to the core, and looked so disappointed when she protested otherwise. Rumpelstiltskin would tell her that mercy had no use for him, and he'd expect her to believe him.

If he were here.

Which he was not.

It would be a week tomorrow, and for all she knew it would be another before Rumpelstiltskin returned. He wouldn't use the road down below, of course. He would simply appear beside her demanding his tea, or leave a new book within sight to announce his presence. But Belle still looked out this window, her own little way of showing she waited for him.

Would she have done the same, had she stayed in Avonlea and married her fiancé? Gaston would also have taken her off to his own home, away from her father and her people, and she would have watched him go off to battle or to court, or to any of the hundred reasons why husbands were free to wander while wives stayed home. Perhaps she would have looked out for that husband of hers, too. Perhaps she would have waited for any sign that he was coming closer. Belle liked to think that she would have grown fond of Gaston, if he was good to her. At the first sight of him, she would have hurried to make his favorite meal, stoked the fire of his rooms and prepared a fresh bath, and changed out of clothes that were fit for cleaning and into the pretty dress he'd brought for her....

A dress of such soft silks and such vibrant colors that no knight would be able to afford it, even were he to visit the land where such fabrics were made.

Belle chuckled to herself, shaking her head.

It was a silly thought, anyway. Gaston's wife would have servants to tend their master, her duty no more than to give the proper orders to her household. She wouldn't look forward to stories of far-away places, or glimpses of magical items and books in languages she'd yet to master. Gaston's wife would already have learned everything there was to know about her position in life, and there would be no surprises left.

Belle had not looked forward to becoming that woman, back when she'd still been headed that way, and she didn't regret the path she'd taken instead.

Perhaps if she'd loved Gaston...

But she hadn't.
He had called her a madwoman, when she'd refused to leave with him. He might have said more unpleasant things, if Rumpelstiltskin hadn't threatened to cut off his tongue if he said another insulting word. Instead Gaston had renewed his efforts at courting, and promised her the life they should have had: a home to call her own, the respect of their neighbors, and a husband instead of a master. *You'll be free, Belle,* he'd said.

Belle hadn't even been tempted by the notion.

Freedom wasn't defined by the walls around a castle, but by how much she could challenge the man she lived with and have him admire her for it.

She might be looking down an empty road, alone in an empty castle, but her decisions were her own. The Dark One's maid was given choices, even the choice to stay or to leave, where the knight's wife would have to comply with the requirements of her standing.

In Avonlea, she would have known exactly what was expected of her. Never worried about anyone's soul or the darkness pressing down on it. She would have been content, eventually, because she'd never be one to suffer for what cannot be.

But for the things that might be?

Belle leaned against the window, still unsure whether her choice was wise or foolish and fully aware that she wouldn't change her mind.

Better to stay here - yes, even forever - and discover what laid ahead.

The End

09/04/16
Rumpelstiltskin's good mood sank as soon as the purple smoke cleared from around them.

Belle didn't thank him for their short trip outside the castle, and neither did she smile and pull him to a chair for a step-by-step recount of everything she'd seen while they'd been outside. Instead her blue eyes fixed on his face, and she waited for exactly three seconds before the look turned into a glare and, with a loud huff, she whirled around and marched toward the staircase without a word.

It took Belle hurrying upstairs, not even a goodbye or a plea to change her dress back to her more modest - and easier to manage - everyday dress, for Rumpelstiltskin to realize that his maid was in a snit.

"What is the problem with you?" he snapped six hours later, when no dinner had appeared at his table and, when he'd checked her library, her favorite nooks in the castle, and even ventured to knock on her bedroom door, Belle was still nowhere to be found.

If she'd picked the kitchen as her hiding place on purpose, she was growing a devious streak. Given the missing meal, it was the last place Rumpelstiltskin had thought to check.

"Well?" he demanded.

The book she'd been reading at the hearth snapped shut.

He could count in one hand the people who'd meet him eye-to-eye without hesitation. Only one of them held neither title nor power to think themselves shielded from his displeasure.

His maid stood to her feet, arms crossed before her chest. "Must you ask?" She looked at him searchingly, then took a deep breath. "You used me, Rumpelstiltskin!"

He... blinked in confusion.

"This morning," she said, as if it should clarify matters. "You said I could help you recover a lost item. That a powerful dragon was keeping it from you."

"So I did, and so the old lizard was." Past tense, now. The mirror had turned out to be useless to take even a peek into the world without magic, but it was still a nice addition to his collection.
Then he remembered how oddly attached to polite rituals Belle could be, and he essayed a slight bow of thanks, "and I'm grateful for your compliance, dearie."

If anything, her face darkened at his words. "You had made a bet," and she spat that last word with a note of sharp ire. "You put me up as the ante!"

Rumpelstiltskin grabbed this inkling as to the reason of her mood with both hands, and rushed to reassure her. "I couldn't lose. It was never a possibility."

Belle hissed in a breath. "You. Lied. To. Me."

The words made sense, their meaning easy to understand, but Rumpelstiltskin was still at a loss as to their application in this conversation.

This morning he had invited Belle to come along with him, and yes, he had told her about the kind of host they'd be visiting and what he expected to walk away with from the meeting.

"No. I did not," he said, frowning at the accusation.

"You told me we'd be facing great danger - and all you had me do was to stand there, while the two of you talked!"

He had never said such a thing. But he had known that the girl had a fertile imagination, fed by all the tales she'd found in his library. He wasn't really surprised that she'd hurried to agree to come along, even expecting trouble. His maid craved adventure like other girls did jewels. "You can't have expected me to slay the beast," he tutted, nodding at her rising blush. "Exactly. I'm not the type, dearie."

Her shoulder drooped. "There was no danger at all, was there?"

"I never said otherwise," he reminded her, hating to see her disappointment but needing to clear things up. "You assumed a dragon would be the enemy - what better way to teach you the truth, than to show it to you?"

"Why take me at all, then?"

*Because it was safe!*

But if he said that, it would confirm that he had played a bit of a ruse on her. He had really needed her to appear as happy as possible, when introduced as his maid. And how to expect her to look eager, when all he could promise her to see in Haynd's lair were even more piles of useless gold than there were at the Dark Castle?

Not a common dragon, Haynd. Most of his kind ignored that their human forms could be satisfied with human meals, and instead chose to hunt for... well, *human meals*. But the labyrinth of caves he had claimed was not decorated with bones and corpses, though few realized it.

People forgot, because their memories never lasted longer than their lifespans, but Rumpelstiltskin had noticed the trend a few decades ago: Haynd would fly over a town, beat his wings and puff some smoke, and once the villagers were terrified, in came Sir Whoever, ready to beat back the darkness... and charge for his good offices. A few months later, another village on the other side of the Enchanted Forest would run the same fate.

Rumpelstiltskin applauded the enterprise, of course. Partnering with the descendants of an old enemy (and, later in that knight's life, the first dragon-slayer, never mind that said dragon didn't
stay slain for long) was a sound decision.

Pity that the streak of good luck hadn't made Haynd any less stubborn.

Because even an old dragon who had long decided to bank his fires kept the habits of his species. No deal would tempt him to part with any of the treasures he guarded, and a threat would lock them in a fight that would alarm all kingdoms... and Rumpelstiltskin needed the royal heads to keep their attention on their personal matters rather than the potential spillover damage of a magical fight between the Dark One and one of the oldest dragons.

In the end Rumpelstiltskin had proposed a bet. To pick one item among their respective collections, and the owner of the rarest treasure would walk away with both. Haynd, sure that a mirror crafted by the first Dark One had no compare, had practically purred in delight as he agreed. How he'd roared when Rumpelstiltskin had left with both mirror and maid!

(For what could be more rare than a beautiful, young girl, freed three times and three times returned by her own will, and after three years still content to make her life in the Dark One's castle?)

"Rumple?" that girl said now, calling his attention back to the present.

Was he really standing in his own kitchen, being lecture by his maid?

"I told you," he grumbled. "I needed you to come with me!"

"No. What you needed was to tell me the truth," she retorted. "You knew I was expecting something different, and you didn't tell me otherwise on purpose." Belle uncrossed her arms, but just to point a finger at him. Rumpelstiltskin stared at the wagging digit, unable to think of the last time someone had taken him to task as if he were a boy to be reprimanded. He would have growled out at the insult, but her next words caught him unaware. "You didn't need to trick me, Rumpelstiltskin. Did you really think I wouldn't help you?"

She still looked disappointed, but now Rumpelstiltskin had the nagging notion that she was sadder at his lack of trust.

"That's not-!" But it was. He hadn't even considered informing her on his plan. "You would have?"

Belle's hands dropped at her side, and her head tilted as she studied him. It took her a moment to realize he was asking in earnest, and another to sigh impatiently at his inability to guess the answer.

"Yes! If you had explained... Why didn't you?"

Rumpelstiltskin passed his tongue over his lips. "Doesn't matter," he said at last, voice a high trill as his mind tried to understand what Belle was telling him.

He didn't expect her to reach for his hand, a quick touch of her fingers grazing his. She squeezed for an instant, and then let go. "Just ask me first. Please?"

He thought of catching her hand in his in return. He thought of vanishing to his tower, or maybe to slip into another world for a week or two. He thought of apologizing, and almost bit his own tongue to swallow the damned words back.

In the end he shook his head, and gave her some of the truth she'd pleaded for: "Don't trust me,
Belle."

The girl's smile didn't falter. "Sorry. Too late."

The End
31/08/16
Chapter Summary

Slight crossover with the Narnia Chronicles. If you're passingly familiar with 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe', you're good.

Chapter Notes

Written for Yuidirnt at Comment Fic. Prompt: **drunk and crying.**

Usually he would have kept the Hatter waiting for a while longer, just to prove that a one-trick magician wasn't worthy of summoning the Dark One's name, but he felt compelled to make an exception today.

It wasn't everyday that Jefferson had Belle under his watch, after all, and the young jumper had been eager enough to escort the pretty maid rather than an ill-humored wizard across a portal this morning. If he was calling for Rumpelstiltskin now, then it must be important. Rumpelstiltskin had made sure to stress that a simple exchange of magical items was low in his list of priorities, and that he'd be annoyed if he was pulled out from his very important work.

Very few things would motivate Jefferson to court the Dark One's temper, and only one could make him reasonably sure that he wouldn't pay for it.

Rumpelstiltskin set his teeth and refused to believe that Belle could be hurt. Narnia had become disgustingly peaceful ever since Jadis's demise, but with its sunshine and kind, heroic royals, it was an adequate place for Belle to visit.

It better have remained so, or else... A few drops from his private stash of squid ink, and even that lion could be tamed. He'd wanted to keep the peace with Narnia's true ruler, in the hopes that he would find out for certain whether the rumors about the reigning tetrarchy were true. If he could find that door to the World Without Magic, then he could forget about his little project to take the whole of the Enchanted Forest come along for the trip.

It would be simply *delicious* to be able to tell Regina that she wasn't welcome anymore!

But he did have his plan, and it was as successful as it could be at this early stage. Regina could be counted on to keep her hate alive and burning, and all the other pieces were moving into place.

If he must lose his chance at Narnia, well, that was all it was: a chance.

Belle's well-being was more important than that.

With that thought firmly in mind, Rumpelstiltskin took hold of the magic tugging at him and followed it. "Hold it, dearie," he sang cheerily when the power of his name echoed for a fourth time. Such a waste. "Here I am!"
As the words were said, he popped into the room next to Jefferson. It took a single sniff to realize where the magic had led him. The smell of alcohol and greasy food was ripe in the air. He sneered. The highest peers of the land entertained him in palace halls and, on the occasion some discretion was necessary, in lush private gardens.

Now he was an unwilling patron at some lowly town tavern.

"This better be worth my time," he warned the younger man, feeling tempted to snap his fingers and remove himself and his associates back to the Dark Castle.

If half of them weren't missing, he'd gladly have done it.

Raising an eyebrow, he gave a speaking glance to the empty seat across the table. "Well?"

Jefferson gulped. Fidgeted. Opened his mouth, cringed at whatever he saw in Rumpelstiltskin's expression, and closed it again.

And still no sign of Belle.

"Jefferson!"

Jefferson almost jumped from his seat, eyes wide as he tried to put some distance between the two of them without actually leaving Rumpelstiltskin alone at the table. Smart boy. It was wise not to insult the Dark One. "It's not my fault!" he finally rushed out, holding his hat to his chest as some sort of shield with his right hand, while with the other he pointed to the table to Rumpelstiltskin's back.

Rumpelstiltskin looked over his shoulder, and promptly forgot about his annoyance. The budding feeling grabbed on and took the flavor of outrage instead.

"Explain," he said shortly, tapping his fingernails against the tabletop. The small action distracted him from the urge to retaliate. Belle wasn't hurt, not physically at least. But she was distinctly out of commission and, a detail that made him clench his fists and stomp down his magic, there were tear tracks on her face. He couldn't remember hearing Belle cry since she'd first come with him - and those weren't memories he cared to revisit! He wet his lips, holding himself from cursing the entire house - hell, the entire town, and perhaps all nearby farms as well - until he knew the specifics. "Why was she crying?"

Jefferson swallowed. "I don't know!"

The sheer panic in his face made Rumpelstiltskin snicker despite himself. A girl-child at home, which implied he'd been familiar with at least one other female in the past, and still the boy looked utterly bewildered. He decided to show some pity; he had experience with this particular bewildering girl. "Try going step by step, dearie. I'll tell you where you took a trip."

Of all things, Jefferson looked grateful. Yes, Belle had struck again. "We stopped for a quick toast to our quick - and successful - return. Her idea. I swear," he said, and to his credit he didn't stammer, "she only had a couple."

He gestured.

Rumpelstiltskin followed the motion to the tankard sitting a few inches away from his maid. Oh? "So, Belle is...."

"Drunk, yes," Jefferson confirmed.
Rumpelstiltskin closed his eyes. They'd have a glass of wine at dinner, of course, but not more than that. Oh, he would indulge in something stronger occasionally, like when his visions decided to visit in all their incomprehensible glory, but it had never occurred to him to offer a drink to Belle. Why would he have, when Belle had never showed any interest? The gods knew that she made it clear when she was ready to try something new, and that she didn't stop pressing until Rumpelstiltskin had indulged her.

(Within reason, of course. But one could afford to be generous with the staff when it was composed of a single woman with few demands.)

A variety of fine choices at the Dark Castle, expensive gifts given in an attempt to pacify the Dark One, and Belle had ignored them.

Instead, it seemed her taste ran toward the cheapest beer in the Enchanted Land.

Despite himself, Rumpelstiltskin found a smile curving his lips. The girl never ceased amusing him. He turned to her and, gently, whispered a light spell in her direction. Better to let her sleep it off now.

Almost immediately, Belle's soft snores smoothed out.

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. It was a handy spell he'd perfected after many evenings spent with a snoozing maid in the vicinity. He might have gotten used to the company, but that didn't mean he had to bear the accompanying noise as well, did it?

Beside him, Jefferson looked a little less tense. "Please say you're taking her home? Talking animals who point swords at me, I can handle; your little maid in the middle of wild mood swings..." he trailed off when he saw Rumpelstiltskin wasn't liking the direction of his musings. He coughed, straightening his collar with suddenly shaky fingers. "I mean, sweet girl, really, but she probably wants to be home soon, anyway. You know, since she was really looking forward to - oh!" He fiddled with his hat, and a weighty pouch slid out. "For you, from Belle."

Rumpelstiltskin took it, frowning as he hefted it. The deal - a simple, almost benign thing - had been for a magical root he needed for his next potion, and which only grew on a land that had been cursed under ice for more than a few decades. According to his research, it was a light thing of barely more breadth than human hair.

It didn't account for the size of the little package.

"Oh right," the Hatter said, smirking with something more like his usual zest. "The stones we took along? They came back with us."

That made his teeth drag against each other, holding back a shouted curse. The Dark One didn't yell. The Dark One made deals, and he kept them. "What did you do?" he hissed, wrenching the little bag open, and subsided when he saw the thin brown shoots nestled to one side. Then he realized what he held, and immediately discarded the notion that he held stolen goods. Jefferson wouldn't mind pinching something if it was within reach and it could gain his favor, but Belle would never allow it. "What did you do?"

Jefferson grinned. "From my point of view? Magic!"

Rumpelstiltskin lifted an eyebrow, unimpressed by the other man's fondness of theatrics. "Pay attention, boy. I have a housekeeper to cart back home, and a possible... diplomatic mishap... with the protégés of a very powerful feline. My patience is at a low, Hatter." He enjoyed the sight of
Jefferson's playful mood dying into paleness. "Explain."

"They gave it to her," Jefferson said simply.

Rumpelstiltskin tilted his head. "'Gave'?"

Jefferson nodded. "I swear, one moment they're leery about having us as guests, and the next your girl has won them over and the younger Queen is sending for more of those roots, and handing them to Belle."

"...and the deal?"

"A favor, no strings attached," Jefferson hurried to explain. "The words were spoken in front of witnesses, and the terms accepted by your representative. That counts as a new deal, doesn't it?"

Rumpelstiltskin had met with those royals half a dozen times already, and never gotten so much as a glass of water out of the goodness of their hearts. "Was there a reason for such unselfishness?"

Jefferson eyed him. "Belle mentioned it was for a good cause. Say, Rumpelstiltskin, is it true you needed this spell for a healing potion?"

Well, healing that boy was one step in a long chain of favors. But yes, rich sea merchants liked to keep their heirs alive, and Rumpelstiltskin liked the artifacts that could be brought from across the sea. "In the most strict of senses, yes," he admitted with a shrug.

Jefferson nodded, though he looked a bit bemused by the notion of the Dark One being called to heal anybody. "I owe Belle an apology."

"Thought she was lying, didn't you?"

Jefferson gave him a speaking look, quirking up the corner of his mouth. "Who wouldn't, oh terrible Dark One! Even King Edmund..." He suddenly looked as if he'd gladly have cut off his tongue. "Um."

"Oh, I know this one," Rumpelstiltskin said, having no trouble picking that particular thread. "He intimated that the dear girl was being manipulated, and that she'd grown too comfortable with the situation to be able to tell." He shook his head. "That boy. He's got problems."

"Well, yeah, but..."

Rumpelstiltskin sighed. Apparently, here came the only part he'd predicted correctly about Belle's trip. There were risks about sending her among the heroes of Narnia, after all; a pretty, young girl doing the Dark One's bidding. It was bait some types couldn't help but bite. "Let me guess. One of the young kings or the other-"

"Or both."

"-offered to ride up to the Dark Castle and save my Belle from-" His hands fluttered in the air. "-these evil clutches. Oh, to have a listening crystal in that throne room!"

"There was one touching marriage proposal," the Hatter confided. "Almost brought a tear to my eye."

Being in service to the Dark One had done wonders to Belle's marital prospects, if nothing else. Some she let down gently, others... Well, he'd learned to be glad that she had no reason to strip a
torn off him. The woman had a sharp tongue, and she cut deep.

Rumpelstiltskin pictured pompous Peter or his younger brother pitted against Belle, and laughed gaily. "Tears of mirth, perhaps!"

Jefferson was grinning from ear to ear. "She's something else, that girl," he said, nodding toward Belle. "Those young men now have a lot more respect for a woman's opinion. Their sisters fell in love with Belle after that."

Rumpelstiltskin cracked a smile. "Of course they did."

Jefferson glanced up at him, and just as swiftly dropped his gaze to his coat buttons. "Right," he said awkwardly after a few seconds of silence. He patted his coat pocket, where he'd tucked his share of spun gold for today's work. "I guess I'm free to go now?"

Rumpelstiltskin waved a hand in dismissal.

Giving a short bow, Jefferson scuttled around him and set off, his departure aided by the fact that the tavern was almost empty now.

Having the Dark One as a patron was never good for business. One couldn't know when the beast would snap, could one?

Rumpelstiltskin sighed, and slowly stood up, ready to leave as well. He could have transported himself and Belle back to his castle with a thought, and perhaps he would have done that if he hadn't caught the look on the face of one of the men across the room. He was staring at Belle, and Rumpelstiltskin had been in public with the girl enough times to recognize the man's thoughts: the Dark One's possessions must be respected at all cost, but if the little maid were dismissed, then she would rank barely higher than a street whore, and even the whores would protest. Everyone in the Enchanted Land had heard about Belle by now, and most knew her by description; without his protection, she'd be considered fair game to every man.

Never mind that Belle was not a plaything.

Or that he'd rather lose all his treasures than leave her unprotected.

The fool, clearly, needed a lesson. Since he hadn't actually done anything, Rumpelstiltskin could afford to be merciful. A timed spell, yes, slugs lived longer than twenty-four hours, didn't they? Plenty of time for reflection.

He smiled at the stranger, and was delighted when the man shivered.

But first, everybody needed to know that Belle was not to be bothered. There might be only ten souls in sight, but the tale of the Dark One picking up a sleeping maiden into his arms and cradling her against his chest would travel fast across the land.

That she would sleepily burrow against him, and go as far a to thread an arm around his shoulder, would be a nice detail over which they could gossip.

Only then, with Belle secured against him, did Rumpelstiltskin wish them back home.

The End
22/11/15
The tavern crowd was in full swing, voices mingling together and shouting their orders and at each other.

At a table in a corner, alone and left undisturbed, a man sat in full armor, only his helmet resting next to his elbow as he either sank his face between his hands or spent whole minutes staring at the wall.

Sir Thaddeus had stood in battle since before he'd grown a beard. He had seen more blood and misery than this whole town put together. He had fought for his very life countless times, and he had expected that the battle tonight would either grant him great rewards in victory or the honor of death if the Dark One caught him.

Instead he found himself in a small town in the middle of nowhere, contemplating the many questions that had aroused after the brief attempted rescue he'd wasted so many weeks to plan.

The hand at his shoulder startled him.

He looked up into the rotund face of the tavern owner. "Leave me alone," he said impatiently.

The other man chuckled. "In a moment, sir," he agreed, then presented him with a full tankard of ale. "But first have this. It helps with the nerves."

Thaddeus scowled. "What nerves?"

Laughter answered him. "Come from the Dark Castle, don't you? We've seen many like you pass by, shaky and spooked. Have a drink, man. Some things no one should contemplate while sober."

"The Dark One doesn't scare me!"

"The Spinner? Who is talking about him?" He still made a quick sign against evil, crossed fingers rubbing across the spot over his heart. "Make no mistake - you annoy him, and you won't have time for fear. But he's not the issue, is he? After all, that's not the one you met today, did you?"

Thaddeus looked away.

"Oh, don't feel embarrassed. Pretty girl, isn't she? Smiles like the sun. Eyes like summer sky. She'll feed you and water your horses, and even offer a spot by the fire if her master is not at home."

"...she did."

The short man nodded. "You don't seem too bruised, so I'll guess you didn't try to haul her away by force, did you?" He cringed at some memory. "Good man. Some seem to come rolling all the way down the mountain. Painful, isn't it? Our healer makes a good living from those too hurt to continue their way without his help, but he's not in town tonight."
"She told me to leave," Thaddeus said, still at a loss.

Any girl spirited away from her home as she had been would have jumped at the chance to run away, but this Belle had given him a fond look and practically patted his hand in reassurance as she explained that there was nothing wrong with his strategy except that he should have made sure of her wishes first. She had even counseled that next time he check how receptive his objective was to the idea of a rescue, before he climbed up a mountain for nothing.

For nothing!

"She told me she wouldn't come with me...."

"Ah. Yes. She does that." The tavern owner shuddered, then grabbed one of the other tankards in his tray and took a long swig. "Even sounds as if she doesn't mind the company, doesn't she? Him with the powers of the underworld thrumming inside him. Hideous inside and out, and older than any of our records. And that girl won't leave him - gods protect us!"

Thaddeus glanced up at the strength in that last sentence. He frowned in thought, trying to pin down the expression on the other man's face. He had seen all kinds of fear in his decades on the battlefield, so it wasn't hard to recognize it now. But not at the mention of the Dark One, he realized.

The most powerful sorcerer in centuries had made his abode a few hours away, and the people in the village talked of him as a fixture in their lives.

But when they talked of the Dark One's maid....

"You're afraid of a little girl in servitude?"

"Servitude, you say?" The tavern owner chuckled. "When she comes on market day with enough gold on her to buy the entire town, and never tries to run? When she has knights beating at her door to whisk her away, and instead she calls onto her master to get rid of them?" The laughter that came next was nervous. "The Spinner is a dark soul, but he's a fair one. Girl like her? Who knows what's she's up to!"

Thaddeus shook his head. He was too old to see monsters in the shadows. The girl had been kind if resolute, seeing him to the door with the courtesy of a hostess to a honored guest.

But it hadn't been her unexpected choice that had unnerved him, but rather the reason she had given for it.

"Do you think - do you think she might be happy?"

The other man barked a laugh. "She got to you, eh? Give it up, old man. Whether she stays for his pleasure or her own, the girl can't be good news either way. Those mountains have been taken by the darkness, and whatever finds root there is nothing we want to try and understand." He gave a last pat at Thaddeus shoulder before turning away. "That way lies madness, doesn't it?"

Thaddeus thought of the skein of spun gold he had found in his bags upon arriving in the town.

He had gone to rescue a princess, in hopes the reward would be enough to set him up in his approaching old age.

Instead it was she who was rescuing him from penury.
He had come to the tavern to decide whether he should return to thank her, or whether he had to throw the gift into the closest river, lest accepting it made him a pawn.

But the tavern owner had mentioned that the Dark One's gold was spent in town, and hadn't seemed wary of its use.

"I need to go," he said, rising to his feet.

He got an understanding glance. "Can't get away fast enough, can you?"

Thaddeus only grunted, choosing not to give an answer.

His personal code forced him to show his gratitude and - within reason - offer his service in exchange. But not to hear a stranger call him mad for returning to the Dark Castle so soon after having left it with all his limbs intact.

Leaving a few coins on the table, he made his way back outside.

"Good luck, sir!" called the tavern owner, obviously happy with the price for a drink that hadn't even been touched.

Thaddeus nodded in acknowledgement.

If this second interview didn't catch him as unprepared as the first had, he would count it as luck enough.

The End
03/12/16
FTL. The Power of Nature

Chapter Summary

FTL. Rumpelstiltskin takes his maid along on a trip.

Chapter Notes

Written for BeastlyCheese. **Prompt:** volcano.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the last hour, the only signs of activity in the island had been the thickening clouds of smoke curling into the sky, and the reverberating rumble from deep within the mountain that had made Belle jump and grab Rumpelstiltskin's arm the first time she heard it.

"Have I finally found something that frightens my brave maid?" he asked, eyes alight with humor.

The question made her straighten her spine. If Rumpelstiltskin had brought her along to see her scared, he was in for a disappointment. With a shake of her head, Belle forced herself to loosen her grasp. They would be safe here, she reminded herself, with miles of ocean between them and the eruption about to take place. "Nothing to be afraid of," she'd muttered, mostly to herself.

Rumpelstiltskin smirked, having caught her words. "Oh, but there's plenty."

When she glanced at him, he was looking at her expectantly. It took her a moment to understand his meaning, and then she had to hide her smile.

It had been a long time since her master had scared her. It certainly wouldn't happen on a night when he'd taken the time to return to the castle to collect her, when it would have been so much easier to leave her unaware of his latest deal.

At that thought, her eyes traveled to the base of the great mountain. Some of the bigger buildings were recognizable despite the distance. It was not a great city like Avonlea, or even a growing town like the ones she had visited in the last year.

There were small clusters of houses. Settlements. Surrounded by grazing lands and the sporadic cultivated field. The short rows tweaked at her heart, since soon they and all the hard work they represented would be obliterated.

But the people were safe.

"They're going to lose everything," she said, thinking of the crowd of frightened people she'd glimpsed as the smoke of Rumpelstiltskin's mode of traveling drifted. He had exchanged a few words with their leader, making sure to keep a grasp on her wrist so she wouldn't wander away, and after being handed a small satchel, Rumpelstiltskin had nodded and, with another spell, brought the two of them here. "They'll have to start over."
"They still have what they could carry. And their animals," Rumpelstiltskin responded. "Considering the alternative, they'll have an easy time."

Belle wasn't satisfied. "You could have stopped it."

Her master didn't rebuke her for the disapproving tone. Instead he simply shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I could!" he admitted, but tapped her nose with a chiding finger before she could say anything. "But even the Dark One cannot fight nature for long. Say I tamp the fires down now, how long will it last? A year, a decade? There will still come a time when the pressure wins over my magic. And, no, dearie. If I'm to be found at fault for the loss of an island to the bottom of the ocean, I'd rather it was my choice."

Belle could see his point.

His magic could dry a lake with a snap of fingers, or make snow fall in the middle of a summer day. But the springs that had fed the lake would continue doing their job, and eventually the waters would have the same level as before, and the snow would still melt and the sun would shine bright the next day.

People believed that the Dark One's power was unlimited, but only because Rumpelstiltskin was careful to keep a sight on his limitations. The high price he set for his help also kept outrageous petitions at bay.

Which reminded her of a question that had bothered her since he explained the situation...

"So what's the price for getting an island's population to safe ground?"

Rumpelstiltskin blinked, surprised at the change of subject. Then he grinned. "Afraid I'm replacing you, dearie?"

There would be a girl better prepared to deal with a maid's work here, where the living was rougher than at court. But the thought hadn't done more than cross her mind before Belle dismissed it. It had taken Rumpelstiltskin years to get used to her presence, he wouldn't be adding to his household any time soon. Still, she pretended to give his suggestion some thought. "Well, I was hopeful you would bring in a cook next."

His eyes widened, and he searched her expression, relaxing when he realized she wasn't making an actual suggestion. His smirk reappeared, and he tutted at her. "Don't give up yet, my dear. There's still hope for you in the kitchen."

See if she made any of his favorite meals for the next week!

"Will you say the same tomorrow at dinner?"

"If you haven't burned the potatoes again..." His tone was serious, but the curve of his lips said that he'd caught on and was now playing along. "Maybe."

Belle poked her tongue out at him. "I haven't burned a meal in months, and you know it."

"Then lucky me!" he exclaimed, clapping with enthusiasm. "I don't need a cook at all, do I!"

Her responding sigh was fake, and a part of her wondered at that.

There had been a time when she had prayed for company other than her strange master. But now she wouldn't know how to deal with some stranger living in the Dark Castle. "Well, then," she gave
in without further protest, "so what is it I'm going to dust for the rest of my days?"

"Oh, just a little trinket," he said easily, but the smug smile contradicted him. "They were happy to part with it."

Belle snorted, but didn't protest. She understood that no price was too high when your people were in danger.

"Now, stop plaguing me with questions and pay attention, girl," he said suddenly, pointing outward.

A louder explosion. A flare of light that shot into the sky.

Belle jumped around, mouth falling agape at the sight. Streaks of bright orange shot into the sky before they fell heavily upon the mouth of the great mountain, and then started their sluggish way down the slope. The smoke thickened, and Belle thought she could hear the rocks sizzling over the distance.

Over the course of minutes, the lines of fire became thicker, faster. Left nothing but charred remains behind. But, even from so far away, it was easy to tell that the lava ran down familiar paths. The island had survived a thousand eruptions like this, and it would survive a thousand more.

It hadn't been a disaster until man had decided to settle where he didn't belong.

The sight made her heart beat wildly.

"Breathe," Rumpelstiltskin said, so close that Belle realized he'd put his hands at her shoulders to support her.

"It's beautiful," she said, and found herself blinking tears away.

He snorted. "It will destroy half that island before it's done."

"I know." But nobody would be hurt. "It's beautiful anyway."

And because she couldn't tear her eyes away, she didn't notice as his observed her instead.

The End
23/08/16

Chapter End Notes

*points to Masterlist*

*points to comment box*
A Flicker of Light

Chapter Summary

Belle's first spell.

Chapter Notes

Written for Cozy_Coffee at Comment Fic. Prompt: Let The Wrong Light In

The unlit candle was winning this round.

Again.

Belle glared at it, going through each step as told in the texts she'd been studying in Rumpelstiltskin's absence. It wasn't exactly a secret, since she'd been curious enough to ask about learning magic once she'd exhausted every other interesting topic in the library. She'd taken the lack of sneering laughter as approval, though he'd been quick to remind her that he'd taken on a housekeeper, and not another pupil, when he'd brought her to the Dark Castle.

The same housekeeper who was free to indulge in reading and gardening at her whim.

Rumpelstiltskin might want the world to believe that her life was devoted to his satisfaction, but Belle had long ago come to the conclusion that he would often make an effort to accommodate her need for more adventure than a life dusting the Dark One's halls could offer. For all that darkness he carried inside, Rumpelstiltskin had a soft side too. He didn't care to reveal it to her, though she'd come to recognize it under much of his bluster and threats.

Not that anyone - no, not even Jefferson and much less Queen Regina - would ever believe that the dreaded Spinner could sometimes even be... sweet.

Her lips had started to curve into a smile when she caught herself. Really, her goal wouldn't be served by such distraction! She was about to force herself back into focus, when a swish of air at her side let her know that she wasn't alone anymore.

"Well, well," came Rumpelstiltskin's voice, and he leaned over to inspect the candle, "having a little trouble with lighting up the place, are we? Perhaps the wax is deficient..."

And he gave a soft blow.

Of course, the wick came on fire instantly - as did the hearth with a roaring growl and the torches in their scones against the walls. Show off.

He tittered. "Or perhaps the trouble lies somewhere else."

Belle opened her mouth to remonstrate, but had to close it again. Because he was right, wasn't he?
He looked expectant for a moment, obviously counting on a rejoinder, and her continued silence seemed to provoke him into a disgruntled scoff. With another gesture, he brought down the fires to the single flame of her candle. "Concentration, girl," he snapped, clicking the fingers of his right hand before quickly reaching to tap a black fingernail to the middle of her forehead. "Can't expect to work a spell if you're daydreaming about!"

"I wasn't-" Belle remembered the direction of her thoughts before Rumpelstiltskin's interruption. "Well, not really."

"Ah, ah. I know a dreamy look when I see it, missy," he said, crinkling his nose in a show of disgust. "You'll never coax so much as a breeze if you don't put proper attention to the task."

"I was trying."

He did not look impressed.

"I was!" she insisted. Then realized how depressing that was, when she had nothing to show for all her effort. She had studied every book available to her; even now she could recite whole sets of instructions and even the more simple incantations. But once she'd tried to put her knowledge into practice... Belle looked away. "What if you're right?" When Rumpelstiltskin blinked in confusion, she sighed. "What if I can't do it?"

He reared back, a hand flying to his chest in that gesture that spoke - sometimes sincerely - of hurt feelings. "Now, when did I ever say that?"

"You..."

"Tsk!"

The sound was sharp enough that Belle quieted. Experience told her that he was in earnest, so she settled back in her chair and waited for him to continue.

He took his time, glancing at her for a long moment before he let his gaze drift around the room. "You're not the first to learn magic here, you know," he said at last.

Belle nodded. "The queen mentioned you'd tutored her for a while."

"Yes, of course. Regina dearest. Could have made more of her marriage if she hadn't spent all her time here - or perhaps not." He shrugged, as if the matter didn't interest him one way or the other. Belle wondered why he brought it up at all when she'd seldom heard him mention the late King Leopold before. "There was one more. Dreadful girl, but powerful enough to need my teaching as well.

Do you know what the two of them had in common?"

The woman that now ruled a country, and one whose power had inspired Rumpelstiltskin's interest. "Their strength?"

His shout of laughter made her jump.

"Oh no! No, no, no." He chuckled one last time. "Weren't you listening, dearie? They needed my help. 'Oh, please, please, oh Dark One,'" he mimicked, though Belle couldn't believe such an ingratiating tone coming from the queen she knew. "Well, that and one more thing, but let's not talk about that."
Curiosity prompted her to ask what he meant, but that was when Belle caught onto what he was trying to tell her. "Oh."

"So," he said, suddenly so close that he could tip up her chin, "do you still think you're not able to call on a bit of fire?"

She bit her lower lip. "No?"

His eyebrows rose.

"I mean... yes." The flicker of approval in his eyes coached her to continue. "Yes. Yes, I can."

It was as if an invisible weight had been lifted from her, the niggling thought that this time she was taking too big a challenge. But how could that be? What was the simplest spell against coming to the Dark Castle and thriving here?

The books didn't speak about self-assurance, but now Belle understood that it had always been implied. She should have known better than to doubt herself. After meeting several magic users, the concept that will was more important than matter should have stuck.

"I can do this," she repeated, calmer now.

Rumpelstiltskin then let go of her, staring at his hand for a second before he stepped back. "Good," he said, already looking away but then he turned back toward her, one finger raised in admonition. "And no more daydreaming!"

Belle nodded and turned to face her candle.

After another half hour of failure, she heaved a sigh, ready to call it quits for the day and head to the kitchen for their dinner.

"Stop right there," Rumpelstiltskin called out, jumping out of the chair where he'd been comfortably sitting with a book. "Try once more."

"But, Rumple..."

"Just once, dearie," he insisted.

With a sigh, Belle grabbed the candlestick and put it back before her. She closed her eyes, trying a few deep breaths, and then opened them again, focusing on the short thread that made up the wick.

But this time she felt Rumpelstiltskin's presence close in on her, until he was at her back. For a few moments, neither of them moved, and Belle almost protested that if he wanted her to focus, standing over her really wasn't helping.

Then she felt his hand ghost over her shoulder. Not really a touch, but it hovered there until it finally brushed the back of her hair and then settled on the high end of her chair.

"Close your eyes, Belle-" he didn't wait to check if she obeyed, but Belle did as he said without delay "-and think of why you want this so much. It's not the power, is it?" She snorted at that, and he responded with a soft laugh. "Of course not."

"It's knowledge," she whispered.

This time it was his turn to scoff. "You have more facts tucked away in that pretty head of yours than even I would know what to do with. Try again."
"But to do it-

"That's not it either. You're quite happy dealing in theory only. You drove me crazy with talk about architecture for weeks, yet I've never seen you so much as draw a barn. Focus, dearie." His voice came closer, as if he was whispering into her ear. "You've lived without magic your whole life. You don't need it for revenge or for riches; there's no danger to protect yourself from. So think and tell me: why magic, why now?"

Because more than power, magic was imagination with no limits but the unthinkable. Perhaps people outside the Dark Castle viewed it as a tool and nothing more, a curse or a blessing depending on the caster; but Belle had spent years dusting after Rumpelstiltskin's experiments in his laboratory, deciphering his notes when he left them within sight.

Magic wasn't only a set of rules. In the right hands, it was as malleable as soft clay and still as wild as the sea during a storm. It was...

The word slipped out unthinkingly. "Freedom."

The grasp on the chair wobbled for a second, followed by the crunch of wood under his claws.

Belle hurried to explain, but he shushed her.

"I understand," he assured her. "Very well. Then use that, dearie. Think of your life here, within the boundaries of my power. Think of the years you've lost, shut in with the monster."

This time his hand did land on her arm, stopping her when she would have protested.

"There was a time you could have left, but you ignored every chance. You could be somewhere else, living your life as you were meant to. You should be a wife already, perhaps a mother. You would love and be loved, and nobody would have a reason to look down on you. Thank of that life which you'll never have, and then..."

He paused, and she felt him grab her hand and guide it to wrap around the candle.

"Then think of your life here, Belle. What do they call you?" He ignored the quick shake of her head. "Ah, yes. The Dark One's maid, my little slave. The devil's paramour, if they're feeling polite. And what do you get in return, hm? The empty castle, the many chores. The poor company. That's your life in the Dark Castle, are you really surprised freedom is what you seek? Think of the deal we struck. A lifetime here, with me. Think of forever." He let that word hang in the air, and then, so softly she almost didn't catch it. "Think that I will never, never, let you go again."

Belle felt it then, a heady rush that filled her heart and sang through her. She leaned over, prepared to blow softly over the candle to finish the spell, but instead found herself cupping her hands together over her mouth, and speaking a single word into it: "Come."

Then there was warmth, and when she opened her eyes, it was to find a small ball of light flickering a few inches over her joined palms.

"I did it," she whispered, barely noticing the noise as Rumpelstiltskin made a hasty retreat. She turned toward him, cradling the tiny light, and beamed at him - just to find him looking completely bewildered. "Rumple?" Sure, she'd been supposed to light the candle, but there was nothing wrong, was there?

He recovered in the next instant, straightening and making her a deep bow. "My lady sorceress."
Belle laughed at the misnomer - one simple spell did not a sorceress make - and pouted when the light died away. Resolutely, she closed her eyes again, calling back the warm feeling that had heralded her success. She thought of her life in the Dark Castle, the place she'd carved for herself at Rumpelstiltskin's side. She thought of the truth behind the ugly rumors: the safety and the unshakable knowledge that she belonged here. She thought of home, and yes, of forever as well.

And she smiled.

"I'm doing it... aren't I?" When there was no answer, Belle cracked her eyes open, and there it was. Even smaller than the first, but just as warm. Just looking at it made her happy. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Rumpelstiltskin said nothing in response, but his eyes stayed fixed on the spot of magical light she'd called forth.

A few more seconds, and it was gone again.

Even thinking about trying it for a third time was exhausting, so Belle decided she could practice more the next day.

This time there were no more protests when she got up, intending on serving their meal at last. But before she left the room, she walked up to Rumpelstiltskin, and grabbed his hand much as he had done to her a few minutes earlier. "Thank you." When he looked at her in incomprehension, she squeezed just a little and smiled. "Guess I did need your help after all."

He stared at her, his eyes too wide for fake bashfulness. "No, dearie," he said, his voice so serious he hardly sounded like himself, already slipping away from her. "You didn't need me at all."

The End
13/03/16

Chapter End Notes

Comments are welcome!
His maid was not a particularly graceful dancer.

Not that the people she bumped into and whose feet she blissfully trod upon pointed that out. Some did gaze up sharply, but one look at Belle's happy face as she twirled around the dance floor, and they just shrugged off their complaint and returned to their own celebration.

A spring feast in a small town, with none lost to the cold or hunger of winter, was always cause for revels.

It was also an appropriate place to tuck in a girl for a few hours. Belle had already been helping with another errand when someone in the nearest palace had summoned the Dark One's name with enough desperation and malicious intent to warrant an immediate audience. Political intrigue was always a delight to attend to, with all the bitterness running deep and the ambition that soured every goal even as it was met. The best deals came from playing kingmaker behind the scenes!

But Belle wouldn't have been thrilled by their destination, and he'd chosen to keep his maid smiling rather than have her glare at him for playing with people's lives when it wasn't necessary for their survival.

_Do you like it?_ he'd asked a few hours earlier, once their carriage had come to a stop.

_Oh, I can really wait for you here, Rumple?_ Enthusiasm had threaded in her voice as Belle watched the people put in the final touches in the modest decorations around the square. A few ribbons and colored paper glued to the walls, and a gathering of small tables that had been carted from individual homes and heaped with trays. Belle had taken it all in from the carriage window, practically vibrating with eagerness. _Oh, please, please, don't tease me if it's not so!_

_Only until midnight, dearie_, he'd told her.

He had meant to warn her not to share her identity, but instead he gasped as her hands trapped one of his, squeezing tightly as she beamed at him without reservations, her grateful expression so open that Rumpelstiltskin knew he'd been saved from a hug only because Belle knew it wouldn't be
welcome. *Well, he'd huffed instead, Try not to get kidnapped this time.*

She'd just given a quick roll of her eyes in response, and then let go of him to smooth down the skirts of her dress and pin up the tendrils of hair that had escaped during the ride.

*Will I do?*

*Fishing for compliments?*

*What if I am?*

The girl had stayed in his company for too long, if she was coming into the habit to answer a question with another question. He had studied her, taking note of the expensive dress he'd presented to her for their original travels. The light green of the fabric looked creamy against her skin, and the silver thread adorning the sleeves and front sparkled with her every movement.

Eye-catching. Distracting.

Adequate for the Dark One's companion.

But too rich for a girl unprotected. Her throat was left too bare, and the soft expanse of skin down her collarbone too vulnerable. *As a matter of fact...* he'd murmured.

Her yelp had been more surprise than fright when his magic enveloped her, and as it cleared, she had glanced down and smiled. *Oh, this is perfect!*

Rumpelstiltskin would have felt more satisfied by her approval if he didn't suspect that she'd have said the same if he'd dressed her in her everyday service dress.

Brown wasn't her best color, but it would fit a merchant's daughter sent ahead to secure lodgings. Belle only nodded as he instructed her, already aware that to announce the presence of the Dark One's maid among the unwary was always trouble.

He had left her smiling, content to let the driver he'd summoned lead her ahead while he transported himself to this new fool.

Now there were minutes 'til midnight, and her dress was wrinkled and her shoes muddy. But her smile was the brightest in leagues around.

Rumpelstiltskin had picked a spot beyond the light of the great fire, hidden from the townsfolk so as not to interrupt her fun. Unwatched, he allowed himself a soft smile as Belle's feet jumped and skipped, following a rhythm barely similar to the tune played.

Not even a musical instrument could dictate her steps.

He watched as the dance brought her close to one of the tables, and she laughingly picked a cup and brought it to her lips, already moving away. Several of the townspeople carried similar beverages, but where they sipped theirs, Belle just tipped it back as if the contents couldn't affect her.

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. His maid had built quite the resistance to all forms of alcohol. A local brew would do little next to the exotic liquors that had accompanied their meals in the last year or so.

Suddenly she paused, then halted and tilted her head, slowly turning in his direction. He was sure
that she wouldn't be able to see him, but her face brightened and a smile of welcome bloomed on her lips.

"Rumple!"

Few people looked up at her cry. It might be the name of a friend who'd traveled with her fictitious father. It might be that she'd lied and she was meeting a lover to run away.

Nothing prepared the crowd for the moment when Belle stood straighter, hands akimbo at her waist, and addressed the darkness around them. "This is cheating, Rumpelstiltskin. It's not midnight yet!"

He could have thrown a silencing spell over the square, and the result would have been the same. Everybody froze in their tracks, and the lively music died without fanfare. A dozen gazes searched frantically around them, trying to spot the monster so they'd know in which direction to run away.

Rumpelstiltskin's giggle made a bead of sweat appear on many a forehead.

Perhaps the terrified quiet would have broken into screams and panic if the first to move hadn't been Belle. She let out a huge sigh, and caught herself when her body tried to sway to one side. "All right," she muttered, put off by the interruption but willing to halt her fun and keep their deal. "But can we come back next year?"

The hisses that greeted her request told of the popular opinion.

Rumpelstiltskin just felt amused at her earnest wide eyes. "Well, dear," he said as he stepped into the light, enjoying as people scrambled away, "I don't believe that would be advisable."

The path between him and Belle had already been cleared. He stepped forward, aware that he had to act swiftly now that her identity was starting to dawn on some.

They were welcome to hate him. But Belle's eyes were shining with giddiness, and joy like that deserved to be protected.

"Come, Belle," he said more softly once he reached her side. "Time to return home."

Her pout distracted him. "But I haven't danced with you yet."

There had been a lifetime of festivals he'd attended a long time ago. He had always watched from the sidelines, aware that his welcome was fragile. Even before the shame and the broken leg, he had never had a pretty girl ask him to twirl her around a bonfire.

He shook his head. "I don't dance," he told her sharply, but his body belied his tone and his hand crept to the small of her back to guide her back to their carriage.

Her legs seemed to take his support as permission to falter from under her, and, yelping and then giggling, her soft body fell sideways into his. "Oops," she laughed, looking up from where she'd landed with her cheek against his coat. Her face took onto a sheepish blush. "I might have had a few drinks," she admitted.

Rumpelstiltskin snorted.

She made an effort to straighten herself, but her upper body refused to cooperate, leaning comfortably against him. "Okay. No more dancing now," she mumbled, apparently coming to the realization that now that she'd stopped moving, her body was catching up with the alcohol she'd
consumed.

"That's right," he said, and with a sigh as he remembered the crowd around them, he hauled her up into his arms as if the Dark One made an habit of picking tipsy maidens and carrying them off.

He already scowled at the stories that would spring from this little scene.

His eyebrow snapped up as a figure came trembling before him. His fingers twitched, magic to transport them back to the castle a thought away. But he'd been run off from this setting too many times, and the Dark One did not whisk himself away just to avoid a forming mob.

"Yes?"

It was only one man, taller than him by at least a head, and still wringing his hands with shaky nerves.

Rumpelstiltskin felt himself smile, always pleased when someone showed proper submission to his power, and gestured at him to say his piece.

The man swallowed heavily. "We... ah. The girl, sir. She came by herself." He glanced at Belle, who in turn lifted her head at the perceived scrutiny and stared back. The man looked between her and Rumpelstiltskin, eyes pausing at the height of Rumpelstiltskin's chest, drawing him to look down and discover Belle's hand clutching his coat. A flash of horror crossed the man's face before common sense beat it back (luckily before Rumpelstiltskin had to do it). "If- If we'd known she was your..."

Rumpelstiltskin curled his lips, which effectively cut off that sentence. He knew of the whispers attached to Belle's reputation, the slurs that called her the Dark One's bedwarmer at best, and his soulless creature at worst. She would never forgive him if he leveled a whole town for a man's words, but the temptation was there.

"My...?" he prompted, making sure his teeth showed in wordless threat.

The man paled further, licking his lips with fear. "...was yours, I mean. We didn't know, or we'd have called for you at once."

This time it was Belle's turn to snort. "Wasn't midnight yet," she mumbled.

Rumpelstiltskin hid a smile at her stubbornness, which provoked her to poke at him lightly.

He chuckled at the attempt to chide the Dark One.

His amusement made the other man shudder.

"Please, sir! Don't punish us...."

Rumpelstiltskin heaved a sigh and met his eye. "Am I now known for my mercy?" His voice rose at the last word, mocking the sentiment.

The man cleverly clamped his mouth shut at that.

"Exactly! If I had reason to be angry, not a single wall would still be standing, and I'd care little on whose heads they fell." He grinned at the man's shiver. "But I don't have a reason... or do I? Tell me, Belle, have they done anything to bother you?"

Belle turned to him, so her exasperated glance was hidden from others. "They were nice, Rumple,
though..." He could hear the wave of fright that rose with that hanging sentence. But Belle only tried to shrug, movement confined by his grasp around her. "They did leave the cider to ferment for too long." she whispered, smacking her lips as if to repel the bitter taste.

Rumpelstiltskin snickered. "And the headache you'll bear in the morning will be punishment enough for drinking it anyway, eh?" Then he turned to the man. "See? The lady vouches for you. Or you're telling me different?"

Never had a man shaken his head so quickly.

"Then move aside, and I won't have to turn you into something I can step on, on my way out."

He practically leaped out of the way.

Rumpelstiltskin smirked, not bothering to look around as he strode forward. Before long, he was settling Belle on her seat (though the girl seemed to have almost fallen asleep on the short walk, as he had to tug at her hand a little to make her loosen her grasp on his coat). "Had a pleasant evening, dearie?" he asked softly at the same time as he gave the silent command for the horses to start their way.

Belle nodded sleepily. "You?"

"Oh yes."

He smirked at the thought of the man who had traded away ten years of his life for a vial of poison. It had to be dosed very carefully on three different occasions, each time three days apart and under daylight, moonlight, and candlelight respectively. It was untraceable, and had no symptoms to alert its victim. Someone would simply go to sleep after the third dose had been ingested, and never wake up.

Rumpelstiltskin had given the details openly, already knowing that the fool would rush in and deliver the entire vial in one sitting. Perhaps he should have asked for twenty years, Rumpelstiltskin thought now. The potential for life was a powerful ingredient, and scarce because most people hesitated before taking that deal.

Pity about that waste.

Because there would be a meeting at the scaffold for his latest client.

Attempted regicide was frowned upon.

(While actual murder was blamed on the dead's only child, so as to chase that girl away. Regina had a lot of nerve, playing bereaved widow!)

"Thank you," Belle told him sweetly, driving his mind away from dark deals and darker-hearted queens. "I don't think I've had so much fun in months!"

"It was on the way. No trouble at all."

Her blue eyes smiled at him, but she didn't mention that one snap of his fingers could have deposited her back in the Dark Castle. Instead her foot traveled across the small space between their seats, nudging against his ankle. "You owe me a dance, Rumpelstiltskin."

He stared at her, at a loss for words.
Belle only tapped his boot again before drawing away, curling deeper into her seat and wrapping her cloak around her. "Maybe next year?" she mumbled around a yawn.

Rumpelstiltskin said nothing.

It was the drink speaking, he reassured himself. By morning, the silly girl would have forgotten she asked the Dark One for a dance.

He closed his eyes, wishing for sleep.

And instead of his usual dreams, he saw a glimpse of two familiar silhouettes spinning together in the warmth of the brightest fire.

The End
07/08/16

Chapter End Notes

If you're new to this 'verse, you can go straight to the Masterlist, where all the stories live in chronological order.

Happy reading, and comments are loved! :D
FTL - Passing Judgement

Chapter Summary

A damsel in distress asks for help at the Dark Castle.

(Based on The Twelve Dancing Princesses.)

Chapter Notes


In the end, it was the silence that convinced Rumpelstiltskin to set aside his notes on his latest - and failed - attempt to brew a True Love's potion and make his way to the great hall. It had been at least an hour since he'd glimpsed a great carriage make its way up the mountain toward his castle, and he did remember hearing the knocking at his door some time afterwards.

But his maid had yet to call for him, as was customary when a noble - or a noblewoman, given the number of armed riders accompanying her - sought the Dark One.

Belle's attempts to dissuade his callers from a personal interview with the master of the Dark Castle often worked with the poorest of the townspeople, who cringed at her offers of tea and pastries, so terrified at the thought of food prepared under the same roof as the darkest of magics that it took barely an effort to make them realize that they'd be accepting far more of the darkness if they went through with a deal with Rumpelstiltskin.

Only a few, trembling and pale, insisted to see him.

Belle might believe that they were doomng themselves, but she didn't understand how hunger and despair, the horror of losing those they loved, pushed these people into the unthinkable. What was an unborn babe, compared to the thin little faces already at home? What was honor or a pure heart, when the partner of a lifetime was lost in fever and there was no coin for a doctor or a medicine?

Rumpelstiltskin had many a contract binding this people to his service. No questions asked, no denials allowed. They were motes of dust in the big picture, poor people with no influence or importance, but Rumpelstiltskin knew that even the weakest pawn could be placed in a position to throw off course a game plan, and so he held onto their signed promises, and waited for the right timing.

Occasionally Belle managed to make the more successful traders and business owners turn away as well, but this she accomplished by giving them a short tour among his treasures, subtly pointing out their value and hinting that they still had been worth only a little magic. Only the most desperate would pay the savings of a lifetime for a spell.

How could he resist bringing these greedy fools down a notch or ten? Even if they returned to their homes to find their competition crushed and their enemies scattered, their new wealth belonged to
the Dark One in all but name.

Rumpelstiltskin might not need their gold, but the favors they'd do for him to keep their riches? Invaluable.

But there was nothing like royal blood doing his bidding. Belle could try to reason with them, but those in power already believed that they knew best. They fought wars by placing children on the front lines, and they burned down entire villages in search of one fugitive. They were the law and had the choice of life or death over their subjects... Rumpelstiltskin did like to return the favor. Every family at the heart of a kingdom had their secrets... and Rumpelstiltskin collected those little gems as he did any artifact related to the travel between worlds.

Pawns were useful, but maneuvering those born to rule to his whim? That was fun.

Luckily for him, few royals were smart enough to listen to the advice of a servant. It didn't matter how Belle tried to reach them, once they realized they were talking to a maid, Belle might as well speak to a wall.

How strange, to make his way downstairs and discover an exception to the rule!

No wonder his maid had not called for him, or that his wards hadn't informed him of the retreat of this latest visitor. He paused at the bottom of the stairs, taking one moment to watch the unprecedented sight of two young women laughing together over a tray of tea and biscuits. Belle's back was to him, but from the flutter of her hands as she talked, he knew that her face would be animated, blue eyes sparkling with good humor.

"...and then I tripped, but not over the long train of my dress, because I was actually watching out for that. But on the carpet!"

The blonde on the other chair bit her lip, trying valiantly to hold back laughter. The effort made her look away, searching for a distraction, and Rumpelstiltskin knew the moment she'd caught sight of him instead from the tiny, breathless yelp she let out.

Why, had she expected a handsome knight to do her bidding? Foolish woman!

Belle turned around too, unknowingly soothing his temper with an unpracticed smile of welcome. Unseen by the visiting lady, she gave him a conspiring wink, and sunk into a curtsy even Regina would deem obsequious. "Milord," she said, eyes on the floor and, if he read the little jump the other woman gave, kicking the lady's ankle to follow her example.

Ah, his maid did like this one, then. She knew how his mood grew more complacent when he was presented with the proper courtesies.

Rumpelstiltskin couldn't help the smile as the blonde dipped down before him, a stuttered greeting falling from her lips. "What do we have here, hm?" He kept his steps slow, waiting to see what his maid had in mind. She didn't play the submissive servant unless she had a goal, and though he knew that it probably involved his leniency when dealing with this customer, he did enjoy their little charade. "Hmph. Talking to the housekeeper instead of the master can only mean one thing, and I've already said we're not hiring extra help!"

The blonde's eyes widened, and Rumpelstiltskin snickered at the pride that straightened her spine. "I'm not!"

"Princess Amelia has come for advice, milord," Belle said, taking a half-step to the right to put herself between the silly girl and him. "Through no mistake of her own, Her Highness finds herself
in an uncomfortable situation, and now she looks for a way to fix the situation."

He deliberately misunderstood. "I take babes once they're born. Not before."

A gasp of shock, and the princess stumbled back a step.

The effort Belle made not to glance up and glare at him was almost palpable. "There are no babies
involved," she managed.

He feigned disappointment. "Oh?"

"She has been promised into a marriage not of her choice," Belle explained, "and wishes to
extricate herself from it."

With a low whistle, he approached the pair. An arranged marriage. No wonder his maid was
interceding for the princess! "And how would I expect others to believe I'll uphold my deals, if I go
around breaking others? No, no. Bad for business, this mess," he told them with a shrug, then
sniggered. "Though I have heard that if a girl renounces the match and removes herself from court,
there's less chances to haul her to the altar." He paused, amused to see from the corner of his eye as
Belle's cheeks reddened. She said nothing, though. "Little I can do, I'm afraid. Though..." He let
the sentence hang, amused when both women leaned closer. "I guess I could help to dispose of the
abandoned fiancé. For a price."

"I...."

"Not necessary," Belle cut in. "...milord."

Rumpelstiltskin smiled. "Not your choice, either," he reminded her. Then turned to the other
woman. "Now, dearie, what say you?"

The princess gaped. Frowned. Deliberated for too long.

"Pity." He crossed his arms over his chest. Counted inwardly to five.

His maid didn't disappoint.

"Sir?"

He waved at her to go on, forgetting that her show of deference included not raising her eyes until
he gave permission. With a sigh, he reached for Belle's chin and, pretending not the hear the
princess's fearful gulp, gave a soft tap to indicate she could look up.

Blue eyes held no fear of him. No blind hope for him to rescue a stranger either.

But there was a shrew look to the girl, and Rumpelstiltskin almost smiled. "Something on your
mind?"

"Just that the deal that ties Her Highness to someone else's promise was a verbal arrangement."
Belle looked him in the eye. Smiled knowingly. "No signed contracts at all."

Rumpelstiltskin grinned back, rubbing his hands together. He had three hundred years of
experience, and he still preferred a deal to be written down in detail and signed by both parties.
That gave no leeway to the other party, and all the advantages to the one who'd worded it. "Well,
well," he crooned, sidling closer to the princess and laughing at her shiver. "How interesting. Since
when does a king's daughter enter a betrothal on words only? Tsk."
"My father - he..." She shrank away when Rumpelstiltskin took another step toward her. No bravery to this one, he thought with a flash of disgust.

He turned on his heel, bored with the stuttering princess.

"It was a deal made in the belief that the other party wouldn't keep his side of it," Belle rushed in. "A riddle that no one had been able to answer. That no one should have answered."

"Ah. The future groom cheated, then?" He chuckled. "My congratulations, Your Highness. You've been blessed with a smart man for a husband."

The princess turned pleading eyes to him. "But I don't want him!"

"Is he evil, then. Mean-spirited at least?" He wagged a finger at her, making sure his fingernail swished an inch away from her nose. The girl jumped in fright. "The truth, now. Don't think you can lie to the Dark One, dearie."

A head shake.

"I see. The lad is poor, then."

"A lad?" She snorted. "Some crass soldier, not even a colonel, and older than Father!"

"So old he deserved to die instead?"

Belle snapped upright. "Die?"

"Ah, I see our guest skipped some details, didn't she?" He paused, giving the blonde a chance to complete the story. But the princess looked away, curling her hands into fists. "For the past few months, there's been an interesting rumor come from the land beyond the western mountains. It tells of twelve princesses who go to bed dutifully under lock and key, and yet when the morning comes their slippers are worn through from dancing. I understand your father wasn't pleased at the news?" The blonde's scowl was enough answer. Rumpelstiltskin picked up the story. "He wasn't. It seems he swore to give his kingdom to the man who revealed the brats' secret. But - yes, a catch. Can't have an army emptying his larders and making no real attempt to discover the truth while there was wine in the cellars, can he? But three nights surely are enough time. With a crown as the prize, all the hopefuls would do nothing but their best. And if they fail, well. A corpse is a most compelling warning for the next fellow to try harder!" His laughter faded at the look of horror on Belle's face.

"Months?" she whispered.

"I was expecting to receive an offer for my help any day," he confided, then shook his head as if he couldn't think why anybody would hesitate to contact the Dark One. "Any man facing a third night guarding the Lady Amelia and her sisters, and having no hint of how they left the castle or where they danced the night away, should have been motivated enough..." He shook his head. "Fools."

The princess wrinkled her nose. "They had no business snooping around! We always came back home. It was a lark only!"

"And a dozen men dead from laughter, is it?"

"They knew the danger!" she protested. Then turned to Belle, trying to explain. "They could have left after the first night of failure, or even after the second. We told them to leave us alone." Her eyes narrowed. "But they wanted to become Father's heir. Would do anything to rule a kingdom."
"And, on the third morning, they met His Majesty's executioner instead."

The princess raised her chin. "Can you help me?"

Rumpelstiltskin gave a bow so brief as to be insulting. "Of course I can. But I won't." He spoke over the woman's shriek. "He won, dearie. You and your sisters had plenty of opportunities to put rules in place. You could have insisted that no magic be involved, or that the suitor must be of a determinate age - and, I guess, of handsome features too. You could have been discreet, instead of taunting your father with the knowledge that his daughters were traipsing around without so much as a chaperone."

"I should have known a man wouldn't understand!"

"Oh. A man, am I?"

But being blamed for his sex rather than his purported evil was such a rare experience that Rumpelstiltskin changed his mind, grinning as he did. A click of his fingers in front of Belle's nose made the girl startle and break the disbelieving stare she'd been holding on the princess and turn to him instead.

"Well, Your Highness," he said to the princess off-handedly, "I'll do you the favor of giving you a judge of your own sex. Yes," he told Belle as her eyes widened in surprise. "You have heard her. You have heard the facts as well. I could give her this-" he summoned a small bottle and showed it to both women "-a drop, and both king and suitor will forget anything they've learned about the princesses' adventures."

Belle shook her head. "But without an answer...."

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged one shoulder. "A princess married to someone not to her liking, or the groom-to-be thrown into a not-so-early grave. Those are the options." He softened his voice at her stricken face. "What else would you have me do, dearie? Even if could make the man and everyone else forget he'd ever set foot in the royal palace, he would still head there. Our guest didn't lie when she said men would do anything for a chance at the throne, and the king's challenge is known widely by now."

Her voice was just as low. "And there's no way to make him... uninterested?"

"That he'd hear of it and not try? Break his drive, silence his will to improve his situation. Take away his choice?" He saw her pale at each sentence. "Is that truly a better fate than death?"

"No."

"I won't have him!" the princess yelled, going as far as to stomp her feet.

Belle glanced at her, raising an eyebrow at the tantrum. Squared her shoulders. Rumpelstiltskin grinned as he stepped away, content to cede her the floor.

"Rumpelstiltskin is right," Belle said. "You could have changed your own fate at any point, and if you really mean it, it's not too late."

"You'll give me the potion?"

"No. But I'll remind you that the deal was to make him the heir. Convince your father to announce a formal adoption -"
"And let the future kings have none of his blood? He'll never do that."

Belle sighed in wordless agreement. "Then renounce your title. If you're not a princess, becoming your husband will not make him the heir."

"Never." The princess glared at her. "And it wouldn't help, anyway. That brute will just ask another of my sisters."

"The twelve of you created this problem," Belle sentenced, her voice harsh with disappointment. "You had no problem sacrificing others, while all you wanted was to party. If none of you will step up now, then you don't deserve a crown."

"You dare-!"

"She does," Rumpelstiltskin broke in, stepping before Belle and managing to draw their guest's ire to himself. "You could say she's an expert on the sacrifices a lady must make for her people. Your choices are laughable in comparison: keep the crown and be wedded, -" one finger pointed upwards, and then another joined it "- or have neither." He smirked, eyeing her boldly from head to toes. "Somehow I think you'll land on your feet."

"This has been a waste of my time," the princess grumbled, stalking away.

Rumpelstiltskin brought himself to stand between her and the door, enjoying her look of fright as the purple smoke swirled too close to her. "Not so fast, dearie. You came for a way to be rid of an unwanted match, and even if you don't like it, you're walking away with good advice. You don't think that comes for free, do you?"

"I came for results!"

"And results you would have, if you did what Belle proposed. And since it's her advice you're taking with you, it falls to her to choose the price for it." He glanced at Belle, both eyebrows raised expectantly. "Well?"

She started to shake her head, but then frowned and pressed her lips together. "A promise," she said at last, "that no harm will come to this soldier."

"Oh, perfect!" Rumpelstiltskin agreed, clapping his hands together. "Young queens doing away with their elderly husbands... Can't let the one instance become a trend, can we?"

Both women turned to him. Belle, with disapproval; the other, curious despite herself.

"No, no. I'm sure that was only hateful gossip. We shall not lower ourselves to that, hm?"

Rumpelstiltskin giggled. "And as productive as this meeting hasn't been, it's high time to draw it to a close. Your word, dearie, that you will care for your husband's health, so you can be gone. Ah!"

He lifted a hand to halt the princess when she opened her mouth, a stubborn expression on her face. "Before you say something regrettable, do remember that I'm the master here. If you choose to disregard my servant, you leave me no choice than to propose a deal of my own." He smiled, all teeth and malice. "Now, what were you going to say?"

The blonde deflated quickly. "Fine. I promise."

"Fantastic!" He waved toward her, smiling when his power whisked her away from his sight.

Belle glanced at him in alarm, but settled as the princess's voice reached them, yelling for her coachman to hurry. "Let's go! I don't want to stay in this cursed place a minute longer!"
"What about a few extra hours?" Rumpelstiltskin muttered, willing the road down the mountain to run in circles and knots. A useful spell when he wished to trap someone within his land, but it also served to payback those who had annoyed him yet were lucky enough not to deserve a true punishment.

Belle approached him, and he tilted his head at her contrite look. "I'm sorry," she said, "I should have sent her away from the first."

"No need to apologize. You're not here to screen my visitors, no matter what you think."

She reddened. "I'm not here to make friends either."

Rumpelstiltskin sighed. "Her version of the story struck a chord with you. It would be stranger if you hadn't been moved to help her." The roll of his eyes at the mention of 'help' made her grimace. He noticed. Pursed his lips. After a moment's deliberation, he crossed over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You did nothing wrong, Belle."

Belle glanced up at him, lips curving into a small smile at his earnestness. "Thank you, Rumple."

Their gazes met; hers softened with gratefulness while his own remained gentle. It took another moment for Rumpelstiltskin to remember that he was still touching her - and snatch his hand away. "Not 'milord' anymore?" He tossed with a laugh, already putting distance between them. "Pity."

She chuckled, but turned so they'd be facing each other and sank into another deep curtsy. This time, though, the gesture was crowned with a sincere smile. "Thank you, kind sir."

He stared at her. Then, deliberately, with none of the exaggerated courtesy that served more to mock than to denote respect, he bowed back to her. There were a dozen things he could have said, from a reassurance that she was useful, to a teasing reminder that he wasn't a 'kind sir' at all, and didn't she knew better after almost three years in his company? He could even have sent her downstairs to see to their evening meal, or pointed out a spot of dust. But at the sight of her bright smile, all the words stuck in his throat, threatening to become a smile of fondness instead.

His hand snapped up at the thought, sending him back to his laboratory.

The last thing he saw was Belle's look of confusion, mouth shaping his name yet no sound escaping it. Just as well, he thought wryly, hoping she wouldn't come after him yet.

At least he wasn't the only one who didn't know what to say.

The End
18/09/16
FTL - Practice

Chapter Summary

Belle keeps practicing her new talents, even when Rumpelstiltskin is gone.

Chapter Notes

Written for Alias: sd6. Prompt: pillow fight

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later - much, much later - he would blame Belle's laughter for his lack of reflexes. But his appearances in the library were always greeted by either his maid's lack of reaction (because how could the Dark One's unannounced visit compare to a thrilling plot twist?) or a welcoming smile when her book wasn't as enthralling.

The pillow that bashed him in the face was a first.

"Oh gods, I didn't see you!"

Belle's voice was the only thing that stopped him from ripping the offending object with a burst of power. Instead he grabbed it and held it up, quirking an eyebrow in silent demand for an explanation.

He expected an abject apology. Instead he got a beautiful girl rushing across the room toward him, the knit between her eyebrows betraying her concern.

Rumpelstiltskin wanted to curl his upper lips in annoyance - what did he need concern for, hadn't this girl seen him struck by an arrow one moment and laughing it off the next?

He wanted to stare in wonder too.

In the end he blinked both impulses away, and settled for tossing the pillow at the third figure in the room.

Several steps behind Belle, cringing and suitably white-faced with dread, Jefferson didn't even try to dodge the projectile.

"Rumple!" Belle objected in the Hatter's behalf, waving her arm and biting her lip with the effort of channeling power through the movement.

Her aim had improved in the days he'd been gone.

The pillow did veer somewhat toward the wall, its new direction avoiding the target he'd intended. With a roll of his eye, Rumpelstiltskin lifted his hand and twirled his little finger...

"Oomph!"
He twittered at Jefferson's yelp, ignoring Belle's huff.

"Now, children," he said, pointing between the two of them. "Care to explain why you're flinging a pillow -" He finally paid attention to the background, lifting an eyebrow at the collection of silk-cased pillows strewn all over the floor. He twisted toward Belle, who was also looking around with an expression he'd last seen three centuries ago, when he'd returned home to find his son trying to tame a baby wild hog into a pet. It was guilt, yes, but not one ounce of regret. He clucked his tongue reprovingly. "You do realize you're washing all of them before sundown; right, little miss?"

Belle made a face, but nodded. "I didn't use the ones in your room," she offered.

"But all of yours, I see," he said, having glimpsed the rich fabric with blue embroidery he'd chosen for her bedding. Fit for a queen, and laid forgotten on the floor. His temper flared up, annoyed at her lack of care with his gifts. The dismissal of his show of favor. "Perhaps you've tired of such comforts and would prefer to return to your first room?"

Belle's eyes widened at his tone. "What? No!"

He spoke over her protests. "And what have you to say, Jefferson?" he snapped at the younger man, stalking up to him with long strides. He put a finger under Jefferson's jaw, directing him to meet his eye. "I don't remember inviting you for a visit, dearie."

"Ah...."

"I invited him over," Belle said, coming to his side. She didn't try to put herself between them, smart girl, but neither did she back down when Rumpelstiltskin twisted his head to glare at her warningly.

"You presume much, my dear."

Belle glanced at him uncertainly, but her hand still came up to rest at his elbow. His grip on the Hatter slackened, and Jefferson quickly scrambled a few steps away. Belle instead stepped closer. "Remember before you left last week? You said I needed to practice my shields," she reminded him, and for a moment all Rumpelstiltskin could remember was her unconcealed glee when she'd managed the simple spell that had cost her weeks of effort. "Well, I can't throw stuff at myself, so I asked Jefferson for help."

Rumpelstiltskin narrowed his eyes, annoyed again because it made sense.

Unused to the thought of anyone intruding in their lives, he had meant that she should wait until his return so they'd continue the lessons. But Belle, as impatient as ever, had taken it as permission to arrange for outside help.

And of course someone had come when she called.

If people were as willing to smooth his way, Rumpelstiltskin would have reunited with Baelfire centuries ago. Instead he was left to plot and twist the fate of generations, just for a chance at that perfect deal, while Belle smiled and offered tea, and people came running to do her bidding.

He scowled. "I see."

The world had never treated him kindly, but that only meant he didn't regret clawing his way through it. Let them moan and cry; it was only fair.

But Belle was smiling at him...
Every rule must have an exception. Didn't it?

...and her hand pressed against his arm. "You're not really mad, are you?"

Rumpelstiltskin giggled. He was. Oh, he was! But he wasn't angry, and that was what she meant. "No, dearie. Not as long as you explain. The pillows?"

"They're small and light."

"And not a sword," Jefferson mumbled, then shrugged at Rumpelstiltskin's questioning gaze. "Her idea. Not mine," he clarified. "I'm not crazy enough to wave a weapon at your maid, Rumpelstiltskin. Not even if she asks."

Rumpelstiltskin pictured his reaction at that scene. They'd be burying a body if there had been one left. "Good idea," he said calmly, but when the Hatter met his eye, he gulped thickly and made a quick retreat toward the open doors of the library.

"And on that note," Jefferson said, making a show of dusting his hat and settling it carefully over his head, "I must be going or Grace won't read me a story before bed."

Belle giggled at that.

Rumpelstiltskin felt the sting of jealousy and grief, but he still waved his sometimes colleague away. Children needed their fathers, especially when they had no one else. "There's gold in the great hall," he told the other man, "take what you need."

Jefferson glanced at Belle, who gave a slight shrug and then a quick nod.

He hadn't come for payment, then. Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. Of course not, when Belle did the calling.

"Say hello to Grace from us," Belle said.

Rumpelstiltskin wrinkled his nose at being included, but didn't gainsay her.

Jefferson looked between them and grinned, mischievousness flashing in his eyes too quickly for Rumpelstiltskin to demand answers. Then he stood straight, hands at his sides, and made a deep bow to the two of them in the manner a courtier addressing the royal pair. Rumpelstiltskin harrumphed, while Belle chuckled in amusement. With a last grin of his own, Jefferson turned on his heel and jaunted away.

Over-confident as ever, that boy.

"He'll get himself in trouble one day, mark my words," he said to Belle, remembering one of the possible paths Jefferson's life might take. "Not even that hat of his will save him, come th--oomph!"

For the second time that day, a pillow hit his head.

He whirled around, eyes widening when he caught Belle reaching for another one. "What on earth, girl!"

"You were horrible to poor Jefferson," she told him primly, as if the Dark One were a child to be chided. He blinked in disbelief, and she took that instant of distraction to chuck another pillow at him. "And besides," she said over his answering growl, "a good teacher teaches by example."
That stopped him from vanishing all her possible weapons - and perhaps her beloved collection of books as well - into the bottom of the nearest lake.

"Oh, you want a lesson?" He couldn't help it. She'd thrown down a challenge, and he had to meet it. With a snicker, he lifted all the pillows in the room into mid-air, then grinned at her widening eyes. To her credit, the barrier that rose, while still too weak to withstand a magical attack, might work to protect her from more ordinary weapons. "Not bad," he praised her, because the last he'd seen, she couldn't have held back a piece of paper for more than a few seconds.

Belle smiled. "Ready?"

He laughed, snapping his fingers to let the first strike fly.

(No, he wasn't ready at all. But he wouldn't realize that until much, much later.)

The End
25/08/16

Chapter End Notes

This is the 50th chapter!

*throws confetti*

Hope you liked it! And if you did, please leave a comment to let me know. :D

(Masterlist)
Rumpelstiltskin glanced over the scene. Setting his jaw in anger, he swept out a hand to freeze the struggle.

He looked over Belle to make sure she had suffered no worse injury than to her dignity and perhaps a bruised wrist (which he still seethed over, but Belle wouldn’t consider cause enough for punishment). Satisfied on that account, he allowed the stranger to keep breathing and clicked his fingers to return his maid to the present.

Unaware of the missing seconds, Belle gave him a grateful glance before she loosened herself from the tall man’s grasp. “Thank you, Rumple. That was turning nasty.”

Rumpelstiltskin thought of the distress with which she had called his name. Belle, the woman who slipped into the same room as an ill-humored monster with a tea set as her only weapon, scared by this… thug. “I could turn him into something nasty,” he offered. “In fact, I insist.”

Belle usually laughed off such threats, but his voice had carried enough anger that she flicked him a concerned look instead. “It’s all right,” she soothed. “This one was just taking longer to listen to sense.”

“Your problem,” Rumpelstiltskin chided, hopeful that this time Belle would take his advice to heart, “is that you speak to them at all.”

“I’d be missing out on several friendships if I didn’t,” Belle replied.

Rumpelstiltskin gave a disdainful sniff as he gestured to the frozen figure. “Some friends.”

Belle pursed her lips.

The occasional soldier coming to her rescue was a staple of life as the Dark One’s maid. They were men seeking their fortune, and though some proved stubborn, most were satisfied to leave her be and often were glad to perform some task in the castle in exchange for a pocketful of Rumpelstiltskin’s gold.

This man, however, had skipped every formality and showed every intention to haul her down the mountain on his back without even giving her the courtesy of a name, much less the chance to explain that, far from being the victim of popular imagination, she was happy with her post. Belle, unused to physical struggle, had been unable to fight off a man who could lift her under one arm with little effort. Calling out for Rumpelstiltskin had been her last resort.

“Thanks for coming,” she said now, pushing aside the unpleasant memories. “You were right on time.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Rumpelstiltskin gave a dark chuckle. “Don’t bother hiding your hands behind your
back,” he told her, simultaneously summoning a small jar of a fresh paste of healing herbs. “It might not leave a mark if you apply this quickly enough.”

Belle thanked him again in a quieter voice.

Rumpelstiltskin gave a wave of acknowledgement in response, but his attention had already turned to the intruder. “I’d tell you what I want to do with him,” he murmured, his eyes dark with banked anger, “but we’ve been down this road before.”

Belle glanced at him in surprise. It was a ritual in these circumstances to discuss the stranger’s fate.

“Yes, sure,” Rumpelstiltskin answered the unasked question, trying for a virtuous air and almost succeeding. “Patience, understanding, and sympathy for a poor man’s plight. Am I missing anything?”

Belle shook her head, a small smile hovering over her lips. She knew there was a trick to this unexpected show of mercy, but she supposed that calling him out in it would only annoy him further. “That’s very nice of you, Rumple.”

His grin would have terrified the world outside, all stained teeth and a pair of inhuman eyes on top, but Belle shoved down any worries and smiled back. She had seen Rumpelstiltskin in a true rage; this was the prelude of a joke only he would find funny, but that would almost certainly be harmless.

“Sure, sure. Very nice. That’s who I am.” He even bowed from the waist, grin widening at what he considered to be sheer silliness.

Belle didn’t mention that two years ago, he wouldn’t have assigned himself a positive trait even in jest. “I know,” she told him, earnestly enough that Rumpelstiltskin straightened, brow knitted in silent reproach for taking him seriously. Belle feigned ignorance. “So what have you planned?”

He brightened again. “Well, I have decided that if the Dark One can learn to sympathize—” he sneered the word “—with a man such as this, surely we can expect the same from him?”

Belle arched an eyebrow, curious as to his intentions.

“It’s about strength, my dear. Who has it; who doesn’t.” He had sidled around her to stand before the intruder. “Who uses it against the weak.”

Rumpelstiltskin raised a hand and let it hover before the man’s face, an expression on his face that brought to Belle’s mind the potential for destruction he wielded. She bit at the inside of her lower lip to stop herself from making a noise.

Her trust was rewarded when Rumpelstiltskin contented herself with flicking a nail against the stranger’s nose.

“Indeed. Leveling the field might be the making of a man like this.” He grinned, acknowledging her with a slight dip of his head. “Improves the character, to discover that the girl you underestimated will always fight back - and probably win.”

Belle felt her cheeks warm with pleasure, but her delight at the unexpected compliment wilted when she realized Rumpelstiltskin’s intent. “You’re leaving him here.”

“With only as much strength as you have, my dear.” He placed his hand on the man’s chest, dark wisps spreading out to wind around the still limbs and seep beneath the flesh. “I trust you’ll have
run him out before the kettle boils.”

At his words, the stove burst into life.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned. “Let’s have tea after you get rid of this pest?”

Belle licked her lips. She wanted to feel confident but the encounter had shaken her. “He came ready to face you,” she argued. “Do you really think he’ll be scared of a woman?”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. “Not yet,” he agreed. Then he winked. “But if he’s got a working brain somewhere under all that hair, he will.”

The End
07/10/17

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love!
Belle knew exactly who had appeared behind her. It wasn’t only the familiar tingling of Rumpelstiltskin’s magic that suddenly surrounded her, but also the stark paleness that swept over the face of her dance partner.

The man who’d claimed that her beauty left him breathless learned the true meaning of the word when faced with the Dark One. “I… I…”

“You were leaving?” came Rumpelstiltskin’s snide suggestion over her shoulder.

Neither man noticed the roll of her eyes.

Without another word - without even a glance in her direction to check that Belle agreed to being left behind, or an attempt to take her along - the man who had prided himself of his role in the battle against the Evil Queen fled as quickly as his legs allowed it.

High-pitched snickers followed him.

“Not exactly hero material, is he?” Rumpelstiltskin mused once the man was out of sight. There was a thread of fake disappointment in the words, but the gleeful tone let Belle know that her master was indeed amused. “I doubt I’ll find that one beating down my door, demanding your release.” He bent his head closer, practically speaking against her ear. “Double the fool, then.”

If the compliment had not been followed by another giggle, perhaps Belle would have confessed that she was relieved he had gotten rid of her dance partner without a fuss.

The man might be one of the captains in Snow White’s army, but his insistence to dazzle her with his accomplishments and his new prospects had driven Belle to bite the inside of her cheeks to stave off a yawn. Even worse, the man had not taken the hint when Belle had mentioned her wish for refreshments.

She had been on the verge of sending the captain away with unladylike insistence when he had suddenly frozen in horror.

But she would not thank Rumpelstiltskin.
His intervention would have been welcome if he’d meant to rescue her from unwanted company. However, Belle recognized the playful sing-song of his voice, and knew he would have interrupted her dance with the captain even if she’d been having a good time.

Would he have backed away if she had asked? Maybe, Belle thought. Rumpelstiltskin had long grown out of the habit of enjoying a joke at her expense unless she was laughing as well.

Her lack of response to his last jest made him huff, his breath brushing the rim of her ears. “Not even a smile? Hah! It really is as dull an affair as I predicted!”

Belle turned around to face him, one eyebrow raised in what she was trying to convince herself was annoyance. One glance at his grin dispelled that notion, as her lips seemed to pull themselves into an answering smile. “You came,” she whispered.

Rumpelstiltskin gave a theatrical shrug. “The wedding of the century, they say. The beautiful Snow White, at last married.”

“To someone she loves,” she added, then gave him a knowing look. “You made sure of that.”

His nose twitched and he scowled. “Hush, girl. You know nothing,” he scolded. “Next you’ll be claiming that I gave Leopold’s throne back to his daughter too!”

Belle eyed him for a long beat. Then, exaggerating the gesture, brought a hand to her chest and gave a soft gasp of mock surprise. “No! I would never be as silly as to believe such things, no matter what I’ve seen or heard in the last year.”

Rumpelstiltskin watched her carefully. “You grow in impertinence, my girl.”

She grinned. “Why, Rumple. That’s the loveliest compliment I’ve heard all night.”

A corner of his lips quirked up, and he made a point of watching her from her glass slippers to the gorgeous gold-threaded ribbon in her hair. Since every piece of clothing had been his choice, sent from the Dark Castle a few hours before the ceremony, Belle wasn’t surprised to see the satisfied approval in his expression. “Oh, but I doubt it,” he told her, still grinning. “Fools they might be, but not as blind as not to appreciate the look of you tonight.”

“And that’s all they see,” Belle retorted. “I’d rather be called impertinent than ‘a glorious star fallen from the sky’.”

Belle expected him to laugh at the ridiculous phrase, but instead his gaze softened for an instant. Then he was smirking again. “Well,” he said more brightly, “I’m sure he’d have called you both, if he knew you as long as I have!”

Belle blushed. “Thanks,” she said softly, and before Rumpelstiltskin could ruin the compliment, added, “I’m glad you came.”

Rumpelstiltskin stared at her, then stood to his full height and waved a hand in the air. “Of course I came. Isn’t this what polite people do when they’re invited to a special event? Not that I’d know… Not really drowning in invitations, you see.”

Belle only raised an eyebrow. A third of her trips outside the Dark Castle were a response to the several letters asking for Rumpelstiltskin’s presence. People were eager to gain his favor, and several believed that a banquet and adulation would do the trick. “Of course,” she said dryly. “We see so few of those.”
Rumpelstiltskin twittered. “Perchance there was some curiosity involved,” he admitted. “I find I must know what our happy couple will say when someone claims that the charming groom is as royal as Snow White. Such honest souls, the two of them.” He grinned, suddenly all games and mischief. “I’d be so disappointed if they don’t get the chance to prove their worth!”

Belle grabbed onto his arm. “Rumple.”

His eyes fixed on her hand. Then, slowly, ran up her arms to meet her gaze.

“Please don’t make trouble for David and Snow. Not tonight.”

He tilted his head, examining her. “You would protect them?”

“They’ve been good hosts.” When that didn’t move Rumpelstiltskin, Belle continued, “They could have made this last day very uncomfortable for me.”

Rumpelstiltskin glared above her head, presumably to a spot where the recently wedded couple was standing. “They know better.”

Belle’s grip on his arm tightened a little. “They didn’t even introduce me as the your representative,” Belle told him. “Do you know how long it’s been since I enjoyed a party without a line of people trying to befriend me in order to convince me to drop a good word with you?” Or throwing barely shaded insults her way. Not that she’d ever mention that to Rumpelstiltskin. “Please, Rumple. Don’t wreck this for me.”

Rumpelstiltskin stroked his chin. “I don’t see how you can escape their notice now, my dear. Everyone is staring at the beautiful girl deep in talk with the Dark One.”

Belle didn’t need to look around to see that he was right. Even if his features hadn’t betrayed his identity; Rumpelstiltskin’s splendid clothes, far grander than even the new king’s, would have singled him out. “You’re right,” she said, then took a deep breath, having long learned to take the awkward, uncomfortable moments and turn them into good memories, “so let’s give them a reason to stare?”

As she spoke, her hand slid from his arm to slip her fingers through his.

She clasped his hand before he could react and jump away.

“May I have this dance, kind sir?” she asked softly, raising their joined hands into position for the waltz playing in the background.

Rumpelstiltskin blinked.

It took her stepping closer for him to catch up and wrap and arm around her.

“Isn’t this better than upsetting everybody?” Belle asked after a minute of being gently led toward the middle of the room.

Rumpelstiltskin’s grin showed all his teeth. “Oh yes. Most certainly!”

Belle almost smiled back, pleased, but something in his expression made her lean back a little and look around… To discover that most couples had cleared the area and formed a small crowd around the dance floor. Some were whispering, all were looking at them with wide eyes, and a few must have alerted the new king and queen of the Dark One’s presence, because Belle caught sight of the pair at the edge of the ballroom, staring as well.
Several men were already sidling toward David, the expression on their faces stating their belief that his first act as their monarch should be to rescue the poor girl from the Dark One's claws.

“Uh oh,” Rumpelstiltskin whispered, all glee again. “Seems the party is over after all!”

The End
09/03/17

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love. Please leave a comment!
This can only be done under a full moon, Rumpelstiltskin had told her, grinning enticingly. Curious yet?

Of course she had been. But next time that an invitation came to witness some spell casting, she'd remember to pay attention to the weather. Now she was left to bite her lower lip to stop her teeth from chattering, bringing her gloved hands up to rub roughly against her cheek.

Rumpelstiltskin hadn't cited a reason for her presence there, and Belle hadn't asked. She already knew that, if pressed, he would name her familiarity with the most current star maps, after she'd studied the scrolls he'd brought with him a year before. He always made a point of the many ways he could put her thirst of knowledge to good use, and Belle usually smiled and watched happily as her library expanded into subjects she'd never dreamed she could understand.

But tonight Belle didn't want to feel useful.

And since Rumpelstiltskin had yet to ask something of her, perhaps she could pretend that her company had been merely wanted.

That possibility was worth a frozen tip of her nose.

Ever since his return a week ago, Rumpelstiltskin had barely let her out of his sight. He sat with her at the table at every meal, and when nightmares pushed her to wander the dark corridors in the middle of the night, she often found him ready to distract her with a tale or an experiment he wanted her to try... or, tonight, a rare spell.

For the first time, Belle dared to hope that Rumpelstiltskin cared for her. Not just felt responsible for her well-being, as any decent master would over a servant; and not just the feeling of friendship to someone with whom he'd spent the last years in close company.

It was... It must be what had brought him to her when she'd cast the beckoning spell in a panic. It was what had made him drag Regina around the main hall as so much as a rag doll. It was what had prompted him to pick Belle up from the floor and cradle her all the way to her room before depositing her in her bed, promising that nothing would hurt her anymore.

He'd hissed about vengeance. He'd whispered that she always would be safe.

With Rumpelstiltskin, simple words were more binding than blood oaths.

That he'd sworn his protection, no conditions, no deals... It had to mean that he cared, right?

It was reason to hope, at least.

Now Belle wrapped herself tighter in the thick blanket Rumpelstiltskin had summoned for her. He hadn't said a word, but she'd sensed the light spell that shifted the strongest wind currents away from their spot on the castle roof. It had been a nice gesture, but when one was in the open air, high above the snow mountains, there was little magic could do against the cold.

She had become spoiled, Belle supposed, with the bright fires always roaring high inside the Dark Castle and the unending mounds of firewood that were ready to feed the flames. But she had once
lived through wartime, where such commodities were scarce and even a lord's daughter went to bed with only what covers she could find for warmth. This wasn't the coldest she'd ever felt (that had been a night spent in a dungeon, where the humid walls had conspired with the chilly air and left her curled tight into herself, with only her dress and a layer of straw to protect her from the freezing stones).

A lifetime ago, it seemed now. So much had changed since that night!

Her rooms were now fit for royalty, and the mischievous villain who had once hauled her into that cell had kept a hand at the small of her back on their way up the dark staircase, to make sure that she didn't trip as he led her onto the roof. When he had noticed her pulling her cloak closer around her, he'd wordlessly called up the thick down blanket that adorned his own bed and arranged it over her shoulders.

Yes, in his quiet way, without the fanfare that was his signature when he didn't really mean what he said, Rumpelstiltskin cared.

Belle watched him, warmed by that thought.

He seemed to sense her regard, because he turned slightly to watch her, eyebrow raised in silent question. When she responded with a bright smile, he frowned a little and seemed to take it as a signal to drift into his role of a teacher. "See?" he said, leading yet another bright silver tendril into the mixture he'd prepared earlier. "Not too slow, or the light will fade; but not too fast, or..." He glanced at her, smirked. "Well, we don't need an explosion today."

Belle shook her head. "Not so close after the last," she agreed. "I'm not cleaning up, that's for certain."

"Some maid you are," he chided, and then returned to watch his experiment.

Belle made sure that his attention was fixed on his work, and surreptitiously cupped her hands over her mouth and nose, taking a few deep breaths through the makeshift filter. After a few times, she could feel her nose thaw again and relaxed, refusing to shiver and alert Rumpelstiltskin to her discomfort. Luckily he was focused on the potion he was making, and Belle entertained herself admiring the way the tip of his claws painted signs into the night sky and drew in glittery strands of starlight into the glass beaker.

It was beautiful.

So strange to have come to see that magic could be beautiful, even when the Dark One performed it.

Belle often wondered whether anyone else in the world had even considered that.

"It's not a poison, is it?" she asked, suddenly aware that there was a reason people distrusted the Spinner's magic.

Rumpelstiltskin didn't pause, but his soft snicker reached her ears. "All medicines are poison, dearie."

"So it's medicine."

"In the right amount, yes."

Belle narrowed her eyes, as ever frustrated by his manner of avoiding a subject. Then she sighed.
Often the only way to draw a concrete statement out of him, was to lead by example. "Pretty things shouldn't kill people."

His head tilted in thought at that. "But isn't it only fair? People damage pretty things all the time," he reasoned, and the way his eyes fixed on her told Belle that he was thinking of a specific scenario. Her hand unconsciously shifted to her chest, covering the spot where she could still feel Regina's nails dig in. Rumpelstiltskin made a noise, eyes flashing with something that could have been anger before they softened again. "Never mind, my dear. This -" His right hand slowed until the starlight dimmed and vanished, and he poured the contents of the beaker into a thin vial that appeared in his other hand, then held the result to her "-won't hurt you."

That surprised her. "For me?"

He clucked his tongue. "Well, I don't need to shield my heart against a witch's greedy grasp, do I?"

"Oh!"

He tutted when she reached for it. "Now, now, don't hurry so. First-" a thin knife appeared before her "-a drop of blood, please."

She drew back. "You said a virgin's blood wasn't a real ingredient."

A chortle answered that protest. "Yes, I did, and no, it's not. But it needs a piece of you, my darling, and blood makes the strongest bind."

That did make sense. Belle blushed, suddenly awkward at the mention of her virginity. She could tell he was aware of her thoughts, because his lips twitched in silent laughter. Well, then, what was said was said, and it wasn't as if the fact was any shock to him. He'd met her before she'd been wed to Gaston, and the few nice men she'd met at the Dark Castle would have scrambled away running if she'd so much as flirted with them.

No one was foolish enough to even look to be toying with the Dark One's maid.

"Very well," she huffed. She shrugged the blanket off one side to take the knife, ignoring the cold that slammed against her. She'd brave much worse than low temperature and a nick on her thumb to never endure having her heart stolen again.

Rumpelstiltskin helpfully tilted the mouth of the vial so she could squeeze a bright red drop into it, and smiled when the mixture flared silver for a moment before it settled into a dull brown. "It's done," he said.

"Thank you," Belle said feelingly, grasping the vial tight before tipping it off and drinking the contents in one gulp.

Rumpelstiltskin blinked. "You must really wait for instructions, dearie," he admonished, face stern but a tightness to his expression that told Belle he was shaken by her easy trust.

"You would have stopped me if I was doing something wrong."

He stared at her for another moment, and then shrugged his shoulders in silent agreement. With a twirl of his hand, both glass recipients disappeared, hopefully back to their place in his laboratory and not somewhere on a ledge in a different part of the castle, where her duster would tip them off and break them. Belle thought to ask and make sure, but the intensity in Rumpelstiltskin's face stopped her words.
"Well," he drawled, lifting a hand until it hovered at the height of her chest. "Mind if I make sure?"

Belle bit her lip, but shook her head.

He parted the blanket from around her, and frowned at her shiver. "Cold?"

She shook her head again, smiling wryly because she wasn't lying. It was nerves. Even after a week, she could still feel the sharp pain of having her heart wrenched away.

"Oh, Belle." His voice lowered into a soft croon. "I won't hurt you, I promise."

She believed him, and to prove it, she took a step forward.

His eyes widened for a second, and then it was he who took a deep breath. "I'll just-" His hand came to rest against her, right above where her heart rate had foolishly decided to speed up. "Don't be afraid," he murmured, misunderstanding.

Belle didn't have the words to correct him, so she reached for his wrist and, when he took that as a signal to move away, kept him in place.

The look in his face....

"Did it work?" Belle made herself say through a suddenly dry throat.

It took Rumpelstiltskin a moment to process the question. Then he made a quick press against her chest and, slowly, nodded.

Belle breathed in relief. "Thank you," she repeated.

"It's not forever," he warned, stepping away so quickly Belle was momentarily concerned that he'd run off the edge. "It needs to be renewed every month, though I doubt we'll need to do this again."

"You really think Regina will let it go so soon?"

He laughed at that idea. "Oh no! But she... has bigger fish to fry, my dear. Take you out of the equation, and she should fix back on what needs to be - well - " He giggled. "- unfixed."

These hints that Regina was meant to work some feat had come more often in the last year, some spell that would affect more than the stepdaughter she detested. Belle tried not to feel afraid, to trust that Rumpelstiltskin would never let even his brightest pupil go too far.

But there was this eagerness in him, when the subject was raised.

He thrummed with that need.

Belle put her hand on his arm, squeezing lightly. "Let Regina be, Rumple," she tried. "She hates, and she hurts those around her, and... and you don't need that. Leave her to her darkness, and don't turn back."

"Oh, dearie. But I can't."

She sighed, frustrated because it wasn't the belligerent tone of his stubborn whims, but a calm statement of fact. "Why not?"
"Because all that hate needs an outlet." He smiled in the face of her incomprehension, and tenderly removed her grasp from him. "And, Belle, I need to make sure it takes the right one."

"Nothing that dark can be right!"

"She says to the Dark One," he mused, and tutted when she tried to protest that she hadn't meant it like that. "You are the voice of reason, of course," he told her, eyes shut for a moment before he opened them again, and Belle had to brace herself at the anguish in them. "But maybe two wrongs can make a right?"

The End
29/07/16
"The clock had already struck midnight, but Rumpelstiltskin wasn't surprised to see candlelight peeking out from under the library door."

Prompt: **things you said at 1 am.**

Look, there's a masterlist now! In chronological order! And it includes the bitty bits too!

[LiveJournal](http://example.com) . [Tumblr](http://example.com)

The clock had already struck midnight, but Rumpelstiltskin wasn't surprised to see candlelight peeking out from under the library door. He hadn't wandered over to this side of the castle to check on Belle, not exactly, but his focus kept being broken by the increasingly demanding nudges that called him in this direction, warning him of a live presence where it didn't belong.

The same had happened years ago, when Belle had spent the nights in a dungeon cell.

His castle, Rumpelstiltskin had decided, was a better minder of the proper handling of young ladies than its master.

He opened the door carefully, hoping the girl was asleep and a simple spell would whisk her to her bed and solve the problem.

No such luck.

Her head snapped up at the noise, but she relaxed at the sight of him. "Rumple?"

With a quick glance, he tried to measure whether it was her love for a tale and a disregard for clocks that had kept her awake this late at night. Many times over the years he'd had to settle for a late breakfast and a yawning maid because Belle couldn't put down a story once she was in its grip. But this time her face was too pale, and he hadn't missed the nervous clutch on the book on her lap before she recognized him. She looked afraid, for all that she covered it with a soft smile.

Regina was lucky to have enough sense not to show herself yet.

Every time Belle was chased away from her bed by another nightmare, every time she jumped at a noise or asked whether his wards were working before she ventured into the gardens, Rumpelstiltskin wanted nothing more than to squeeze the queen's neck and give her a thousandfold taste of the terror she'd put his sweet maid through.

But Regina needed to live.
To find Bae, he could delay this last lesson he owed his former pupil.

"But of course it's I!" he called out loudly, entering the room with long strides until he stood before her. He studied her from this close distance, mentally drawing the dark rings under her eyes and deciding they looked less deep than the day before. She had gotten a nap at some point during the day, then. Good. "Who else would enter this castle, my dear?" he tossed the question carelessly, but watched for her reaction. To his relief, her shoulders lost that tense edge, and she sank a little into the cushion at her back.

Yes, exactly. No one can reach you while I'm here.

A terrible fate for anyone but Belle.

But not even his reassurance was enough to rid those blue eyes from the remnants of whatever terrors she'd been trying to escape in her reading. He could have cursed Regina into the afterlife and back, and it still wouldn't be enough payment for the nightmare-riddled maid she'd left in her wake.

In the last few weeks, Rumpelstiltskin had discovered that he couldn't find it in himself to relish in Belle's fears. His very insides rebelled at the idea. She'd deny she was afraid, of course. The girl who pretended bravery and hoped bravery would follow. He didn't need to look into the future to know how this meeting would end if he mentioned her nightmares. If these five years had taught him anything, it was that to get Belle to admit to what she was not yet ready to acknowledge required more effort than the Dark One could muster.

Besides, if she wanted to cling to her illusion of strength, who was he to deny her?

Instead he followed a path he'd found useful before: distraction. If he didn't mention the issue at hand, he could eventually lead their conversation down a parallel road and end somewhere close to his goal. With Belle, that was the best to hope for.

"I have work to do," he said. "Any day now, I'll have that interview with Her Royal Highness and our favorite reinvented shepherd, and I need to be ready."

"You'll help David?"

He smirked. "I have a deal in mind," he allowed.

Belle eyed him, but finally nodded in easy acceptance. "Good," she said honestly. "They'll need all the help they can get."

"And aren't I ever helpful!" he trilled quickly, before her mind could wander onto the person bent on harming David and Snow White. Then he leaned closer and tutted disapprovingly. "But while I can work through the night without the need for sleep, the same cannot be said for you. Don't you need to sweep the front halls in the morning? Will I have clean floors, or will I have to drag you and prop you up onto your broom?"

The imagery brought a smile to her lips. "I was just reading one more chapter," she lied.

Rumpelstiltskin huffed. "Yes, yes. And by dawn, it would be a crate of candles wasted when you should be resting."

Belle glanced at the three candles that surrounded her spot. Her right eyebrow quirked up. "Hardly a crate."
"My candles, my count, dearie. And if I say you're done, then. you. are." He extended a hand demandingly, adding an imperious glance for good measure. She made a face, but relinquished her book without protest. After paging through the first few pages, Rumpelstiltskin gave a little snort, but even to his ears it sounded more amused than derisive. "This again?"

"It's a good book," she said defensively.

"It's a silly story, and you know it." He slammed the book shut, and it vanished into its spot in the shelves with a thought. "If a man ever tells you that he's a prince in disguise, he's a liar and best avoided. Believe me, many a young girl has found that out the hard way - and once or twice, with a bellyful to remind her of her idiocy."

Belle rolled her eyes. "I know it's not real, Rumple," she said, and he was glad to see her cheeks glow rosier as she embarked into an argument with the Dark One. Bold Belle, vivacious Belle. He'd rather have her giving him a fight over the validity of her reading choices, than despondent and hiding in her books. "But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the adventures of an imaginary character, right?"

His nose twitched in distaste. "Heroes are boring."

"So you say." She shrugged. "I'll withhold my opinion until I meet one."

He tilted his head. "My dear, the line of brave knights come to rescue you hasn't been enough?"

Belle laughed. "Come to gain fame and a wife, you mean." She shook her head merrily. "A real hero would be selfless, instead of taking my hand for granted just because they made their way to your door. He would listen to me, not insist they can slay my master and use your riches as my dowry."

He lifted an eyebrow.

"Your gold," she explained with a sheepish smile. "Everyone knows you make more than you can need. I guess the general opinion is that it's all here, hidden somewhere."

He gave a soft whistle, and put his hand over his heart as he shook his head. "My, how mercenary. I'm disappointed. I truly am."

Belle giggled. "You're disappointed? What about me! I'm not even the main prize to covet anymore!"

"Fools," he declared. "You're worth more than gold, dearie, and don't let some mindless idiots say otherwise."

Her expression warmed, and too late Rumpelstiltskin realized his simple statement of fact could be misconstrued as a compliment. He cleared his throat, wishing he hadn't been so hasty to dismiss her book, as it had left his hands at a loss without something to play with.

"Well," she said after the silence had stretched over some awkward seconds. "You did choose me over my father's original offer."

The small smile on her lips confused him, but he refused to let it show. "Your father's lack of imagination was pitiable. But luckily he had something to make up for it."

The smile widened.
"Your imagination, on the other hand, is becoming quite the handful," he said, trying for a chiding tone and left to lick his lips when it came out almost fond. He gathered all his contempt for his next words, and knew he'd succeeded when she wrinkled her forehead in response. "Why, you silly girl. Next you'll tell me that good always triumphs!"

"It does."

"Ah-ah! With no deserving heroes around? You contradict yourself, my dear."

"Good people don't need to be heroes," she retorted, standing up and jutting out her jaw obstinately. "They just need to be good."

He faked a yawn.

"Being a decent person is not boring!"

"But villains are so much more interesting," he teased, making a showy bow.

Belle looked him in the eye. "Haven't met one of those either," she told him, giving him exactly one second to protest before she swirled away and around him. "Good night, Rumpelstiltskin."

Rumpelstiltskin remembered to close his mouth.

Well, he thought as he watched her march away, head held high and determination in her steps. At least she wasn't thinking of her nightmares anymore.

The End
02/08/16
Rumpelstiltskin & David: A Threat You Shouldn't Make (pre-curse)

Chapter Summary

Rumpelstiltskin arranges another deal to learn the name of Snow White's baby.

Rumpelstiltskin hadn't been sure whether the new king would come after him, what with the pregnant wife and the evil witch who'd sworn to ruin Snow White's life. He'd been reminded in the last years how it felt to have somebody to protect, so he wouldn't have blamed the former shepherd for keeping himself to home.

But come the king did, complete with white horse, long cape and shiny sword. And, regrettably, he didn't come alone.

Rumpelstiltskin met the pair a few miles away from the Dark Castle, unwilling to disturb Belle's rest now that she spent most of the night walking the corridors from her room to the library and back again, trying to outrun her nightmares into fictional worlds.

One last check at the wards around his land, and he made himself visible to his visitors.

"Your Majesty!" he announced his presence, giggling a little when David's horse reared up in surprise. When the little commotion settled, he swept a courtly bow. "Welcome, good king James. I wonder what could bring you to my humble castle."

"You know why we're here, Rumpelstiltskin!" yelled Snow White's little buddy, and damned if he didn't suddenly have a sword pointed in his direction.

"My, my," Rumpelstiltskin laughed, glancing down at David's companion. He let him keep the sword, for all the good it could do. "Look what the king dragged in. How feisty!"

The dwarf scowled. "See if you're so amused when we put you back in your cell. And this time we'll make sure there's no hidden magic ink!"

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged; he'd known the trick would only work once, but he didn't intend to return to the mines a second time. "And you pretend to do that... how?"

David stepped in. "We'll do what's necessary."

No. He did what was necessary. David and his type did only what their conscience allowed. "Oh really?" He gave a shiver, but made sure the look on his face said it was one of delight. "Now that sounds interesting. Care to elaborate, and please don't say you'll meet me in the field of honor..."

With a simple gesture, he conjured a weapon of his own and, smirking, made a ball of fire sprout from it and fly over their heads "I'm not fond of the sport," he confided.

"You have no honor, you beast."

Really. The insults had gotten repetitive over the years.

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged it away, twirling his sword and making it disappear on the upswing. "Then, what?"
"You could come voluntarily," David said.

Truly surprised, Rumpelstiltskin stared at him before he burst into laughter. "Yes. Of course, your Majesty," he sing-sung, sarcasm heavy. "Let's do that!"

The king had the grace to look sheepish. "No, I didn't think that would work."

"You are smarter than you look, after all," Rumpelstiltskin said snidely.

"That leaves us few options," David said, his tone in earnest. "War, of course."

When they were still recovering from the battle against Regina? No, he didn't think so, but Rumpelstiltskin outwardly thrilled at the idea - "Perfect! I haven't had one of those in person in decades!" He brushed his hand against his chin, feigning deep thought. "No chance you've stumbled into a history book, my boy? The accounts might want to make you rethink that option."

The slightly green tone that swept up David's face was his answer.

Rumpelstiltskin still wondered what those fools had expected, all those years ago. If eliminating the Dark One could be so easily done, it would have been managed centuries ago.

"High war isn't the only option," David said quietly.

"That leaves the fun stuff." He was almost touched that the good guys were considering dabbling in low war for his sake. "What will it be, I wonder. Poison? Backstabbing spies? Or perhaps..." The last word died on his lips, and he raised furious eyes at the young man.

"A hostage," David murmured.

Frantically, Rumpelstiltskin sent a quick wave of magic to reinforce his wards. Cursed himself for a fool for leaving the Dark Castle, and the woman alone in it.

The dwarf laughed. "Whatever you did, it's useless." He stuck his hand in the saddle of the king's horse, and it came out holding a bundle of blue and gold. Blue silk, the finest in all lands, and gold he'd made with his own hands.

Rumpelstiltskin hissed in outrage. Fool, and fool again, for giving in and taking her to Snow White's castle for that one night.

Then he laughed. "A trap made of honey and smiles, why." He looked at the king in the eye. "I feel as proud as if I'd mentored you on purpose, your Majesty."

He had the satisfaction of watching the other man wince.

The dwarf was made of sterner stuff. "It won't matter where you hide her, you monster. With the spell the Blue Fairy has put on this, we can reach wherever she is!"

Ah, these were the enemies Rumpelstiltskin couldn't stand. Full of temper, but no brains for strategy. He smiled. "That," he said, "was a mistake."

A click of his fingers, and the dwarf vanished.

"Don't," he warned the king, throwing a mild spell to freeze him in place. "Be glad I need something of you yet, or you'd be flying back to your wife on the power of your own wings - and
they might be a little broken after I'm done with you."

Wise for once, David said nothing.

The duck flapped about, but went quickly enough to hide behind the horse.

That left the ribbon on the ground.

He came closer to inspect it, but to the bare eye it showed nothing of note. Even as he cautiously probed at it with his magic, it remained inert. But it had been made to adorn one person, and meant to make her feel special on a special night. It had been something Belle had adored at first sight, earning him a hug and a quick peck on the cheek, and she had been disconsolate after losing it - which only meant it could be easily made to track her.

For the moment, Rumpelstiltskin didn't dare touch it, afraid it would set off its magic. He had kept a few secrets from the Blue Fairy through the years, and he was sure she was crafty enough to do the same. There were few spells that could cut through the Dark One's wards, and all of them would be keyed to do something nasty to him.

With a sneer, he surrounded it in a shield and vanished the whole thing into his vault.

And good riddance, too.

Pity he couldn't do the same to the men who'd have used it. They had tried to steal from him, and Rumpelstiltskin struggled to keep his instinctual response at bay. His blood sang with the possibilities, but he needed David alive, and damn all hells, even that annoying dwarf needed to stay unharmed, or he'd lose his place as near to Snow White's good graces as the Dark One could get.

But they hadn't gotten to Belle. And he did need them in order to reach Bae.

Only those two facts kept the fools alive.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said as he reined in his temper, addressing the king. With a wave of his hand, he cancelled the spell that kept him captive, uncaring that the momentum almost made David topple down the side of the horse.

The man deserved more than a few bruises.

David hissed in pain, but righted himself quickly. "To protect an innocent baby from you, yes."

Oh, for their bleeding hearts' sake! That mess again?

Rumpelstiltskin was so tempted to roll his eyes. That princess's baby had already served its use. The only unborn babe he cared about these days was the get of the man before him, and he had very few weeks to get the information he needed. "There was a deal," he said anyway, because everyone seemed to forget that the girl had been eager to sign it. He bet their good friend hadn't even mentioned that she'd jumped at the chance to get gifts from the man who had just slain her fairy godmother. Cinderella had been desperate, yes, but he had always collected what the desperate promised him. It was only fair, since they had collected their share first.

Even Belle didn't quibble much about it anymore.

Though she might have been louder than usual when she'd heard about Cinderella's case. And she might have been furious until he swore the baby was a temporary pawn, and it could return to its
mother afterward.

Some women were so sensitive at the thought of separating mother and child! Rumpelstiltskin had almost missed the more sensible approach of Milah and Cora, and hundreds of other women who gave away their babes without a single regret and gladly received their purse of gold instead.

One needed to raise a child to bond with it, he believed.

Saying that had almost brought Belle to tears, so he'd ended up promising to avoid such deals unless he was called to it. An easy promise to keep, since it was always the parents who made the first step.

Except Cinderella.

Which was why Rumpelstiltskin was willing to let her keep her child after all was done. She would pay him in a different coin, in the other world. He would know when the moment came.

But he was not above using her plight to aid his own ends now. "That's all? Well," he said cheerily, "why didn't you just say so?"

David looked at him, not one ounce of trust in his stance. "We did. Two months ago."

"Oh? My memory must fail me, then." He sneered. "I remember being invited by her Highness to renew the terms of a deal. We are talking about the same girl? Pretty of face, round of belly. Her eyes flash at the mention of easy riches?"

"She was scared."

"And well she should be! Tricking me - or, all right, giving it her best effort, was it you who suggested the idea of twins?" When David flushed, Rumpelstiltskin grinned. "Thought I wouldn't be able to resist, eh?"

"What other choice did we have?"

"Oh, I don't know." He waved a hand around, as if looking for inspiration. "Did I miss the moment she offered a fair bargain? Did you come out of the shadows and make a worthy proposal?"
Rumpelstiltskin shook his head after each question. "Or perhaps she gave a good reason to break the deal and I wasn't listening? Oh, I know! It must have happened between lying to me about the other baby, and asking for more gold for her new father's coffers!"

"What does it matter," David asked, angry as well, "we were all dancing to your tune anyway. You wanted us to put you in that cage."

Rumpelstiltskin's eyebrows rose at that. He hadn't truly expected them to catch on. "Did I now?"

David narrowed his eyes. "You had squid ink on you. You left the moment the whim struck you, with no fuss at all. What else makes sense?"

No, the timing of his break-out had not been of his choice. He'd intended to stay in his prison until the end, and to play his last pieces from behind bars. But needs must, and he'd hardly lost control of the game.

In fact, as infuriating as this visit had been, it had saved him the effort of setting up an interview with the royals.
"It doesn't matter now, does it?" He shrugged to show his disinterest in that little episode. "You want a favor for your silly friend, and luckily for her, you also have something I'd like to have."

"That's not how it works, Rumpelstiltskin," David said. "We have a way to the girl, don't think the ribbon was the only way - and I have the feeling that if we ask nicely, she'll come on her own."

"Possibly," Rumpelstiltskin acknowledged. Because Belle was loyal to him, but she was loyal to her own conscience first. She saw life as a set of choices, and sometimes she ignored the safest course in order to do the right thing. He would know; that was how he'd ended up with the girl in the first place. "But you see, I'm the selfish kind. I just don't share well - old habits, mind. If you take her with you, I promise you: I won't touch a single hair in your head or those you love."

David furrowed his brow.

It was so easy to confuse these young ones.

"I'll lay waste to your lands, dearie," he said softly, smiling with every word. "Burn the fields, freeze the lakes, dry the rivers... and then I'll leave you to figure how to feed your hungry."

The king turned white, appalled.

The threat wouldn't have worked on most monarchs. But David had lived as a shepherd until a few years before, and Snow White had taken refuge among the townspeople during her time on the run from Regina.

It made them great leaders.

It also gave them a weakness easy to exploit.

"That girl will hate you," David said. "I didn't meet her for long but that... that would devastate her."

Rumpelstiltskin gave a small snort. "Sooner or later, she will hate me anyway. And you-" he pointed a finger at the other man "-really don't want to help that day along. I might turn nasty."

After a moment, David nodded his acknowledgement. "Your girl stays, then. And you..."

"Forget about your little lapse." He shook his head in mock disappointment. "Going to the Blue Fairy, indeed. One day, I'll tell you a story - a cautionary tale, really - about people who ask for her help."

"Fine."

Rumpelstiltskin grinned.

Good.

He'd grown... attached... to Belle. He'd given her multiple chances to leave his service over the years, and she'd always ended up back in the Dark Castle. Should she ever choose to leave, he'd swallow his objections and pave her way with gold. But it had to be her decision, for reasons of her own, not because these people were whispering poison in her ear. He wouldn't risk the outcome of the Dark Curse for any reason, but between those limits, he had no idea how he'd respond if she were taken from him.

Better for everybody if he didn't find out.
"It's a deal, then," he confirmed, rubbing his hands together in glee. Now, to the main business. "Now, a sign of good faith is appropriate, don't you think? What about... I know! I'll make your life easier on the way home."

Before David could answer, he had summoned a small wooden box from the castle and, with a wave of his hand, put the terrified duck in it. Quickly, he tucked in the lid - with a few holes in it - and, presenting the box as he would a gift, offered it to David.

For good measure, he stamped 'dwarf' on the side.

David looked incensed. "His name is Grumpy."

Rumpelstiltskin gave his best impression of perplexity. "Should I care?"

The other man huffed, but placed the box - which had gone quiet when its occupant realized it was all the way atop a horse - as securely as he could among his things. Without even the pretense of a polite goodbye, David turned his mount around and started the way home.

Rumpelstiltskin stayed on the road, watching him go.

"The Blue Fairy won't be able to change him back," Rumpelstiltskin yelled to David when he was about to follow a bend that would have taken him out of sight. "Tell your wife I'll be visiting next week - and the two of you should think really hard about how much your friend's bad attitude is worth."

David, red in the face by now, glanced back at him hatefully.

_Hate me as you will_, Rumpelstiltskin thought in glee, _but you'll give me the name I need._

With that happy thought in mind, Rumpelstiltskin made to bow to the king but, before the gesture was complete, he had vanished back into the Dark Castle.

The End
01/07/15
Belle/Rumpelstiltskin: A First Kiss

Chapter Notes

Well, this isn't the original story either. But we're getting closer?

This one was supposed to be six sentences long, as a fill for this prompt, but Belle and Rumpel had other ideas. lol

Belle watched from the heights of the laboratory window as the Dark Curse rolled over the land. Until this moment, she had hoped that Regina would stay her hand. "Here it comes," she announced.

There was movement behind her, as Rumpelstiltskin left his last-minute preparations and came to stand with her. Belle knew she would find triumph in his eyes if she turned toward him, but she still did. He was less likely to lie if they were face-to-face. "Will it hurt?"

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. His hand shifted closer to hers, as if he was tempted to hold it to comfort her, but it quickly moved away. Instead he broke their gaze and glanced fiercely out the window. "We won't know a thing," he promised.

They'd be miserable and wouldn't know better, he meant.

Belle sighed. At least they had the promises each of them had extorted from the Queen, once they arrived in this new land. That was more assurance than she'd had five years ago, on the night the man she'd known only as the Dark One had brought her to this castle.

But as scared as she had been, coming with Rumpelstiltskin had been her choice.

She would have words with the Queen, as soon as her curse was broken. It would take only a few decades, Rumpelstiltskin had said, with the indifference of one who'd lived for centuries.

"It won't be forever," she said out loud, watching the ominous cloud ride closer to their home.

Rumpelstiltskin let out one of his trademark giggles. "Indeed not."

He looked eager, near to vibrating at her side, and the grin on his face proved how satisfied he was with this outcome.

And she loved this man.

"Is this everything you wanted?" she asked softly.

That made him still, and his large eyes blinked rapidly before they settled on her for an instant and then flicked away.

He didn't answer.

Just as silent, Belle shifted closer to him, threading her arm to his. He didn't jump at her touch anymore, and the position was familiar enough after countless jaunts through town streets and
forest trails. This time she leaned her head against his arm, a newer addition, but he didn't tense at her closeness.

Meanwhile, the dark cloud lapped at the outside walls, briefly detained by Rumpelstiltskin's wards. Belle watched its advance, thinking of curses and the breaking of them. True Love, Regina had claimed, one kiss that could beat any curse; and later Rumpelstiltskin had unknowingly confirmed her words.

But Regina couldn't be trusted, and Rumpelstiltskin didn't trust in anything that he couldn't see with his own eyes and touch with his own hands.

For all that he cared for her, Belle knew, her feelings still fell under that category.

Could it be True Love if it was one-sided?

Did it really matter, when they were watching the end of their world?

"We won't remember any of this," Belle said, and felt him hum an affirmation. Releasing a nervous breath, she untangled their arms and, before he could protest (and he would have), Belle shifted to his front and put her right hand over his cheek. There was an invitation in her eyes, and she made sure it was clear as she gazed at him. "If we must forget our lives in this land," Belle continued, gathering the courage that had eluded her for months, "I'd have a last memory."

She knew the moment sheer reflex told him to deny her, but she held on, moving her other hand to his shoulder to keep him from running away (because he would do that, too).

"It's something I want," she pressed.

Not everything. Not nearly.

There was a wave of power as the defenses of the Dark Castle finally crumbled around them, and Belle felt her fingers tighten in response, trying to hold onto him for a little while longer.

"You're sure," Rumpelstiltskin said at last.

It wasn't a question, but she still breathed out in relief and answered, "Yes."

He gave the smallest of nods, and then he was bending down to brush his lips against hers.

Belle would have cheered if she wasn't too busy kissing him back.

And it was lovely: his breath against her cheek, his arms coming around to hold her. Oh, so lovely. At the end of the world, it was lovelier still...

Rumpelstiltskin suddenly stiffened under her touch, and yanked himself away from her. Belle almost toppled back, but he caught her, lifting her against him and grabbing her jaw to tilt her head up and peer into her face. He looked angry. He looked disappointed. *Betrayed.*

Belle looked back in utter confusion.

Then, slowly, he shook his head and his grasp loosened.

"What-?" she got out.

His eyes widened. "Not now, dearie," he snapped, but he hauled her closer and tenderly brushed a
last kiss against her forehead. And all through it, his fingernails kept digging into her arms.

He hid her face against his chest, but Belle still caught a hint of dark purple from the corner of her eyes and held onto him as tightly as she was able.

*I love you,* she thought, wishing she'd said it out loud.

But the curse enveloped them, and Belle of Avonlea and Rumpelstiltskin were no more.

The End
29/06/15
Belle & Mr. Gold. An Accident

Chapter Summary

Set it cursed! Storybrooke. The curse's take of Belle's tumble down the ladder.

However he had expected to end the day, Mr. Gold had never dreamed it would include an armful of a young brunette pressed right against his body.

If both of them hadn't been groaning in pain, it might have been a welcome situation.

"Ouch," Miss French grunted from above him, already picking herself up onto her knees. "Oh my God, Mr. Gold. Are you okay?"

"Just dandy, dearie," he hissed, the pain getting the best of his temper. Then he sighed. "Just give me a second."

Tiredly, he decided he should have gone with his first instinct and pretended he hadn't heard her cry for help.

Just a few minutes ago, he'd been enjoying a new story - a recommendation from the bookstore owner - at the comfortable armchair that had been placed for the use of those clients who wanted to page through some book or who, like him, had time to kill and nowhere better to be. He'd fallen into the habit of stopping by the bookstore on his way home from the pawnshop twice a week, and Miss French didn't mind letting him stay a little past closing time while she did inventory in the back.

He'd been sipping the tea that was always waiting for him on Thursdays at 7pm, when he'd heard her voice: "Hello? Mr. Gold, you still there?" And after a few seconds where he considered his next action: "...anyone? Please?"

With a sigh, he had laid the book down and gotten to his feet.

It was unlikely anyone else would come, and so, he grabbed the cane he'd left leaning against the chair and made his way over, expecting to find her struggling with some huge box of books or a piece of furniture, and already rehearsing the words that would let him bow out on account of his injured leg without making direct mention to it.

"Mr. Gold, thank God!" Miss French had greeted him, coloring slightly as he took in her predicament. There was no need for heavy lifting; the girl had climbed up the ladder on those ridiculously flimsy shoes she favored, and had somehow managed to lose one of them, leaving her unbalanced and gripping onto the metal rails for dear life.

"Just a moment, dearie," he'd said as he - slowly - bent to pick up the miscreant shoe, and - with even more care - moved to place it back on her dainty little foot.

She really should have warned him that she was ticklish.

As soon as his thumb brushed the sole of her foot, there was a muffled cry from above him and Mr. Gold had known what would happen even before she came tumbling down.
Yet he hadn't moved out of the way, as shear self-preservation had demanded. Instead, for some wild reason he couldn't understand, he'd instinctively swept in to catch her.

Foolish!

Of course his leg had given in, and of course all he'd ended up doing was serving as a bony cushion between her body and the floor.

"I'm so sorry," Miss French yelped as soon as she got her breath back, and then babbled an explanation even as she ducked her head to unstrap her other shoe. "I thought I could reach that stupid box, and I must have taken my foot off the rung and then..." Her voice dropped to an embarrassed whisper. "Well, that was a mistake. I should have remembered what a klutz I am."

And though she was trying to smile as she said it, all he could see was the wince she was trying to hide.

As quickly as he could, he regained control of his cane and lifted himself to his feet. He could do little to help her up, but he still offered a hand and was glad she took it without questioning whether he was too pained to bear her weight.

He wasn't. If barely.

His backside hurt, and in a minute the nerves at his right knee would remind why he must avoid this kind of accident. He looked her over, but aside from her bare feet and a bit of tumbled hair, she looked the same as always. It seemed she'd escaped their little accident without more than a bad scare. A second examination, a more leisurely one now that the danger was over, almost made him smile: he had always known that she was a tiny thing, but it was still a surprise to realize she didn't reach much further than his shoulders.

"Are you all right?" he asked, shoving his discomfort aside for the moment. He had broken her fall - he'd have the bruise on his side, from where her elbow had dug in, to prove it; but she'd given quite a frightful shriek when she'd landed.

Miss French just bit her lip. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Gold," she said, sounding miserable. "That was so thoughtless of me."

It had been, but he wasn't about to say it out loud. Were it anyone else, he'd be yelling at them for their incompetence and possibly threatening with legal action. But this was Belle French, and she had his favorite tea ready and waiting for him every Monday and Thursday. He'd never asked how she had guessed his taste, but he suspected it had something to do with the months of trying a variety of brands and blends, until she had settled - quite by chance, she claimed cheekily - on the one he liked the most.

It wasn't the greatest of friendships, but to an old man who never bothered to extend his acquaintance with other people beyond their business transactions, Miss French's kindnesses were worth keeping his annoyance under wraps. "It's all right, dearie," he told her, and was almost sincere. "Just be careful, next time you climb up that ladder."

She blushed and nodded again. Then took a first step forward - and gave a loud whimper. Both of them looked down at her left foot.

"Ah," he said. "It seems you're not unscathed after all."

Her face a mask of pain, she hobbled to the nearest chair and plopped down onto it, inching forward to check her ankle. "I must have put my weight on it," she said. Gingerly, she put a finger
against the skin, and hissed in pain.

"It's swelling?"

"I don't know. Probably?" She sounded near tears now. "Is that bad?"

"No. A sprained ankle, perhaps. Very simple." Ice would help, but she didn't keep any in the bookstore, and he was in no condition to trudge upstairs to her apartment. He did have a few painkillers always on hand, but they were prescription. "Does it hurt very much?"

At her nod, he made a decision. "Let me drive you to the hospital. Just as a precaution."

He half-expect her to protest that it wasn't so bad, given her independent streak; or maybe even to turn him down and wait for a friend to help her instead - the mayor, perhaps. But, without hesitation, she nodded at the suggestion. Sensible girl. "Thank you. I'm - I'm so, so sorry."

"So you've said," he noted, and couldn't help the impatient snap in his voice. He'd never found a use for those words; people either used them too often, without really meaning it, or they were a preface to their excuses for failing him.

"Well, I mean it," she snapped back. She immediately looked horrified at her tone.

"I guess you do," he said, more gently this time, and chuckled. It was not the first time he realized that, unlike most of the town, this young woman wasn't afraid of his reputation - but considering how isolated she was, perhaps she hadn't heard the worst bits of it. "Tell me when you're ready."

Miss French gave him a tentative smile. "I'm as ready as I'll be-" and she made to rise to her feet.

He immediately put a hand on her shoulder, exerting a slight pressure to keep her down. When she looked up at him in question, he was shaking his head. "Try not to make matters worse, dearie," he told her, and offered his arm. She needed to stay off her foot as much as possible, and since no crutch was conveniently at hand, he would have to do. The two of them would make quite the ridiculous sight, with the lame leading the lame, but it was late enough that the people of Storybrooke would miss the show. "Here, lean on me."

"But..."

He raised his eyebrows.

She obediently put her hand on his elbow and, slowly, let him support most of her weight as she pushed herself up.

Gold clenched his hand around his cane, unwilling to falter.

With small steps they made their way to his car, and had her comfortably settled in the passenger seat while he went back to turn the lights off and lock the bookstore.

The ride was made in silence. He had no idea what kind of conversation to start in their current situation - asking how she felt seemed redundant since they were a short distance from the hospital, and it was only a sprained ankle at worst.

Her bubbly personality was nowhere to be seen, and when he turned to check on her it was to discover a nervous expression on her face. He should say something to reassure her, but he'd lived
with his pain for so long that he'd forgotten how it felt to be afraid of it.

At last, it was only a few minutes until the hospital building came into sight.

"Thank you," Miss French said, and as he parked near the emergency entrance, she turned to him, wetting her lips before asking hesitantly, "Would you... would you mind waiting for me?"

He blinked in surprise. His plan for the night included a hot bath to relax his muscles and perhaps a Vicodin to sleep through the night. The idea of staying longer around Miss French hadn't even entered his head. "It's quite late already," he told her, unwilling to admit his own hurts. "And there's work waiting for me at home."

"Oh. Of course."

She sounded disappointed, and only then did it occur to him that she didn't have a ride back home. How shortsighted of him! He would have backpedaled, but she was already giving him an understanding smile.

"I'll just call my dad, then," she said. "Thank you for everything, anyway."

Gold could do nothing but nod, and then he opened his door. "You stay right here. I'll call for a nurse - and a wheelchair. It's for the best, Miss French," he added at her grimace.

"I don't think it's necessary," she grumbled.

He pretended not to have heard her and got off the car. Luckily the hospital staff didn't need much more than an explanation to hurry to collect Miss French. He waited until an orderly wheeled her in, and gave a nod in response to her goodbye wave.

Then, suddenly tired and achy, he made his way back to the parking lot.

He'd done what he could for the girl, he reminded himself. There was nothing else she could need from him. The thought of sending her flowers to wish her a speedy recovery popped up, but he dismissed it with a scowl. With his luck, he'd send an arrangement that insulted a florist's daughter, and going to Mr. French for it would be awkward anyway.

In the end he decided to check on her the next morning. Maybe this was the perfect excuse to finally bring along a new cup to replace the chipped one she refused to get rid of.

It wasn't as romantic as flowers-

Mr. Gold killed that thought in the bud. Romance was the last thing he needed anyway.

The End
03/07/15
A Word of Advice

Chapter Summary

cursed!Storybrooke. Regina tries to talk some sense into Belle French.

Chapter Notes

Prompt: Unrequited love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Thank you, Miss French," Mr. Gold said, his smile thinner than usual but still evident to her practiced eyes. He hesitated for a second, his cane swinging in mid-air as if it also were considering whether to stay or not, but then he looked past her and his brow shifted into a minute frown.

Belle wasn't surprised when he stepped away, wishing her a good night.

It wasn't even two minutes from the moment the bell above her door had announced his presence. Belle gave him the brightest smile she could summon, which mustn't have been too bright from the way his frown deepened. But he still turned around, and Belle watched him leave as she held onto a loud sigh. She had suspected that it would be impossible to detain him for longer than it took to hand him his latest order; usually she'd have offered the use of a chair and maybe a pot of tea to lure him into a half hour of company, but nothing could have stopped him once he'd spotted her other customer...

"Good evening, Mr. Gold!" Henry cried out happily from his spot among the bright cushions that decorated the space next to the kids section shelf.

...and his mother.

Belle decided she wouldn't hold it against Regina.

Not every mother would accompany her eight-year-old to make sure the comics he picked were appropriate for his age. It was just Belle's bad luck that Henry had picked a Thursday to stop by the bookstore, right before closing time. The boy couldn't have known that his presence - to be fair, his mother's presence - would cut into the closest thing Belle had to a standing date.

At least Mr. Gold and Regina had been civil to each other. Inasmuch as curt nods could be called 'civil', anyway.

"Nasty little man," Regina sniffed, the truce over as soon as the door closed behind Mr. Gold. She relaxed in her seat, having sat up straight the moment Gold came in the room. "Can't imagine why you must be so nice to him."

Belle gave the retreating figure one last look before turning back to her friend, smiling even as she
reminded herself that Regina's disapproval was well-meant. Mr. Gold wasn't a friendly man, and his mood would turn frosty (or worse, incisive) when forced to interact with people he didn't like. And even a reclusive like Belle French was aware that Regina and Mr. Gold didn't like each other.

"Because it's only polite."

Regina just stared. Belle had known her for years and was significantly grateful for the a sizable loan that had helped Belle when she'd decided to start her own business. With the exception of her father, she was the person who knew Belle the best. Which gave her the right to sigh in exasperation. "You're not polite. You're smitten."

"And you're being silly," Belle answered, practiced at phrasing a denial of her feelings in such a way that it wouldn't be a lie. She knew that she was past being charmed by an attractive older man; she could fall in love with a man who made her laugh one minute and challenged her to think outside the box the next. If he would but give a little encouragement, she'd fall head over heels for him... and for all she could hide it from Mr. Gold himself, Regina had always seemed able to guess the truth.

"You shouldn't waste your time with Gold. He-"

"He is nice to me," Belle cut in before she had to hear Regina's next words: He is not interested. She knew this conversation could have been only a few months old, but sometimes it felt as if they had exchanged these same lines from the time Henry was a baby. "He is nice," she said again.

And again Regina made a sound of disbelief.

"And funny, too," Belle insisted.

This time Regina laughed. "Funny!" Her head shook slowly in what could have been amusement if the smile that accompanied the gesture wasn't so condescending that Belle felt tempted to protest. "Do you really believe that?"

"Of course," she said easily.

Regina looked at her expectantly, as if waiting for Belle to defend that statement. But Belle didn't see the point of it. Regina wasn't the receiver of quiet smiles and long stories about the more rare items of the pawnshop, and she wouldn't appreciate the wicked wit of Mr. Gold when he warmed up to a subject.

In the silence, only the rustle of pages came from the corner where Henry was still poring over his options.

"I can't believe it," Regina said at last. "All this time, and you're still in love with the awful man."

"He's not awful!" And then, blushing, "And I'm not--- I mean... I'm not, really." Belle gave up under the other woman's knowing glance. She finally exhaled, thinking life would be easier - and less embarrassing - if she were a better liar. "And it hasn't been that long," she muttered anyway, even if it was a small rebellion against Regina's disapproval.

"Right." Regina studied her for a long moment. "But you could move on. Unless you truly consider that unrequited love is an attractive look on you? Because it's not." She didn't wait for a reaction, instead curving her lips into an entreaty smile. "Have you considered moving out of town? Give yourself some distance, meet other people. I could help."

Belle was already shaking her head. "No. No way. I'd love to travel, of course. Perhaps in another
year or two, when the bookstore finally is turning a steady profit. But Storybrooke is home. I like it here."

"It's a miserable town," Regina snapped.

Belle chuckled. "Don't let others hear that. I know elections won't come around for some time yet, but you can never be too careful."

Regina waved off the concern. "Pick a city. Doesn't matter where. Everybody reads."

"Not as frequently as I'd wish!" Belle laughed. "But let's not talk about business, and let's not talk about me moving away. This is my life. I chose to open my bookstore, and I'm not leaving until the books are out of the red. Please don't tempt me, Regina. It's cruel." She smiled at her friend. "Please?"

Regina pressed her lips together. "Since you ask so politely."

Belle was relieved that the other woman gave in without further insistence. "Thank you," she said, then searched for a change of topic. "And talking about the outside world, have you given any thought to making Miner's Day a better tourist trap? I could use the extra crowd...."

The End
14/04/16

Chapter End Notes

Comments are welcome!
The bookstore door opened and a boy with a mop of wild brown hair streaked inside and straight toward the owner's desk, racing as fast as his short legs could take him.

"Auntie Belle!"

Belle grinned at the sight of her favorite eight-year-old. "Henry," she said fondly as she sat up and braced herself for the usual effusive greeting. Indeed, the boy rounded about the desk and careened straight into her, burying his head into her stomach and circling his arms around her hips into the tightest hug he could manage.

Such an expressive little boy!

Nature winning over nurture, she'd teased Regina once - and let it drop when the other woman wouldn't even crack a smile. Regina didn't like to be reminded that, somewhere, there were people with a claim on her child.

"Guess what?" Henry said, voice muffled by her clothes for a moment before he raised his head and beamed up at her. "School is over!"

He might be her best client under the age of eighteen, and the reason she kept her stock of comic books updated every week, but he was still a little boy who'd been eagerly counting down the days to summer.

"That's great, love," she told him, hiding a smile at his enthusiasm. "Have great plans, do you?"

Henry nodded and opened his mouth to give her the details, but then he tilted his head and pouted. "You already know."

Perceptive boy.

"Your mom might have mentioned that she'd give in this year if you did well at school." They shared a look at that. Two fellow bookworms who liked learning too much to worry about low grades. "Disneyland, eh?"

Regina had looked aghast even as she considered the idea, but Belle had reminded her that Henry had asked for the trip ever since his first Disney movie. In the end, her friend had relented, looking both resigned and horrified. Belle had promised that it wouldn't be too bad, that Regina might actually enjoy a vacation away from town, but privately she still had to snigger at the idea of Storybrooke's stern mayor being hauled about by her son all over the Happiest Place on Earth. She was hoping for pictures. Lots and lots of pictures.

Henry grinned. "It's gonna be amazing!" Then he tugged on her hand. "Why don't you come along, auntie?"
The invitation touched her. Not that she would accept it, but it was nice to feel included. Without Regina and her son, she would live a lonely existence in this town. "Don't worry about me, Henry. I'll have plenty of work to keep me busy."

The boy frowned. "Mom has work, too. But she is coming."

The mayor had enough underlings and the budget necessary to leave work. While the bookstore wasn't going under any time soon, Belle certainly didn't have the funds to hire an extra worker, or the freedom to lose a couple days' business. There was rent to pay, after all, and Mr. Gold wouldn't be amused if she was a couple hundred dollars short next month just because she'd gone traipsing to an amusement park.

Perhaps if she invited him along...

He wouldn't be amused at that, either.

"Sorry, honey," she told Henry. "I'm sure you and your mom will have a great time, just the two of you."

Henry smiled again. "Yes." Then he gave her another hug and scampered away. "Gotta go. Mom's expecting me back!" At the door, he turned around and waved goodbye. "I'll miss you, Auntie Belle!"

Belle waved back. "Have fun, Henry!"

She'd miss them as well.

The End
14/06/15
Chapter Summary

In Storybrooke, Belle French makes a stop by the pawnshop.

For all that had changed as they were brought from one world to another, her scent remained the same: floral and light with the tiniest hint of rosemary. He wondered how she did it, now that she didn't have a bed of fresh herbs in her kitchen.

He let his pen pause in his scribbling; the accounts book could wait until she was gone.

"Miss French. What a... lovely... surprise."

Before, she had never set foot in the pawnshop unless he invited her in - and Mr. Gold had seldom asked for company. After three decades following the roles Regina had assigned them, it did gladden him to see her breaking the mold.

But he still hesitated, because in this world Belle French was an intimate of the mayor.

"Can I do something for you?"

She didn't look surprised that he'd recognized her before he'd even glanced up from his work. Instead she smiled - the same smile that was just a little too eager, and which called to memory a hundred other times she'd come looking for him in his private rooms or his tower. He caught the moment she twisted her hands together anxiously, but then she was closing the shop door behind her and, still smiling, took a deep breath and wiped her hands against her pencil skirt before approaching him.

She wanted something, then. Rumpelstiltskin had long learned the signs.

"I believe I asked you to call me 'Belle'," she started, a thread of admonishment in her voice. "We've known each other long enough, don't you think?"

Her desire for familiarity had been one of the many changes brought by Emma Swan's arrival.

The pawnbroker and the bookstore owner had always been polite to each other. One could say they had even been cautiously friendly, if some smiles and a few weekly conversations could account for that. Mr. Gold was an avid reader, and Miss French was ever curious about the knick-knacks in the shop window. He had made an habit of stopping by the bookstore a couple times a week, and she had often popped her head in and wondered if he was too busy to show her a new addition.

They had been lonely people, reaching out to each other and unable to make a meaningful connection.

Regina's curse wouldn't have allowed otherwise.

But a few weeks ago, Belle had grinned up at him as she returned his credit card, and simultaneously she'd tapped the back of his hand with her fingers as it rested on the book she'd been ringing up. Then she had mentioned, very casually, almost timidly, that it was silly to be so
formal when they'd known each other for years.

He'd drawn his hand back and raised a haughty eyebrow, already aware it wouldn't intimidate her, and wished once more that the Savior would hurry and unchain everybody's memories. He missed the real Belle too much.

"What do you say?" she'd pressed, a blush on her cheeks.

"I'm afraid not," he'd answered. Then he'd tampered his refusal with the truth. That had always pacified her. "My given name... It's not something I readily share."

She misunderstood.

"Oh. You don't like it?" She had looked curious at that - something he should have realized before he opened his mouth - and tilted her head in that way that preceded one of her probing questions. Rumpelstiltskin, once the Dark One and still the most feared man in their world, grabbed his book, grumbled a goodbye and fled as quickly as his cane would allow it.

His knee had ached the entire night in thanks for the effort, but he'd hoped Belle would leave the subject at rest.

The stubborn girl, so headstrong in either reality, obviously had other plans.

"I found a solution to your problem," she announced, stepping closer. Before he could point out that he wasn't aware of any problems, she continued, "I'll just drop the 'mister', and since I'm fond enough of my name, it's okay if you use it."

Rumpelstiltskin stared at her, defeated by the knowledge that she wouldn't understand if he insisted on his refusal, and always unwilling to disappoint her when she asked for so little. But Belle was the girl he had fallen in love with, back in the Enchanted Forest (though he hadn't realized it until it was too late to act on it, and now was forced to wait until the curse lifted). This woman wasn't her, even if Regina had kept her promise and not played too much with her personality. "You're persistent," he said.

She regarded him carefully. "That's not a 'yes, of course, Belle'. Is it?"

"Smart, too."

She laughed even as she shook her head. "Fine, fine. Have it your way - for now. I came to fry bigger fish, anyway."

Curious himself, Rumpelstiltskin raised an eyebrow in wordless question. As long as she wasn't asking for a favor in Regina's name, he would in all probability indulge her.

He waited for her to elaborate, but she took a glance at him and ducked her head. Shy, this girl was, where she should have been bold. He sneered - not at her, not truly, but at the deviousness of this curse. "Well, dearie. Out with it."

Another deep breath, and she was smiling - if a bit nervously - up at him again. "I was just wondering... There's Miner's Day around the corner, I mean. And I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"Well, they're already setting up for the festival, and, I don't know. It looks more promising than
other years, so I thought-" She glanced at him, meeting his eyes this time. "Perhaps you'd like to come?"

Oh, Belle, he thought.

Even under the curse, she was still the one who extended a hand in hopes he would take it.

Just like before, he disillusioned her.

"I'm not fond of the occasion," he said, hearing the snap in his voice and regretting it immediately. Belle had known that any mention of fairies would upset him; this girl had no idea Storybrooke's nuns had the same effect.

"Oh! Of course. I should have known...." She sighed. "You've seen so much. I'm sure the whole thing looks a bit ridiculous to you."

Mr. Gold had been well-traveled before he'd chosen to settle on the Maine coast. Meanwhile, just like it had been in her real life, Belle had gone straight from her father's home to a room attached to her workplace - and this time she didn't even have an ill-tempered beast to keep her company.

He would make it up to her, once she woke up.

He would put the world at her feet, if only she was willing to wait until he'd found his son and returned for her.

But Belle had never been the patient kind. Biting her lip ruefully, she glanced at him for a long moment. "In that case," she started, and she sounded as careful as when she'd probed for a chance to visit Avonlea, "perhaps we can skip the celebration, the two of us." She took his surprise as permission to continue. "I've been wanting to try this new recipe, and it would be just as easy to make enough for two. Spaghetti. With calamari sauce. I could - I could bring it here, make a picnic of it, or - or you could come by my place. If you wanted." She was already wringing her hands together, and when he wouldn't answer, her mouth twisted in defeat. "Or not."

Rumpelstiltskin stared at her.

This was not his Belle. She was not the woman who had lived with him for half a decade, and made him hope that he could still be loved - the one who had proved it, at the end. The last thing she had done, in their world, was to ask him for a kiss - a True Love's kiss, even if she hadn't planned that.

Now, the first step she was taking was to ask him out on a date.

He should say no. He wanted to say no. Mr. Gold didn't date. The Dark One would have howled in laughter at the thought. It would be foolish. They were still cursed, so it could only go wrong. And the timing! He had a savior to push to her destiny, the kidnapping of a princess to oversee, and an innocent queen to terrify into running from town. He was too busy! He'd always been too busy!

And just like before, when he should have been focused on the small strings he must tug to bring the Dark Curse along, one visit from his blue-eyed maid had the power to distract him.

"I'm - I'm sorry," she said, avoiding his gaze now. Her hands had dropped at her side, and she gave a little shrug. "I'm just... Going. I'm going."

Rumpelstiltskin watched her suit action to words, and his teeth gnashed at the rejected set of her
shoulders. He'd watched a young woman leave his great room to make her way to a dungeon cell on a nightly basis, during those first months before he eased the undeserved punishment, and she'd still kept her head high.

Even if this wasn't the same Belle, his heart twisted at the sight of her in defeat.

"Wait."

He would regret this.

But not as much as he'd regret having to answer for her dejection, once his Belle woke up. He would deal with Regina, if she tried to use her tricks on this girl to influence her against him. It was a dance they'd danced before, and he'd come out the winner by far. Belle had asked for the ability to make her own choices, in this world, and he would make sure that Regina kept her word.

Later, he would ask her why she'd still chosen to be friendly to the Queen.

"Oh, this is too embarrassing!" he heard her mutter now.

But she did stop and, slowly, turned around.

"Oh no, not yet," he chuckled, and enjoyed the moment she glared at him. The curse was weakening, and Belle - the real Belle - was fighting her way through. He kept on before she could leave his shop in a huff. "It will only be embarrassing if you're an awful cook." He waited for her to assimilate his meaning, then asked mildly, "Are you an awful cook, Miss French?"

She tilted her head slightly to the right, her mouth pursed in thought. It was a familiar gesture, one that had always meant that she believed he had an ace up his sleeve. (Belle had usually been right.) "Better than I am at baking."

Rumpelstiltskin nodded, unsurprised. Up to the end of their time together, he could still find burned bits in his cake. Here in Storybrooke, Mr. Gold hadn't had the heart to give back her cookies when she'd come by with a batch just for him. "Good," he said.

"Does that mean...?"

He put a hand up. "Say, dearie - if I agree to becoming a guinea pig for your culinary, ehem, talents,-" again "-will you be content that I address you with all the respect you deserve?"

As he spoke, Belle's lips started curving into an enchanting grin. She rolled her eyes a little when he finished, but she was nodding already. "Really? I mean, yes, fine!" She retraced her steps toward him, and only stopped when she reached the counter between them. "I'll give up, if you really want that. Deal?"

In the last world, or this land without magic, some things stayed the same.

"The deal is struck," Rumpelstiltskin heard himself echo his own words, from years ago.

Her hand came up, ready to be shaken.

He took it, but lifted it to his lips instead, pressing a gentle kiss upon her knuckles. He had never done this, never dared impose himself no matter how invitingly Belle looked at him. But this was a new world, and some things should start changing now.

Her fingers curled against his for a second, and then retreated. She was blushing, but still managed
to keep her voice steady. "Is Friday good for you, then... Mr. Gold?"

He smirked at her cheeky quip. "Yes." Kathryn Nolan should be safe behind the locked doors of his cabin by then. "I'll call you if there's a problem. Now, run along, Miss French. Your business won't run by itself."

She nodded and, though for a moment he feared she'd lean in for a kiss, she made her way to the door, practically bouncing on her high heels. "You won't regret this!" she told him cheerily as she let herself out.

He hadn't even noticed that he was smiling until his lips turned down at her words.

Regret this? Yes, yes, he would.

Rumpelstiltskin cursed himself for a fool, but he couldn't have done anything different. He just had to treat this girl well, and push Emma in the right direction while he kept Regina at bay. A dozen strings in his hands, again, and again a girl who almost made him wish he could let them loose.

But there was Bae, and this was his only chance, and...

And he had to hope (when it had been centuries since he'd hoped for anything) that, in the end, Belle would forgive him for everything.

The End
29/06/15
Belle made a mental note to highlight this recipe. It was a fairly simple dish: shredded chicken in a sauce of peppers and cheese, with baked potatoes and a bit of lettuce salad on the side. Gold had lit up from the moment he'd stepped into her living room, taking in the distinctive sharp smell, and he had congratulated her even before he'd actually tasted his dinner.

Judging by the way his conversation had dipped into non-verbal nods and grunts from the moment they'd sat at the table, Belle could be sure that he was enjoying her latest efforts.

That made her happy.

She should have pressed to have him over for dinner a long time ago, instead of burying him in cookies and bread even she knew were mediocre at best.

"More salt?" she offered when he looked around the table.

Gold shook his head. "It's perfect," he mumbled, already digging his fork through another slice of potato.

But he still gave another searching glance.

Belle grinned. "Would you like another serving?"

He gave a disarming smile. "If it's not too much trouble."

She had saved some for him to take home, but she'd gladly surrender it now. It meant she would have a reason to invite him over sooner than planned, since they both knew that Belle couldn't bear to think of him and the sad frozen meals that were his usual diet.

She wandered over to the kitchen, glad to have her back to him when he spoke again, - "Thank you, dearie." - without the condescending note he employed against everyone else, the endearment made her break into a silly grin.

The next ten minutes passed quietly, with only the occasional tinkle of cutlery against porcelain and a few words exchanged between them.

He rarely looked this relaxed, Belle mused.

She had seen him at his pawn shop, where he was the adept business man milking his clients to the last cent. She knew of his sharp coldness as he went collecting the rent from his tenants, accepting no sad tales as an excuse for delayed payment. On the streets he made an unapproachable figure, ready to snap at whichever fool dared to interrupt him.

But here, in this tiny room that doubled as her living and dining room, Gold looked unmistakably... content.

Too bad that he always could sense when she was watching him, and this time was no exception. He glanced back at her, looking self-conscious for a heartbeat before he gave a low chuckle and dabbed at his chin with the cloth napkin. "Did I get it?"
Belle blinked.

She could pretend there had been a drop of sauce and she'd been too polite to point it out. Or she could admit that she'd been staring at him for her own pleasure. "Um. Yes?"

He quirked an eyebrow.

At least he didn't call her a liar.

"It's just... Well." The tines of her fork gave a nervous tap against the side of her plate. But there was kindness in his gaze, and he'd said she didn't have to be so shy around him. "I was wondering whether anyone has ever seen you like this."

His head tilted a little, more curiosity than amusement.

"You look... different," she tried to explain, but the slightly confused look in his eyes proved that it wasn't explanation enough. With a sigh, she confessed, "You look happy."

A silent groan followed that word choice. Shelves full of books that had gone through her hands, and the command of three languages other than English, and she'd settled for 'happy'.

At least Gold seemed to take it in good humor. "Shouldn't I?" he asked pleasantly, his tone of voice instinctively setting her at ease. "I'm spending the evening in good company and-" he gestured at the remains of their dinner "-a hot, delicious meal. For the second time this week." He smiled and Belle felt her cheeks color at the warmth in his eyes. "I believe those are good reasons not to be unhappy."

Hesitantly, she smiled back.

Of course she knew that Gold must like her. They'd been on friendly terms for years, spending a half hour here and there discussing an interesting book or the news, or, after a long day of work, their more annoying customers. He had always amused her, with his knack for seeing a story from a sideways point of view, and making her reconsider her own opinions.

As busy as he kept himself, he wouldn't squander his time with someone he didn't value.

But while her reason told her all that, there was a nagging little voice at the back of her head that insisted that their relationship would never grow past this point.

That, in fact, their friendship would be ruined if she tried something more.

The last couple of months Belle had done her best to gag those insecurities and prove them wrong. She had followed Regina's lead and taken the metaphorical bull by the horns - though of course she wasn't standing up to her child's interfering birth mother but rather enticing a middle-aged bachelor into looking at her with something more personal than fondness.

She hoped she was being more successful than her friend.

Though, considering that Emma Swan had stayed in town and was growing closer to Henry, Belle couldn't possibly do worse. She felt sorry for Regina, she really did. Not that she'd ever say something like that out loud, much less in the other woman's presence.

Regina had never been an easy-going woman, but since Miss Swan had become Deputy Swan, her mood had taken a sharp turn to the crabbier.
Unlike the other most ill-tempered inhabitant of Storybrooke, who was currently sitting on the other side of her table, enthusiastically chasing the last bits of chicken with his fork.

Belle smiled at the sight. Gold might not be like any man she'd ever met, but the way to his heart seemed to lie along similar roadmarks. *Bull*, she reminded herself. *Horns.* "If you promise to come tomorrow evening," she offered, "I'll make more."

She did not try to sound nonchalant. He needed at least one person to speak to him in all honesty.

And he would see right through her, anyway.

Gold stopped, raising his gaze to meet hers. "Tomorrow?" His brow furrowed, as if he were paging through an invisible calendar. The way his lips tightened told Belle that he'd found a previous appointment, and she was ready to compromise and ask when he would be free, but he spoke first. "And you'll make more of this-" he waved his fork over his almost empty plate "-right now?"

Well, it was her fault for not specifying a timeline. If there was one thing Mr. Gold could be counted upon, it was to twist everyone else's words into a deal that benefited him.

She could set him right.

Or she could go along with his request.

After all, it meant an extra hour spent together... didn't it? "All right," she decided, and then pointed a warning finger at him and added, "but only if you stay and help."

Gold stared at her for a moment too long.

Was the flash of disbelief because she was asking him to stay? Because in that case he was even slower to pick up on her hints than Belle had dreaded. Or was he surprised that anyone would recruit him for what was essentially a house chore?

The note of approval in his next words seemed to signal the latter: "Of course."

"Good."

Belle broke into a grin. She couldn't help it. Last month she had been too afraid to even address him informally, and now she had arranged for them to work together in her tiny kitchenette and secured another dinner date for the next night.

At this rate, perhaps by summer she would have gathered the courage to check this *was* a date!

"I had no idea the prospect of dealing with more pots and pans delighted you so, dearie."

There was mirth in his expression, and she answered to his teasing with a careless little shrug. "I enjoy cooking."

"You do?"

The shock wasn't feigned, though it was instantly smoothed away.

Belle remembered that Gold hadn't expected much of her promise for a warm home-cooked meal, that first time she'd come to his shop armed with Tupperware and a fork, and presented him with one of the new recipes she'd been trying. He'd stalled for as long as possible before taking that first bite, had even offered to take her to Granny's for lunch instead, as if Mrs. Lucas' grudging welcome was a better fate.
The terror of Storybrooke, terrified of her pasta.

She would have laughed at the situation, if she hadn't been so mortified by it. There she stood, with her heart in the palm of her hand, or so it had seemed to her, and Gold was rejecting it. It had taken all her courage to persevere, and Belle was still sure that he had only given in because she'd been on the verge of frustrated tears.

Those who said that Mr. Gold lived to see others suffer really didn't know this man at all.

"Of course I do!" she answered now. "I've lived on my own long enough to appreciate a meal that doesn't come from a box-" she caught the amused glint in his eye "-and unlike certain people who shall go unnamed, I actually take time away from causing trouble all the way from City Hall to the docks, to learn my way around a stove."

She cocked an eyebrow, daring him to contradict her.

Instead he smiled lazily. "Lucky me."

She snorted at that. "All right, Mr. Lucky," she said as she rose from her chair. "Time for you to learn how to eat decently without calling up a delivery service."

"Or accepting your kind invitations?"

Belle had reached him, and put a hand on his shoulder before he could rise. "Oh no, we'll not be getting to that level anytime soon," she told him, daring to look him in the eye. "You're not getting rid of me so easily, Gold."

Gold smiled again, giving her hand a quick pat before reaching for his cane and standing to his feet. "Lucky indeed," he murmured.

What could she do, but smile back?

The End
13/01/16

Chapter End Notes

Comments are welcome.
Belle had expected to find Gold alone during the lull of lunchtime. Instead she had to jump back as the door of the pawnshop snapped open and a fuming Deputy barged out, yelling over her back. "We're not finished, Gold!"

And Gold's cold voice answered back, "Yet I'm not the one walking away."

Deputy Swan made a hissing noise, but caught sight of Belle and, pressing her lips together, stalked off to the yellow bug parked a few yards away. Apparently to yell at a citizen at his place of work was acceptable, but not in front of witnesses. Belle thought of pretending she hadn't noticed anything wrong; she could just lower her head and walk straight on.

Gold wouldn't hold it against her. He knew her too well to expect anything else.

But... shouldn't she expect more of herself?

She wasn't quite sure how to show her disapproval, but she still met the deputy's eyes, and waited until the crossed ways on the sidewalk. "Good morning," Belle said to the woman's back, making her presence known. I'm watching you.

She got a snarled 'G'morning' for her trouble.

From inside the pawnshop came a not-too-soft chuckle. Belle gave Gold a chiding look, silently asking that he not make the situation more uncomfortable, but he only smirked back. It was a good thing that he reveled in his dreadful reputation, because that attitude would never let their neighbors see the true man behind that mocking mask.

Behind her, a car door banged closed.

Belle felt sorry for the deputy's car. It looked at least a decade old, and she wasn't sure that it was up to handle the woman's obvious frustration.

Perhaps there was a career change in the horizon, if a job at the Sheriff's office of such a little town had her so rattled. Belle was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, though, and guess that the root of the trouble was more personal in nature. After all, policing Storybrooke could not possibly be more stressful than working as a bail bonds agent.
Though, with the latest streak of crime, maybe it was.

Belle bit her lip against a smile at the thought of Storybrooke as some hotbed of violence.

"Indeed," Gold's voice cut into her thoughts. He was standing closer now, holding the door open for her. "Deputy Swan is quite the amusing young lady. All impatience and heart. Reminds me of a couple I was once... acquainted with," he said, twisting his lips into a wry smile as he said the last.

There was little known about Gold's life before he had settled in Maine; he certainly never mentioned family or friends. Or even old acquaintances.

However, now was not the moment to pry. No matter how curious she was.

Instead she looked back at him. "And you weren't goading her?"

He gave a shrug that tried to be helpless. " Couldn't resist, dearie."

Shaking her head - but more in amusement than disapproval - Belle stepped past him, hoping she wasn't interrupting his work. There was no paperwork or trinkets to be repaired on the surface of the counter, but that didn't mean he wasn't busy. Especially considering his latest visitor. Emma Swan was never a paying client, yet she always had a request to make of Gold.

Ever since her arrival, Gold had grown more tense. That alone would have made Belle feel wary around the newcomer. But added to her loyalty to an old friend, Belle couldn't bring herself to like their new deputy. Not that it bothered the other woman. Emma Swan didn't even seem to notice her existence. Too busy connecting with the boy Regina had raised... and the man who, until recently, had been content in a long-term relationship with Regina.

And people wondered why Regina wanted her out of town!

But where Belle was only a character in the town background, the deputy had noticed Gold. In only a few weeks, she had already bought into the town's tale of the boogeyman hiding in his lair.

Though, given the closed-in and dark feeling inside the pawnshop, Deputy Swan could be forgiven for that confusion.

"Hey," she said softly. "It's not a bad time, is it?"

"Oh no." Gold was quick to leave the door to close and come after her. "Not to see you," he said easily, with a quick check at her reaction that let her know that he was flirting. Belle knew she blushed in response, but since it seemed to set him at ease, she didn't turn away to hide it. "What brought you here, Miss French?"

"Well, Mr. Gold," she said, giving a playful lilt to the formality. One of these days, he would bend and call her by her given name. Hopefully, her plan for today would be a step in that direction. "A little bird happened to tell me the town is celebrating an important date today."

"Ah. That."
If they had been closer, she would have covered his hand with hers. Or at least patted his arm. Of all the reactions she had expected, she hadn't thought he'd be so at a loss. His silence triggered her insecurity, and suddenly she found herself shifting uncomfortably. "I did get the right date... right?"

That had him hurrying to reassure her. "Yes, of course. You did. I was just surprised you'd managed to unearth it at all."

Belle breathed in relief. Then grinned. "Surprise!"

His smile settled what remained of her nervousness. Steeling herself, she marched toward him and, with as much authority as she could, took his elbow and pointed to the door. "Now, out."

His eyebrows rose so high they almost met with his hairline.

"It's time for lunch," she said, making to tug him. "Go grab some." He, of course, didn't move an inch, staring at her instead. A shiver down her spine told her that only a fondness for her was staying his tongue. She doubted that anyone else would have dared give him an order in living memory. "Please? It took me ages to pick your gift, and there's no way I can do it with you in here."

He gave her a doubtful look.

Behind it, she saw the glimpse of eagerness.

"A gift?"

"Yes. And all this fuss is your own fault, really," she said with a small laugh, escorting him to the door as she spoke. "If you weren't the proverbial man who has everything, you wouldn't be so difficult to shop for."

"Yes, yes. But you said you had a gift," he insisted.

She smiled. "A practical gift. That needs you to get out for lunch today - and don't get thrown out just so you can come and peek!"

He crinkled his nose, thwarted.

"Just as a curiosity... You don't happen to be allergic to, say, pine-scented disinfectant, do you?"

His brow crinkled, and after a beat, his eyes went to the purse at her shoulder. It was the biggest she owned, and at his speculative gaze, she pressed it closer to herself.

"You know, never mind. I'll take that as a 'no'."

"You want to clean." He stared at her, then around the shop. "I hire a cleaning service, you know."

Belle scoffed. "Well, it obviously has gotten lazy in the last months." Since the debacle with Ashley Boyd, to be exact. The girl's coworkers couldn't strike against such a wealthy client, but they could make their disapproval known. Not for the first time, Belle wished the town would stop sticking their noses where they didn't belong. "There's dust in the back shelves, the windows have smudges in the corners, and the other day I spotted a spider web above that cupboard." She pointed to the far left corner, shuddering at the memory. "It's been bothering me... to know that you're working in such conditions."

"I see." Gold glanced at her, and finally nodded in agreement. "I guess the place is a bit, well..."

"Filthy?"
He laughed. "It might need a more careful touch, that's all."

"It needs someone who cares for you, that's what."

He froze. So did she.

Had she really said that?

"I mean...."

"Can I bring you something from Granny's?"

Their simultaneous sentences made them both see the humor of the situation.

Belle answered first. "Yes, thank you. Some cake, in honor of the occasion?"

Gold nodded.

He was already outside, having flipped the 'open' sign and about to close the front door, when Belle remembered one last detail: "Oh, and Gold? You don't mind if I open the curtains, right? It's awful dark in here."

He chuckled, as if there was a hidden punchline in her words. "Go ahead, dearie. I'll just have to get used to it, won't I?"

The End
24/03/16
Homemade. Belle&Rumpelstiltskin

Chapter Summary

Rumpelstiltskin is busy arranging for the curse to be broken, but in the meanwhile he has someone to keep him busier still.

For all that Belle doesn't remember their life in the Enchanted Forest, she falls easily into the patterns of it as the curse weakens around them. Her fingers start to twitch as she takes in the state of his shelves, and Rumpelstiltskin heard her moan about his organization skills the first time she entered the back room. Now she questions Regina's choices, and comes to him for advice instead. She feeds him at every turn, worried when he skips a meal and downright nagging if his shirts look too loose.

This time she knows nothing about the stress of arranging people and their actions (and reactions) to his benefit, but she still has the same knack forinterrupting his work and tempt him away from it for an hour or two with the promise of a delicious meal.

With the use of modern appliances and a pile of step-by-step recipe books, she even delivers truly most nights.

Abandoning her years of near isolation, Belle has started seeking company outside her bookstore. She will wander into his shop at random times, and then pouts when he's too busy to entertain her. But unlike in the Dark Castle, in Storybrooke Rumpelstiltskin - or Mr. Gold, as she'll know him until the curse is broken - is not the limit of her options, and Belle will often tell him of visits to her father, or treks into the diner or the ice-cream parlor and her conversations with the owners.

It's that last place that gives him pause.

The Snow Queen is not an enemy, but neither is she an ally. The fact that Ingrid has infiltrated the town and disguised herself as another peasant under Regina's curse is suspicious, but Rumpelstiltskin is loathe to reveal himself to her and add another player to an already volatile game. Let her keep her secrets for now. He will learn Ingrid's purpose in due time, and perhaps help her in exchange for the sorcerer's hat; but until that moment, he has no wish to see Belle wander unknowingly into the territory of another magic user.

The girl will probably try to befriend Ingrid, as she's already doing with the werewolf. As if the last time she reached out to an embittered witch wasn't bad enough.

Without her memories to at least warn her to be careful, Belle is easy prey.

Magic is coming, and every sorcerer will be looking for an advantage in this new world. Belle is his strength, but she also has already proved to be too tempting a hostage for those who want to make a deal with the Dark One without paying the price.

Luckily, finding a way to draw her away from Ingrid is not difficult at all. In fact, it's Belle herself who gives him the idea one night as they wander down Main Street to her home.

The next morning, Rumpelstiltskin walks into the bookstore and places a wrapped package on her
"What's this?" Belle asks, eyes alight with curiosity.

For an answer, he hands her a pair of scissors.

Laughing, she snips the ribbon away and makes quick work of the paper. "Oh!" she exclaims in delight. "You were listening."

"You were talking," he says, as if it were all the explanation needed, and enjoys her blush. He always listens, but when her wishes overlap with his agenda, he hurries to make them true. "But - uh-uh, not so fast, dearie." he puts a hand on the cardboard lid when she would have lifted it. "There's a price."

She sighs, but it's mostly for show. The amused twinkle in her eyes betray her. At times like this, Rumpelstiltskin almost forgets that she is still cursed. "There always is with you," she says, then raises an expectant eyebrow.

"It stays at my place for, let's say... a month?"

Her lips part into an 'o' of surprise, but she recovers quickly to parry. "Make it two."

"Two and a half, and not one day less."

"Oh, all right. Three months." She snags her gift, box and all, and hugs it to herself, cradling her new ice-cream maker against her chest. "I accept."

Rumpelstiltskin swallows a snicker. "You drive such a hard bargain, Miss French. Are you certain you want these terms?"

"You have the bigger kitchen, Mr. Gold," she retorts, still grinning, "not to mention the better wine selection. I win on all counts."

"We'll make a toast to the winner, then. Tomorrow night?"

Belle nods, obviously pleased at the suggestion. "You know," she tells him, her voice softer now, "when I start rambling about experimenting with new flavors, I expect people to nod along and forget about it within the hour." Her right hand reaches out to take his wrist between her fingers. "You're too good to me, Gold."

No. He isn't. And she will remember that soon.

But Belle loved him anyway, and even this version of her is very fond of him.

"I like to spoil you," he says sincerely, and then smirks. "Take it while it lasts."

Belle laughs at that.

She does not understand that it will last forever.

But she will remember that, too.

In the meanwhile, Rumpelstiltskin can wait for his Belle's return, and let this girl be wooed by her Mr. Gold.

The next night, Rumpelstiltskin savors the homemade ice-cream in his living room, a bowl sitting
between him and Belle. He likes the effect of her in his house, how it suddenly seems less lonely. It took him a long time to appreciate the difference in the Dark Castle, but he intends to bask in it from now on.

All is going well, if not exactly according to plan. Emma has proved more stubborn than he could have foretold, surpassing even her parents in sheer mulishness. Only hard evidence will do for her, not the hints or a ten-year-old's insistence. But evidence will come, oh yes, it will - and Emma will ask him for help; that much he has seen.

On the other hand, Regina is distracted plotting how to utterly ruin her stepdaughter's life rather than paying too much attention to the cracks in her curse. Were he still her mentor, he would demand that she set her priorities straight. But this is Regina, always led by her heart - and her heart has only thirsted for revenge for too many years now. She won't see the trees for the forest until it's too late. Then she will run to him as well.

It almost makes him laugh now, to picture the Evil Queen and the Savior come to the Dark One for advice. But despair has always made for strange bedfellows, and Rumpelstiltskin is always happy to cater to the desperate.

"My ice-cream is not that good," Belle tells him, breaking him from his thoughts. "What has you so happy, Gold?"

He glances over at her. "You need to ask?" Her eyes roll at this attempt at flirtation. It's not the best, he admits, but it's all he has. "And, perhaps, an old... investment is about to pay off. But really, that's still some weeks off, so it must be your company after all."

Her expression softens.

As always, truthfulness is the key to her heart.

She is not too different, in the things that matter, this Belle.

"I like coming to see you, too," she tells him.

Rumpelstiltskin smiles back, already aware that he will miss her while he's gone. But go he must. A few tugs here, a couple gentle pushes there, and soon he'll be free to look for Bae.

It must be that thought, combined with the comfortable atmosphere that he always finds when Belle is close, that loosens his tongue. He takes another spoonful of their dessert, and it flits through his head to wonder what Bae would have made of the delicacy - for it would have been an expensive delicacy, in the Frontlands. "My boy would have loved this," he says, words tumbling out from his mouth before he recalls that they're not meant for this time and place yet.

"You have a son?" Belle gasps, eyes wide; at his tight nod, she grins, surprise giving into curiosity. Rumpelstiltskin knows what she'll say next; she has said it before. "Oh, tell me about him, please!"

Three decades ago, he told her the bare bones of his and Baelfire's story, gritting his teeth against each word and still dazed at her willing return. Later he explained a little further, to help her understand why he'd let Regina cast the Dark Curse. Now he wants to tell Belle more - to confess everything - but she, this Belle, wouldn't understand the significance of trusting her with his past. He might as well write down his feelings and give the letter into a stranger's hands, or shout out the depths of his love for this woman to an empty room.

"Not now, sweetheart," he tells her, keeping his voice light, "It's not a pretty tale."
Belle looks disappointed for a second, then sad. There aren't many reasons in this world for a father not to speak about his child, and only one for there to be no sign of that child in his father's life. Magical portals have no place here, and neither do queens unaware of his story and thus unable to write it into their cursed town. "I'm here," she finally says, shifting closer to put her hand on his shoulder. "If you ever want to talk.... I'll be here."

Rumpelstiltskin nods. Takes her hand and presses it against his cheek. "Soon," he promises, looking into her eyes.

It won't be this girl to whom he'll open his heart, but Belle will have the memory of this moment. She will know that he meant to tell her, the real her.

Until then, his story can wait.

The End
05/07/15
Rumpelstiltskin had spent centuries looking forward to his arrival in this land without magic, this last step in his reunion with Bae. For years he waited, and decades, and the world around him had become a path to tread on. Plucking here, tugging there, bringing together the right people and plaguing away those who would interfere.

Kingdoms had fallen for his search, but kingdoms rose and succumbed and rose again, infinite in their number across the ages.

Rumpelstiltskin had only the one son.

(He regretted nothing.)

But now that he had crossed into this strange world, now that he was awake and had shaken away the sleepiness of decades under Regina's power, Rumpelstiltskin wanted to snarl and rage at the static life forced upon him.

There were only so many tripwires he had set in advance, and he gritted his teeth every time Emma ignored them or refused to be caught into the notion of curses and fairytales.

Born in a world where magic was as common as forests, Rumpelstiltskin's one failure had been his sad underestimation of the Savior's unwillingness to see the truth.

Emma refused to believe.

She antagonized the Evil Queen, shared an apartment with Snow White, and saved Cinderella's child, and she still couldn't see the wrongness at the core of Storybrooke. He would pity her, if he had room for anything other than exasperation, at the realization that Emma truly believed that their sad, cursed lives was the norm.

What kind of life had she led, that she came to a town where happiness was the most forbidden commodity and she saw nothing amiss?

If he'd known David and his wife would chip in their stubborn nature into their child, Rumpelstiltskin would have reconsidered whose True Love potion to prepare. Perhaps little Alexandra would have been a more easily influenced pawn, or he could even have waited until that girl under Maleficent's sleeping curse was found by her prince.
But Regina would have swept aside anyone weaker within a week, so he was stuck.

It was Emma Swan or nothing.

"You're growling," a sweet voice remarked from the shotgun seat.

Rumpelstiltskin unclenched his fists from the wheel. "Just thinking."

Belle licked her lips, hesitation on her expression, and Rumpelstiltskin reminded himself to smile. This girl liked him enough to jump and hug him when he'd proposed a day trip to his cabin, but she was not used to his dark moods and had little idea when to tease him into a laugh and when to leave him to stew in his musings.

She was trying, though.

"If skipping work will stress you this much...."

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. He would worry about the pawnshop later, after the curse lifted and people realized that the Dark One's treasures were not hidden away in an unreachable castle, but showcased behind glass cabinets in the middle of town.

But for now, the business Regina had granted to him was running smoothly.

A well-satisfied owner could afford to close his doors for one day and escape the monotony of life in Storybrooke for a few hours.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said, gentling his voice. It was easy to apologize to this Belle who only saw the very best in him. The real Belle, he would have brought into his confidence, would have shared his frustrations over the slow pace of events. Instead he took her hand and brought it to his lips, smiling at her blush. "I'm all yours, Belle. I promise."

She squeezed his fingers, grinning widely. "Thanks for inviting me, Gold. I don't think I've really taken a break since-" She frowned, the curse providing no answer because until recently, Belle French had worked at her bookstore day after day. "-well, must've been a long time ago!"

Rumpelstiltskin smiled, unsurprised at her lack of surprise with the vague memories. The curse still held strong. "I'm sure it'll come back to you," he told her, swearing to himself that Emma better hasten the process or he'd take her on a visit underneath the one abandoned shop on Main Street.

See if she still doubted after meeting Maleficent's dragon form.

"You're growling again," Belle told him, but this time there was a giggle in her voice. Apparently she had decided that his bad mood was nothing to be concerned about. A new development now that change was allowed, or an instinct that was fighting through the false set of memories?

Either way, it was promising.

The curse was weakening, then. Maybe a few more weeks...

His calculations were thrown off when Belle leaned against his arm, giving a quick nuzzle at his shoulder before she looked up. "Can we have a picnic?"

So that was what the backpack she'd carefully placed on the backseat was about. "A picnic?"

Belle nodded eagerly. "A day in the woods cannot be complete without a picnic. Please, Gold?"
Please, Rumple? Sit down, just for a moment.

He had complied then, bewildered by the invitation to share the blanket she'd spread on a sunny spot in his gardens, and even more so when she pushed the plate of little sandwiches in his direction and he realized she'd brought enough for two. Toward the end, they had spent several mornings and afternoons like that. She, paging through a book, while he made notes of the visions that were changing since he'd escaped his magicked cell... and pretended not to steal looks of his maid when she wasn't paying attention.

On that last summer, he'd spent many a dinner trying to convince her to let him heal the sunburned spots on her nose and cheeks, while Belle laughed and told him not to fret, that they didn't hurt and instead were reminders of a day well spent.

Rumpelstiltskin had thought her mad, but he had never vocalized his protests. The girl sounded sincere, so what if she was wrong?

Had she known, already, that they were in love?

"If you wish, sweetheart," he said now.

Belle's grin was worth the extra Vicodin he'd have to take that night, to chase away the twinges in his knee after an hour or two sitting on the ground.

"I can't wait!"

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled at her excited voice, thanking every god he'd never believed in that Belle's own deal with Regina allowed her to break from the misery that was everyone else's punishment.

"I'm glad you came along, Belle."

In response Belle leaned over, taking advantage of a straight patch in the road to tilt his face toward her and give a sweet kiss on his lips. It didn't last more than a couple seconds, but Rumpelstiltskin found himself smiling even as she blushingly retreated to her seat.

"Really glad," he told her honestly.

Belle glanced back at him, her heart in her eyes. "Me too."

The End
26/08/16
Inroads

Chapter Summary

Season One. Sometimes even the Dark One sees the advantages of allaying someone's fears.

Chapter Notes

Okay. This is my third attempt at writing 100 words on 'wish'. As in the two other fics, I don't think the word actually comes up at all.

I'm hopeless, lol, but at least I'm having fun! :D

In their old world, Sir Maurice had lived in terror that one day the Dark One would snap and send back his daughter's body if there was enough left of her. Belle's visits and the letters father and daughter had exchanged more frequently had no alleviated that fear - with good reason, Rumpelstiltskin thought, when he'd nurtured the impression of cruelty and none but Belle had ever thought to look deeper.

Helpless to do anything but watch as his only child put herself at risk, Sir Maurice had stood by horrified every time Belle returned to the Dark Castle. Too many times he'd begged her to seek refuge elsewhere, promising that Avonlea was strong enough to survive whatever retaliation Rumpelstiltskin would seek over a broken deal, but Belle had never accepted.

Later, when he had realized that pleading with his stubborn daughter would have no result, Sir Maurice had resorted to a show of force. Oh, the men he had sent had been charged with treating Belle with care, but how was Rumpelstiltskin supposed to have guessed that? Belle had reacted as any woman who hadn't been warned that she'd be grabbed in the market, and in turn Rumpelstiltskin had acted accordingly. The sorry affair had ended with Belle mourning for the needlessly dead, and only his promise that her friends and family would be safe as long as she kept their deal had saved Sir Maurice from proper punishment.

Rumpelstiltskin had sympathized. He'd even come to forgive the attempt to cheat him - for didn't the most helpless fathers always make the most foolish choices? - but he had never attempted to sit Sir Maurice down and have a honest conversation with the other man. If Belle's continued well-being could not reassure him, then Rumpelstiltskin figured that the Dark One's promises would only seem the more foreboding.

Instead he had absented himself during Belle's visits home, allowing the man the delusion that his daughter's life was not too tightly entwined with that of the most feared monster in the Enchanted Forest.

In Storybrooke, however, there was not enough room to play pretense.

The flower shop was a few blocks away from the pawnshop, and it was impossible to miss the
appalled expression on Moe French's face every time his daughter and Mr. Gold walked together down the street.

"I don't understand," Belle said, the smile that had grown more vibrant as the curse weakened slipping into a concerned frown. "He's always insisted I would find someone perfect for me, and now he won't even let me raise the subject."

Rumpelstiltskin felt his eyebrows rise in surprise. "You've talked to him about me?"

"About us." She squeezed his arm. "Or, well, I've tried."

He pondered the matter for a minute. He hadn't spent enough time around either version of the man to understand how the curse had changed him, but he was sure that Moe would be just as disapproving of the idea of his daughter spending time with Mr. Gold. But Mr. Gold was just a businessman with a nasty humor and little pity for those who got in debt over their heads. Not the dream son-in-law, but neither a nightmare made flesh. Until the curse broke, there was a chance to make some inroads with Belle's father.

He grimaced as he played with that idea - he didn't make inroads! he never needed to! - but then had to sigh as he saw no way out. Not as long as they lived in this tiny town where they'd cross each other's way every day, and most importantly, where Belle would feel all the awkwardness involved.

It could take months. Probably longer. Even after the curse lifted it was unlikely that they could return to their original land.

Rumpelstiltskin couldn't bear the thought of Belle being burdened by something he could avoid if he exerted himself.

"It's important to you, isn't it? Your father's opinion." The slight hope that Belle would deny it died as she smiled hopefully. Taking a deep breath, Rumpelstiltskin reminded himself that he'd faced bigger and scarier foes than a middle-aged shop owner. "I see. Then what do you say if I pay him a visit? Allay any concerns he might have."

Her face glowed with joy. "Oh, Gold, would you really?"

Rumpelstiltskin gave a small shrug, but he was unable to stop his lips from curling in a smile at the sight of her beaming expression. "Careful, dearie," he told her with a low laugh, bending his head so there was no risk someone would overhear, "keep looking at me like that and I'll be tempted to do something quite outrageous in the middle of the street."

Her cheeks pinked at the suggestion, and for a moment it looked as if she would take him up on it. But then uncertainty reasserted itself, and Belle grew flustered and laughed nervously as she looked away in embarrassment.

Rumpelstiltskin said nothing. His words had been a deliberate push past the boundaries of her cursed self, and he hadn't really expected anything different. This Belle didn't jump readily where her emotions led her, though at least now she would bring herself into action if given enough encouragement and time to deliberate a plan.

He gave her a minute to compose herself, and was pleasantly surprised when she took a deep breath and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Thank you," she told him in a softer voice. "I know you can't be eager to have that conversation
with my dad, so I really appreciate that you will anyway."

"I understand where he's coming from," he admitted, and was grateful for the way her fingers laced through his at the oblique reference to his son. He hadn't told her much, and hadn't corrected her when she assumed his boy had died, but it still meant the world to him that even this Belle recognized how fatherhood defined him. "He's your father;" he continued, "he will always worry for you. If there's a way to convince him that I'm not such a monster that I'd ever harm you, I will find it." Or, more likely, he'd make it clear to what lengths he was willing to go to keep Belle happy. He knew from experience that it was easy to make peace with the blackest of powers, when it kept your child safe. "And if that fails," - he smirked - "I'll remind him who holds his lease."

Belle rolled her eyes, unamused by his attempt at a joke. "You're not a monster, Gold," she said firmly, elbowing him in reproach to punctuate her words. Her wholesome belief in that notion surprised him, as it always had, but since this Belle had no idea what a literal epithet it was, she grinned too. "Nice girls don't fall in love with monsters."

But you did.

Instead of saying that out loud, Rumpelstiltskin pressed his hand against the spot she'd elbowed, moaning as if his ribs were suddenly sore. "Well, that wasn't very nice at all, was it?" he teased.

Belle laughed. Then she tightened her grasp on his hand until he looked down at her. "Just promise you'll be friendly when you go see my dad?"

"Sweetheart, I doubt your dad and I could be friends even if you weren't going out with me."

She bit her lip, but nodded to show she acknowledged that truth. "Then just be nice. And don't, please don't, hold it against him if he loses his temper."

"Courtesy, patience, and forgiveness," he summed up, wrinkling his nose at the prospect. "Would you like the moon and the stars with that?"

Belle shook her head, regarding him with earnestness. "I just want you to be the good man you've always been to me."

Rumpelstiltskin wanted to protest that he hadn't always been 'good' to her, but he held in the words. Her perspective was different under the curse, since Mr. Gold had indeed always been on his best behavior around Belle French. "I won't make any promises," he warned her, but then relented at the hopeful expression on her face, "but I'll try."

And when she smiled so proudly at him, Rumpelstiltskin dared to believe that he could be that man.

The End
20/07/16
The Benefit of the Doubt

Chapter Summary

S1. Moe has an unexpected visitor.

Chapter Notes

Remember that in this 'verse, Sir Maurice has known for years that Belle is content with her life at the Dark Castle.

Moe couldn't think of a single instance where Mr. Gold had stepped across the threshold of the flower shop. That he did so now made Moe clench his jaw, and his fingers itched for his pruning shears - or anything sharp and effectively threatening - but he forced himself to relax his hands and, even if he couldn't smile at the other man, he still nodded his head in brief greeting.

"Mr. French," Gold said, coming to a stop before the register. They eyed each other with distrust, both aware that there was a conversation that needed to take place, and both unwilling to be the one who started it. At last Gold sighed, and his cane tapped the floor three times. "I assume you understand I'm not here for flowers?"

"God forbid!" Moe blurted out.

Gold chuckled. "Yes, well. I do try to avoid awkward moments." He gave a shrug. "Not sure how well I'm doing at present, though."

Moe felt a reluctant twinge of sympathy. He quashed it with a thought.

A few weeks ago, he had been too distracted to pay attention to his only daughter's life. They might live in the same town, but his business had demanded all of his time, and as long as Belle sounded content over the phone, and she reported that the bookstore was keeping her out of the red, Moe was happy to keep their relationship to twice-a-week phone calls and sporadic short visits where Belle would breeze in with lunch and run back to work before a half hour had passed.

Then her visits had dropped to none in three weeks, and Moe still had thought nothing of it because Belle seemed happy every time she called.

Ignorance, as the old adage went, had indeed been bliss.

He had remained unaware of the development in his daughter's life until the day the mayor had stopped by, looking for a special arrangement to cheer up her office for Miner's Day. She had taken her time selecting the freshest blossoms, the spirit of the holiday making her a much more agreeable woman than Moe had supposed her to be. She had asked about his health, made a few comments on the improvements of the local economy, and at last, when she'd been about to leave, she had casually mentioned how cozy his Belle and Mr. Gold looked together, and wasn't it a relief
that his girl had landed such an important man? Surely Gold was fond of her as well, and wasn't just abusing her generous heart until the amusement of dating such a much younger girl waned.

Moe didn't even remember what Ms. Mills had walked away with, except the vague impression that she had been smiling with satisfaction.

The news had snapped him out of his routine, and Moe had closed the shop and marched to demand the truth.

Instead he had found Belle standing by her doorstep, and not by herself. His first instinct had been to stride between the two lovers and push Gold far away from his little girl. He had even made the first step when Belle's laughter had reached him.

It had been years since he'd heard such a happy sound, if ever at all.

Most surprising of all, Gold's softer laugh followed.

The bastard cared. Or at least gave such a good impression of it that Moe would only look the fool if he claimed otherwise. And Belle's radiant expression....

He had retreated, fuming but resigned.

Belle would make her own mistakes, and it was left to her father to give her a shoulder to cry on and bury the body of the man who made her cry.

It was that last thought that gave Moe the guts to look Mr. Gold in the eye and say, "You have some nerve, coming here."

Gold's lips curved into an amused smile. "And there I was hoping we could be civil," he said brightly, though the look in his eyes was cold and detached. How did his sunshine-girl stand in this man's presence for long?

Moe straightened, grasping at the advantage of sheer height over the other man. "You are dating my daughter, Gold. You get as much civility as I grant you." Annoyance flashed in those dark eyes, but after a beat the other man gave a slow nod and motioned at him to continue. "Of all the men in Storybrooke, I cannot see why she would choose you."

Gold gave a shrug. "She insists I'm lovable."

The worst part was, Moe could picture his daughter saying exactly that to the man everyone else took pains to avoid. It was the same girl who'd tried to cuddle every stray cat she ran across, and ended up having to be rushed to the emergency room for a rabies shot.

He doubted that Gold was any better domesticated.

"You are trouble, Gold," he said. "Even pregnant teenagers turn violent around you - what will happen when my Belle gets in the way of whoever wants a piece of you next time?"

Gold's features twisted into a furious scowl. The smooth tone that followed was unnerving in contrast. "You don't want the answer to that, French."

Moe's legs begged for a swift retreat, but he firmed his stance. If he started running from Gold, he would never stop.

"I just want Belle safe," he said, and part of him was satisfied to see that wish reflected in Gold's
expression. The most important part of his life was his daughter, no matter how he had neglected her since she moved away from their home. As long as Belle was happy... Well. A father could bite his tongue... when that daughter was present.

He took a deep breath and charged ahead. "Your business is your own, but there's no denying that you deal with the shadiest characters in this town. The only reason I'm not lumping you in with that lot, is because I don't have proof that you actually benefit from their activities."

"I'm a lawyer," Gold protested. "I know better than to break the law."

"Of course. You just know how to bend it until it's unrecognizable, but still legal." He shook his head, because that wasn't really what mattered now. Gold could play with technicalities until the sky fell over their heads, and Moe wouldn't care except to pity those who'd thought they could beat a master at his own game, but Gold's reputation went beyond his business. "But what worries me is that there's not one person in this world who would vouch for you. You came from nowhere, Gold, and no one has ever claimed you. No family, no friends... what do you have to offer my Belle, except some great house no one ever visits?"

Gold's hand tightened on his cane. "She might appreciate the solitude."

"Not that girl." Moe snorted. "I know she has kept to herself these last few years, struggling with that business of hers. But she was always so affectionate, picking new friends as others pick dust on the streets." He glanced at Gold, daring the other man to contradict him. But Gold was nodding, his features softened with a fond smile. Moe went in for the kill: "Tell me, in the normal course of things, if Belle had been surrounded by people her age - men her age - do you really think she'd have given you the time of day?"

Gold physically reared back at the blunt question, but it only took him a moment to compose himself. "That doesn't matter now," he grit out between his teeth, glaring with such animosity that Moe took a step away and out of reach from that cane.

He might be fairly confident that he could avoid any actual damage in case of an attack, but he would rather not test that theory.

"It's not personal," he told Gold. "You're just not the kind of man I wished for my daughter."

Gold stood there, absorbing that with a deep breath. Then he narrowed his eyes and tilted his head, peering at Moe with disconcertingly honest curiosity. "But you won't tell Belle any of this, will you? You have had weeks to try to convince her to keep her distance from me, and yet she says you won't talk about it."

Moe gave a helpless shrug. "My daughter has grown up in this town. What can I tell her that she wouldn't know already?"

"You are her father. Your opinion matters."

"If you believe anyone can change that girl's mind once it's made up, then you're in for a surprise," he told Gold, almost feeling sorry for the man. Belle was a darling girl, all smiles and happy hugs, but when she didn't get her way... Moe still remembered a few tantrums that had made his ears ache for days. "I don't like you, and I definitely don't trust you, but I raised a girl with a good head over her shoulders. If Belle believes in you," he shrugged, glaring at Gold for putting him in this position "-then I guess I should give you the benefit of the doubt."

Gold's eyes widened. "You...?" He gave a slow blink. "I see," he said more firmly, looking over
Moe as if gauging his sincerity. With a satisfied sound, he drew himself up, gathering the cane to his side as he nodded politely and started his way out.

He was almost to the door when he heaved a sigh and turned around. "Fair is fair, Maurice," he said, surprising Moe because no one had called him by his full name in years, "if you won't cause trouble, then I guess I'm bound to warn you when trouble's heading your way. Talk to your daughter, before she gets it into her head that you're mad at her."

Moe frowned. "Why would I be mad?"

Gold's hand whirled into a pointed finger aimed at himself.

"I'm not mad!" Moe remonstrated, then corrected himself when Gold raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I'm not mad at her," he clarified. "I'm not happy either, but I've never said a word about it."

"Indeed. Your only child wants to talk to you about something important, and you're dismissing her attempts." Gold almost hissed the last, as if to show how despicable such a father would be. "You should see to that, before it's too late."

Moe wanted to bristle at the audacity of another man meddling in his relationship with his own daughter. But a thread of logic told him that if Belle was indeed upset, then it was a good sign that Gold was attempting to smooth things over.

"Fine," he said, and then reluctantly added, "and thanks for the advice."

Gold nodded, and this time the door closed behind him.

Once alone, Moe expelled a long breath and stumbled backwards to sink into the closest stool available. Delayed nerves shot through him, and he wasn't shocked to find that his hands started trembling. He grabbed onto his knees and bent down to take deep breaths.

Gold wasn't a devil, but he was the closest thing out of hell. The people he... cared for... might be safe, but all others were at the mercy of his power.

And Moe had told him his true opinion to his face.

After this, he figured, finding the bright side to the nerve-wracking interview, it should be the easiest thing to talk to Belle about her love life.

The End
22/07/16

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was attempt #5. At least it has the word 'wish' in it? lol
Belle/Rumpelstiltskin. Wake Up

Chapter Summary

Set in S1finale. Belle wakes up.

Chapter Notes

Written for Cozy_Coffee at Comment Fic. Prompt: “Shut up and kiss me, your fool!”

It took Belle a moment to realize that he was apologizing. That he hadn't stopped since the purple cloud cleared away from their spot by the well. She'd come here expecting a romantic gesture, perhaps even a proposal - he'd been so nervous when he'd asked her to come along! - and instead...

"Stop," she said.

Gold... Rumpelstiltskin closed his mouth, but the look in his eyes was eloquent enough, and they all but pleaded for forgiveness.

As if she hadn't forgiven him months (or years, rather) ago.

But the words wouldn't be enough now. He knew better than most how slippery they were, how they could promise one thing and mean the exact opposite. Words were his favorite weapon, to be molded at his whim and depending on the occasion, and for that same reason he distrusted them.

No. Not words, then.

Instead Belle caught his hand in hers. The hand that wasn't holding his cane, of course, and in the same breath she pushed away her questions about its presence. Out of habit, she gave him a moment to realize she meant to come closer, and then almost laughed when she realized how silly that was now.

Rumpelstiltskin had resisted any form of physical contact, but Gold had given in gracefully enough... No, not Mr. Gold. Rumpelstiltskin had. He had broken the unspoken rules between them, and she'd been oblivious to the huge shift represented by every quick hug and gentle kiss.

Grinning, laughing, she launched herself against him.

There was a surprised huff above her, but Belle didn't look up to check his expression. She was too busy convincing herself not to cry; they would be joyful tears, but Rumpelstiltskin was bound to given them the wrong interpretation.

"Belle?" came his voice.

Gold's voice. Without the playful tilt to which she had grown accustomed during her years in the Dark Castle. And yet... and yet his tone was familiar, as well.
She didn't answer yet, just let her arms thread around him and, after a moment, breathed in relief when his hand came to rest at the small of her back. A soft touch, a little unsure of its welcome, and yet Belle didn't feel like she had to remain as still as she could, lest Rumpelstiltskin remembered himself and sprang back, barely meeting her eye and avoiding her company for days.

Yes! she wanted to shout.

If they had to spend twenty-eight years of misery, it was all worth it, just to enjoy this reunion at the end of it.

Of course, that it didn't feel like such a long time made it even better.

To Belle, it had been a moment ago that they'd been standing in his laboratory, watching the Dark Curse sweep their land into another world. She could still feel the press of his lips against hers, the bite of his fingers at her arms, holding her against him.

The words she hadn't said. Not then.

They were only words, but Rumpelstiltskin had to know that she meant them. He'd known, back in the Enchanted Forest. He would have guessed at her feelings - an easy feat, since she hadn't cared to keep them hidden for long - but he had never made reference to it, not even to mock her when he'd been at his meanest.

He had held his tongue, when he made fun of every bit of silliness and pretense he encountered. That had comforted Belle, that he at least hesitated to call her feelings either even when he couldn't bring herself to acknowledge their sincerity.

"I love you," she told him now.

The way his body stiffened at the words wasn't a surprise; but before she could admit to disappointment, the tension had broken away, leaving him holding onto her with both hands. His cane fell onto the grass, its loss un lamented by either of them, and Belle braced herself as his only support for the moment.

She expected their embrace to gentle into a comforting hug. Perhaps she hoped for a soft kiss against her brow, as the ones Belle French had often received from her boyfriend. She knew he eventually must let go, for there was unfinished business in town and Rumpelstiltskin couldn't afford to stay for long if he wanted to go after his son.

She never expected an answer.

"I love you too, sweetheart."

Belle bit her lip against a startled gasp, and this time she had to step back just enough to watch his face. She wanted to commit to memory every detail of his expression, from the paleness of his skin at his admission, to the tousled hair above it. "Yes," she said, astounded by the certainty that had suddenly enveloped her. "Yes, you do."

Because Rumpelstiltskin had turned to her, even when she hadn't remembered him.

Because he hadn't allowed himself to seek her out, not in the middle of the battleground Storybrooke was meant to become, but he hadn't rebuked the clumsy overtures of a shy woman, and eventually he'd made some of his own.

Because he had brought her along, here, when he could have given her time to come to terms with
the consequences of his actions, instead of risking her anger.

In the end, Belle shouldn't have needed the words either.

But it was still nice to hear them.

"...and I promise," Rumpelstiltskin was saying now, and she realized he'd been speaking while she'd still been basking in her realization, "it won't take long at all. This is it, Belle. This is really it." The wonder in his face, the excitement in his voice... He became a new man at the knowledge that he was at last in the same world as his son. Belle knew she would remember this expression forever, as well. She had never seen him this happy. But in the next second his focus was back on her. "You will be safe while I'm away," he said, and his voice now promised deathly punishments to anyone who dared defy him. "I'm sorry I must leave you alone, but you don't need to worry. I'll come back as soon as I can, my dear, and I'll make sure nobody bothers you-"

She stopped him.

She didn't want to hear about how he'd threaten everyone from Queen Regina to the most harmless dwarf in order to ensure Belle's safety. He was fair, but he had a meanness to him that delighted in terrifying those that displeased him; and while Regina was welcome to his nasty temper, Belle had become fond enough of the rest of Storybrooke not to wish a protective - and therefore short-tempered - Rumpelstiltskin on them.

Before, she would have distracted him from his tirade with a tray of tea and an array of her least burned muffins.

Now she placed her forefinger over his lips.

"Hush," she ordered.

The mildest of orders, with no strength but her will to back it up.

And the Dark One still obeyed.

Not for the first time, Belle was aware of the power she held when the most powerful man in the Enchanted Land was willing to indulge her.

But she didn't want the power.

(No wonder he granted it to her, contrary man that he was!)

"You're wasting time, Rumpelstiltskin."

He looked at her, confused, but held his silence even as she removed her finger to place her hands on his shoulders.

Belle smiled. Waited. Laughed kindly when he didn't move at all. "I never knew you for a fool," she told him, and because he wasn't taking the hint - and he never did, not in this world or the last - Belle took matters in her own hands and leaned up against him, brushing her nose against his chin before letting her lips hover over his. "Just shut up and kiss me."

And he did.

The End
Regina straightened in her cot the moment he crossed into the Sheriff’s office. Rumpelstiltskin gave an assessing gaze at his surroundings, making sure that Emma and her deputy were out for lunch, and then turning to his newest client.

"About time," Regina grumbled, rising with the grace of a monarch in her throne despite her circumstances. Her cell remained bare, her complaints unheard.

The Evil Queen back in disgrace.

"Bad morning, Your Majesty?"

"Every day away from Henry is a nightmare," she hissed, but since the sentiment was sincere, he made no comment about the tone. He only stared until, without other witnesses, her shoulders drooped, and for a second she was the insecure girl who'd once called upon him, desperate for affection. "When will you bring him to visit?"

In truth, it was a minor miracle that the boy's mother and grandparents allowed Belle to see him, and the unvoiced condition was that she not encourage him to visit Regina.

But the boy didn't need encouragement, so Rumpelstiltskin smirked with confidence. Experience told him that resourceful ten-year-old boys didn't need help to get in trouble. And sneaking in to see Regina would get Henry in trouble indeed. "You'll see your boy soon," he promised.

Regina wasn't satisfied. "You could try harder."

"Or," he retorted, giving his voice a hint of a sing-song trill, "I could leave you to rot."

She stood up, striding to the bars that separated them. Had she better control of her magic, her anger would be a prelude to a nasty fireball. "And haven't you already? I thought you'd be helping me get out of this rat hole, not slinking in after midday as if you have more interesting things to do."

"And who says I don't?"

That gave her pause, and she stared at him for a long moment. He regretted the outburst when she laughed. "So it's true. I guess Belle is interesting indeed."

"Careful, Regina."

Regina's smile was foreign in its sincere humor. "Why, Rumple," she purred, eyes bright with amusement, "is that red on your cheeks?" She ignored the glare that struck her, and instead leaned
closer, presuming on the decade they'd been the closest thing to a friend each other had. When she wasn't hurled back against the wall, she dared a smirk. "My, my. The Dark One blushes. Now I've seen it all."

Rumpelstiltskin inhaled deeply, clutching his cane so he wouldn't raise it against his former student. He'd promised not to use magic to hurt Regina, but Belle had meant that the queen should come to no harm, and his goal was to keep to the spirit of their deal.

If Regina didn't make it impossible.

The girl had always needed to push her limits past the breaking point. Falling in love with a servant, exiling her mother to a different world, killing her husband and rising as the Evil Queen. She hadn't stopped until there was only one person to love her... and then she had killed him too.

And now she was baiting the only person in Storybrooke who stood between her and a lifetime locked up. For years, he'd spoiled her by rarely showing his temper when she annoyed him; but now there was no need to coddle her.

Did she even grasp that, without Belle's insistence, he wouldn't be here at all?

"Your Majesty," he said sharply. "Better worry about your own life."

"Aw. But it's so boring in here," she said with a sigh, waving around the small police department. "Nothing to do except listen to our new Sheriff and her clinging parents." Her nose wrinkled, and Rumpelstiltskin knew that she must be burning at the thought of having Snow so close and being unable to twist the other woman's neck. "Really, Rumple. I'm tempted to ask them to move up my execution date, just so I'll never have to hear them discuss your love life again."

"My..."

"It's been hard to keep food down, hearing them go on and on about how they hope that little girl will... what's the word? Ah yes... appease you."

His scowl wasn't the gruesome sight of darkened teeth and thin gray lips, but still Regina's taunting smile dropped in response. He met her gaze through the bars, rubbing the handle of his cane with his thumb as he considered how to handle this attempt at manipulation.

Luckily for Regina, she was as blatant as an ogre attack in daylight - and just as easily swept away.

"Nice try, dearie," he said at last, keeping his annoyance under check. "But I'm not killing your dear stepdaughter for you. And, if you really want Henry back, you're going to make peace with the fact that you won't either."

Regina growled. "Never!"

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. "Parents make sacrifices for their children, Regina."

"I wouldn't know," she snapped, curling her fists around the bars.

A chuckle escaped him at her fluid memory. "Don't try that on the man who knows the final ingredient for the curse you cast," he chided her, always amused that the spineless mouse wedded to Cora had been such a crucial piece of his path to this world. "There's that ridiculously large mausoleum that says you know what I'm talking about."

He'd expected her to flinch at his remark. One flicker of regret, and he could push it into a credible
reason to let her free.

It didn't even need to be *too* credible, as the Charmings wouldn't put much in the way of resistance. The shepherd and his wife had already proved that they didn't have the stomach to kill Regina, and Emma was even more hesitant to doom the woman who had raised Henry and whom the boy still loved.

There were options, of course.

But shoving Regina across the town line would have no effect on her, and even if they managed to include her in the curse so a new set of memories would replace her real self (or more probably a blank state, Rumpelstiltskin hypothesized), wasn't that as much of a death sentence as chopping off her head? The other option was exile. But now that the tempers had calmed, Jefferson's continued offers to open a portal to their old world were denied because there was no assurance that someone had a chance to survive on the other side.

Her best chance at the coming trial was to convince everybody that the twenty-eight years of the curse had been time enough to repent.

But instead of regret, there was mockery in Regina's eyes. "Well, this world has changed your tune, Rumple," she said. "Left the scales back home, and you're a man now?"

He'd said that, hadn't he? And he wouldn't take it back.

But of course she wouldn't understand that it wasn't this world that made him feel less of a monster. It was the girl who'd never treated him as one.

"I'm your lawyer, dearie," he told her, refusing to give an answer to someone who'd only see the truth as weakness. "And if you behave, I'll be the one to convince the morons outside to let you out. You've never cared what I was if it helped you - why start now?"

Regina gave him a look that teetered between curiosity and distrust. The latter won out, and earned him a scowl. "Whatever. Be the Dark One or Mr. Gold, I don't care. Just get me out!"

Rumpelstiltskin dipped his head into a short nod. "And on that note-" a wave of his hand conjured the comfortable swivel chair from his studio at home, and a stack of notes hovered helpfully next to it. Emma had insisted that the trial be held according to this world's customs, and Rumpelstiltskin had agreed before anyone could point out that the more complicated the rules, the better grasp the Spinner had of the outcome.

"Let's start, shall we?"

The End
11/08/16

Chapter End Notes

Comments are great!

Remember that there's a [Masterlist](#) now.
The Dark One was at his doorstep.

Graham had expected a wrong fast food delivery, or the ten-year-old Scout Girl that lived a few houses down the lane who refused to let such a minor thing as a curse breaking intrude in her cookie sales projection.

"Mr. Graham," said Gold (and Graham refused to use his true name), "if I may have a moment of your time?"

Graham panicked.

He moved to shut the door, but the door remained unmoving. With sinking dread, he looked down to find a cane keeping the door in place. In a world where the laws of physics ruled, it would be impossible for a man at least a foot shorter and several pounds lighter to stop Graham's attempts.

But now magic was back, and Graham knew that he had no defense against it.

"What do you want?" he asked, hostility warring with anxiety.

Under Gold's gaze, it was easy to imagine how a rabbit felt when a wolf spotted it.

"A chat, Mr. Graham. A deal, if we can come to an agreement," Gold said. "I promise it won't take long."

The Dark One had been the queen's mentor, and now Mr. Gold stood as Regina's lawyer. Graham didn't want anything that reminded him of that woman. He definitely was not interested in a deal. "I have nothing to discuss with you."

"Before you get too self-righteous, dearie-" Gold lifted a box he'd been carrying in his left hand "-let me show a little something that might be of interest."

"I don't care-"

Graham blinked as the lid clicked open on its own. Reared back when he recognized the red glow from within.
Gold was smirking. "Do you care now?"

His eyes flew to the man before him, then down to the beating heart. His throat suddenly tight, he opened the door further, and let the terror of the Enchanted Forest into his home. "How...?"

"As I said, Mr. Graham. I'm interested in a deal."

He wet his lips. "With that," he said carefully, knowing he might be jumping from the pan to the flames, but preferring to know the score now rather than harbor an impossible hope, "you don't need me to agree to anything."

To his surprise, Gold's nose wrinkled in distaste. "I don't barter with the unwilling, dearie. Cheaps the magic."

Graham frowned at that bit of information. Regina's power had never suffered for its use of the hearts in her possession, but Gold's expression wasn't open for questioning. "All right," he said, forcing himself to relax. He had never had occasion to meet the Dark One face to face in their world, but even a loner like him had heard the stories. A deal with the demon from the snow mountains might leave you begging for mercy, but not for a fair chance. He looked Gold in the eye, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together to channel his nerves. "What do you want?"

Gold's lips curved in satisfaction. "That's more like it." He passed his eyes over the room, unimpressed by the bare surroundings. As a nameless hunter, he'd had need of little in the material sense; as Storybrooke's sheriff, he had the bare necessities of life in this world.

The Dark One, reputed master of a great castle, didn't seem to think much of the state of his furniture. With a twist of his mouth, he waved his hand at the same time he sat into the air behind him.

Of course a cushioned chair appeared into place.

"What I'm here to bargain for, is silence."

Graham looked at him askance.

"Let's call this... a preemptive strike in a legal battle. I have permission from my client to use this little jewel-" he leaned forward, the box with the heart held out in his hand, and snatched it back before Graham could make a motion to reach for it. "- for her benefit. In this case, what will help her the most is... silence. Your silence, Mr. Graham. You don't air the dirty laundry of your relationship with Regina, and you don't answer the thornier questions if they should come to the mind of our delightful new Sheriff. Should she ask, you admit to being one of Regina's puppets, but only that."

"I won't lie to Emma."

"If you like. I'm not asking for lies." Gold shrugged. "Just discretion."

"Like Regina was discreet?" Graham chuckled darkly. He still remembered the shock of a whole town turned against him, judging him guilty for two-timing a hardworking single mother before he ran into Emma and she blamed him for making her more of a pariah. "Believe me, sir. She can rot in that jail cell before I lift a finger to help her."

"Not even for your heart?"

"Not even for my life."
The Dark One tutted in disappointment. "Such a hero." The last word was a sneer worthy of the worst epithet. The box lid snapped shut, hiding his heart from view. Graham winced when the red blaze disappeared, unable to stop his reaction even as Gold spotted it and smiled. "What you don't seem to understand, though, is that this is merely preventive action. Unless Miss Swan has come this way before me already?"

Graham shook his head.

"Very well. And since you have worked so closely with her, do you believe that she will approach you at all about this if she hasn't this far?"

Again, he was forced to shake his head.

Between the people who had woken up to discover that their worst enemies now lived within the same town - and in the case of the small settlements that had riddled the Enchanted Forest, often within the same building - In the five days since the curse had broken, Emma had been running herself ragged trying to keep the order. Graham would have liked to help, but every time he thought of arresting anyone and having to bring them to the sheriff station, he could only think of the Evil Queen awaiting him there.

"I won't help Regina."

"Understandable." Gold even sounded sincere. "But will you help yourself?"

"What she did to me..."

"Was unforgivable, I'm sure. But she's not interested in your forgiveness, and frankly, at the moment you're barely a problem to be avoided. You can take advantage of that, or you can let this chance pass you."

Graham frowned, because it sounded as if Gold was not only pointing out a window of opportunity, but also propping it open and pushing him through it. "Why me?"

"Pardon?"

"She holds dozens of those," he said, pointing at the box. "Are you making deals with their owners as well?"

"Would any of them trust a Sheriff in this town? And would Emma even know where to find them?" Gold gave him a patronizing smile. "Lucky you, eh?"

Graham thought of all those souls doomed to the same life he lived. The emptiness of it, no pain to bring him down but also nothing that made the world brighter... and, worse of all, the bitter certainty that it should be different.

And just like Regina, the Dark One didn't care.

"You're a monster."

"Wrong," Gold returned swiftly, expression unmoved. "I'm a lawyer."

Graham snorted, seeing no difference at all.

"If it'll ease your conscience, I have counseled Her Majesty to give up her... sentimental... collection as a show of goodwill. You can call this-" he nodded at the box with Graham's heart "-a
test drive."

To his shame, he was tempted by the offer.

He still made himself shake his head.

He might gather the courage to go to Emma and list the offenses Regina had done against him, and so many others he'd done in her name. None of the other people missing their hearts would even think of doing it.

"I wasn't expecting such a hard sale," Gold commented with a wry chuckle, leaning back into his chair with a half-amused head shake. "It's my experience that when someone has their will and soul stolen away, one does whatever it takes to have them back."

"Not when the price is your honor."

Gold's mouth tightened into a straight line. "Let me be clear, Mr. Graham. Regina might not be able to do much from her cell right now, but once she's released, you can be sure she will remember those who stood between her and freedom. Do you really want your heart in her hands when that happens?"

Graham thought of the nightmare that was following orders unquestioningly. Without choice. Despite his abhorrence of each deed.

"Make no mistake," Gold continued, "she will be released. Snow White has spared her stepmother once before, what makes you think it won't happen again?"

The confidence in Gold's voice shook him to the core. Since the curse broke, he had managed to sleep only with the knowledge that Regina was behind bars, her access to magic cut off. "But, the curse!"

Gold waved his hand dismissively. "A trifle, compared to a grandchild who calls Regina his mother."

Graham closed his eyes, feeling his stomach drop. Snow had built herself a makeshift family wherever she went; with the werewolf and the dwarves, while on the run, with the members of her council, once on her throne. She would deny Henry nothing.

And when Regina was set free, he would become the weapon at her disposal again.

"I won't seek Emma out. But I am not lying."

"Fine," Gold said, acknowledging his capitulation with a satisfied smile. "Just don't tell too much of the truth. Deal?"

Graham jerked his head into a nod.

"Perfect. Now, for the legalities of this matter...." Gold made a motion to hand him something, and in the next breath there was a sheaf of paper waiting for Graham to grab it. "A signature, and-" another twirl of his hand produced a needle "-a drop or two of blood. Because now we need a little more binding to our promises than in the old world."

Gold picked the paper from his hands when Graham was done, then exchanged it for the box. With trembling hands, Graham pulled the lid open, taking deep breaths as he watched his heart beat for the first time in more than three decades.
"Just grab it and line it up into position. Then push," Gold instructed.

With the care of a she-wolf carrying her newborn pup, Graham did pick it up. He would be free, his decisions his own. But before he reached his chest, a new thought forced him to pause.

"It's not that difficult." Gold sighed. "Unless you want me to do the honors, dearie?"

Graham shook his head. He hadn't been holed up in his house the entire time since the curse broke. Hunger had driven him back to the diner, and once there it was impossible not to listen to the rumors going back and forth. "Is it true..." He started, licked his lips and called himself a fool a thousand times over. But rather a fool than a coward. "They say there's a girl with you now."

Instantly it was as if a wall had fallen between him and Gold. No, not the lawyer come to deal on his client's behalf. Despite the human skin and brown eyes, Graham knew to the bone that he was before the Dark One now. He could tread with care, or he could end up buried in a shallow grave like the ones he'd dug in Regina's name before.

"I just meant, well. Is she...?" There were words for this. He just couldn't bring himself to say them. "Have you...?"

He finally motioned to the heart in his hands.

Gold growled, catching his meaning. "No."

Graham regarded the other man carefully. He looked insulted at the accusation, but not guilty. "Good," he said, and with a grunt at the sudden pressure, drove the heart into his chest.

His hand stayed over the spot, getting reacquainted with the rhythm under his skin as Graham took a few deep breaths. There was his love for the wildness of the forest. His mourning at having abandoned his four-footed cousins. The joy of feeling, not just remembering.

When he opened his eyes, it was to find Gold peering at him.

"You meant to offer your heart in exchange for Belle's, didn't you?" he asked, voice quiet and thoughtful. "You haven't even met her. ...Why?"

Graham thought of a dark-haired girl he'd been sent to kill. He hadn't known her before letting Snow run, either. "I don't need to meet a woman to help her."

Gold shook his head. "I'm surrounded by idiots," he muttered, then got to his feet, chair vanishing without fanfare behind him. "But I'll give you a last piece of advice before I show myself out, Mr. Graham. Read what you've signed. It will stop Regina from any retaliation against your person - including but not limited to murder and stealing your heart again," Graham blinked, feeling daft at not having considered those possibilities "-and perhaps more to your interest," Gold continued, "it won't stop you."

Graham dismissed that notion at once. "I'm only one man, Mr. Gold."

A corner of Gold's mouth lifted in true amusement. "Oh, a smart man can storm a castle by himself. Just give him a reason not to care if he dies attempting it."

"But I would care," Graham said. He tapped his chest. "Especially now."

Gold nodded at that, turning on his heel without pressing the subject.
"Mr. Gold," Graham called, curiosity piqued. He had never been called a hero before, always done only what seemed right. Was that how someone with dark powers, an ally to the Evil Queen, defined heroism? "The man you were talking about - the one with a good reason to die trying - would he be a hero or an idiot?"

Gold stopped in mid-stride, and after a moment looked back over his shoulder. The smile on his lips was thin and mocking, but his voice was harsh. "Why, Mr. Graham, don't you know they're one and the same?" Gold said, then started toward the door again.

Graham had his heart again. For the first time, he felt invincible. Perhaps that was why he called out again, "That's not an answer."

"The answer is neither," Gold bit off without turning around. "Such a man can only be a desperate wretch, nothing more."

Graham winced at the unexpected bitterness, regretting having asked at all, and this time let the other man leave.

The End
30/08/16

Chapter End Notes

Comments are welcome!
Belle took her time toweling off her hair, left arm slower even though there was no bullet wound in it. Am I crazy? Stress hallucination, the doctor had said, dismissing her concerns as he focused on her treatable ills.

But that didn't make sense. The swerving car had come later. Before it had even appeared on the road, she remembered falling, and Gold screaming, and so much pain she'd almost passed out before... before...

It had to be her brain, playing tricks on her.

There wasn't even a scar on her skin.

She should be happy. She'd walked out of a potentially nasty car accident with nothing to show but a couple of bruises and skinned knees. Not even a bump on her head (and she'd told them to check twice). Unlike the driver and some other guy who took the worst of the damage, she didn't need to stay at the hospital overnight. The doctors had insisted - even Gold had looked worried enough to suggest she consider it - but no. Belle had told them all that she had a perfectly serviceable bed, and she'd been taking care of herself since she was nineteen, just get her the release form and she'd sign everything.

Even then, all the eyes in the room had strayed to the man beside her.

On a normal day, she'd have been amused that Gold held so much influence even outside his usual sphere. The medical team were professional enough not to look too terrified of displeasing Gold, but she'd gone out with him enough times to recognize the expression.

The reputation one man could make for himself among those who didn't know him!

But this wasn't a normal day.

This time Belle glared at the doctor until his gaze shifted back to her.

"I'm leaving," she had said, injecting as much authority as she could muster while wearing scrubs and Gold's jacket on top. "You can let me go, or I can sue you so fast you'll never see it coming. I know a good lawyer."

That was met with a chuckle from beside her, and the fastest wheelchair the nurses could find to
roll her out of their way.

It felt good to be scary. Even if the power behind the threat was borrowed. But Gold didn't seem to mind.

He was right. Scary was better than scared.

Especially when losing the last two weeks of her life was a terrifying prospect. There was still nothing. The last thing she remembered was a nervous Gold asking her to come along with him, then leading her into the woods despite her protests to take care of his leg. If he had ever explained why he'd taken her to that old well, Belle didn't remember it. Ruefully, she had to concede it couldn't have been a proposal. There would be some sign if they were affianced now, right?

If only she could remember...

Belle looked at herself in the mirror. She looked exactly the same as she remembered - same nose, same hair, same worried blue eyes hoping for an answer. But those two weeks.... Almost half a month lost.

Stress amnesia, too?

She hadn't asked, and nobody had seemed to notice the lapse in her memory - and why would they? Nothing ever changed in Storybrooke, so unless someone had asked her for the specific date, there was nothing to give her away. She wouldn't have noticed if all the calendars from her phone to the huge printed one downstairs didn't say the same.

It didn't make sense.

Belle could have handled forgetting the last few hours - coupled with the vivid sensation of being shot, it could be just a passing symptom.

But... Am I crazy?

"Sweetheart?" Gold's voice from behind the bathroom door. He sounded as exhausted as she felt. "Everything okay?"

She took a deep breath, ready to blurt it all out.

"Yes," she heard herself say instead.

Not yet. Maybe she'd wake up and her brain would work right again. Maybe she'd stop feeling as if everything in her own home had moved an inch to the right and she was the one out of place.

Maybe Gold wouldn't be able to help her.

"You sure?"

Belle had to crack a smile at that. He worried. He always worried. He'd been tense for weeks - months! - and as soon as they'd been out of the sight of strangers, Gold had looked twice as weary as she remembered.

Whatever had happened in the last two weeks had only made things worse. Belle wasn't about to add to his burden when she could help it.

"Yes." He'd offered to stay the night. Belle had no idea whether he'd pick the couch or whether they'd gone further and he'd expect to join her in bed. If there was a way to ask without giving
herself away, Belle didn't know it. So she didn’t. "Why don't you get ahead and turn in for the night, you sound like you're dead on your feet. I think I'll pick a book and read some downstairs."

There was a moment of hesitation, but it was followed by a short laugh. "Of course. Perks of having a library all to yourself, I guess."

If only. In a library the books didn't need to be brand new and she could keep them forever. But a girl had to eat. The bookstore wasn't the booming business she'd dreamed of, but it was enough.

"Can't really sleep with all the excitement," she explained.

It was even true.

She'd go downstairs, rifle through the medical tomes, and hope for the best. There had to be a logical explanation for hallucinations that left ghost pains - and for memory gaps. If that didn't work, there were always forums online if she wanted to drift through warnings of brain tumors and the symptoms of every rare disease known to man.

But it was still research. Enough to keep her busy for a while. She'd come up to bed afterwards and find out how far their relationship had progressed.

Too late, she wondered whether she should just have walked up to him and let the towel wrapped around her... unwrap.

If she thought Gold needed more proof of her intentions, she'd be tempted, but there had to be a limit for how many times a girl threw herself at her too old-fashioned boyfriend.

At least she knew he had... intentions... of his own. He just refused to follow through.

It was endearing.

And frustrating.

Maybe they were already over it?

"Sure, darling," Gold said, and his voice sounded as if he was already turning away from the door. "See you tomorrow, then?"

She hoped she'd find him in bed before that. "Yes," she said instead, "and Gold? Have pleasant dreams."

"You too, sweetheart."

How would he deal with a verbal invitation, at night in her apartment? No. Priorities. Research first, tempting the impossible man later.

If she was lucky, whatever was wrong with her would go away by the next day.

The End
09/10/15
Chapter Summary

Henry has nightmares of a room in flames. He goes to his Aunt Belle for help.

Chapter Notes

Prompt: **Terror in the night.**

"Aunt Belle?"

Belle was grinning even before she looked up. For the last few days, no one had so much as poked a nose into the bookstore, and though now she understood why people in town either peered at her as if she were an unprecedented oddity, or avoided her altogether, Belle had still felt a little lonely. The business of a ten-year-old wouldn't do much to add to her groceries and utilities fund, but right now Belle would take the company over the money. That it was her favorite ten-year-old in town was a bonus.

"Henry!" she greeted him, and then her delight dimmed when she discovered the boy still standing uncertainly by the doorstep. "It's okay," she said, waving him over. "I do remember you - and the Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone copy I'll never sell because *someone* had been eating their peanut butter sandwich while paging through it."

The boy's cheeks pinked, but he still beamed. "Auntie!"

Suddenly she was being hugged so hard that she gasped out a breath. "Henry, love. It's okay."

"I missed you," Henry mumbled against her shirt. "And then I didn't, and *I'm so sorry."

Gold had said something similar. Except he'd been talking about *her*, the Belle of a land of fairytales. The Belle who, in a twist of irony, turned out to be the *real* Belle. "So who am I?" she'd asked, and Gold had given her a trembling smile. Holding onto her hand, guilt and a simmering anger shadowing his expression until he'd softened and promised that he still loved her. That he'd never give up. That he would fix everything, but to please understand that he needed to do something else first.

Of course. His son was lost; she wasn't.

She *wasn't*.

Belle had assured him that she understood. She had also wanted to tell him that there was nothing to fix because she didn't feel broken, but at the last moment she had hesitated. The memory of pitying glances following her didn't let her continue. If everyone believed that there was something wrong, how could she be so sure that there wasn't?
"It's okay, really," she said again, half to herself. "Everything will be all right."

Her tone must have sounded confident enough to a child, because Henry gave a shaky nod and stepped away. "You do look well," he offered, peering up at her, and then added with the blunt honesty that marked him as Regina's son, "I thought you'd be more scared."

Belle congratulated herself that her fear didn't show. "So you came visit because you were worried? That's sweet, Henry."

He flushed. "Well... I did worry, but I was also wondering..." He took a deep breath. "Look, you're the only person I know who will think of something outside magic to help me. Well, Emma will too, of course, because I don't believe she likes magic very much; but I don't want to tell her because then she'll get angry with mom, and already too many people hate my mom. But you don't, right? I mean, you've been friends with her for years!"

Henry had such a hopeful expression on his face.

Belle wanted to reassure him that nobody really hated Regina, that they were either jealous or cowed by her power; but that had been true of the Storybrooke townsmen and their mayor. The real Regina - Queen Regina, as Belle had gathered, *the Evil Queen* - had the reputation of a monster.

"Yes, of course," she said anyway.

Because Gold had even darker stories attached to his real name.

She shepherded Henry to the group of chairs she'd set a long time ago to welcome the customers who didn't wish to wait to get home to start a new book. It had turned into quite the cozy spot, perfect for the times those customers - and perhaps one in particular - chose to engage into a bit of conversation and maybe a cup of tea while they were there.

She thought wistfully of those evenings. Maybe she'd call Gold later and ask him over.

But before she could decide whether that was a good plan, there was a boy's problems to sort out.

"How can I help you, Henry?"

"Promise you won't tell Emma?" he asked anxiously. "Or my grandparents?"

Thinking of David Nolan and Mary Margaret Blanchard as a married couple was still a shock. There were no words for the fact that they were Emma's parents. "It's not like I'm friends with them," she hedged. She would tell Regina first, of course.

Henry seemed to consider that was enough. His expression turned serious, too old for his ten years of age. "I - I can't sleep at night. Or, rather, I can, but I had awful dreams and... and..."

"Oh darling," Belle said, tempted to pat his head as she'd done when he'd been a toddler. "Nightmares are normal. Especially after such an upheaval as the last couple of weeks." In fact, with his birth and adopted mothers at each other's throats from the moment Henry had brought Emma to town, and he always caught in the middle, Belle was surprised the boy's nights hadn't been troubled before. "I'm sure that-"

Henry shook his head. "No, auntie. You don't understand." He gazed up at her, gauging her willingness to help him. And of course, *of course* Belle would always look out for him. Finally he took a deep breath and fingered the right cuff of his jacket. "I dream of fire-" he shuddered as he spoke "- being trapped in a burning room - and I'm not the only one there. There's someone with
"Sweetheart..."

"Every night, it's the same. And then..." He shoved his sleeves back to his elbow. "I wake up with these."

Belle gasped.

The skin was an angry red on several spots, even with a few blisters despite the ointment he must have put on himself. Her first thought was that Henry was doing those to himself. Too much change in his life, and too little over which he could assert control. Self-harm wasn't unheard of as a coping mechanism. But one glance at his unhappy face, and Belle knew it had to be something else.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his hand as she shot to her feet.

"What? Where?"

"To your mom's office."

"Belle, no!" He dug his heels in and made to yank himself out of her grasp.

"Henry Daniel Mills," she grit out, and the sound of his full name made him flinch. "There's no way you can expect me to keep this to myself."

"No, wait! Mom can't find out. No!" He tried harder to loosen himself, growing more agitated. "Don't you understand, she did this!"

Belle froze mid-step. "Regina what?"

Henry looked wretched. "She didn't mean to," he ground out, looking at her pleadingly. When he made sure that she was listening and not heading off to the city council, he licked his lips. "Look, I know you've forgotten a lot about the last month, but do you know anything about how the curse broke?"

"Was broken," Belle corrected. Because she'd done a little reading, and it didn't matter whether it was research material from the other world, or legends from this one, they coincided in the idea that curses stood indefinitely unless an outside force challenged their power. "By Emma."

"Yes. Exactly. Emma gave me True Love's kiss."

Belle still reeled at the idea that love was an actual force in this world. "Because true love is the most powerful magic of all," she recited, quoting Gold word by word.

Henry nodded. "Yes. It broke the town's curse - and the sleeping spell I was under, too."

Belle thought of the apple tree that was Regina's pride. She remembered a tale every little girl knew by heart, of the Evil Queen and the poisoned princess caught in a death-like sleep. "She'd never hurt you," she said, unable to believe otherwise. Regina doted on the boy, and was more likely to make life miserable for anyone who even looked wrong at her son than to harm even one of Henry's hairs.

"I know," Henry said wholeheartedly. "She - It was an apple turnover. Emma was supposed to eat it. But I took it instead." The words came faster. "I knew I would wake up, Aunt Belle. Honest. The
"But Rumpelstiltskin's deals are dangerous!"
And the Evil Queen slaughtered entire towns so thoroughly that people know the stories, but there's no one left to mourn or avenge the dead. "Fairytales don't tell the whole story, Henry," she said earnestly, because the boy needed to realize that real people weren't like the characters of a book. Heroes sent their newborn daughter to a different world, and villains adopted a little boy and gave them their heart.

"I guess," he relented.

Belle put a hand on his shoulder and led the way to the front door. "He's a fair man, you'll see. I'd never take you to Gold, if I didn't trust him," she told Henry as they walked, feeling the boy's nervous tension. When that did little to ease him up, Belle gave him a little squeeze that made him glance up. She smiled. "Hey, I won't let anything happen to you."

Henry took that in. Trust in his eyes, he nodded. "I know, Aunt Belle."

Belle's smile deepened.

Broken, she might be. But she wasn't useless yet.

The End
08/05/16
As the others had gone on deck to get some air, Belle found herself alone with Rumpelstiltskin, keeping vigil over him as he slept with his head on her lap, and muttering soothing words when his rest turned fretful. She couldn't remember holding him this close, but she must have, because he'd known exactly how to curl around her so they would both be comfortable through a long expanse of time.

It felt nice, she decided.

If he weren't hurt, she would share that tidbit with him. He liked to hear when Belle discovered something she enjoyed, in this life with him. That she liked to watch him sleep... It would make him smile, at least.

She bit her lip against a yelp when Neal suddenly appeared before her.

"Sorry," he said, looking a bit guilty.

Belle wondered where he'd learned to make no noise upon entry. Or if he'd inherited the annoying trait from his father. "It's okay," she whispered back, checking to see if Rumpelstiltskin had woken up.

He looked feverish, but slept still. Good. He said there was a cure in Storybrooke; as long as they made it back to town....

Her thoughts scattered, distracted by the weight of Neal's gaze on her. A little surprised at his sudden interest, Belle glanced up at him. "Yes?"

Rumpelstiltskin's son shook his head.

He was as bad as his father at pretending nothing was the matter.

"He won't listen," she told him, intuiting that was what kept him silent.

Neal looked unsure, aiming a doubtful look down at his father's dozing form. But as Rumpelstiltskin remained motionless, Neal gave a little nod and started, "Henry says you're his True Love."

Belle didn't know whether to frown or smile. She settled for a small shrug. "Close enough."

"Yeah. That's what Emma said." He sounded hesitant, and his eyes went from her face to the fingers that rested tenderly against Rumpelstiltskin's hair, ready to caress him back into sleep. "I don't understand."

Belle chuckled softly. Lucky him; sometimes she wished she'd been kept in the dark as well. "Didn't they tell you? I'm under a curse; I don't remember anything outside this world."
"But you're with him."

He didn't need to sound so shocked, Belle thought. "I love him."

Neal shook his head. "You don't know him."

Belle held onto her temper, aware that he wasn't speaking in anger but deep bafflement instead. "Did anyone tell you about Mr. Gold?" Nobody had, of course. "That's who he was under the curse," she explained. "People said he was cold. Unfeeling. Utterly terrifying." She smiled. She remembered that, and it hadn't changed at all. People were still warning her away from such a scary man, except they called him by a different name now... when they dared to use that name at all. They never asked whether she was afraid of that man. "But he would come to my store, and he would be politeness in the flesh. And so sweet."

He studied her smile. "You fell in love with him."

"I could have, if he'd given me a chance. But we were cursed." This part was the most difficult to accept. "I'm told we spent twenty-eight years like that. With me liking him, and he liking me back - and neither doing a thing about it. Isn't that ridiculous?"

A small smile tugged at his lips, but it died as he spoke. "But that man - that Mr. Gold - was not my father."

"No." Belle looked down at Rumpelstiltskin sleeping features. "Your father woke up first. I think I noticed the change, but I thought..." She'd thought that Mr. Gold had realized his feelings for her. "Doesn't matter. But he suddenly was there, you know. One hundred per cent. And he made sure I understood I was important to him. I guess I was, and he was waiting for the curse to break so he could tell me how much." She chuckled. "Wish I'd remember that, at least. Then this happened-" she motioned to herself "-and I don't remember anything. But he still makes me feel as if I matter to him."

"He's good at that," Neal acknowledged, then he scowled. "Until his power comes first."

Belle sighed. Power was important to Rumpelstiltskin, but he loved his son beyond that or he'd never have stepped beyond the town line, into this world where there could be no magic. "He is sorry about that."

"And you believe that?"

She looked him in the eye. "Yes."

"Has he even told you what happened?"

"He broke a deal with you," and when Neal only huffed at that description of the past, Belle continued, "He let you go. He had you in his grasp and he let you go. Is that what you want to hear?"

"It's what happened."

"And he's spent centuries looking for a way to see you again. That happened too."

Neal looked away.

Belle let out a sigh. "Look. I could ask you to forgive him, but I see it's too soon for that. I won't even ask you to listen to him, because he's slow to say the right thing and you'll only hear all the
wrong ones."

"So I should ignore him? I like that advice."

"You would," Belle grumbled. "He also likes to ignore the problems he can't solve." And before Neal could protest, she continued, "No. I won't meddle between the two of you. But I will ask you to listen to me for now."

Rumpelstiltskin's son was staring at her now, one brow raised in that curious tilt that she'd seen in his father's face so many times before. It broke her heart, to know that father and son had no easy reconciliation before them.

"I'm listening," he said.

"He is a good man." She lifted a finger, a silent reminder that he'd promised to listen so it was understood that he wouldn't interrupt. "He is harsh, and he doesn't forgive easily. But he is also kind and fair - and you must know it, deep down, or you wouldn't be coming with us."

"I couldn't leave him to die!"

"Yes, you could. He is the man who ruined your life, isn't he?"

Startled brown eyes shot up to her face. "He's my father."

Belle forced her expression into blank disinterest. "That makes it worse, I'd think."

Neal sucked in a breath between his teeth.

"You're here," she told him, after allowing for a minute of silence. "You're taking him home. What does that tell you, Neal?"

"That I'm a good guy?"

Belle laughed at that. "Heroes and villains, and everyone must be one or the other. Is that what the Enchanted Forest is like? Because I don't think I'd enjoy the popular mindset."

Neal shook his head. "You didn't know him then. As the Dark One...."

"I don't remember," she corrected him. "But I know I spent years with him. And I know I fell in love with him. Then I met him here, and I fell in love again."

"Perhaps you're a bad judge of character?"

"Or perhaps he deserves to be loved."

"And forgiven?"

Rumpelstiltskin had lied to her. He'd confessed that he would have used her, too. "I forgave him, yes."

Neal looked at her dubiously.

"He once told me he wasn't an easy man to love," Belle said, running the back of her hand softly along Rumpelstiltskin's cheek, having felt him twitch, and lowered her voice even further, "that no one could ever love him." She searched Neal's expression, wondering whether allowing him into the privacy of her and Rumpelstiltskin's relationship would have any good results. But he looked
curious, and perhaps cautiously hopeful, and so she continued. "I told him he was the one to make it so difficult - and that the only question was whether he did it on purpose."

Neal’s eyes flicked down to his father, and there was a hint of softness before he scowled and looked away. "He always knew what he was doing."

"Always?" Belle countered, hearing the echo of Rumpelstiltskin’s tale: *I made a deal I didn't understand*. He'd been talking about his encounter with the Dark One, but... "He promised to get rid of his curse, if you found a way-""I did!"

"-and you presented him with a portal into an unknown world instead."

"A new beginning," Neal gritted out, "a chance to start over."

"Yes, I know that. And the two of you would have landed on your feet - he knows that now, too. Look at you, with a home, a job, a girlfriend - *a good life.*" At some point, Neal had fallen quiet and when Belle looked at him, it was to find him wringing his hands together. "That's what parents want for their children, and he missed all of it. And if you don't believe he's sorry, you never knew your father at all."

To her surprise, Neal let out a short laugh. "Oh, yes. He did miss it all, didn't he?"

She suppressed a shudder at the bitterness, but made no comment because she understood its cause... Until she didn't.

Neal was staring down at his father, and for once there was something other than disappointment or anger in his face. "Lucky you," he shot around a dark chuckle and then rose to his feet, shaking his head as he turned back to the hatch.

Belle looked after him askance. If only she could remember everything! "He wanted to be there, Neal," she tried anyway, because she did know that much.

The words did seem to reach him, and Neal came to a stop. He glanced up at the ceiling as if searching for answers and finally took a deep breath. "No," he said at last, turning to look at Belle in the eye. There was a little smirk on his lips, but Belle was at a loss as to its cause. "He really did not."

Belle would have questioned him further, but Rumpelstiltskin shifted in his sleep, groaning in pain when the movement bothered the wound on his chest. While Belle moved to soothe him, wishing they were in Storybrooke already, Neal slipped out of the room.

The End
14/07/15
S2B. Belle French deals with the consequences of her fall across the town line.

There were condoms in her nightstand drawer, the start of a collection of sexy nighties in her closet, and several changes of clothes missing that had mysteriously popped up in her laundry basket after she'd mentioned their disappearance to Gold.

Belle might still not remember what had happened in the weeks the curse at the town line had wiped from her memory, but by now she felt confident that she had not spent them chastely in her own bed.

Which made Gold's refusal to spend the night go from baffling yet endearing, to another hurtful reminder that she wasn't the woman he loved.

"...and I'm sorry, but I can't change back!"

His face now that she'd confronted him just added to her sorrow, because it was clear that he was miserable at the thought that she felt unwanted. Gold stared at her for a long moment, clearly trying to put his thoughts together now that she'd dumped all her discontent from the last three weeks on him.

She had tried to keep silent; she really had. But he'd asked why she was avoiding him, and he'd looked so scared that he had done something wrong, that Belle had found herself nearly in tears and babbling all her fears out loud before she'd made a conscious decision to tell him.

"Oh, sweetheart. No."

He reached out for her, hands hesitating over her arms for one instant before their eyes met and, with a sob, she crashed into his embrace.

"Hush, darling," he murmured, lips pressed against her hairline. "I love you. Of course I love you. Don't even doubt that."

A deep breath helped to calm herself. "Then why...?"

"Oh, Belle." He drew her even more tightly against his chest, and when he would have tipped her chin up for whatever he meant to say next, cowardice won out and she stubbornly hid her face against his shoulder. "Darling..." He said, moving to run his fingers down her hair instead. "I know it's difficult for you to understand, but believe me when I say that I don't love you any less."
"But you're still looking for a 'cure'." She couldn't help the accusing tone at that last word. Logic had proved that there was a curse on her, but she didn't feel different - and according to Gold, that was the problem. "I still love you," she said in a lower voice, threading her arms around him as if keeping him close would make everything magically better.

But magic didn't work like that, she'd learned.

Her words made his arms tense around her, but he still leaned in to drop a kiss on the crown of her head. "Yes. I know."

The show of affection emboldened her to glance up, and she smiled in relief when the kind look in his eyes and that small smile at the corner of his lips said that his acceptance wasn't faked.

"But sweetheart," he continued gently, "you don't know me anymore."

Belle frowned, the protest quick on her lips.

He was shaking his head before the words were even spoken. "I'm not the man you remember, Belle," he said roughly, and it was clear that he regretted having to tell her. "We didn't meet when you opened the bookstore. I didn't pretend to look for rare books just as a pretext to come by more often. I didn't fall in love with you because you were kind and sweet-"

Her eyes widened at that, but he grabbed her shoulders before she could pull herself away.

"Oh, Belle. You are those things, but you're so much more," he tried to explain, looking her in the eye. "You're the kindest woman I've ever met, and the smartest; and darling, you're the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on, and the most stubborn too." He gave a little laugh that betrayed so much fondness that Belle stayed in place, letting his warm affection wash over her and didn't move away even when he continued with, "My love. You're rash and you can be thoughtless. You trust too easily and always try to talk me into seeing things your way. You're a headache waiting to happen whenever your curiosity gets the best of you, Belle; and I'd happily spend ten lifetimes plucking you away from dragon caves and teaching you how to handle nightshade without poisoning yourself - but you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

Tears in her eyes, because she couldn't imagine being the woman he described, Belle had to shake her head.

To her surprise, Gold's lips drew into a soft curve. His eyes were still sad, resigned with their situation, but his fingers at her cheek were tender with love. "It's all right, dearest," he said, finally leaning in to touch his forehead to hers. "You will remember. Soon."

Belle closed her eyes, letting herself enjoy the contact.

There was a whirlwind of thoughts in her head, but one pressed for immediate attention. "That doesn't mean I don't know you," she whispered. "You say you're my savior. My teacher. I see these things in you now, too." She could feel him gather his breath to contradict that idea, so she rushed in to make him see. "Didn't you tell me the truth about the curse when everyone else would have kept me in the dark? Aren't you always telling me what has changed, now that there's magic, and how?"

Gold sighed. "Is that why you love me, sweetheart?"

Belle nodded, thinking that at last he understood.

But the chuckle that left him had a bitter edge. "What do you think would happen," he started
slowly, laying each word as a brick on a road he hadn't meant to travel, "if one day you're on the street and someone tries to grab you, and you call my name for help?"

Belle blinked. The only time she could remember being in physical danger had been a few months ago, when she and Gold had just started to date. One of the local drunks had decided to have a joke at her expense, and had shoved her into an alley while asking for a kiss good night. By the grace of God Gold had been close enough to hear her scream. "You would deal with that person," she said now, trying not to shudder at the memory of his ferocious expression as he'd swept in, cane in hand. "But maybe not like you did before?"

"Oh no, darling." He gave a fleeting kiss on her forehead and then straightened, giving a rueful smile. "Not like I did with Mr. Nottingham at all."

She wanted to breathe in relief, still upset at the reminder that Gold had spent the night in jail when he didn't belong there. But the gravity in his words didn't let her relax.

"Brute force is unreliable, dearie," he said in something of a lecturing tone, wagging finger and all. "And completely unnecessary now."

When she drew her eyebrows in confusion, he sighed.

His hand came up, and with seemingly no more preparation than a thought, a ball of fire erupted from his palm.

Belle jumped in place, still shocked by the evidence of magic. Then she turned to him, bewildered. "Gold?"

"If someone dared attack you now, they wouldn't escape with a few bruises, do you understand?"

Belle had seen what a fireball could do if it reached a living body. "That's not necessary."

"Oh, but it is," he retorted, so calmly that it was impossible that they were discussing the permanent scarring - and perhaps murder - of a human being. But Gold seemed unperturbed, though he closed his fist and snuffed out the magic, then held her gaze. "When it's you, I don't play games."

Belle shivered.

He still continued, his voice even. "Once, I heard you call for me. You were so scared, I dropped everything to reach you. You had gone to the market, you see. And I thought you'd be safe, because you visited the town often and people were terrified of giving offense. But there were men trying to kidnap you - one was hurting you..."

Belle's voice was a whisper. "What did you do?"

"I took his heart." His hand made a grabbing motion, then a sharp twist. "Crushed it. I don't think he even noticed. His accomplice was next-"

"Stop."

Gold sighed. "Exactly, sweetheart. That's the man you've fallen in love with. He's a monster." He sat back, glancing down at his other hand as if just noticing that he'd grabbed onto her wrist as he told of that part of their past. He let her go with an abrupt movement, then crossed his arms over his chest as if that gesture alone could put him miles away. "You can't remember why you love me, and I'm doing a poor job at reminding you." He chuckled darkly. "Still eager to bed me?"
"...you did it to protect me."

"And for far less altruistic reasons, before you."

Belle scrambled for understanding. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, my dear, you deserve the truth." He sounded so distant, already preparing himself to be sent away. It broke her heart. "And when you wonder whether I love you or not - and it doesn't matter that I do - now maybe you'll pause and think about who it is you claim to love... and if you should."

Claim, he said. As if it was a choice she could make one day and forget the next.

"But I already do," she whispered, then took valor from the flash of hope that crossed his face at her words. "You promised that nothing I felt was a lie, that my memories are missing but the feelings are real. Did you lie?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why can't you believe me?" The answer came to her without him needing to voice it. When they had first started dating, he had warned her that he was a difficult man to love, and she had laughed, thinking he was teasing. But his haunted expression told her that a part of him still held that as truth. This time it was she who caught his hand in hers, and had to tug a little until he relinquantiated. His eyes flew to her face in wonder. "Gold, listen to me... Was I the kind of woman who would fall in love with someone cruel, someone evil?"

His eyes widened.

"Was I?" she pressed.

"...no."

"Then there must be more to you than this - this monster you've just described to me. You... You are gentle, and kind, and funny. You make me happy, Gold."

He stared at her.

"Do I make you happy too?"

His hand tightened around hers. "You make me better," he admitted at last.

The raw honesty in those words vanished her last doubts. With a relieved sigh, she went into his arms, smiling when they enveloped her. "I'm sorry I don't remember much at all," she told him, thinking it must be as frustrating to him as it was to her, to deal day after day with someone who was and wasn't the person they remembered so well and loved so much. But at least he knew their story, while she felt a little lost in emotions that had little base in her actual experiences. "But please don't doubt me again."

"You impossible girl," he murmured, so softly that she almost didn't catch the words. "What am I supposed to do with you?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Belle still answered. "Just don't push me away. I know I don't understand everything yet, but let me try?"

His answer was a wordless nod, followed by a fervent kiss on her forehead.
She wanted more. She wanted *everything*.

"And maybe... stay tonight?"

He stilled at that. "Are you sure, sweetheart?"

Belle hoped her blush wasn't too visible, but she nodded firmly.

His thumb came up to swipe the curve of her cheek, and he gazed at her for a long moment. "I will return your memories to you," he promised.

"I know." She didn't miss how his posture relaxed at her show of trust. With her hand at his shoulder, Belle leaned up to brush her lips against his. "But in the meanwhile, maybe we can make new ones?"

The End
20/08/16

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to check the [Masterlist](#) if you want to see all the stories in chronological order.

And comments are great!
Chapter Summary

Belle hears the news of Neal's death.

AR. 2x22. "And Straight On 'Til Morning"

Chapter Notes

I'm not 100% sure that this is how the final version of this storyline will go. But this bunny has been biting my ankles for a week, and it fits well enough at the moment.

A few sentences into Emma's frantic call, the picture of the last hour finally broke through Belle's subconscious denial. "No," she gasped, almost dropping the phone and scrambling to put it back against her ear, hoping to have misunderstood.

How could Neal be dead, when his father had just found him?

Half-listening to the story - Tamara's betrayal, the fight, the bean falling and opening yet another portal - Belle raced down the street, careless as she bumped into a dozen other panicked people, and had to stop a few yards away from the pawnshop. There was a group of men between her and Gold's business place, arguing amongst themselves while two of them held another - the pharmacy clerk? - in place despite his struggling. As she watched, one of the men, the loudest of them, rounded toward the pawnshop door and gave it a hefty kick - and was thrown away halfway across the street by an unseen force for his trouble.

His friends scrambled to help him, and the clerk managed to escape his distracted captors.

Belle took advantage of the confusion to scurry forward.

Deaf to their warnings, she planted herself before the door and, with only the ends of her fingertips, she brushed against the wood. When no magic leaped up against her, a huge sigh escaped her. Emma was now explaining about a self-destructing device, but Belle cut off the call at the same time she pushed the door open. Yes, of course they were all in danger again. It was important, but right now she needed to make sure the man she loved wasn't alone with the news.

"Gold?"

The storefront was empty. And whole. The sight that greeted her made the knot of dread in her gut jump up to her throat. There was not one shard of glass on the floor, not a single article toppled off its shelf. Belle shuddered, more afraid than when she'd found the place in shambles, and hurried through it.

"Gold!"

"In here," came his voice when she was a few feet from the dividing curtain.
Belle closed her eyes in relief and, without breaking stride, took a deep breath and stepped into the back room. He hadn't vanished as soon as he heard her. That must mean he wanted her close. "Oh, Rumple," she murmured when she caught sight of him.

He was on his feet, back straight and his hands casually resting on his cane. The unbendable landlord who had no patience or pity for penniless tenants. The powerful wizard who inspired terror in all who gazed at him.

The relentless father, left without a son again.

"I heard," she said, showing him the cell phone in her hand.

He made no answer except for a brief nod.

Belle knew of no words that would console him, wasn't sure if it was right to attempt such a thing so soon. Instead she stepped closer, unwilling to keep any distance between them at such a moment, and raised her arms with the intention to wrap them around him.

"Don't," he said.

She refused to listen.

His hands shot up to grasp at her shoulders, and for a moment Belle feared he would push her away. "Don't," she echoed him, and when his hands hesitated in place, neither letting her go nor pulling her close, she added, "I'm the one here. Just let me... Please."

He made a noise in his throat.

And hauled her against him, trapping her within such a strong embrace that she bit her lip against the pain. "He's gone," he moaned above her.

Belle didn't shush him. Didn't tell him that Neal would have wanted him to delay his mourning in order to help the others. That might have been why she'd been called, as a last resort to break through Rumpelstiltskin's barriers and convince him to help the greater good. But she had a feeling that, for this man, 'good' started and ended with his son.

Perhaps her other self - that real self, according to everyone else - would have tried anyway.

But Belle didn't have that much optimism in her. She couldn't be certain what the right thing was, and she certainly wouldn't tell him that it would get better if he did it. She didn't want to die, she did know that, and perhaps telling him as much would be enough.

(Or perhaps not, if he'd already weighed the whole of their world against his grief and decided it wasn't worth it.)

He was the most powerful wizard in all the stories, and she was a shadow of his True Love.

Was that enough?

She didn't know. She didn't ask him.

Instead she held him in silence, and hoped that he would find a bit of comfort in her arms.

The End
The Promise

Chapter Summary

S3A. Regina needs to make sure Rumpelstiltskin isn't playing games.

Chapter Notes

I've mentioned the Neverland arc plays out differently in this 'verse. One of the reasons is explained here.

As Rumpelstiltskin says, *Consequences!*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you crazy?"

Regina, as ever, could manage subtlety only so far.

Her hissed question was low enough that it wouldn't catch the hearing of the others on board, but there was no way that they'd missed the way she had grabbed Rumpelstiltskin's elbow and pulled him to the back of the deck, trusting the wind and the distance to keep the conversation private.

Rumpelstiltskin raised an eyebrow, throwing a pointed glare at the spot where her hand still lingered over his sleeve. "I wouldn't, dearie. I'm not in what you'd call a good mood, and my patience with you has been growing steadily thinner in the last few days."

She looked rebellious for a moment, but the tight anger in his voice made her reconsider. They both had lost their sons in recent hours, but unlike him, Regina had a chance to recover hers. In Rumpelstiltskin's place, she would be burning to cinders anything that registered as an annoyance until the world paid the price for her grief.

"All right," she said more calmly, taking a slow step back. "I just didn't expect you to bring Belle along. What do you expect her to do, throw a book at that demon child?"

He straightened his coat, chuckling low in his throat. "She's more resourceful than you give her credit for, your Majesty."

Regina huffed. "The real Belle, perhaps. But this girl? We'll be lucky she doesn't scream at the first sign of danger and alert Pan of our arrival."

"My dear, we alerted Pan the moment we crossed into Neverland. You didn't think we'd sneak a whole portal and the ship crossing through it, did you?" He tutted at her sudden pallor. "You've grown too complacent in your little kingdom, with no one opposing you. Are you ready to fight in someone else's turf, dearie, under someone else's rules?"

"I'm bringing Henry back," she snapped back.
That was the only thing that mattered. She would lie and cheat and kill, in order to accomplish it.

Rumpelstiltskin nodded in understanding. "I'll help with that," he promised.

Regina sneered. "While babysitting your girlfriend? Please, Rumple. Be serious."

"Leave Belle to me; she'll be no problem." When she looked dubious, he waved a hand in the air in impatience. "You don't believe I'd ask her to come and not know how to deal with the situation, do you? There's such a thing as planning ahead, dearie. I know we didn't cover it in our lessons, but I assumed it was common sense?"

Regina curled her hands into fists so as to not poke the irritating man in the chest. "Why bring her at all? This is a rescue mission, not a blind date!"

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm starting to think you're actually worried about her," he mused. Her answering scowl made Rumpelstiltskin tilt his head in thought. "Be like that, then. But just in case there was some truth to the little charade you've been playing with Miss French for the last twenty years, ask yourself this: what would happen to the woman everyone thinks of as the Dark One's mistress, the same that, thanks to you, is known as Mayor Mills' friend and confidante? Nothing to protect her from those who hate you or me, and between the two of us, that's quite the list." His expression grew dangerous. "No. To leave her behind to that.... Out of the question. Don't think I've forgotten they'd have gladly burned you in your own home, if Deputy Swan hadn't intervened."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten either." It still left a bad taste on her tongue, to acknowledge her debt to Emma. "But isn't Neverland even more dangerous?"

"I doubt it. At least I know what we're dealing with, with Pan around. Who knows what might be creeping to Storybrooke as we speak."

Her eyes widened.

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. "Consequences, Regina. The barrier at the town line is gone. Do you really think that pair of fools would be the only ones tracking down magic?"

"I didn't--- I had to come for Henry," Her dark eyes glared at him. "And if you thought of that, why didn't you say something? We could have figured something out. A shield wouldn't have taken you any time at all!"

"Indeed. And yet-" He smirked. "-why would I?"

That gave Regina pause. She regarded him carefully. "Belle was wrong," she said, almost gleefully. "You haven't changed at all."

His lips thinned, but he didn't raise a defense to the charge.

"You're still a bastard, Rumpelstiltskin."

But the curve of her lips said she approved the notion.

Rumpelstiltskin snorted as if she'd said something amusing. "Not the point, dearie. But," -he pointed a finger in the air- "no need to fret. I'm confident the Mother Superior will rise to the occasion if there's too much of a threat, and, Regina dear," he continued before she could protest that the fairy had always proved a weak ally for Snow White, "would you rather have a powerful shield protecting the rabble in Maine, or here, where it might actually work to protect my grandson?"
Her lips pressed together, and she gave him a furious look. But she nodded. "Here," she admitted.

Rumpelstiltskin smiled and made a little bow, as if accepting her gratitude.

Regina bristled. "Just keep in mind that this is about Henry," she snapped, holding his gaze. "If your girl gets into trouble, it's on you."

"Oh, we both know they'd go rushing to help her," Rumpelstiltskin said, pointing his chin at Snow White and her family, "but I'll make sure that it won't be necessary. I have no more of a wish to be indebted-" and he accompanied that word with a gesture of distaste "-to the heroes than you do."

"I just don't want you distracted, Rumple. And that girl...."

*Has always distracted you.*

A quiet chuckle acknowledged the unvoiced truth. "Then believe I have no other goal than to grab the people who matter and get them to safety. Both of them."

"Lovely," she drawled. "What about the rest of us?"

Rumpelstiltskin grinned. "A useful distraction, of course."

Her eyebrows climbed up at the honest answer. "That... might work, actually," she said, considering the possibilities. Snow and Charming were decent strategists, but they'd practiced only in open war. Battlefields and direct confrontation, yes, but recovering a hostage needed a finer touch. Like the hand of the man who'd manipulated every person on this ship into doing his bidding. "You can do this?"

"As I said, it's a matter of forethought, dearie."

"What if you have to choose between one or the other?"

He hissed at the very idea. "I don't compromise, Regina. And *I don't fail.*" If he had his cane, each word would have been punctuated by a harsh tap against the wooden floor. "Henry and Belle will be perfectly safe."

Perhaps it was because, in all the stories about his deals and her own experience with him, Rumpelstiltskin had never broken his word. Perhaps because she believed in power, and the Dark One had always been the most powerful of all. "I'll trust you," she said grudgingly. "But if this is one of your sick schemes...."

Rumpelstiltskin barked a rough laugh. "Oh, no, not that!"

*Not a scheme, or not one of yours?*

But Regina didn't think of that question until a few days later, when she realized that Rumpelstiltskin had promised her son's and his True Love's safety.

But not his own.

The End
29/05/16
Also, if someone likes the Beth/Daryl pairing from TWD, I've just started an alternate 'verse for them. :)
http://archiveofourown.org/works/7003792/chapters/15951757
Because True Love's Kiss is the strongest magic of all.

Prompt: The Vessel.

Masterlist.

Once everybody had stumbled onto the Jolly Roger, safe at last, Belle just wasn't able to stop herself from touching him. She kept a hand at his elbow while they climbed on board, reassuring herself that he was alive. She put an arm around his waist as they made their way below deck, ready to support him if the spell he'd cast around his knee decided to give out after all, and when he sat heavily on the cot in Hook's quarters, she knelt before him, wrapping her hands around his and digging her thumbs into his wrists just to feel the pulse beating under his skin.

"I'm fine, sweetheart," he told her, his voice raspy.

Belle tightened her grasp, her mind reeling back to the pained screams that must have scrapped his throat raw. "I thought I'd lost you," she whispered, kissing his knuckles.

He gave a tired chuckle, his long hair swinging forward to cover his face. "I thought I was lost."

The low confession made tears spring in her eyes, but Belle decided to smile anyway. He was here. Her Rumpelstiltskin was here. Later they could talk about his rushing into a suicide mission without any warning, and about self-fulfilling prophecies, but for now she only wanted to press her forehead against his knees and breathe freely for the first time since she'd woken up.

Her last memory as Belle French had been a blissful one: true love existed, and Gold did love her as she was. Then the curse had lifted, and the former maid of the Dark One had spent too many years getting to know her master, not to understand that Rumpelstiltskin had just kissed her goodbye.

"Don't ever lie to me again, Rumple," she said, turning to glance up at him.

His lips curved into a soft smile. "Nothing was a lie."

Because you never told me what you were planning.

She closed her eyes, knowing that the vision that had just flashed in her mind would revisit her in nightmares for months to come. Her love stretched out on the ground, bloodied and unresponsive, with no sign that he was even breathing. "Whatever you call it, just promise you won't do it."
"Sacrifice myself?" He rumbled a soft laugh. "Believe me, my darling. This was a very special set of circumstances, and unlikely to repeat itself."

She met his eye. "That's not a promise."

"No," Rumpelstiltskin said simply, sounding surprised at himself. "It's not."

Belle wanted to shake him. To gather him in her arms and plead that he never put himself in such danger again. But his son's life had been on the line, and Henry's too, and Belle wasn't selfish enough to ask him to put their future over his son.

A sudden jerk as the ship started moving made her lose her balance, but Rumpelstiltskin loosened one of his hands to grab her shoulder and steady her. They stayed unmoving for long seconds, waiting until the ship settled into a smooth movement unimpeded by any waves.

"We're going home," she breathed, unsurprised that the others had managed to latch the demon-shadow to the sails to make their getaway. The Charmings were a resourceful lot, and what their conscience wouldn't approve, Regina and Hook would be happy to do as long as it benefited them as well.

Add Rumpelstiltskin's ruthless tunnel vision when he had a goal, and Pan had never had a chance from the moment their group had stepped onto the island.

"Home?" Rumpelstiltskin glanced at her, then gave a slight head shake. "I learned something here, Belle." His hand moved across her shoulder blade, making a quick pass up her neck and settling gently on her cheek. "The Enchanted Forest or Storybrooke; that horrible house Regina gave me, or camping with annoying royals... Wherever you are, that's home."

Belle beamed at that, turning to kiss the palm of his hand. "I love you too, Rumple."

He let out a deep breath, as if a burden that had settled over him for weeks had been lifted away. "It really is you."

Belle couldn't imagine what seeing her as Belle French had done to him. He had once told her that one of his reasons to speed the Savior through to the end of Regina's curse had been to be able to reunite with her again. What had gone through his mind, when her crossing the townline had meant that she was cursed again, and this time with no cure for it?

"It was always me," she reassured him. Unlike with the rest of the town, Regina had been restricted in how she could twist Belle's personality to fit her unhappy world. "Just with some parts missing."

"I love you always, my Belle. But I love you whole best."

Belle had to smile at that. "Thank you."

He tilted his head, a crease deepening in the corner of his eyes as he tried to work out her meaning.

Belle nuzzled against his palm first. "For being so understanding," she explained. "I know it wasn't easy for you, but you never lost your patience. So, thank you, Rumple. Thank you for being so kind to... me."

"It was difficult sometimes," he admitted. "Not the kindness, but the waiting."

"That makes it mean even more to me."
His eyes brightened at her positiveness. "I missed you so much, sweetheart," he said, motioning her up and onto his lap. Belle hesitated briefly, aware that their privacy depended on everybody else staying on deck to watch the Jolly Roger fly across dimensions, but she followed his direction in the end and sat with care on his good leg, ready to jump away at the slightest sign of pain.

But the damage must have washed away, because Rumpelstiltskin only smiled in welcome and gathered her closer.

Belle shifted into a comfortable position, leaning her cheek against his shoulder. "Was it your plan all the time, to wake me up here?"

"Believe it or not, no." He chuckled. "I only wanted you with me, where you would be safe." He didn't describe the dangers of leaving her without his protection in Storybrooke, and Belle had lived through enough nasty scenes with people who only knew her as the Dark One's servant, not to try to dissuade him from those worst-case scenarios. "I hoped, though", he continued. "Neverland runs on belief, and I do believe in you, Belle."

"And I, you," she returned the sentiment, nudging her nose against the side of his jaw. "Even when I didn't remember everything, I knew you cared for me." She giggled at his raised eyebrow, and amended, "Eventually."

"I will always be amazed by your faith in me," he said earnestly, dropping a kiss on her forehead, followed by another on the tip of her nose - which made her tilt up to meet her lips with her own into a more lingering kiss.

This time the magic was a milder buzz, without a curse that needed to be stripped away so their love could reach its full potential. The possibility to shed away his own curse was there, but neither of them pushed for it, content in the knowledge that as the Dark One or just as a small-town pawnbroker, he would always love her.

True Love was about trust, too, and if Belle French hadn't trusted herself to be the rightful mate to such a powerful man, Belle didn't hold any such doubts. Five years living in the Dark Castle had showed her the dark wizard and the mourning father, the playful companion and the determined protector. What secrets he might still keep from her, they were so small in comparison to all the facets he'd willingly shared.

In return, Rumpelstiltskin knew her strengths and her weaknesses, her need for approval and her thirst for adventure.

And he still let her in.

"I'm your True Love," she said around a grin, a simple statement that made the world seem so much brighter after the last hours of pain and grief.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned back. "Did you doubt it?"

Belle shook her head, impulsively throwing her arms around his neck to hug him tight. His laughter welcomed the motion, and she drew back enough to smile at him. "Never," she said sincerely. "But it's nice to have proof."

With that, she swept in for a deep kiss.

To gather the evidence, of course.
Chapter End Notes

I feel I should add that this was planned waaaaay before canon made such a mess of their TLK.

Hope you liked it!

(and if you did, don't hesitate to tell me in the comments.)
3B - The Proposal

Chapter Summary

3B. "You already hold my heart, Belle. Why not have the rest of me, if that's really what you want?"

Chapter Notes

Originally meant for the Rumbelle Appreciation Week. Prompt: Colors (red)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trip to Neverland had been a nightmare, but the two weeks since their return had taxed their energy until they were down to holding onto their patience by their teeth. Belle had known it was time to bring the last of these foolish meetings to an end when Rumpelstiltskin had grabbed her wrist under the table to stop her from blasting Blue away.

It said a lot about the head of the fairies, that her relentless badgering had Belle reaching for one of the few spells in her bag of tricks that weren't defensive.

"I'm exhausted, Rumple," she whispered, leaning hard against him as they ascended the stairs to their room, so glad that his limp had disappeared for good and the cane was an affectation rather than a necessity. He took on the extra weight without complaint, adjusting his grip at her waist to bring her even closer, and she gratefully rested her head against his shoulder, trusting him to steer the two of them in the right direction. "I just want this to end."

Rumpelstiltskin gave a chuckle that sounded as tired as she felt. "Just say the word, Belle."

For a moment, Belle was tempted to let him take the easy road. Intimidation would still the tongues of the people who'd come forward to present their grievances - because making a deal with the Dark One was an acceptable last resource, but having him as a neighbor affronted their sense of right and wrong.

Reaching a compromise, when all they had was the shaky support of the people who'd seen Rumpelstiltskin sacrifice himself in Neverland, was proving an uphill battle.

But having the Dark One practice fright tactics on the loudest protesters would only prove their fears right and isolate them again.

Belle shook her head.

There had been little choice to the solitude of the Dark Castle, but in the Enchanted Forest no one had dared suggest that her trips into town be curtailed, or that Rumpelstiltskin wasn't welcome at all.

The Blue Fairy had certainly used the time as Storybrooke's de facto leader to her advantage, riling
everyone from dwarves to kings until their complaints had to be addressed or David and Snow White risked losing their position of leadership over the town. Usually Belle didn't care whose hands took the reins of power - not in a world where the Dark One was above such matters - but here it would make matters impossibly tense if someone with a grudge (and they all seemed to remember a grudge against Rumpelstiltskin now) replaced the Charmings.

Better the royals you knew, the two of them had decided.

"We can't give up," she told him, determination starting to flare up again. "This is our home, too, and we'll fight for it."

He sighed, hanging his head down. "It doesn't have to be your fight, sweetheart," he murmured, leading her forward.

Belle threaded her hand through his, squeezing hard. "Yes, Rumple," she told him. "It does."

A slight change of pressure told her he'd deactivated the barrier that protected the second floor, and another as they passed signaled that it had been reinstated. A strong magic user might be able to teleport downstairs, and some had abused that privilege already; which was why invading their private quarters was now strongly discouraged by a spell that shoved intruders back onto the street as a warning, sapped them off their energy at a second attempt, and only got nastier afterwards, fed by the attacker's own power.

So far no one had tested the barrier after a few burns.

Belle was glad for that. She really hoped never to have to clean blood off the floors of her home ever again.

"At least nobody can bother us here," she said, looking for something positive to concentrate upon.

But when she turned her smile to him, Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Oh, Belle," he sighed, opening the bedroom door and guiding her to sit on her side of their bed. She quickly toed off her heels, and tugged him to sit next to her when he would have walked around to his side. Hand holding was a beautiful show of affection... and also insurance that Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't slip away to deal alone with whatever was bothering him.

"Hey," she said softly, bringing his hand to her lap and trapping it between both of hers, stroking his knuckles lightly until she felt his fingers relax. "What's wrong?"

"You deserve so much better."

She could remind him that she'd walked into this relationship with her eyes wide open until she was blue in the face, and Rumpelstiltskin would still stare at her with those sad eyes, always waiting for her to realize she should walk away.

He might have stopped believing that she was ready to pack her bags and leave him at the first sign of trouble, but in moments like this Belle had to wonder whether he truly saw a future where they stayed together.

"Is that so?" She made her voice light, banishing her impatience to a corner. Not even exhaustion could make her forget all she'd learned about the skittish man she'd shared so many years with. Experience had proved that an insistent avowal of her feelings would not make her point. Rumpelstiltskin might have come to believe that she loved him, that she didn't mean to leave him. But he also believed that intent was meaningless.
Words were poor assurance to the man who played with the outcome of a deal without ever deviating from the script of a signed contract.

Which left Belle to join action to sentiment and, without letting go of his hand, pull her feet up onto the bed and then lean sideways to rest her head on his lap. A sound of surprise left him, but his free hand still moved to pet her hair reflexively.

Belle smiled, enjoying the moment. But it would do them little favor to leave his worry unaddressed. "Tell me what I deserve," she ordered.

He made a vague gesture. "You know."

"No, I don't. Or so you seem to believe," she said, unable to bite back that last part. It made him look suddenly wary, and he licked his lips uncertainly. Belle let out a sigh, rubbing her cheek against his thigh to show that she wasn't really upset. "Just tell me, Rumple."

He let out a long sigh. "A town that doesn't mean to run you out. A life without looking over your back in case my enemies decide to strike. A house that's not bursting with dark magic just to keep you safe." His hand curled into a fist, loosening only when he realized he'd trapped her fingers. Then he shook his head. "And that's just the beginning!"

Belle waited, but there was no mention of loving someone else in his list of desired 'improvements'. She forced herself not to jump up and kiss him silly in reward for the progress. "The townspeople can get lost," she replied, deciding to tackle each of his concerns. "I'd like to get to know them, but if they decide otherwise, it's their loss. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't I a target for your enemies long before we fell in love?" He snarled at the memory, and not for the first time Belle was glad that there was no sign of those witches in Storybrooke. "And finally, I am safe here. That's what matters."

"That's not..."

"Will your magic harm me?"

"Never!"

"Then you worry for nothing," she said, moving onto her back so she could watch him better. He was staring down at her, that look of marvel on his face that had always warred with sheer incredulity. Slowly, his expression softened. "You deserve the world, Belle."

Belle chuckled. "It will still be there when we are ready to see it. And no," she added before he could make the suggestion, "I'm not going alone. You're stuck with me, Rumpelstiltskin."

"Do you mean that?"

She thought of all the times she had been tempted to walk away, just leave the maddening man to stew in his power and pretend it was what he wanted. The times he had sent her away. The times she had gone. And she always returned to him.

True Love had to be fought for, Rumpelstiltskin was fond of saying. But they had already paid their dues, both before they admitted their feelings and after. It hadn't been an easy road, not with the scorn of strangers that had even followed them across worlds, each other's doubts, and their own fears.
And at the end of it all, they had still chosen each other.

"I'm yours," she said simply, condensing years of friendship and a future with him in those two words.

Rumpelstiltskin swallowed, tracing a finger down her temple and along the side of her cheek. He looked dazed for a moment, as if he still couldn't find a place in his understanding of reality for her honesty. "You... are?"

Belle grinned.

"And I'm yours too," he told her, his voice barely above a whispered confession. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You should know what you're getting, then."

The hand that had been caressing her went to his chest, and before Belle had time to blink in confusion, it was digging into Rumpelstiltskin's chest. She yelped, jumping to her feet in alarm. She knew that spell. Had suffered through it once, and still woke up whimpering at the memory in her nightmares.

Rumpelstiltskin didn't even wince.

"It's not a pretty sight," he said, but he wasn't talking about the gruesome show of magic, but rather staring sadly at the weight held in his palm.

Belle searched his face for pain, but found only the shadow of resignation over his features. Taking a deep breath herself, she glanced down and in the next moment wished she could have hidden her reaction, unable to stop her eyes from widening in shock.

"Oh, Rumple."

Rumpelstiltskin only gave a somber chuckle. "It used to be worse," he admitted.

Belle only stared at the black mass in his hand. It looked bruised... dented. Missing tiny chunks and with thin cracks spreading over the surface. It was little like what Regina had tried to steal from her, all those years ago in the Dark Castle, except for the similarity in shape and size.

How could someone hold so much darkness inside them, and still be the gentle soul he let her see? How could it have been worse than this, and not led Rumpelstiltskin to rend and destroy the world around him? "Worse?" she echoed the course of her thoughts, disbelieving, and she almost missed his soft gasp when she moved closer and crouched before him, keeping her love's battered heart at eye level.

There was no brightness to it, only the unforgiving darkness and the damage of too many decades without a kind thought. Not one given. And since Rumpelstiltskin was a fair man, always meeting like with like, not one received either.

Dark and damaged, yes. And yet, to Belle, it looked so... fragile.

Her hand was reaching out before she gave it permission to move, but once she noticed she didn't let herself hesitate. This was the man she loved, laying himself bare as he'd never done during their most intimate moments.

She wasn't afraid of him.

She was afraid for him.
But Rumpelstiltskin was too nervous to see the difference, and a moment of doubt would be taken as revulsion.

"Please," she pleaded when he instinctively moved to hide it from her.

Their eyes met, his searching her gaze with frantic disbelief while she tried to explain without words that she felt honored by his trust.

He inhaled sharply. "You impossible girl," he breathed, and said nothing else as her right hand came to hover beside his while the other one, slowly, giving him time to move away, grasped his wrist and tipped it to the side with a delicate push.

Her own heartbeat thumped as Rumpelstiltskin's heart landed on her hand.

His hands, now free, moved to cradle her face, and Belle only noticed that a few tears had slipped from her eyes as his fingers rubbed them away. "I love you," she told him.

He responded with a teary smile. "You're a wonder. See? Look again, Belle."

Belle did, only then registering what his fingers had hidden from view. In the middle, the black gave way to two points of bright red set deep in its center. Little more than pinpricks, but Belle couldn't think of anything stronger than the light that fought against so much darkness.

As she looked, one of them flared, and above her Rumpelstiltskin laughed. "That's how wonderful you are, my love. An ocean of darkness, and you shine true through it."

Belle didn't need to be told who the other light represented. There was only one more person Rumpelstiltskin loved openly, and Baelfire had been his papa's light long before she'd entered his life.

"Why try to hide them, Rumple?"

He gave a little shrug, but his hands caressed her face, her cheeks, her temple... "Because it won't ever get better," he said at last, his fingers pausing at her mouth in a bid not to challenge that. "That's it, Belle. That's all I can offer you. A man's love, and three centuries of living with a dark curse to accompany it."

"But you said it was worse, before."

He gave a reluctant nod. "It used to be just the one, before -" he waved between them "- this happened. But that doesn't mean...."

"It means it did get better," she interrupted, beaming at him with all her hopes written on her face. "Don't you want to try? Because I do, Rumple. I want to make you happy, and I want you to make me happy, because I know that's just as important." Carefully, she stroked the air over his heart, lingering over the small red spots. "And even if there's no improvement... well, it's beautiful already."

"How can you...?" He shook his head. "Do you mean that, sweetheart?"

Belle nodded.

Rumpelstiltskin searched her expression for any doubt, but Belle had made up her mind a long time before. This was the man she loved, and every misunderstanding and fight they'd lived through had not been in vain. "It's forever, Rumple," she told him, echoing her first promise to him.
He took that in with a deep breath, then gazed at her and the heart in her hands. "Marry me," he whispered.

Belle gasped. "But you said...."

He grimaced. "I know. And that still stands, but..." He quirked his lips into a tentative smile. "You already hold my heart, Belle. Why not have the rest of me, if that's really what you want?"

"And you...?" She looked at him carefully. He had been so adamant about not tying her to him. "Do you want to marry me?"

Being his maid had been a deal honored by both parts and acknowledged as an necessary evil by her people; becoming friends had been an unexpected development, but mostly kept to the two of them. In Storybrooke, they had been discreet with the new direction of their relationship, and still people singled her out for their pity or their censure.

Becoming the Dark One's wife would put a permanent taint on her reputation, he'd decided, and nothing she said had changed his mind.

But now Rumpelstiltskin was nodding. "More than anything."

She wondered if she had to send the Blue Fairy a thank you card after all. If people weren't calling for her banishment, trying to punish her for their relationship, would Rumpelstiltskin have given in so soon?

"Belle?" he asked, a little nervous now.

Belle bit her lower lip, giving a series of little nods until she couldn't resist anymore and launched herself at him. "Yes!" she said against his shoulder blade, arms crossed around his neck and her only care that she didn't drop her precious burden. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Rumpelstiltskin laughed, holding her against him.

Belle then reared up to kiss him, long and hard with all the enthusiasm in her own heart. From the corner of her eye, she saw the little light come to life again, and she grinned against his lips. "It's working," she said, and when Rumpelstiltskin looked at her in confusion, Belle leaned in to brush her lips against his once more. "Kiss me again," she told him, showing him his heart and nodding when her meaning dawned on him, "it's working."

And he did.

The End
14/08/16

Chapter End Notes

So, what'd you think?

Remember that there's a Masterlist now.
Baelfire raised his glass in the air, chuckling when his father only stared blankly at the gesture. "To the most boring bachelor party ever," he said, tipping the glass into a one-sided toast.

His father rolled his eyes. "I've told you already, Bae. It's not a party."

Baelfire made a point of looking around at the room. Save for the two of them and the sleeping boy laid out on the couch, there was no one else. "I noticed, Papa." Then he shrugged. "But you're getting married later, there's alcohol now, and technically, more than two guys have come to wish you well. I think it counts."

"Hopper only came to try to talk us into a more conventional venue," Rumpelstiltskin sniffed. "Again."

"And he said he was looking forward to officiating. He even sounded sincere." Baelfire laughed. "Admit it, Pop. You're making friends."

Rumpelstiltskin's scowl would have sent anybody else - except his future wife, of course - scrambling for cover, but his son was immune to the Dark One's displeasure.

Baelfire smiled, but let the subject drop. His father would never be hailed as Citizen of the Year, but there was no mob beating down the doors and the talk about exiling him had died down. People didn't scurry away at the sight of him on the streets. Well, not too obviously.

"It was a nice gesture to offer his office for a reception," he pointed out, though he suspected it had been an attempt to avoid the hike to the well. It might be a significant spot in his dad and Belle's relationship, but the rest of Storybrooke avoided the place since Regina's mother had used its connection to Lake Nostos to cross into this world. "It's on Main Street, and he says it can fit a small crowd."

"Bae... Both Belle and I work on Main, in our own buildings. Why would we need a third option?"

"He obviously assumed there would be more people involved."

That only made his father shake his head impatiently. Were it up to him, he and Belle would make their promises to each other in private, and to the public's eye they'd carry on as they had thus far.

However, this was a world governed by paperwork, and Rumpelstiltskin was not known to leave
loopholes for any deal he made. In the Enchanted Forest, no one sane would have dared contest his right to keep Belle at his side, but here the rules were different, and a valid marriage license would go a long way in silencing those who still muttered about a woman kept against her will.

Witnesses therefore became a necessity.

Family only, as Baelfire had been told sternly over the phone before he even had the chance to ask whether he was supposed to pass on the news. The others could find out in the next day's paper.

When Baelfire had knocked on the door, a grinning Henry in tow, his father's eyes had widened in surprise but he'd let them in without complaint. ("You said family was invited, Pop." "Yes, of course. It's all right, son.")

Henry had dropped off for a nap an hour ago, making each of the adults promise to wake him up when it was time to go.

There was only one person unaccounted for.

"Is Belle's dad meeting us at the well, or coming here too?"

His father rolled his eyes. "Oh, he won't show his face at my home any time soon. He already tried to convince Belle that she was making a wrong choice. Apparently dallying with the Dark One is a forgivable mistake - his words - but to marry me is beyond the pale."

Baelfire cringed, and hoped that he wouldn't have to convince his father to turn Maurice back into human form. "And now he is...."

"Picking flowers for Belle's bridal bouquet, probably." There was a hint of a pleased smirk as he continued. "In the end it was either that or having Belle refuse to talk to him."

Picturing his diminutive stepmother-to-be facing off against her father was not too difficult. That the bigger man had given in, in the end, was no surprise either.

His father might manipulate all available strings to his benefit, but Belle just grabbed at them and pulled stubbornly until they delivered what she wanted.

Baelfire now had cause to be glad that circumstances had forced him to come to Storybrooke. After getting to know Belle, he had the feeling that she would have reassured him that she understood his position (and she wouldn't even have been lying!), grabbed his arm, started talking about all the interesting things she'd found in New York, and before he knew he'd have found himself on a plane bound to Maine despite the resentment he'd nurtured for centuries.

Her own father never stood a chance.

"I'm sure he'll come around, Papa."

His father snorted. "As long as he comes without wielding sharp objects," he grumbled.

Baelfire decided it was time to change the subject. "Thanks for having me over, Pop."

"You're welcome at any time," his father said earnestly.

With a quick look, Baelfire made sure that his son was still asleep. "And you're really not mad I brought Henry with me?"

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. "Of course not. The boy will need to spend more time with our side of
the family, or he'll take too much after the Charmings." The last was said with an emphatic wrinkle of his nose. Personally, Baelfire could think of worse fates for a boy than to be a loyal warrior like David, or a strong leader like Snow, but he didn't say that out loud.

His father might be resigned to a familial connection to the royals in question, but he didn't like them a whit better for it.

"Sometimes I think he's all Emma," he admitted with a wry chuckle.

"Which is noteworthy, considering who did the actual raising of your boy."

Baelfire downed his drink, as ever perturbed by the reminder that his son had been under the care of the Evil Queen for ten years.

"Henry was the making of that girl," his father pointed out softly. "Regina was headed down much darker roads, if she hadn't found someone to hold on to."

"Regina is a grown woman," Baelfire retorted. First impressions were everything, and his first meeting with the former queen had involved threats, ropes, and fireballs. "She can choose her own roads by herself."

"She can," his father said, "but she has a tendency to choose the wrong one."

"All the more reason to watch her. Look, I'm not trying to take Henry away from Regina, so you don't need to look so worried. But I want to chip in too, you know? Emma lives with her parents and she still has Henry over half the time. I think I can find some place big enough for the two of us. You know, with a room for himself if he wants to spend the night."

That made his father look up. "Ah, right," he started, "and that brings me to the reason I asked you to come earlier tonight."

Baelfire wondered what he had missed. "Wow. You really didn't mean this as a goodbye to your bachelor ways, did you, papa?"

"Not at all, though I've liked sharing a drink with you. We should do it more often." And he tipped his own glass in Baelfire's direction with a content smile. "But Belle and I made some decisions, and one of them needs to be addressed before the honeymoon."

Baelfire didn't ask what their plans were. With the curse still an issue at the town line, and the magic beans carefully tended by the giant, the only option was to stay in town. If the next morning Storybrooke woke up to a barrier around his father's house, Baelfire would have no comment and absolutely no thought on what was going on inside it.

"What is it?" he asked instead.

"Belle has already all but moved in here, but now that it's official we have to do something with her place. The bookstore was Regina's idea, but even if Belle isn't interested in running it, it still wouldn't feel right to rent it out to a complete stranger." His father looked at him entreatingly. "So what do you say, Bae. Feel like moving to a second-floor flat with a guest room that can be furnished and decorated for a ten-year-old, and a rather large library below it?"

"You're not kidding?" Baelfire grinned even as his father shook his head. "Sure! Sounds better than my room at Granny's. For how long?"

"For as long as your visit lasts. Indefinitely longer is you plan to stay for good."
His father looked cautiously hopeful as he made the offer.

Baelfire's memory took him back to the hundreds of times his father had presented him with outrageous gifts, and how Bae had shot him down at every opportunity. But this? He actually could use a place of his own. He'd bring up the matter of payment once he had worked out a paying job in Storybrooke - and his father didn't look as if he expected his offer to be kicked back in his face.

"Thank you, Pop," he told him, smiling to show that he was sincere and reaching out to clasp his father's shoulder gratefully. "And there I'm the one supposed to bring you a wedding gift!"

His father closed his eyes in badly hidden relief. "You just did."

The End
21/08/16
Belle and Henry enjoy an afternoon of tabletop games.

@still-searching47 asked: "It's not rocket science."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Henry peered at a bright blue puzzle piece, considering for a moment before he placed it down on the table. "Damn," he muttered when it didn't quite fit.

"Henry!"

Henry shrugged, but a light blush on his cheeks betrayed that he was aware of the infraction. "Please don't tell mom," he muttered as he tested another spot unsuccessfully.

Belle put down her own piece, which of course slid into place at her first try. "If you don't tell her I laughed," she offered.

Henry glanced up, regarding her with that amused smirk he now knew he'd inherited from his paternal line. "You're the nice dealer, then?"

Belle grinned. "Whenever I can." And in went yet another piece.

With a sigh, Henry exchanged the piece in his hand for another from the pile at his elbow - in the exact same shade. "I had no idea the sky would be so hard to put together." He looked over the half-formed picture, looking for a spot that matched the shape he held. Guiding himself by color was useless, as the picture had only a few clouds to break through the blue background. "It seemed easier when we started."

"That's because we did the edges first. After that you have to watch out for the little details," Belle advised, tapping her chin with her own piece as she considered her options. "Once you take all the sides into account-" she brightened and reached over to place it "-you'll see exactly where it belongs."

If he were sitting with his grandfather, Henry would take those words as a metaphor of their current circumstances. Grandpa Gold would give him a significant look and offer a few more hints until Henry had worked out his true meaning.

It didn't take much to imagine his mom's sister as the loose piece trying to force her way into the wrong place.

"Do you think Mom and Aunt Zelena will ever get along?"
Belle froze with her piece hovering an inch over the table for a full five seconds. Then she straightened and gave him one of her most thoughtful looks. "Henry, darling, have you talked about this with your mother?"

Henry nodded. "Sure. She says her sister is out of her mind and that soon she'll be out of Storybrooke, so I shouldn't worry about her."

"That doesn't sound like Regina is keen on reconciliation."

"Sure. Not now." Henry spoke with the certainty of past experience. "But she used to say the same about Emma, and now they're all right."

Belle started to say something, but reconsidered and gave a little cough. "Right," and then, with more conviction, "Do take into account that Emma never meant to hurt your mom. In fact..."

Far from dejected, Henry nodded with enthusiasm. "Exactly! And they're still working together. Then there's mom and grandpa Gold, of course." He raised his chin, proud to have worked out the truth from both what he'd seen since the break of the curse and the vague stories in his book. "I know they haven't always been nice to each other."

Belle's lips quivered, but settled into a smile instead of the laughter her eyes announced. "Right," she said again, if with even more hesitation than the first time. She finally put her puzzle piece down, and then that hand reached over to pat Henry's shoulder. "Honey, you must understand that your moms have put their differences aside because they've got you. Rumple and Regina, too, are working together more often than not because they care about you." Her voice softened, and she gave his shoulder a light, supportive squeeze. "Zelena, I'm afraid, isn't interested in finding common ground."

"But she and mom are sisters!"

"Relationships," Belle said, her eyes as gentle as when she'd explained to a little boy that his birth mother might not want to be found, "are more complicated than that."

Henry had heard that before.

His mom - Emma, not Regina - and his dad were at ease around each other now, but both had made a point of remarking that they were only friends. Insisting that they were True Love had only led to the explanation that life was 'more complicated than that'.

Grown-ups, Henry decided, needed to focus on what was important.

"I don't care that it's complicated," he said, aware he was being stubborn and unable to see the flaw as stubbornness was a common thread among all three sides of his family. "It's not rocket science. It's being a family!"

Belle regarded him for a long moment, turning away from their puzzle. Henry waited for the usual reaction - even Archie had told him not to hope for too much - but instead he found himself being drawn into one of his aunt's tight hugs. "I wish more people thought like you, Henry." Then she kissed his forehead and drew back to look him in the eye. "I won't make you any promises; Zelena really isn't making things easy. But if there's something I can do to help you, I will. Okay?"

That was the only positive response he'd gotten on the subject of inviting the Wicked Witch into the family circle. "Sure! Thanks."

"And in return," Belle's little wink reminded him of an earlier part of their conversation. At least,
Henry thought, she was the nice one. "You will not, under any circumstances, run off on your own. Or talk to Zelena without one of us there."

He made a noise of protest, but Belle shook her head before he could verbalize it.

"No, Henry. I do hope that you're right, but nothing Zelena's done has made me trust her. Promise?"

Henry sighed. He'd had no concrete plans, but meeting with his aunt had been an idea at the back of his head for weeks, waiting for parental attention to lower their guard.

However, he was not the kid who'd offered his heart to Pan without giving it any thought. He had grown up, and he knew that Belle's support would be more effective than an escapade in the long run.

"Deal."

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The End
07/11/17

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is love!
It was a smart trap, cutting off any access to dark magic when the strongest fighters were the Dark One and the Evil Queen. The two of them might fight for the side of good, but their methods were their own.

Which at the moment meant that they were useless.

Everybody breathed in relief when a small ball of light flared in the unnatural darkness of the cave.

"I knew you could do it, Emma," came David's gruff voice.

Regina scoffed. "Look closer, farm boy."

Belle looked almost apologetic, the little light wavering a few inches above her hand. "Can we hurry?" she muttered, motioning the group forward with her other hand. "It won't hold for too long."

The others stared for another second, expressions ranging from bewilderment to Henry's enthusiastic grin. Only Gold looked unsurprised.

Of course he would be, Emma thought irritably. He had cards under his sleeve even when nobody expected him to sit at the game. "You taught her?" That sounded petulant to her own ears, so she lowered her voice. "Thought you were too impatient to bother with someone who's never handled magic before."

"He is," Belle and Regina spoke at once, then eyed each other.

Through her months in Storybrooke, Emma had gathered that the two women had been familiar with each other as they coincided in Gold's home in the other world. But if they'd ever been on friendly terms - and Belle French, local businesswoman, had certainly been content to call Madam Mayor her friend - now they tread with care around each other.

"But I had the innate talent," Regina said, standing straighter.

Belle let the light flare up in wordless riposte.

"Guess that's something to show for all the hours you could spare from sweeping the floors."

"I could have tried to steal and then lose a kingdom," Belle said, and whoever had tried to make fairytale princesses all sweetness had never met any from the Enchanted Forest, "but I preferred to do something more productive."

"Like the laundry?"

"Or visiting my father." Belle looked the taller woman in the eye. "Whom I love dearly."
Regina hissed.

"Enough!" Gold must be a decent teacher, because both women responded to the authoritative tone, retreating to their metaphorical corners. Gold watched them for a moment, then turned to Emma and cleared his throat. "To answer your question, Miss Swan, my students must be eager to learn - much unlike you. And also unlike you, they do what it takes to achieve results."

At that, Regina turned to the couple, a too sweet smile on her lips, and addressed Belle. "So whose heart did he have you take?"

The light faltered, but it quickly returned to life brighter than before.

"I chose a different curriculum," Belle answered tightly, though the glare she pinned on the former Evil Queen said that she wouldn't mind using Regina as a subject in that lesson.

*Careful about dismissing Rumple's little doll,* Regina had told her once. *That bookworm has teeth.*

Emma believed that now.

"Let's just be grateful that someone here can use magic at all," Mary Margaret cut in, the voice of reason, though she also looked surprised that anyone under the Dark One's tutelage could work light magic. "Will it last until we reach the outside?"

Belle bit her lip, but nodded.

"Can anybody use magic, then?" asked Henry.

Emma glanced up, already shaking her head. From the corner of her eye, she saw Regina doing the same. They might be shaky at sharing the duty of being Henry's mothers, but in this they didn't need an argument to agree.

"I don't think..." Emma said.

Regina was firmer, twelve years of being Henry's mother backing up her resolved stance. "Absolutely not."

Gold glanced between them, and too late Emma realized he was delighted for a chance to thwart the two of them at the same time.

Luckily Belle got there first. "It took me months to do as much as light a candle," she admitted, "and, really, I only kept trying because I had too much free time and not enough to fill it with."

Gold harrumphed.

It must be an old argument between the two of them, because Belle gave an exasperated huff. She leaned in to whisper something in his ear, and that made Gold raise an eyebrow and shake his head.

Emma only caught a word that sounded like 'looking'. Or maybe 'cooking'? "*Anyway,*" Belle said, picking up her explanation, "it takes more effort than most people are willing - or able - to give."

Unless they chose a darker path. (Not that they'd tell Henry that now.)

As Regina explained it, darker magic was easier to access, easily fed by hate and hurt. It was often more powerful, too, since its objective was to do harm. It was easier to destroy than to create.
Emma looked at the light hovering over Belle's palm. She looked a bit pale now, and the little ball had shrunk further in the last minutes, but she kept the spell going anyway.

This was no weakling, no plaything to the Dark One, and they'd do well to remember that.

Henry nodded at Belle's explanation, but then his brow furrowed. "So you could do what Grandpa does, eventually?"

Belle shook her head quickly. "No! I...."

She sounded scared by the idea.

"Not everyone needs that kind of power, Henry," Gold stepped in smoothly. "Some people are powerhouses, with the potential to light up the world."

*Or burn it to ashes*, Emma thought, still uncomfortable with the idea of wielding magic of her own.

"Others-" Gold put a hand on Belle's shoulder and smiled "-must shine only if they're needed."

David came to a sudden halt, and looked over his shoulder at the older man. His expression was tentative as he glanced between him and Belle, as if he was dealing with a square peg that suddenly fit in a round hole. "A flicker of light in an ocean of darkness?"

Gold met his gaze, but in the end let out a small laugh. "Indeed. A pretty way to phrase it, if I may say so."

David chuckled. "Oh, you may."

Regina snorted. "Never thought I'd hear *you* wax poetry on weakness, Rumple, but never mind that. This isn't a new development, is it?" she asked with the air of someone who'd finally had a long-standing question answered. "That time, when you were supposed to be locked away--" she cast a glare at Gold "-you'd given her a summoning charm, hadn't you?"

Gold flashed a grin, all teeth and mockery, in response. "Just for emergencies, dearie. The castle going up in flames; an army beating down the doors." He gave a twirl with his right hand, the movement ending with his pointing finger in Regina's direction. "Or a naughty queen looking to cheat me out of a honest deal."

Regina scowled.

"Oh, be glad your silly plan didn't work. I would never have traded the curse's secret for Belle."

Emma expected Belle to be offended by that, and even Mary Margaret gasped at the callous admission. But the brunette stood straighter and instead put her free hand on her husband's arm, a gesture of support rather than hurt feelings.

The two of them would never make sense to her.

Regina instead gave the couple a condescending smile. "Let me guess. You'd have taken apart my castle piece by piece until you found her. How... romantic, Rumple."

Gold's smile sharpened. "Not your castle. Dearie."

Regina had the good sense to pale.

Emma gulped. In that moment, it was easy to picture Gold as the villain he painted himself to be.
"You belonged in that cage," Regina told him curtly.

Gold shrugged. "Lost chances are lost forever, Regina. You know that." Then he smirked. "But isn't the irony delicious? The one time you trust your dear stepdaughter to do something right and cage the beast permanently," he rumbled pleasantly, "and what a shoddy job that turns out to be!"

Mary Margaret and David stiffened.

Regina glanced at the pair, then at Gold's grin, and broke into an unexpected laugh. "The wonder couple did fall for it, didn't they?"

"I did write a convincing script," Gold said modestly. "And they played it with such enthusiasm!"

"Rumple," Belle said, and there was reproach in her tone.

_A beast, perhaps, Emma thought. But a leashed one._

And from Gold's look on his face when he turned to his wife, happily so.

"Very well, sweetheart," he said with seeming sincerity. "I apologize for implying you were gullible fools. And since we are all playing nice," he continued, ignoring David's reddening face or the way Mary Margaret grasped his wrist and tugged him along with her to avoid a confrontation, "I believe I might as well take the opportunity to thank the fair queen Snow and king James for their kind yet too short hospitality."

Inexplicably, Belle giggled at that. "Haven't you thanked them enough?"

A hard look crossed Gold's face. "Not nearly."

Her parents squirmed, but Emma couldn't find it in herself to rise to their defense. She had seen the cell where Gold had been left to rot. She'd never been one to root for the villain of a story, but in that case she was glad Gold had gotten a pass.

There was an awkward silence, as not even Henry knew how to bridge over the fact that one set of grandparents had imprisoned his other grandfather.

Awkward family dinners were a distinct possibility in the kid's future.

"Rake them over the coals on your free time, Rumpelstiltskin," Regina suggested, clearly happy to be invited to watch. "Right now we've got a wicked witch to catch."

And she did look delighted at the idea of thumping Zelena down.

Emma sighed.

Yes, family was definitely complicated in Storybrooke.

The End
30/12/15
"Bad day?" Neal asked

To his surprise, she shook her head. "No. Not at all. Great news, actually."

He raised an eyebrow.

Emma opened her mouth. Closed it. Then pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know what. It is good news, but I still need alcohol to talk about it."

Neal chuckled when Emma just seemed to melt into his couch. He had kept most of Belle's furniture from the time her cursed self had lived in the upstairs apartment, but he'd gone to great lengths to ship in the couch from his place in New York. Emma, of course, had fallen in love with it the first time she'd sat down for a talk.

Watching her lean back and exhale in apparent exhaustion, Neal had the feeling that he owed this particular visit more to his couch than the company. Emma had barely mumbled a greeting before sweeping through the downstairs and up here. Neal wasn't sure when she'd gotten comfortable with the idea of dropping by his place with no warning or explanation, but he was glad she had somewhere to retreat. Her family was great, but they could be suffocating for someone who'd spent their whole life alone. And the townspeople... well, it hadn't taken Neal long to realize that their expectations of their savior (and sheriff) were too high.

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A minute later she was grabbing onto a cold beer as if it was a lifeline. She took a long gulp, then set the bottle between her knees and tapped at the rim with her fingernails. "Have I mentioned how
"crazy my life is?"

"A couple times," he agreed.

"No, really. I just was dragged to karaoke by Red Riding Hood and Cinderella last week, and I had to listen as they planned the baby shower for freakin' Sleeping Beauty. What's next, tea parties with Alice in Wonderland?"

"Jefferson says there's rumors she's around somewhere, so don't be surprised if a white rabbit shows up."

Emma groaned. "I'll be shooting it on sight. I can, you know. I'm the Sheriff now. I can shoot things that annoy me."

"Oh, we know it." He thought of their last encounter with Regina's crazy sister. Now that was one redhead who had learned to take seriously the threat of a gun pointed at her. "Is Regina still mad at you?"

She followed his thought process without a hitch. "Yeah. Still harping at me for using a lead bullet instead of a spell. As if life wasn't crazy enough already, I've got the Evil Queen pressing me to learn magic. The Evil Queen, Neal. How crazy is that?"

"Um. Rumpelstiltskin's son here."

"Oh, I'm only getting warmed up. Do you really want to get into the subject of fairytale parents now? At least your dad isn't younger than you by half a decade."

That had to be weird, Neal acknowledged. "My stepmom is," he still tried.

Emma gave him a look. "You got nothing better?"

He didn't have to dig too far. "My grandfather has been around for three centuries, and he still looks like a sixteen-year-old - and he likes it that way."

Her nose wrinkled. "Okay, that's more disturbing than catching Snow White and Prince Charming doing the dirty in the living room."

Neal chortled. "That cannot be the good news."

Emma shook her head. Took another swig of her bottle. "Oh no. You should congratulate me. I mean, congratulate Mary Margaret first, but it's not fair because she's been pregnant before."

Emma looked up at him, a grin that looked forced on her face. "Look, it's me, the oldest older sister in the world."

The urge to laugh at her miserable expression was promptly stomped out. Neal managed a commiserating sound. "Um. Congrats?" He was tempted to take the seat next to her and offer a hug. Friends hugged each other, didn't they? But his relationship with Emma was still up in the air, for all they acted as co-parents in Henry's life and had managed to rebuild the trust between them. Touching made things weird, so he did the next best thing. "You know what. this calls for bigger guns. Whiskey, vodka? A night at the Rabbit Hole?"

"Tempting."

"Come on," he cajoled. "Call Graham to do the rounds. That's what deputies are for."
Emma laughed. "Welcome to Storybrooke, where half the police force runs on four paws."

"Safest town in America," Neal responded. "No one will misbehave while the wolves are running. You can take the night off, get drunk with me for the last time before it becomes a bad example for impressionable kids."

"What about Henry?"

Neal snorted. "He's not impressionable."

Emma nodded. "It's not the worst idea I've heard. Beats staying at home, listening to David and Mary Margaret plan out the nursery...."

"You moving out?"

"I was planning to." She had stood up and collected her jacket, and sighed as she put it back on. "But now I'm stuck because if I say I'm going, they'll think that the baby is ousting me, and isn't that ridiculous?"

"Yes, ridiculous," Neal agreed, grabbing his keys and checking his pants pockets for his wallet. "As if you're not grown up enough to realize that the fact that your parents are getting a second chance at a happy ending, complete with toddlers on their knees, does not mean that they love you any less?"

"...Yeah."

He kept speaking even as he led their way down the stairs and through the room that had been Belle's bookstore. "It's not as if you've had them back long enough to do more than build some bridges and try to forget that, all their good intentions aside, you were on your own for most of your life. And now this new kid will get the improved, more mature version of the people who raised - I mean, should have raised you."

"Right...."

"It's not like you can turn back time and change the past, can you? I mean, sure you used to wish for a home now and then, but that was a long time ago. You grew up. Grown-ups don't get homesick for what doesn't exist anymore."

"Hey, Neal?" Emma grabbed his arm and, having successfully halted his progress, placed herself between him and the front door. "Don't get me wrong, but this is my pity party. You can project your own 'future older sibling' issues on your own time, okay? If you ask nicely, I promise I'll be there to listen."

He smiled ruefully. "Caught onto that, did you?"

"Takes one to know another," she said, landing a light punch on his bicep.

"It's not that I'm against the idea," Neal tried to explain. "Not that I get a vote, but I'm all for Dad getting to be a dad again. Between one thing and the other, he missed out on a lot of raising a child the normal way. All that teenage angst. The raging hormones and awkward talks. The blaming everything on him, whether it's right or not...."

"So, basically, you want Gold to suffer?"

"Kinda," he admitted, shrugging.
Emma chuckled. "Can't blame you. But you do remember that you've got a pre-teen of your own, right? Maybe by the time your dad gets there, you'll have some pointers for him."

Now that would make their family dynamics odder than they already were. "Not if it's a girl," he said quickly. As he spoke, he pictured his father, the staid figure he had adopted in Storybrooke, and a brown-haired, brown-eyed little girl. If she had even half of Belle's enthusiasm for anything that caught her attention... "God. She'll run circles around him," he breathed.

Meanwhile, Emma's thoughts had run in a different direction. "Just remind me to quit before this imaginary sister of yours starts dating," she asked urgently. "Sooner or later she'll get her heart broken, and I've seen what your father does when he believes his girl has been hurt. I don't need all that paperwork again."

Neal frowned.

"Um. Long story." She hurried to unblock the doorway, turning the doorknob with one hand and passing through onto the sidewalk before Neal could question her. "The Rabbit Hole, you said?"

"Emma..."

"Neal..." she said in the same tone. When he only waited for an answer, she sighed. "Look, it's water under the bridge. Old history, really. If it helps, it was Regina's fault."

He considered that. "Actually, it does help."

"Now come on," Emma called out, waving him over to her car. He slipped easily inside, threw back the seat to accommodate his longer legs without her needing to warn him of the tricky lever.

Details like that unnerved her a little, the too vivid reminders that once they'd shared what little they owned. But he'd been right, no one could turn back time. They were here, and they still shared enough in common that they could be friends as they raised a kid together (along with the Evil Queen, but today she didn't have time to fret over that).

The past was in the past.

Now she and Neal would head to the bar, spend a few hours playing pool and forgetting their tangled family tree and the future little branches in it. Then they'd nurse a terrible hangover tomorrow morning, and perhaps by then she could tell Mary Margaret how happy she was over the new baby without the feeling that a part of her was lying, and lying horribly about it.

It wasn't bitterness, not exactly. Nor did it feel like jealousy.

It was a bit of sadness, that she would never be the one who knew the safety of her parents from birth. And it was this need to make sure that the new kid's life was nothing like hers.

Which meant that she and this kid sibling would only have so much in common. Even in the best case scenario, Emma would be more of an honorary aunt than a sister, and that was one more experience that she would miss.

Yes. It was sadness.

"You know, Em," Neal spoke up suddenly. "Kids do this all the time."

He'd lost her. "Huh?"
"Become older brothers. Or older sisters," he explained. "And they deal with it just fine."

"Are you saying that we can do it too?"

He crooked a smile. "Or we can throw ourselves onto the floor and have a tantrum. Whatever works best for you."

That surprised a snort out of her. "Let's leave that as plan B, if you don't mind. I'm sticking with alcohol and loud music for tonight."

"And good company," Neal reminded her.

Emma glanced over at him. The smile was the same that had captivated her at eighteen, and she couldn't imagine another person she could have gone to after Mary Margaret's announcement that would have accepted her mixed feelings without diminishing their importance. Even if he wasn't practically in the same boat, Emma knew she could have counted on him to understand.

They'd been two lost kids once, alone for years before they'd found a temporary home in each other. They understood that the world wasn't made of happy endings and vanquished villains, and that love wasn't always enough no matter how true. Alone in their extended family, they knew how difficult it was to believe they belonged somewhere now, that people loved them without conditions.

Neal was someone she could count on, and she thanked God and all the twinkly little blue stars that he'd decided to come live in Storybrooke.

It would have been hell, to brave the fairy tale madness without someone else who remembered how the world worked when magic wasn't a factor.

"Yes, Neal. Good company." She steered with her right hand, and with the other knocked her knuckles against his shoulder. At times like this, she almost believed it was a pity they'd settled as friends and nothing more. "The best."

The End
24/04/16
Chapter Summary

Belle finds out about a rumor in town.

Chapter Notes


Instead things settle down after their return from Neverland.

Belle hurried blindly through the front rooms on her way to the kitchen, managing to snap the door closed with a single kick, keep her keychain hooked around her right thumb, and not drop any of the four tall grocery bags she carried hugged to her chest as she made her way to the kitchen counter.

The bags made a loud thud as she slammed their weight against the marbled surface. A moment later, the sound was followed by a frustrated snarl. "I do have a great sex life!" she raged, pouring all the anger she had bottled back while in public.

A series of coughs answered her, so unexpected that it made her jump in place.

"Rumple is home," she thought, feeling her cheeks burn.

She hesitated, considering a flight into her study until the embarrassment passed and she could face him at dinner - or more likely at breakfast the next morning. But in the end Belle took a deep breath and, sighing, flattened the top of the nearest bag, revealing the figure seated at the kitchen table that had been blocked from her view.

She was never leaving home without her high heels again, she decided as she steeled herself against one of his jokes. True Love didn't mean that Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't poke fun at what he perceived to be a weak moment; it just meant he'd never take it far enough to actually break her.

But instead of a smirk, Belle found a dumbfounded expression on his face. Brown eyes stared at her, wide and unblinking, a coffee mug dangling from his grasp.

The picture of her shocked husband brought forth a giggle. For someone who adored disconcerting everyone in his vicinity, Rumpelstiltskin looked quite helpless on the other side of that equation. "Hi," she chirped, aware that she must make a ridiculous sight from among boxes of cereal and juice, her color high and probably a bit disheveled from her rush back home.

She laughed at the mental picture of the two of them, really, caught in this awkward moment.

Her amusement served to unfreeze him.
He gave a slow blink, clearing his throat as if her outburst hadn't just made him choke in surprise. "Hello, sweetheart." he said at last, placing the mug down in front of him with too careful precision. He wasn't quite avoiding her gaze, but neither did he rise to welcome her with their customary hug and kiss on the cheek either. "Everything went well?"

Belle huffed. Well enough, when one was the wife of the Dark One. The people in Storybrooke either sneered or cowered when they had to come in contact with her. And those who did neither.... "Ran into Granny," she said with an airy tone, hoping to redirect him away from her embarrassing statement.

It seemed to work.

Rumpelstiltskin's shoulders relaxed, apparently just as relieved that the conversation would go in a more established direction. He knew about the townspeople and his wife; he knew that he was expected to listen and give advice that didn't involve revenge or shows of strength (which limited his options but piqued his imagination, so he embraced the challenge).

He tapped his fingers against the edge of the table in a cheery tone, wordlessly dismissing any other subject. "How lovely," he said sarcastically, used to the old woman's open spite unless his grandson happened to be at his side. At least Madam Lucas was smart enough to be civil to Belle, but could never hold her tongue if she saw an opportunity. "Sent her kind regards, I'm sure?"

Belle lifted a sealed envelope from on top of the bag of apples. "Sent the rent instead." She eyed him. A minute before, she would have done anything for them to ignore her mortifying entrance; but now that Rumpelstiltskin was avoiding the subject.... Had they ever mentioned sex when they weren't actually in the middle of an intimate moment? No. No, they hadn't. It never had reason to come up at all.

It almost made her giggle again, to think of her husband as that much of a prude. He certainly had never given a sign of it, in the privacy of their bedroom or when teasing others (namely, Regina, and sometimes Emma when his son was out of hearing).

"Ruby was with her," she continued, considering whether it was worth to explain how that detail related to her harried return home. No, she decided as she busied her hands by sorting the fresh veggies and fruits that needed to be placed into the fridge, and the dry goods destined to the cabinet. But if it came up again, she must remind herself to slow down. Always better to gentle Rumpelstiltskin into a difficult conversation, because his instinct was to either growl and demand to be left alone, or to flee and make it thrice as difficult to approach him again. "She kinda stuck with me after her grandmother left. Treated me to some ice cream and all; that was nice at least."

Rumpelstiltskin lifted an eyebrow.

The werewolf had befriended Belle during the time she'd had her memories erased at the townline. He suspected that Ruby's intent had been to save an innocent from the Dark One's influence, but his Belle (yes, even that Belle) had taken Ruby's warnings with a laugh and, instead of allowing the other girl to draw her away from Rumpelstiltskin, she'd nurtured the friendship until even one of Snow White's oldest allies was willing to give Rumpelstiltskin the benefit of the doubt.

As Ruby had pointed out, the time he'd found the redhead at his doorstep with a basket of ready meals under her arm and rehearsed congratulations on the recent marriage on her lips, there must be some redeeming quality in him if Belle was so blissful about spending the rest of her life tied to him.

The admission had been followed with a growled warning to keep Belle happy.
As Rumpelstiltskin's own state of mind had been as close to bliss as he ever dared to feel, he had allowed the little show of heroism without more than a snap of his fingers and a smirk as the girl was dragged away back to the inn by his magic.

He'd kept the basket, of course.

A whole week's worth of Granny's cooking, and none of it the lasagna he was indifferent to.

Belle could indeed work miracles.

"Probably quizzed you about that little cloak of hers, too," he prodded. The girl had been making noises about getting an outfit more in trend with this world's fashions. As if cloth imbued with were-magic was spun at every corner.

Didn't even have a bargain worth considering, to get his interest.

Rumpelstiltskin would take it... amiss... if Ruby thought she could manipulate Belle into pleading her case.

Belle shook her head. "It was mentioned, but I don't think she really cares that much. Mostly, she complained about losing her drinking buddies and tried to get me to agree to a night at the Rabbit Hole."

"Place's a dump," Rumpelstiltskin said, wrinkling his nose.

"Is it?" Belle shrugged. "Told her I'd think about it. Might be fun." She made quick work of shoving the cereal into their corner in the lower cabinet. When she rose again, she gave a little sigh. "Just not sure how I feel about playing second choice - or fifth, since most of the girls she usually hangs up with can't drink either."

Rumpelstiltskin nodded. Snow White and her fellow princesses were busy bearing the fruits of their happy endings. A whole harvest of royals that didn't need to be herded into a specific direction. After three hundred years tending to all the strands that would eventually come into play when it was time to enact the Dark Curse, leaving them to their own fates would be a welcome rest.

He looked up to share his thoughts, but found a pensive expression on her face, and re-routed his next sentence into a question. "Everything all right?"

Belle glanced at him, then down at the foodstuff still on the counter. For a long moment it seemed as if she had something in mind, but in the end she only nodded and continued picking through her purchases.

His fingers twitched to provide the magic that would send every piece to its place, but he'd come home for a break, not for another argument on his dependence on magic. "Need help?" he asked instead, already lifting himself from the chair.

"Thanks," Belle said softly, smiling at him with sincere gratefulness.

Magic had its price. But while Belle was around, setting it aside had its own rewards as well.

He didn't need magic to spend a quiet half hour with his wife. It felt wonderful, as it always did, to be appreciated for his presence and not his power.

They worked together for a few minutes, until the counter was empty and they exchanged their places, with Belle sitting at the table while Rumpelstiltskin fiddled with two cups and her favorite
He'd lost the taste for coffee, today.

"Is there trouble?" Belle asked once he'd handed her a cup and sat himself next to her. She hadn't heard of any new enemy on the streets, and now with cellphones and landlines and the local radio station, the former peasants caught up with the news a lot more quickly than they had done in the Enchanted Forest. But, in either world, Rumpelstiltskin's battles were rarely fought in the open. "Is that why you've come home early?"

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. "Nothing serious. Just a slow day and no sign of it improving."

Belle nodded in understanding. She remembered life during the curse, and how her work at her bookstore had seemed to stretch a few minutes into full hours on the slower days. "I'm glad you're here," she told him. Then gave him a sheepish smile. "I was surprised, though."

He did a quick gulp, and his color heightened. "Ah. I noticed."

He made to rise, give an excuse about work to be done at his office; but her hand shot across the table to settle on his, a mute appeal to keep him close. Brown met blue, and after a long silence, Rumpelstiltskin heaved a deep breath. He wasn't comfortable, but she had nobody else to confide in. His fault, for tying her to himself so securely, so it was fair that he replaced all those friends she'd never have.

He squeezed her hand. "What happened really, sweetheart?"

"It's silly," she started, then shook her head at her own choice of words. "I mean, it seemed so silly. I've told you most of it. I went out shopping, had a run-in with Granny, hung out some with Ruby. That was nice." A note of wistfulness snuck into that last sentence. She had spent years in the Enchanted Forest wishing for a social life that included more real friends than Rumpelstiltskin's contacts, or at least that the distance to those few acquaintances she enjoyed visiting wasn't so vast. Now she lived in a small town, surrounded by people and passing dozens every time she headed to the pawnshop for a visit or to the diner for take out, and still she didn't have many occasions to mingle socially with them. "And then she had to grin and say she was so happy I wasn't joining in the baby race. And when I tried to explain, she gave me this sad look - as if I was making it all up! - and offered to give me a few pointers to- to help myself out," she finally choked out, unable to blame Rumpelstiltskin for the grimace he was wearing. "I know! As if I --- I mean, you... We don't need that!"

"And if Ruby believes that, then everyone thinks the same!"

And she wouldn't have reacted like this, in public, wouldn't have raised her voice or done more than shake her head and given a quiet argument in return. Belle had learned to keep her quick temper under wraps. Because gently-reared noblewomen didn't snap in anger, and if they did, then it must be the Dark One's influence.

Rumpelstiltskin didn't mind one more charge laid at his door, but Belle bristled at the injustice and had responded by bottling up her instinctive response.

One day, Storybrooke would answer for its short-sightedness.

But not today.

"They're idiots," he said succinctly.

The assessment usually found Belle protesting it, but this time she squeezed his hand in silent
agreement. He gave a slight tug, leading her out of her chair and onto his lap. "Say the word, and I'll turn that red cloak into baggy sweatpants."

Belle imagined Ruby being forced to wear such an article on every full moon. She snorted a laugh, which she guessed had been Rumpelstiltskin's purpose. "That's too cruel, Rumple."

"Is that a yes?"

She shook her head, then leaned more comfortably against his chest, cheek fit against his shoulder. "I know nobody approves of our marriage-"

"Except Bae."

"Except your son," Belle agreed, and then her voice brightened a little, "and his son."

"Henry's a good boy," Rumpelstiltskin rumbled, always aware that when the Truest Believer cheered for the happy ending of the woman he called 'aunt', a smart man took measures to keep that boy's innocence intact.

"But everyone else." She gave a dejected little sigh. "I thought I'd seen the worst of it. They don't get why we're so happy with this marriage, fine. But how can they really think that we're not... not satisfied with it! Have they seen you?!"

He petted the back of her head, making sure she was facing away. He was now more comfortable with her compliments, but the blunt honesty of it... She just sounded so heartfelt, his reaction was instantaneous. The Dark One could blush, who knew. "That's my line, honey," he managed.

Belle shifted on his lap. "They're idiots," she echoed him.

Rumpelstiltskin liked that she was finally seeing things his way, but at the same time he was disconcerted by her bitter tone. "Well, the solution is simple," he said, grabbing her shoulders and tipping her straight so he could kiss the tip of her nose. Then he smirked at her quizzical expression. "We get Emma to set them straight."

Belle's eyes flew wide open, then she blushed - probably at the memory of several interruptions in their private time led by the Savior - and finally she let a giggle escape past her lips.

He relaxed at her laughter, and something in his expression triggered a new softness in hers. Her hand raised to stroke his cheek, then upwards to his temple. "Or I can stop caring about their opinion," she suggested, almost absently, as if talking to herself alone while her fingers played with his hair.

It was on the tip of his tongue to congratulate her on the decision, but something stopped the words from being voiced. Belle cared; Belle *always* cared. She wouldn't have found joy in what others called misfortune, or come to befriend the darkest soul in the realm, if she didn't care first. She wouldn't understand, time and again; and she wouldn't forgive every single time.

"That's not you," he settled for saying, and nodded to himself when she didn't protest.

"But it'd be easier..."

"It's all right," he promised. "That's what I'm here for."
This was supposed to be a tiny drabble. A distraction from another scene I was working on. But then Rumpelstiltskin didn't react as expected, and instead it's the one of the longest scenes in this 'verse so far. lol. It went nowhere it was expected to, but it was fun writing it. Hope you enjoyed!
Blue eyes widened as Ella recognized the woman at her doorstep. "You!"

To her cursed self, Belle French had been just another unremarkable inhabitant of Storybrooke; Ashley Boyd never had enough time to think of books, and even less money to spend on them. The small bookstore on Main Street had been as unfamiliar to her as the world outside the town line.

But now that the curse had lifted, those who had not believed in the rumors of a woman that willingly lived in the Dark Castle now did believe. And everyone had learned to recognize Miss French - now Mrs. Gold - on sight.

It helped their odds for survival, when those without magic knew who they had to avoid.

"What... what do you want?"

The other woman gave her a slight smile. "May I...?" She motioned to the interior of Ella and Thomas's apartment, but both her smile and her hand dropped when Ella shook her head. "I see."

"I don't mean to insult," Ella said quickly, scrambling for a reason that would indeed not be insulting. Perhaps others would challenge this woman and called it bravery, but Ella had been the victim of the Dark One's temper one time and she was terrified of giving him any reason to return for more. "My daughter has been up all night. I just got her to sleep."

Thank the gods, it was even true.

She had never been more grateful for a colicky Alexandra.

Mrs. Gold's features softened. "Oh. Of course. In that case, can I have a minute? I promise it won't take longer than that."

Ella swallowed. In the stories she had heard in the Enchanted Forest, this woman had been featured as a slave or as a mistress, but never evil. "I guess," she conceded, stepping out and shutting the door behind her.

"Look. I came because I know you're friends with Snow, and it's unfair to her that you'll avoid her in public just to steer clear of us."

No need to detail who was included in that 'us'.

If Snow and her family had been hanging out with this woman alone, Ella might even have approached them for a quick chat. She definitely wouldn't have pretended not to hear Snow's greeting and hurried out of the diner. But nothing, not even friendship, could compel her to put herself back in the Dark One's path. "I'll talk to Snow," she said, feeling a bit guilty that she hadn't called her friend yet. She should have understood earlier that, having a grandson in common, the Nolans and Mr. Gold would spend time together. She just had never witnessed such a reunion. "If it
helps, I have nothing against you," Ella added politely, almost sure she was being sincere.

The other woman shook her head. "That's not how it works. You must know that."

Ella blinked.

"Would you be friendly to someone who hated your husband?"

Ella wanted to protest that it wasn't the same. Couldn't be. She and Thomas were meant to be, two halves of a whole. They were True Love, and... oh. "Oh," she repeated faintly. So that rumor was true as well. "Then why come here at all? Snow and I would have patched things up eventually."

In fact, she'd be picking up the phone as soon as her guest left. It was bizarre that the man they had trapped together was now the reason for the distance between them, but Snow White and her husband had helped her when no one else would have dared, and Ella couldn't allow herself to forget that. Out of all the pleas for help Thomas had sent across the land, they were the only ones who had been willing to challenge the Dark One.

"Because you will see us in town, and if we don't clear the air now, it will be awkward again." Mrs. Gold wrinkled her nose a little. "This isn't the Enchanted Forest. You don't get to avoid people just by not saying their name, and we don't get to live so far away that no one comes knocking for every petty trouble. For better or for worse, we're stuck here, in this crowded little town, and we need to work things out."

"Are you visiting every person who's made a deal with the Dark One?"

Mrs. Gold chuckled. "Of course not. I wouldn't have the time." And then she surprised Ella. "In fact, you're the only one."

Ella's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Open-ended deals are not the norm," the brunette explained, with an edge that said that only the ignorant would take them. Then she sighed. "But Rumple did cross a line, with that deal he made you. And though you were a fool both before and after you signed it, it stands that you couldn't have known what he intended, so you did the best you could."

Ella pulled herself straighter. She had tricked the Trickster - or at least been brave enough to attempt it. And even here, as Ashley she had dared to steal from the most powerful man in town, and when cornered resorted to violence when the law wouldn't help. "I would do it again."

"So would he. Parents always would, for a chance to keep their children safe."

Ella knew that the Dark One's son had been lost in this world, but she couldn't see how to compare their situations. Her daughter had been a helpless newborn, so fragile in comparison to the grown man who had settled in Storybrooke a few months ago.

"I don't care."

Mrs. Gold pursed her lips. "You signed, your Highness. Out of your own free will."

Somehow the use of her title chilled Ella's spine. She wondered how many times this woman had faced the people who had been used by the Dark One, and be they royalty or peasant, had reminded them that there could be no victims when their names had been written on a contract by their own hand, and their lives were better for it.
"He wanted my baby!"

A short laugh. "You still don't see? No, he didn't." She gestured to the door, encompassing the sleeping toddler behind it. "You were always meant to keep your child. It wasn't kind, to fit your fear into his plans, but it was fair play. You were lucky the magic considered twenty-eight years of grief as enough payment for your broken word, or you'd never have seen your husband again."

Ella whimpered.

"I'm not asking for your friendship," Mrs. Gold told her, a hint of weariness in her voice. She must know that, as the Dark One's love, there would be no people lining up to become her friends. "I'm asking you to be just. Don't blame Rumpelstiltskin for your choices, and don't blame Snow White for the consequences of them."

Ella thought to protest again, but what would be the point? She had her baby; she had her husband. She gained nothing by antagonizing this woman. In truth, the Dark One hadn't paid attention to her family at all since Alexandra's birth, and now Ella had the feeling that if she had acted normally yesterday and just waved and smiled at Snow, Mrs. Gold wouldn't be standing at her front door right now.

"Why are you doing this?" Ella asked.

"Because Rumpelstiltskin is not a villain, and I'm sick of people acting as if he is," was the soft response. "Because love is not weakness, forgiveness is not useless, and not everything has a price. Or at least peace doesn't." Their eyes met. "If we must be neighbors and share friends in common, let's be civil about it."

She could hold her grudge. Or she could move on, secure in the implied promise that she and her family would be safe.

Ella made her choice: "Just don't ask me to be nice."

Mrs. Gold chuckled. "As long as you're not upset when he - and I - respond in kind."

Ella nodded. "I can live with that."

"Good." Mrs. Gold put her hand forward, and Ella shook it. "It's a deal, then."

They both pretended that Ella hadn't paled at those words, or the way she yanked her hand back, and the other woman left after a quick goodbye, her mission accomplished.

At least, Ella consoled herself, this time she knew the terms she had agreed to.

The End
24/03/16
Rumpelstiltskin accepted the tumbler of fine scotch with a polite smile, waiting until she had settled behind the desk to raise it into the air. "To the smart woman who holds the reins of this town."

She preened. Being the Mayor did have several advantages. Even if it meant being confined in this office for too many hours for her liking, the effort was worth the attention and power she received in return. A compliment hovered on her tongue, making her almost giddy to be trading such niceties with the Dark One.

"Of course," he continued, his expression hardening, "this toast would mean more if the woman in question were in the room."

Shock made her blink.

He chuckled without humor. "Now, dearie, don't make this unnecessarily unpleasant-" He carefully settled the tumbler on the desk, as if this were no more than casual conversation, and held her gaze "-and tell me where you hid my wife's heart."

She scrambled for the appearance of confusion. "Rumple?"

"Oh!" He tapped his cane against the floor in impatience, unimpressed by her theatrics. "And your sister's whereabouts too, if you please."

His cold certainty was a wall against further pretense.

Zelena felt her smile slip, all her plans teetering on the edge of Rumpelstiltskin's temper. And as the whole of the Enchanted Forest knew, that was one capricious creature. "How?" she spat.

"You stole the only heart Regina wouldn't dare touch," he said simply. "You should have chosen to impersonate someone beneath my notice, but you couldn't resist framing Regina, could you?"

"I fooled you all this time!"

"And you want a standing ovation?" One eyebrow quirked as he gave a soft laugh, enjoying her reaction. "Deception counts only when you aren't caught, not when you overplay your hand until you trip on your own conceit. Did I teach you nothing?"
Regina would have sneered. Zelena sulked.

"You're still protecting her!"

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. "I see we don't understand one another." His hand lifted, and before Zelena could mount a defense, she was flying against the wall, her scream cut off by an invisible force pressing her lips together. "I don't care about your little jealousies, dearie. You and your sister can lambast each other on Main Street and I wouldn't be bothered to come to my doorstep and watch. But you don't bring my family into your madness. Understood?"

Unable to move, Zelena still felt a shudder travel down her spine. She had seen Rumpelstiltskin angry before, but never enough to go beyond yelling.

Pride demanded that, bereft of speech, she glared her answer back at him.

Still seated, Rumpelstiltskin laughed at her defiance. "For someone smart enough to outmaneuver Regina, you're just... so, so stupid." He shook his head. "Let me put it in simple terms. You give me Belle's heart, and you walk out of here on your own two feet."

The magic keeping her silent relented. She took the chance to snarl. "That's not-"

"My mistake," he said, gesturing to silence her again. But this time the pressure rose to her nostrils, and she glanced wildly at him when she could not draw any air into her lungs. The bastard was looking at her expectantly. "Did I not mention that was non-negotiable?"

Zelena tried to lift the spell, but the magic in this world was not as easy to reach as in Oz or in the Enchanted Forest. And even at full strength, did she dare pit herself against one who'd been known as the most powerful wizard in their land, and who had wielded magic here for years already? Lightheaded, she reached into the corner of Regina's vault she'd appropriated for her own treasures and brought forth the small box with Belle Gold's heart.

It clattered against the surface of the desk between them, and a gesture from Rumpelstiltskin had the lid snapping open so he could check the contents.

He stood and passed a hand over the glowing heart, checking for traps Zelena hadn't had time to place and nodding to himself before, with another wave of his hand, the box vanished out of sight.

"I suppose that's a start," he rumbled, turning to her.

Zelena could have cried when she was able to breathe again. She would have screamed at him instead, but the original spell kept her mouth shut.

Perhaps that was for the best, as it forced her to pay attention to Rumpelstiltskin's stance. His shoulders had lost their tense line, and in his human features the relief was more evident than it could have been under the cover of his true face.

And all over that silly girl she'd found in his shop.

True love. Despite the fragmented memories she'd wrestled from her sister's mind, Zelena hadn't believed even Rumpelstiltskin could be affected by that nonsense. Taking his wife's heart had been meant as a step in her plan, a tool to discover where the key to the Dark One's power was hidden, but from his reaction Zelena realized that, under the right circumstances, it could have been exchanged for the dagger itself.

She growled noiselessly at the thought of a missed opportunity, but immediately consoled herself.
The pretty wife wasn't Rumpelstiltskin's only weakness; his son might be surrounded by more people, but eventually she would find a way to get to him as well.

"Plotting, are we?" Rumpelstiltskin said, glancing at her with amusement. He walked around the desk until he was standing in front of her, unperturbed by the fact that he had to stare up at her in order to catch her gaze. "I'll do you the favor of believing that using Belle wasn't in your original plan. I taught you, remember? I know both your and Regina's methods, and I know which one would break in where she wasn't invited and plunge a knife into someone's back, and who is so devious she'd suggest to use my trust in Belle to condemn myself. Good to know that Regina hasn't lost her edge." He smirked at her muted protests. "It would have been a beautiful tragedy... if it had a shot of working. Which brings me to this piece of advice I will give you, for old time's sake: do not listen to the people you've captured and imprisoned and have yet to break. In case you haven't noticed, they can't be trusted."

Zelena glared.

With a shrug, Rumpelstiltskin waved a hand. "Oh, very well."

The words that had been choking her spit out. "Regina had nothing to do with it!"

Rumpelstiltskin just stared at her, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "So she didn't mention Belle at all. Or how she is one of the few people that my wife sees socially, often in the privacy of their own homes?" He snickered as realization swept Zelena's features. "What I bet she never mentioned, though, is how I promised to skin her alive, rearrange her insides, and dump her in the middle of the ocean, if she came near Belle's heart again."

The fear that struck Zelena made him lean forward, as if he could catch the sweet scent of terror - terror of him - as it raced across her skin. Clutching onto his cane, he made himself take a step back. Then another.

"She set you up, dearie," he said more softly.

Her scream of fury would have brought several people from the adjacent offices running, but he had slapped a silencing spell around the room from the moment he'd crossed the doorstep.

"I'll kill her!"

"No, you won't." He raised a hand before she could turn that anger against him. Her next snarls were soundless, and she finally settled for bared teeth that communicated well her feelings. "I can't, so I don't see why you'd get the pleasure."

That made Zelena settle, as she stared at him in true confusion.

"She provoked you into action," he explained. "I find I'm not entirely forgiving."

She smiled like a girl being handed her favorite dessert before lunch.

There were few people who relished the thought of throwing others into the lions' den. Cora and her daughters would have starved the lions to ensure a good show, and kept to their front row seats throughout the spectacle.

"Don't get your hopes up, Zelena," he warned. "This means you tell me where she is, and you tell me now. Or," he added when she shook her head resolutely, "I can decide that you were not her instrument, but her accomplice. And why halve the punishment when you're so conveniently at hand?"
Her eyes widened.

"You hurt my wife," he grit out. "You meant to set her against me. What did you think would happen?"

There was no room to shrink further into the wall at her back, but Zelena still tried to burrow further away. He may look human, and the threads of magic in this world felt both too heavy and too fragile, but when she looked him in the eye, the Dark One was still the strongest power in all the realms.

Rumpelstiltskin took a deep breath. "Now you'll tell me?"

Zelena nodded.

The pressure against her lips released. The question blurted out before she could change it into the information he wanted. "Why won't you kill her?"

He sighed. "Because she didn't do it; just like you get this warning because you weren't aware of the consequences."

"Technicalities, If you wanted..." She narrowed her eyes, wondering when the world had tilted so much that Rumpelstiltskin was digging for holes in his own deals. "But you don't want to, do you?"

Because Regina still stood as the mother of Rumpelstiltskin's grandson. Because their mother's death had meant that Zelena was all alone, without even a chance to reunite with Cora, but for Regina it had closed all wounds between her and her new family. Because, even if reluctant, their teacher still preferred Regina.

Because Regina had everything. Again. Always.

And Zelena...

"Oh, I'm getting rid of you," Rumpelstiltskin told her, as easily as if talking about the weather. "You would have struck regardless, and perhaps with more... permanent damage. I can hunt for a stolen heart; I cannot return someone from the dead." Yes. That would have been her first choice. She couldn't help the eager spark in her eyes at that thought, and paid for it with the tip of his cane digging against the base of her throat. "Be glad your sister saved you from that fate, Zelena," he hissed. "There would not have been anywhere in all the worlds to hide from me."

She had nothing. She had no one.

But she still had herself.

"So I'm to be 'rid of', while Regina returns to her throne?" Every fiber of her being rebelled at the thought. "Never!"

Her indignation finally allowed her to unravel the spell around her, the tiny cracks she'd been chipping at it from the moment she'd struck the wall finally giving way after this final shove. There was no way to stay and fight, not when her opponent was Rumpelstiltskin, so instead she bit down her pride and forced herself to flee.

The sound of his cursing followed her, but not even the Dark One could follow where blood magic protected her.
"You'll pay for this," she muttered bitterly as she shed the six-leaf clover that allowed her to wear the likeness of her sister. "You will *all* pay."

All her ideas. All her plans! Weeks of careful arrangement had just burnt up in flames. She blamed Regina. She blamed Rumpelstiltskin. She blamed that insipid wife of his and the boy who had glanced at her warily, as if not even by wearing Regina's body could she be as good as her.

Yes, the boy first. What kind of aunt would she be, not to keep an eye on her sister's only son? She would have to share every detail with Regina, of course. Because nothing could be more cruel than to keep a mother without news of her child.

Henry first.

And then the rest would follow.

The End
11/09/16
Chapter Summary

Nova's life in Storybrooke.

Chapter Notes

Written for Ethereal Wishes. **Prompt:** gardening.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It wasn't unusual to find Mrs. Gold pruning her rose bushes in the morning. Nova always took a minute to stop on the stone path and greet the other woman before she stepped into the house to start her work, and that minute usually stretched into five or ten as they talked about the days since they'd last seen each other.

Mrs. Gold - or Belle, as the other woman had insisted more than once, though Nova couldn't bring herself to call her that when she'd never heard anyone outside their family address the Dark One's wife by name - was much nicer than what Nova would have guessed, going only by what people said. She had never pried into Nova's reasons to leave the convent, though even someone as isolated as Mrs. Gold would have heard about the fairy who'd chosen a dwarf over Blue's rules, and she had never hinted that it had been a poor choice.

After hearing such advice from multiple sources, Nova would have been thankful for that alone.

But on top of her discretion, Mrs. Gold never scolded her when Nova's clumsiness ended in a broken dish or coffee stains on the carpet. That first time she had braced herself for a lecture, perhaps even one in the patronizing tone she'd heard from senior fairies all her life, but Mrs. Gold had only pointed to the supply closet and, when Nova had offered to pay back for the damage from her wages, there had been a head shake and a sincere, "It's just a plate."

Yes, Mrs. Gold was nice, and nobody could convince her otherwise.

Not even Leroy.

He had been so supportive since she'd turned up at his boat with a suitcase that barely reached her knees and still contained all her belongings. Despite his shock, he had still welcomed her and practically turned his private space over to her while he moved in with Happy (until she'd convinced him to come back, but that was another story).

And when Nova had decided that she needed a job or she'd go stir-crazy, Leroy had grumbled a little about being able to support the two of them, but he'd quickly promised to help her spread the word.

That promise had not extended to the Golds.
But they had found out anyway.

Leroy had been furious about that. The minute he had heard that she was considering a job as the Gold's housekeeper (twice a week only, but with better pay than she would have dreamed to ask for), Leroy had been opposed to the idea. He had protested, and loudly, and only stopped when Nova pointed out that no one else was taking the chance to upset Blue. The leader of the fairies might have given her permission for Nova to walk away from the fold, but it didn't take much observation to realize that she wasn't pleased about it.

And who would risk upsetting her?

Even Queen Snow had asked whether leaving the convent had been a good idea, and Nova had the impression that if the reason hadn't been one of the queen's most loyal friends, the conversation would have taken a sharper tone.

Finding her footing in Storybrooke hadn't been easy. Most people regarded her with distrust, unable to understand that someone might disagree with the Blue Fairy and still be a good person. Jobs were already scarce in a town where everyone had been fit by a curse, and as a former nun Nova had a very limited set of skills.

Her first month outside the convent had been as frustrating in her search for a normal life, as it had been rewarding in her joy at working on a relationship with Leroy.

Even when the stubborn man had nearly exploded when Nova had announced that she had an interview at the infamous pink house on the outer edge of town.

He had listed every offense the Dark One had done against the realm, his friends, and him personally.

("A duck?" "Long story." "But... why turn you into a bird?" "...doesn't matter now.")

Nova had insisted that Mrs. Gold had been very polite over the phone call, and since she'd already promised to check out their offer, she wouldn't back out now.

Thankfully, by the time Leroy had come home with the news that the primary school - the same school Queen Snow had worked for under the curse, and which now enjoyed royal attention and probably their close scrutiny as well - had an opening for an assistant teacher, the interview at the Golds' place had already gone underway and Nova could truthfully claim that the pay and conditions there were better.

("But it's Rumpelstiltskin!" "And he offers paid vacation time!")

Leroy had driven her to her new job that first day, and only left when assured that Mr. Gold - there was no way she was calling him by his true name! - had left for his pawnshop early in the morning and there was no possibility that Nova would cross ways with him.

Nova had insisted he returned home before he antagonized Mrs. Gold with his suspicions about her.

"I'm so sorry," Nova had said, cringing a little because she was certain Leroy's voice had carried over into the house. "He's just..."

"Protecting you," Mrs. Gold had finished the sentence, and then heaved a little sigh. "But you understand you're in no danger here, right? I don't want someone to stay if they're too scared."
Nova had read her contract three times before signing it. The Dark One was many things, but neither in this world nor the last was he a deal breaker. And, well, it helped that she hadn't actually talked to the man except for a brief greeting (which he'd returned with a sneer, but after the horror stories told to the younger fairies about the Dark One, it wasn't too bad), and she'd actually liked the time spent with his wife. "I'm glad to be here," she'd said truthfully.

And in the months since that first morning, Nova hadn't had cause to regret her decision.

The Golds barely stirred at home on Tuesday and Friday mornings. Mrs. Gold divided her time between her garden and her study, and it usually was up to Nova to knock on the door and remind the other woman to leave her law books aside and come to the kitchen for lunch. Of Mr. Gold she saw even less. In fact, there had only been the occasional glimpse of him as he rushed on his way to town, late and still fixing his tie and, once, wearing a little smile that had morphed into an impressive scowl the moment he caught sight of her.

That these mornings coincided with the days she found Mrs. Gold just getting out of the shower or, that once, still in her nightgown and a dreamy expression while she asked Nova to be quiet because she needed to take a nap, was something Nova kept to herself.

There were several rumors that could be put to rest if she spoke up, but one of the clauses in her contract was never to speak of anything she witnessed in their home, grounds, and at any point during her employment (it was thorough, that contract, but as it spelled her benefits in just as much detail, Nova didn't complain).

People wouldn't understand how their home - yes, the Dark One's abode - had a consistently happy atmosphere that made one relax as soon as she stepped in. Or about the little signs that spoke of an easy rapport between husband and wife. There were teacups left forgotten in the porch, or an afghan misplaced and wrinkled on the couch, or the DVD cases portraying movies she wouldn't have pictured the two of them watching unless they both had learned to compromise... It was a lovely portrayal these little touches painted, and going by the blissful smile that Mrs. Gold couldn't hide every time the conversation turned to her husband, Nova knew it wasn't her idealistic view of the world tricking her.

If she described the scene she was walking in on right now, would anyone believe her?

Mrs. Gold was indeed standing by her rose bushes, but this time there were no pruning shears in her hands and her attention was definitely not on spotting dry leaves or damaged growth. Mr. Gold had his arms around her, and his face was hidden by his hair and the angle as he spoke in his wife's ear. He must have said something funny - the Dark One! Funny! Who'd believe that? - because Mrs. Gold started giggling, twisting in his arms until she gave up with a pout because he wouldn't let her face him.

And then the most shocking thing happened.

Male laughter broke from the couple, and it had nothing in common with the nasty smirks and mocking tones Nova had witnessed the few times someone had dared confront this man in public.

Despite her optimism, she still hadn't imagined these two could be so... so sweet in private.

Until now she'd only seem them together at home during that first interview. In town, yes. Sometimes they stopped at Granny's to pick up their dinner, or one could see the pair at the pawnshop or visiting his son. And though Mrs. Gold often held his hand, or had her arm hooked around his, there had never even been a whisper of Mr. Gold showing affection.
She tried to hold in a gasp, but their sudden alertness told her that she'd failed.

"H-hi."

They turned toward her, and Nova could only fight the instinct to change into her miniature version because Mrs. Gold was smiling in obvious welcome.

Mr. Gold wasn't as sanguine.

"Miss Fair," the Dark One rumbled, eyes narrowed as he pinned her to the spot.

Correcting his use of her cursed name didn't even cross her mind. She barely managed to gulp down the sudden nervous knot in her throat and squeak a more formal 'good morning'.

"Good morning to you too, Nova." Mrs. Gold turned to her husband, and what silent communication passed between them ended with a press of her fingers at his shoulder and a nod on his part.

Nova started breathing again.

"Why don't you go on in," Mrs. Gold suggested, then added with a rueful grin. "There's a bit of a mess in the kitchen. I tried a new recipe for breakfast."

That made Nova smile. Mrs. Gold wasn't a terrible cook, but she was curious about new combinations and, even more dangerous for the floor and the walls, always willing to try several recipes at once. "It's no problem," she said, making a mental note to go straight for the mop before turning on her heel. "Don't worry about it at all."

Mr. Gold said nothing, but Nova could feel his gaze between her shoulder as she walked toward the house.

She wasn't quite out of earshot when Mrs. Gold's surprised voice drifted to her.

"I think... I think she likes us, Rumple."

"Oh no, sweetheart. Our little rogue fairy isn't quite that silly." The Dark One's answer was too pointed not to be aware that Nova was listening. "But despite everything she's been told, she does seem to like you," he acknowledged, and Nova risked a glance over her shoulders to see as the darkest evil in all realms - according to Blue - caressed his wife's cheek with a gentle touch. "Can't say I'm surprised about that, now can I?"

The End
19/08/16

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget the Masterlist.

And to leave a comment!
Belle/Rumpelstiltskin: The Good Wife

Chapter Summary

Rumpelstiltskin's wife has a few duties Belle didn't see coming.

Chapter Notes

3-word prompt: honor - weasel - beneath

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Belle could almost hear the snap of her husband's fingers as she felt the pressure in the room dip and the air was displaced to make room for a traveling body.

In the next breath, Rumpelstiltskin was standing before her.

His clothes were the same as when he'd left home that morning. Not one tear or singe on his crisp suit, and his tie still straight and unwrinkled. Whatever had brought him home so early wasn't another disagreement with Emma or Regina, or a more dangerous battle against one of their enemies in common.

He was grinning, too.

Belle relaxed. Whatever it was, it had him in a good mood.

Indeed, his cane swung into a happy high arc before he stopped in the middle of the room they'd appointed as her office. "Hello, my dear," said he, lifting a finger when she would have stood to greet him. "Ah, ah. We'll save the warm welcome for later, love. Very much afraid it's business first for now."

Belle gave a curious look at that statement.

It wasn't often that he brought work home, and when he did it was to look for an old contract in his archive (which had been moved to the house after Her Whining Highness had broken into the pawnshop), or consult one of the books of the laws of this land if someone was desperate enough to consult him in that capacity.

But in either case, he would have dropped straight into his study, and maybe come in for a goodbye kiss on his way back out.

Instead he was glancing at her expectantly.

Belle closed down her laptop, putting it aside as she tried to guess his purpose. She had little to do with any of his current deals. With his old 'colleagues' and clients crammed so close together in their little town, Rumpelstiltskin didn't involve her in the magical side of his business at all. Disgruntlement had always been a side effect of dealing with the Dark One, but where his isolated castle had been an insurmountable prospect for anybody to attack, their home in Storybrooke was
more tempting a target. He'd confided that no matter how many spells he set to dissuade unwanted visitors, their defenses weren't even a hundredth of what they'd been in a castle where the very walls had breathed in magic for centuries.

Belle's protests that she could defend herself had been met with a roll of his eyes and a pointed question: *Do you really mean to keep playing errand girl, when you have so many options now?*

After some thought, she had decided that Rumpelstiltskin was right.

Which meant that her days were now filled with online courses - both in literature and law, a combination that amused her husband to no end. Unless he had brought it up at dinner time, or Emma had come by after some poor fool had gone to the Savior with his complaints, Belle didn't keep abreast of the details of Rumpelstiltskin's work.

"Do you need my help, Rumple?" she asked, a little confused, not quite believing that he did.

He smiled at her, the wicked smile that had put her off when they'd first met and that now made her want to pinch him into dropping the farce. "Oh no, dearest," he said, his voice a purr of delight. "Not I."

And up went his hand.

The resulting cloud cleared rapidly, revealing the frozen figure of a man in mid-speech.

"Rumple!"

Belle jumped up from her seat, barely restraining herself from placing herself between her husband and the stranger. Rumpelstiltskin had promised that he would bring no violence under their roof, and though that left a glaring loophole about his response if someone managed to invade their home with the intent to harm either of them, Belle allowed for it.

She would handle the situation if it ever came to the point, but Rumpelstiltskin needed to feel free to protect his family. She wouldn't push him into a promise he couldn't keep.

She still took a quick breath of relief when the stranger didn't seem hurt. Walking to her husband's side, Belle peered at the pale face, frowning when she was unable to place him. "Who is this?"

His hand wrapped around his waist, securing her against him when she would have stepped closer to the man. "Why, a petitioner of course!"

Belle glanced up at him at that.

Now there was a concept almost forgotten in Storybrooke. There were no official courts; no peasants or royals either, in this time and place that claimed all human beings were equal. Very democratic, but it also left the people with no formal way one to apply for direct help to those who had a duty to see to their needs.

No one would confuse the Dark One for a such a lord.

"What?"

Rumpelstiltskin tutted. "And to think you grew up in a palace. A petitioner is---" "Rumple," she interrupted him, keeping her voice just under an irritated snap. Long ago she had learned that, to cut through one of his set ups, her best bet was to patiently point out that she wasn't
in the mood to play along. "Please tell me why there is an immobilized man in my office or kindly take him away."

He shrugged a shoulder. "You'll see," he said, and then he nodded at the man as if giving him the floor.

The spell melted away at the gesture.

"---promise, I do! Whatever she says, I'll..." He started, just registering that he was in an unfamiliar room. His face paled further when he noticed Rumpelstiltskin, but then his eyes alighted on her.

The change in his expression was unmistakable. Sheer relief came over him a moment before he practically launched himself at her.

Belle squeaked a little, and only a quick press of Rumpelstiltskin's fingers at her side kept her from casting a shield to repel the man.

"My lady," the man said effusively, unaware that he'd barely missed a few nasty burns. Belle's bewilderment grew when he dropped into such a deep bow that his head came to a level with his knees. "I'm in your hands."

Belle looked at Rumpelstiltskin, hoping for guidance. Or even better, an explanation.

He just smirked, too amused to be of any help.

"Um." Still clueless, she glanced down at the man. He hadn't moved from his position, waiting for permission. His attitude cast her as the person in charge, and himself as the dependent. Belle licked her lips, calling up her memories of life in her father's small court. "Rise, good man." And because they didn't live in the Enchanted Forest anymore, she added, "And it's Mrs. Gold, please."

She heard Rumpelstiltskin's soft chuckle. He would appreciate the meaning behind the polite request, the none too subtle reminder that the two of them were on equal standing.

The man looked between them, wide eyes filled with apprehension, but when Belle raised an eyebrow, he started a series of quick nods. "Of course," he rushed out. "I... I... I just. I came to ask, I mean---"

Rumpelstiltskin harrumphed. "Out with it," he said impatiently. Then he turned to Belle as if apologetic. "He seemed eloquent enough in the shop, I promise."

Belle told herself not to laugh. Few men would have the nerve to be transported to the Dark One's home and not trip over their own tongues. "Perhaps you can start with a name?" she suggested, seeing that the poor man had broken into a sweat.

An audience with the Dark One was never good for one's health.

"Paul! Paul of Eversea. I mean, Paul Dickson, now," he corrected hurriedly, looking afraid he'd given offense by offering his original name first. "Of Dickson's Farm?" He seemed to deflate when she didn't recognize the name. "We- My family. Well, up to the time of my grandfather, perhaps. We ran quite the successful business."

"Best poultry in the lands," Rumpelstiltskin agreed.

Paul nodded. "Yes, that. And meat, and milk and cheeses."
"And eggs."

Paul cringed a little at that word. "Yes," he agreed less enthusiastically. "That too."

Belle stared at him. "Congratulations?"

Rumpelstiltskin tittered. "Oh no, my darling." He dropped his voice, but not enough that he couldn't be heard from a few feet away. "They're scraping by these days. His father... well. Not quite the head for business, had he?"

Proving that he had indeed overheard, Paul shook his head.

Belle tried to form a picture. "So... you need help?" She raised her eyes to Rumpelstiltskin as she made the question. Hearing out the desperate who needed practical help rather than one of Emma's pep talks, fell under his purview.

He caught her intent at once. "No, no, no. You see, they already had my help. Hence the look of distress on that long face."

Belle narrowed her eyes.

What did you do?

She didn't say it out loud. She made a point not to blame Rumpelstiltskin for the past. Not in public. And not without hearing his side of the story.

"Explain, please," she asked instead.

Her expression must not have been as smooth as her words, because Rumpelstiltskin dropped the smile. He eyed their guest, who was busy looking elsewhere, and scowled. "Ah. We need a moment," he said, and then pointed a finger at the other man's chest. "Excuse us."

Belle almost protested as the man froze in time again, but reconsidered at the thought of having a witness to this conversation. "Is he all right?"

He purposely misunderstood the question. "Your regular good guy. Hard-working, shockingly honest. Reminds me of our good king James before he got crowned."

"His name is David," Belle said, deciding to follow along for now.

He crinkled his nose. "Nice-local-vet-David doesn't quite have the same ring," he complained.

"Rumple." She took the hand he'd loosened from around her, a silent plea. "Please. I just want to understand. Who is this guy, why bring him here?"

He exhaled. "He's recently come in charge of the family business. Had the good sense to come to me when he saw what a dreadful mess his father and older brother had made of it."

"How did you become involved in the first place?"

"A deal, of course! With his great-great-great-grandfather, plus one or two generations in between." Belle blinked, always unused to the ease to which Rumpelstiltskin referred to such impossible length of time. "Another great guy. Kind to animals, helped the needy. And always the poorer for all that helping." He shook his head at the perceived foolishness of a long dead man. "The world is never grateful, dearie. A man who shares his last crumb of bread with his neighbor will just lose his food and, eventually, the strength to get more."
Belle tightened her grasp on his hand. He could have used such a neighbor, once. "But he got help," she said, sure that the tale didn't end with a starving man in his deathbed.

Even good men called on the Dark One.

"Oh yes. A fairy heard of him. Pitied him, the poor bastard." He sniggered. His feud against Blue was at a standstill, with Neal playing arbitrator as he considered both parties equally at fault for his exile, but Rumpelstiltskin didn't hide that he despised the fairy folk. "The next morning, he woke up to a fat hen clucking at his ear - and a golden egg in a corner of his hut."

Belle hadn't expected that twist, but she still recognized the story. It was used as a cautionary tale in this world. "Wasn't it a goose?"

"Don't be impatient, dearie. That'll come yet." He smiled. "But you know the gist of it. Our man gets rich and richer every morning, the richest farmer in town, so much so that when he goes a-courting the prettiest girl in the land, she snatches him up before he can wonder how smart she is. You see, even a wise man can be a fool for a pretty face."

Belle thought of the men who'd come to Avonlea after hearing of Lord Maurice's beautiful daughter. Few of them had cared to get to know her, instead rushing to her father to ask for her hand after the first meeting. A few had even cornered her in the darker hallways, trying to secure her agreement to their proposal with a stolen kiss. "And the fools become slovenly beasts," she said with feeling.

Rumpelstiltskin's expression sharpened. Before he could ask for a list of offenses, or worse, a list of the names of the offenders, Belle grabbed onto his shoulders and brushed her lips against his cheek. "Old history," she whispered. "Then you came, and everything got better."

"I came, yes." His tone was softer now. His gaze, more tender. "And proved that even a fool can make a wise choice once in a while," he said, leaning in for a quick kiss.

Belle blushed, remembering the unseeing man across from them, and stepped away. "What happened then? In the story they kill the bird and end up with nothing, that's all."

"Right. The wife wanted more jewels, more dresses, more parties... and she couldn't wait a whole day to get her hands on the money for it all. And down goes the poor hen. But as every story that traveled here, they got the details wrong." He waggled his eyebrows. "They didn't have nothing left, oh no. They had their debts; well, hers mostly. Mountains of them."

Belle could imagine the situation too easily. Even with a prosperous business, the promise of new gold every day would tempt anyone to run up on their credit. Add a greedy woman to the mix.... "So they called for you."

"He did. Wife up and left, at the first whiff of poverty."

That would have gotten his attention. The memory of Milah was full of both guilt and anger, and it would have been centuries fresher then. Of course Rumpelstiltskin had gone to scope up the situation, get his laughs at a betrayed husband in the depths of penury.

"You helped him."

He drew up taller, hand to his chest in a show of offense. "I made him a deal," he corrected, enunciating each word. Then he shrugged, as if not noticing her emerging smile. "I had just moved
to the castle and its empty pantry. The man ran a farm. It seemed logical."

"Only logical, of course," Belle agreed. "And that's where the goose came in."

"Luckiest bit of feathers in all worlds. Lived over twenty years; it was kept that carefully." He chuckled. "In exchange, I got what I needed from the farm... for perpetuity."

To keep the Dark Castle stocked with enough food to satisfy a man who needed to be reminded of meal times and then cajoled into eating a whole portion. A light duty, for a thriving farm. A contract passed from father to son, and again, and again, until mismanagement made it an impossibility.

She glanced at their guest with new appreciation. She could count on one hand the people who didn't wait for Rumpelstiltskin to demand fulfillment of their deal, and came to face him instead.

"He wants... out of the deal?"

No wonder Paul had asked for her intervention, if that was the case.

"Not exactly." Rumpelstiltskin lifted a shoulder at her look of surprise. "Oh, I wasn't expecting that either, my dear. Says he assumed the responsibility with his eyes open, and his honor won't allow him to shirk it. He does come from a long line of fools, after all."

"What does he want, then?"

"Alteration. Revision. Amendment." He said the words as if they were epithets. "The Dark One doesn't do that!"

"A reprieve then," Belle surmised.

Rumpelstiltskin huffed. "The Dark One doesn't do that either."

It took her a moment, but she smiled when she caught on. "No, I guess you don't," she said sweetly, reaching up to straighten an already impeccable shirt. "You do have a reputation, after all."

He nodded, almost purring as her fingers drifted against his chest. "Heartless and mean," he agreed, "that's who I am."

Belle managed to hold onto a snort. "Of course, of course. Can't be seen to be lenient. A deal is a deal, no matter who comes begging for mercy."

"Mercy is beneath my dignity," he said earnestly, at the same time he took one of her wrists and placed her hand over his heart. "There's nothing in me but darkness."

Belle decided that the presence of Paul Dickman didn't matter. She closed the space between her and her husband, and pressed her forehead against his collarbone. Yes, there was darkness in him. It was a growling thing, content to curl in the depths of Rumpelstiltskin's soul, but it flared up at any sign of a threat to its dominion over him.

And it was threatened.

Rumpelstiltskin himself had shown her the two specks of brightness in his heart. Barely bigger than a thumbprint, but they stood at the center of him, stubborn against the black that surrounded them.

"Darkness and love," she whispered.
"Aye."

"Love for your son."

"Always."

"And... for your wife."

"Forever, Belle."

Belle smiled, then shifted so she could hear his heart beat. They stood in silence for a minute and more, until Belle remembered that they had a guest waiting for them. "Right," she said, standing straighter and turning to the farmer. "Coming to me wasn't his idea, was it?"

"He did ask to have this conversation in a private place," Rumpelstiltskin said, avoiding her actual question.

"I wonder how he knew I have something of a reputation, too."

"You do?"

"Well, among those who know me best."

"Hm."

They both knew what most of the town thought. At least no one dared to say it to their faces. It was difficult to tell oneself that gossip didn't matter, when one was forced to dissuade Rumpelstiltskin from making the people spreading it swallow their own tongues.

She toyed with his tie, wrapping it around her finger until she could reach to stroke the line of his throat. "Ruby says I'm your soft spot."

His gaze dropped down at her breasts. "The wolf has a point."

Belle laughed. "Of course, I don't know how a complete stranger could have come by such an idea."

"No idea at all," he concurred. "But then, he's smart enough to come to me without whining or threatening, no telling tales to our Sheriff. Even had this little plan to make up for the lack of edibles for the next two years or so; no more than three, he swears."

"We can shop in the market for that long, I guess."

"I haven't said yes yet, dearie."

Belle faked a pout.

"Try harder."

With a playful sigh, she brought her fingers up for a kiss and then reached out to press them against his lips.

"Not yet," he said, but his eyes danced.

She smiled, and draped his hair behind his ear.
"Closer."

Taking a deep breath, as if preparing herself for an arduous task, Belle leaned forward... and kissed the spot beneath his earlobe. "Later," she promised as she felt him shiver.

He breathed out slowly. "Thank you, darling."

For giving him an out, of course. For taking the credit for his good deed.

She nodded in acknowledgement. "Shouldn't we...?" she said, waving at the unmoving man.

"Yes, of course." But he didn't make a move. "Ah, darling? Should our friend ask about his brother, make sure he knows the situation is off-limits to him."

Belle looked at him questioningly. There had been a mention of Paul's older brother, but she hadn't taken it as important. "A brother?"

"Hm, yes. Every bit as thickheaded, but not nearly as smart," Rumpelstiltskin said. "Came yelling about the new world, and how things were different here. The little rat, trying to weasel right out of a deal."

"And you...?"

He gave a little shrug. "Put him in a cage, of course. Where rodents belong." He was already shaking his head before she spoke. "Oh, no. Off-limits, my love. I do have my pride."

"Rumple..."

"And I might have left him an opening," he confided. "As soon as he realizes the foolishness of his actions, he'll turn back. A little cramped, in his new accommodations, but I'm sure he won't complain. Or, well, he will. But I'm sure his little brother will get him out at once. I wouldn't, he's a detestable, horrid man; but little Paul here is too good a chap."

"Rumpelstiltskin! You can't---" At his look of incredulity, Belle changed tracks. "You shouldn't! Human beings don't belong in cages, Rumple."

He pressed his lips together. Pure stubbornness. "You didn't meet this one."

"I wouldn't leave Pan in a cage - and I knew him!"

"Well, I wouldn't either," Rumple said. "I'd just kill the little bastard once and for all."

Belle stopped, agape. He talked to easily of parricide.

How could the fate of an annoying man compare, when Rumpelstiltskin was ready to bring down his own father?

For a moment, she felt defeated. At times like this, she felt like she stood hitting a thick wall around him. No matter how many times she knocked it down, he would always bring it back up, and she'd always stand on the outside.

"Hey," he said softly. He grimaced at the misery on her face, and heaved a long sigh. "One more week. If he hasn't repented until then, I'll turn him back... as long as I get to shove him across the town line. And he can't come back unless he's got a sincere apology with him. A public apology," he said, warming to the idea. "At Granny's."
Belle nodded. "At lunchtime," she whispered, knowing she was condemning a stranger to a life outside Storybrooke. Nobody apologized to the Dark One. Nobody ever thought that Rumpelstiltskin wasn't at fault, no matter the situation. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "I said I wouldn't meddle with your affairs."

"You're a kind woman, Belle. Too kind." Rumpelstiltskin grazed her cheeks with the back of his fingers. "But I knew that when I married you."

Just as she knew the man he was.

And the man he pretended to be.

Even when Rumpelstiltskin himself seemed unsure which was the real one.

Reassured by her thoughts, Belle nuzzled into his hand, then tried on a smile and knew she'd succeeded when he smiled back. "Well, we have good news to give."

Rumpelstiltskin nodded.

In agreement, even if it wasn't perfect, they turned to face their guest. Unconsciously, they moved to stand side by side, and this time Rumpelstiltskin's hand came to rest at her hip, securing her against him.

He waved.

Paul shook himself and blinked owlishly, aware that something had happened but not sure what. He looked at Rumpelstiltskin with apprehension, and then at Belle. "I..." he started. "I. Uh...."

Belle smiled encouragingly. "You wanted to ask me something?"

The End
29/04/16

Chapter End Notes

I kind of scrapped the whole 'OUAT goes back to the Enchanted Land for a year' thing. Instead things settle down for a while after Neverland, and yes, Rumpelstiltskin asks Belle to marry him.

Thoughts?
This meeting was deteriorating by the minute.

When it came to magic, Emma was supposed to be Regina's student, but Regina had declared that the casting of glamours was Rumpelstiltskin's province more than hers, and packed Emma off to the pawnshop for further lessons.

True to habit, Emma had burst in at the worst possible moment.

To make matters even worse, she hadn't been alone.

Belle had rushed out of the back room, pulling her hair into a messy bun and hoping she hadn't missed any buttons, to find Emma, Bae, Henry, and Jones staring at her.

At least Bae had the foresight to elbow his pal before the pirate could make one suggestive comment. Rumpelstiltskin tolerated him for his son's sake, and would usually ignore the other man in a public venue. But now that Jones had stepped into the Dark One's territory, he should watch his mouth or a wrong word would land him at the town line if he was lucky, forced to walk a few miles back to town (because Rumpelstiltskin never chose the same spot to dump him, so no one knew where to pick Jones up). If Rumpelstiltskin found him particularly disrespectful, it was a toss off the harbor and a soggy walk home under everyone's stares and snickers.

Tilting her jaw up, Belle addressed Bae, who was blushing but at least didn't wince before meeting her eye.

"Hey, Belle. Is Papa here?" he asked.

Emma snorted. "Obviously."

Belle had said nothing, too aware that the door had not been locked and neither she nor Rumpelstiltskin had remembered to flip the sign to 'closed'. They should have known better. "He'll be coming soon," she said. "He was right behind me."

Her brain didn't catch up with her mouth until Bae shut his eyes with a pained expression, and Jones twisted around with sudden interest in the cabinet closest to him, lifting his good hand to his mouth to choke back a laugh.
Emma just looked horrified, shooting a glance at her son and letting out a little relieved sigh when Henry only smiled back, oblivious to the adult undercurrents.

Lucky Henry.

Belle told herself not to blush.

"And here I am," came Rumpelstiltskin's voice as he stepped through the connecting door, eyes narrowed as he spotted the pirate. His expression softened at the sight of his son and grandson, and he was almost smiling before he turned to Emma. "Miss Swan," he greeted her, voice even if not welcoming, and he settled at Belle's side behind the counter, "I assume you need help of some kind, and have had the foresight to call on my son to make sure I don't charge you for it?"

"Papa...."

Emma glared. "Neal offered to come."

Rumpelstiltskin smirked. "After you happened to meet up with him, I'm sure." He waved a hand before Emma could respond. "But why don't you tell me why you've come first, and we can decide on the payment then."

The next ten minutes had been an example on why strong-willed people were not meant to work together unless they held a modicum of trust for each other. For a common cause - like Henry's well-being, or occasionally the safety of their town if the threat had a chance of reaching Baelfire or Belle too, Rumpelstiltskin and Emma left their disagreements aside and concentrated on the mutual enemy.

Otherwise, watching them discuss terms reminded Belle of dragons flinging fireballs at each other.

Except it would be safer to be in the same room as the dragons.

Emma explained about wanting to learn about glamours.

Rumpelstiltskin demanded a reason.

Emma said her reasons were her own.

Rumpelstiltskin invited her to pick up a book for once and work it out herself.

Emma told him not to be ridiculous.

Rumpelstiltskin made a comment about spoiled princesses.

Emma retorted that she wasn't the one who was behaving like a three-year-old at nap time.

"Emma," Bae hissed, at the same time Belle held onto Rumpelstiltskin's elbow and stepped closer to him.

That avoided an actual explosion, but it didn't stop them.

Each time Emma or Rumpelstiltskin opened their mouths, the tension rose. Belle could feel the hum of the more powerful objects in the pawnshop as they stirred in response to their master's anger. Rumpelstiltskin was by no measure a patient man, though he'd claim otherwise. He set out careful plans, yes, and he was willing to wait for his efforts to bear the results he'd intended.

But if something deviated from his original plan....
And he had not planned on being invaded by Storybrooke's Savior and her loyal retinue without warning. At least she'd played it smart and brought Baelfire along instead of her parents. Belle winced at the thought of Snow or David jumping at their daughter's defense. Very commendable, but it still would have gotten them shoved out onto the pavement and the door slammed in their faces by now.

"Miss Swan," Rumpelstiltskin was saying tightly, "I suggest you try politeness. Perhaps even a 'please'?

"I did say-"

"Ah-ah! And mean it this time, dearie."

Emma flushed with anger. "You arrogant son o-"

"Emma!" This time, Bae gave a pointed look at their child.

Emma clenched her fists, but said nothing.

"Compliments will get you nowhere," Rumpelstiltskin said in a calm voice, ignoring the blonde's temper and instead giving her a reproving look for her near slip.

With her lips pressed tightly together, Emma took a step forward.

Belle knew the situation had escalated, but was helpless to stop what came next.

"You can teach me," Emma said clearly, meeting Rumpelstiltskin's eye with the utter lack of fear of one who hadn't grown up listening to the stories about the Dark One, "or you can admit you are too damn afraid of having someone surpass you."

Belle groaned. A poorer choice of words would be difficult to find.

"Rumple..." she tried, but Rumpelstiltskin's face had already twisted in anger at the implication of cowardice.

"Fine," he gritted out, teeth bared.

And snapped his fingers.

Belle expected to see Emma disappear in a cloud of magic, trusting that he wouldn't dare to actually harm the mother of his grandson.

But Emma was still standing in place.

It took Baelfire's muttered, "Papa, really!", as he slammed his hand against his forehead before Belle realized something else had happened. Following Bae's gaze, she gasped, and so did Emma.

But none was louder than the shrieks coming from the spot where Jones had stood a moment before.

Bae seemed about to take up a stand on his friend's behalf, but he was interrupted by Henry's soft "Cool!" as the boy stared at the large black rat that chittered with indignation, sitting on its hind legs as it couldn't stand properly on all fours with its left front paw missing. He took a look at his father and, though he didn't look pleased by far, said nothing in the end.

It was Belle who whirled toward her husband. "Rumple!" she cried. "Turn him back."
Rumpelstiltskin's features were a definition of stubbornness. He glanced at her, eyes dancing with mischief, and shook his head with barely concealed glee. "No." He stopped her next protest with a hand at her shoulder. "The girl wants to learn. What better way than to give her something to practice on? Break the spell, dearie," this he said to Emma, meeting her glare with a smirk. "No faster method to learn a spell than to undo it, I assure you."

"But I don't know how!"

"Ask your teacher, then. Try being polite," he suggested snidely.

"Regina knows how to shift with potions only!"

Rumpelstiltskin tutted. "Then our pirate seems to be in a bind, doesn't he? But never fear! I have plenty of confidence in your resourcefulness, Miss Swan."

Emma narrowed her eyes. "Fine!"

Belle closed her eyes. They had just drawn a line in the sand, and Rumpelstiltskin would not be able to shift his stance without losing face. He looked impassive now, but soon he'd be fretting that Baelfire and Henry would be afraid of him - or worse yet, that his only son and grandson would avoid him.

"Wait, Emma!" she called out before, rat in hand (yet held at a distance so it wouldn't be able to nestle against her chest), Emma started her way out of the store. "I'll help."

She ignored Rumpelstiltskin's displeased grunt, and gave him a disappointed look of her own. Jones was not her favorite person, but he still hadn't deserved to be caught in the struggle just because he was the only available person to be made into an object lesson. "This spell is beyond my ability, but I can help," she told Emma, then held onto her husband's hand and squeezed reassuringly, lowering her voice to a whisper. "I mend the bridges you burn, remember?"

It took a few beats, but Rumpelstiltskin finally gave a brief nod.

Belle raised on her tiptoes to give him a quick kiss, then hurried around the counter to catch up with the others. She put an arm around Henry, watching him closely for any sign of upset. "Sorry you had to see that, love," she told him, not sure how to handle it Henry was afraid of his grandfather now.

But the boy who'd been raised by the Evil Queen was made of sterner stuff. "What? No. It was great!" he grinned, every inch a boy bursting with enthusiasm. "I mean, I'm sorry for Killian, but both mom and dad told him to stay behind." He shrugged. "And mom will get him back to normal anyway, much faster if you're with us, auntie"

Smiling, Belle ruffled his hair. Then, sensing his attention was on the rodent in his mother's grasp, let him go and turned to Rumpelstiltskin's son. "Are you all right?"

Bae gave the question some thought. "Surprised," he decided. "But not as pissed off as I think I should be." He gave a guilty glance at Jones, but then shrugged. "Guess that after-" A quick look at Henry confirmed that the boy was still distracted examining Jones's new form. "-after the snails, turning people into small mammals seems like progress."

Having seen the fate of those snails as well, Belle nodded. "Mention that to him at some point, will you?"

"It's very slow progress, though," Baelfire remarked.
Belle sighed, knowing her husband's view of himself. He didn't claim to be a villain anymore, but Belle suspected that was more for her benefit than because he actually trusted himself not to slip into darkness.

She would give Rumpelstiltskin a few hours to cool off, use that time to help Emma, and then rush home to check on him.

"Tell him anyway," she asked Bae.

Because even that careful positiveness was better than Rumpelstiltskin's own thoughts on the matter.

"I will," said Bae. Then he bumped his elbow against hers. "Hey, don't worry. He really has changed for the better, and I know that you're the reason for most of it."

Belle started to shake her head, but then stopped herself. If Rumpelstiltskin could admit that True Love was worth fighting the darkness for, then so could she. "He has to do it for himself," she said, "but I'm happy if my presence helps. And, Bae..." She smiled at the man who had forgiven his father for three centuries of loneliness and had decided to rebuild a relationship with him. She couldn't imagine what would have become of Rumpelstiltskin if his quest had failed, and she never wanted to find out. "...you help too."

Baelfire gave a thoughtful glance over his shoulder at the pawnshop. "He's going to be okay, isn't he?"

Belle nodded. Grabbed his hand in a silent promise. "We will make sure of it."

The End
28/08/16

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?
Peevishly, Emma wondered whether the reason Rumpelstiltskin kept the practice of his more complicated spells to the back room of the pawn shop was because, if he stayed at home, he would never escape his wife's running commentary.

Belle had been helpful in the location of the spell that would return Killian to his human form, and Emma was sure she had thanked the younger woman - so why was Belle still here?

The answer, of course, came via the second voice that had been intruding in Emma's concentration for the last half hour.

"I don't know," Neal was saying, laughter in his voice. "After some consideration, I think he's cuter like this."

Emma didn't have to turn around to know that his stepmother was rolling her eyes.

"Bae!" Belle chastised him, though there was a thread of amusement underneath. "He's your friend. Do you really want to explain to David why his best buddy is a rat?"

"Ooooh. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that!" Neal stepped closer. “I need to take a picture to show David later! Hey, Em, can you--?"

That was the last straw.

Emma spun on her heels, pouring out all her frustration at the uselessness of her magic when she couldn't unravel even one of the Dark One's spells. If Regina had relented and come, Killian would already have turned back into a man and probably he'd be milking the situation for all he was worth.

Emma had a feeling that she would be going out for drinks that evening, and paying for two. That would be fair enough, but she doubted she’d escape a night peppered with complaints about 'the crocodile'. Not that she could blame Killian - he had never volunteered to be turned into a practical lesson on shapeshifting - but couldn’t he take the whining to Gold? After all, Emma, Neal, and even Henry had warned him not to come along to the pawn shop.

Not that any of them had expected to walk away with a rat instead of a reformed pirate....

With Regina insisting that Emma needed to practice her magic (and snickering over Killian’s fate while she did), Emma was stuck with the responsibility.

If at least the company was supportive....
Only Henry was helping, having left to see if he could convince Regina to give a hand. Meanwhile Belle and Neal had been acting as if her attempts to de-rat Killian were an amusing sideshow.

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude but this is not as easy as it looks,” she snapped, scowling at the pair, "so I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t distract me.”

Neal immediately looked contrite.

Belle just widened her eyes, and after a heartbeat her teeth came to nibble on her lower lip in an obvious attempt to hold back a smile.

Emma narrowed her eyes. Crossed her arms over her chest. "What's so funny?"

"Sorry, sorry... You just look so stressed. I guess I thought you were making Hook sweat, not that you actually were having trouble doing the spell."

Exasperation filled her, making her glare at the other woman. "Why would I do that?"

Belle arched an eyebrow.

Right. The Golds weren’t Killian’s fans. They had buried the hatchet after rescuing Henry in Neverland, mostly for Neal’s sake, but it was an accepted fact that both parties kept a spade at hand. Just in case.

"He doesn’t deserve to live as a rat!” Emma protested, glad to have Neal nod along.

Looking between the two of them, Belle shrugged. "Okay. I guess I'm biased. So... what's the holdup? You have the power, and I'd bet our house that the spell I showed you is the right one. Rumple already did the hard part, which was forcing something into a different shape - your part is just returning it to normal."

"'Just,'" Emma scoffed.

"Yes! Like when a literal dust bunny is hopping around the room? It's not meant to be animated; it's not natural. So returning it into a dormant state is pretty easy."

Emma tilted her head. "You can do that?"

"I was the Dark One's maid."

Belle arched an eyebrow. "I don't have that kind of power. Even pirates are actual living beings. Maybe if Rumple had only magicked his coat into strangling him..." She noticed the alarmed look on Emma's and Neal's faces, and there was a loud squeak of protest in the background. "He wouldn't do that without actual provocation," she added, and when that didn't calm the others, she gave a shrug. Rumpelstiltskin didn't punish people randomly, so she didn't see a reason to fret. "The point was, the spell is basically the same, it just needs more power behind it." She motioned toward Emma. "Just relax and don't try to force anything. Let it flow instead. Unless Hook prefers to be a rat rather than a man-" Another indignant squeak came at that; Belle ignored it. "-light magic should return him to normal."

Emma's mouth twisted. "You make it sound so simple."
"All spells are the same deep down," Belle said. "The ingredients and the intent may vary, but all that really matters is that you have the power to make them work."

"You're the Savior, Emma," Neal added helpfully, then gave a sheepish smirk at her glare. "Not that you would've forgotten that, of course."

Emma sighed. "So... I relax?"

Belle nodded. "This is restoring magic, and everything wants to return to its proper state. Let the magic guide you, and it will untwist what Rumple did. Remember: do not try to fight it."

"All right," Emma said, cracking her knuckles as she turned around so she was facing her newly rodent-shaped friend. "Let's try this again, Killian."

A chirp, and another burst of magic.

If Emma had to describe the moment, she would tell of how she sensed a heavy, foul cage trapping Killian, and how it was impossible to lift it and wrestle it away no matter how much strength she poured into it. Still, she kept trying.

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"Can she really do it?" Neal whispered, having leaned closer to Belle so they wouldn't distract Emma this time.

Belle bit her lip, glancing at Emma's new attempt. "She is Regina's student," she sighed. "She's still trying to beat down Rumple's magic first, no matter what I've just told her. But once she understands that she needs to let her own magic find the weaknesses in your dad's spell, instead of battering down the whole thing... sure. I'm confident she can manage."

"You're telling me Emma needs to stop being stubborn first?" At her nod, Neal winced. "I almost never say this, but I'm sorry for Killian."

Belle made a sound that could have been sympathetic if it didn't lack in sincerity. At Neal's raised eyebrow, she shrugged. "Okay, I don't really care," she confessed, "but it'll be all right."

"Promise?"

Both of them said nothing when Emma started swearing under her breath again.

"...Eventually," Belle said, then smiled at his doubtful expression. "Worst case scenario, I'll talk your dad into reversing the spell."

Neal stared at her. "Do you actually believe Papa will..." he trailed off at the look in Belle’s face. "Of course. It’s you. Forget I asked."

Belle just smirked back.

The End
02/04/17
Chapter End Notes

Comments are love! Please leave a comment!
Neal opened his apartment door to find a wide-eyed Emma on the other side. Considering that he'd seen her face everything from the possibility of having magic of her own to Pan's being her son's great-grandfather with aplomb, Neal instantly worried that something was terribly wrong. "Em?"

She blinked twice, as if to rid herself of an image that haunted her, and grimaced. "Sorry. I came as soon as- I got your message just a moment ago, and, um." A sigh. "Did you know that Gold was downstairs when you called me?"

Neal grimaced. His father had been on a short temper since Zelena's return to Storybrooke. He wouldn't tell Neal what worried him so much - and it was always worry at the root of his father's bad moods - but he'd spent the last few afternoons in what had been Belle's bookstore, before the curse had been broken, diving into the few boxes of magical texts that were innocuous enough to have been stored here instead of taken back under the Dark One's roof. Neal didn't know whether to fret or be relieved, that the answer to his father's problem seemed to lie in relatively safe magic, but he knew that with every book deemed useless and discarded (and that pile had been steadily rising), his dad's mood worsened.

"I'd apologize for his behavior," he said to Emma as he motioned her to come in and closed the door, trying not to cringe when she turned around to glare at him over her shoulder. "Exactly. Doesn't mean anything in the end."

"Ugh." Emma practically sank into his couch, toeing off her shoes with the ease of a frequent guest. "I swear I can't walk three steps in this town without tripping right into those two."

Two? "Dad's not alone?"

Neal groaned in sympathy at the look that told him that, no, Gold hadn't been alone; yes, it was exactly the person Neal was thinking of; and no, whatever scene he thought Emma had stumbled upon, it was a thousand times worse.

"Are they always like that?"

Neal tried not to think too much of what his dad and stepmother got up to when they were alone, but Emma sounded so distraught that he allowed himself to remember his own run-ins with the pair. "Pretty much," he answered, shoving the worst of the memories back into a queue meant for future denial. "Always call them first, and never open a door to a room where they might be
Emma crossed her arms over her chest. "I had no idea Gold was around," she defended herself, "and the other times... most times the sign said 'open'!"

Or there was an emergency. Or the Dark One's advice was needed in a hurry. Or a hundred other reasons why Emma forgot to announce herself. Neal said nothing. Telling Emma not to charge ahead blindly was as useless as asking his dad not to make deals.

It just wasn't in them to stop.

"The trick is to make a lot of noise," he told her anyway. He was now a master of the heavy tread. Not to mention the occasional chats out loud he had with himself, voice raised enough to carry across rooms.

It had been almost two months since he'd seen more of his father than any son should see. He counted it as an achievement, and couldn't wait to take the record into a lifelong run.

"I guess," Emma said, but the stubborn look in her eye meant she expected the other party to change their habits.

Neal hoped his dad would restrain himself from turning her into something too nasty. "Your choice," he said with a shrug, hoping the uncomfortable topic was closed. Were it up to him, he would never discuss the private aspect of his father's marriage. In fact, he had hoped to convince Emma to help him get Regina's permission to take Henry on a trip to New York - but how to raise the subject now?

It was especially difficult when Emma didn't seem ready to drop their original conversation. "You'd think they would be over the honeymoon stage by now," she muttered.

Neal lifted an eyebrow. "Because Mary Margaret and David are? Please remind me who's getting sibling number two in a matter of months?"

Emma chuckled, granting him the point. "What's this, a competition?"

"This is True Love, Em," he said, finding himself smiling because no matter how ridiculously giddy the couple downstairs could be, seeing them happy gave him hope. Whatever was preying on his dad's mind had no chance now that Belle had arrived. "Of course they want to enjoy it. My dad waited for three hundred years; and if Henry's book has the stories right, your parents almost died trying to find each other." He glanced at her pensive face. "Or you think this happens every day?"

In the end, she shook her head. "I'm still arresting them if I catch them in public," she said, clicking her tongue as she mimicked locking a cell and tossing the key.

"I promise. I'll take my time posting bail if that happens."

Emma started to nod, but then thought about it. "Remind me to put them in separate cells first."

With a wince, Neal nodded. "Good thought."

The idea of locking up the Dark One seemed to mellow her. Not that Neal could blame her, after all the grief his dad gave her over her occasional mishaps with magic. With a smile, Emma turned to him. "Well, assuming you didn't call me just to get an update on Gold, what is it?"

Neal took a deep breath. He really wanted to show Henry all the parts of New York they'd missed
on Henry's first trip. Preferably by themselves. He didn't have a prayer of a chance to convince Regina on his own, but maybe if he and Emma were on the same side.... "Well, you see. Do you remember how Henry has been complaining he never even got to see the Statue of Liberty? Or how no one makes hotdogs as good in Storybrooke?"

"My poor deprived child," Emma said fondly, but she still rolled her eyes.

Neal understood. At twelve, he had also had bigger concerns than a trip cut too short. “Yeah, well. Anyway. I thought he could have those things. Summer holidays are coming up, after all.”

Emma straightened. "You want to take him to New York?"

"Yes."

Her face brightened with cheer. "You want out of this place?"

"Only for a few days," he told her, just in case she needed the reassurance.

Emma shrugged. "Even a few days would be great!"

And from the expression on her face, Neal knew she was counting herself in on the trip (and that he wouldn't say no, not when she was this happy at the thought). He resigned himself to a dozen ‘operations’ their son would plot during the trip, trying to get his parents together.

"Yeah," he said, trying to sound sincere. It had taken him over a year to get over Emma, and the worst thing would be to get his hopes up. He would just have to have a serious conversation with Henry before they left. "It does sound great."

The Emd
22/09/16

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