Once Upon A Different Time

by WorryinglyInnocent

Summary

A rewrite of Once Upon A Time from the beginning of Season 3. We're now on season 3B! The Wicked Witch is in play...

With each half-season beginning and ending as closely as possible to where the canon series begins and ends, this is just a little look at how things could have gone rather differently. I'm not saying I can do it better than the showrunners, I'm just saying I can do it differently with the benefit of hindsight.
Neverland – Present

The Jolly Roger broke the calm surface of the inky sea surrounding the Neverland island with an almighty splash and continued to soar.

“Well, I think we can safely say that we’ve lost the element of surprise,” Gold remarked dryly, and Emma, the only one within earshot of this remark, had to give a snort of laughter in spite of the rather dire circumstances. “And would someone care to explain why the ship is currently airborne?” he added, yelling to Hook over the roar of the wind and the rushing water that was pouring off the keel as the vessel continued to climb.

“It’s the pixie dust,” Hook replied through gritted teeth, desperately trying to regain control of the flying ship and bring it onto a level. “It must not have burned out completely from the last flight.”


“What’s wrong with putting pixie dust on a boat?” Snow asked from the other side of the ship.

“Oh, I don’t know, what’s wrong with our current situation?” Gold snapped. “Pixie dust, among other things, enables flight, and boats aren’t designed to fly!”

“I bloody know that!” Hook shouted, just as the Jolly Roger gave a tremendous groan of wood under strain and jolted sideways, throwing its passengers around.

“Can’t you do something?” Hook called back to Regina and Gold over his shoulder, looking frantic as he wrenched the ship’s wheel in utter futility.

“What?” Regina asked coolly, or at least, as coolly as was possible from her windswept position.

“This isn’t good,” Hook muttered to himself, flexing his hand on the wheel to regain the feeling in it where he had been grasping it so tightly, and he dug the point of his hook into the damp wood, hoping for more grip.

“What isn’t good?” Regina asked coolly, or at least, as coolly as was possible from her windswept position.

“Simple law of physics, dearie,” Gold replied. “What goes up must inevitably come down.”

To Emma, it was the same as that horrifying moment in Titanic just before the ship broke in half, the single moment of stillness and silence. Then the Jolly Roger gave an ear-splitting screech of wet wood completely unprepared for the demands being made of it, and the ship suddenly tilted into the opposite angle, the bow pointing down towards the island.
“Hang on!” Hook shouted to his passengers.

Everyone was already hanging on, but as the ship began its rapid descent, the rush of air made it difficult to keep a grip on anything, and the vessel gave another lurch and a terrible crack.

“What was that?” David yelled.

Hook cringed. “That was the main mast. Duck!”

Regina ducked as the mast splintered and broke, but Emma, who had been holding onto a rope that attached to the top of the main mast, was sent flying as part of the beam fell and she let go of her hand hold to avoid being crushed under the wood. She landed hard against the angled deck and slithered down, her nails scrabbling for purchase against the boards.

“Emma!”

Strong fingers grabbed her wrist and she looked up to see David clinging to the rigging with one hand, and her with the other.

“I’m not losing you again,” he said grimly as he readjusted his grip on her arm and tried to pull her back onto her feet, but it was to no avail, and Emma felt her slippery hand move in David’s grasp. She shot him a fearful look, one that said ‘don’t let go’ without the need for words.

At the same time, the piece of broken mast swung low over the ship on a collision course with Regina and Snow. Regina let go of her grip on the rope she was holding with one hand to send a pulse of magic towards the beam, sending it flying in the opposite direction before it could make contact. Hook ducked the beam, but in doing so he inadvertently caused the ship to give another violent lurch, and David was thrown back against the ropes, losing his grip on Emma’s hand.

“Dad!” she screamed as she fell.

There was a sound like a whip crack and Emma felt something warm snake around her ankle, holding her upside down, but arresting her movement. Above her, Gold had one hand outstretched, his face a mask of concentration.

“Don’t move,” he muttered gruffly. Emma could only give a small nod and hang where she was.

“The sail!” Snow yelled. The splintered mast had caught on one of the billowing sails, and the fabric ripped cleanly down the middle, tearing a hole and causing part of the sail to flap freely. David braced himself for the smack of the canvas as it fell, but Gold, distracted as he was with Emma, was taken by surprise and the slap of the torn sail sent him clean over the side before anyone else could do anything to stop it.

Emma felt the warm pull of magic around her ankle snap as Gold went over, but it was too late, he had already dragged her with him and she followed him down, plunging into the cold, dark sea.

“Emma!”

Snow screamed as the ship continued its haphazard descent over the island. “We have to go back!” she said, frantically searching over the side of the ship.

“She landed in the sea, she’ll be fine!” Regina snapped, finally succeeding in securing all the loose parts of the main past from causing any more damage. “If you follow her now, you’ll only end up on the island with several broken limbs!”
Snow and David looked at each other and at the sea and island below them that were coming closer with every second.

“We’re not leaving her again!” Snow yelled. “Not again!”

“It’s too dangerous!” Regina retorted.

“And staying on a crashing ship isn’t?” Snow asked. “I’d rather take my chances!”

Hook interjected: “Well whatever you’re going to do, do it quickly or don’t do it at all!”

Snow nodded to David and the pair jumped from the boat together, freefalling down into the trees that covered the island.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, Your Majesty,” Hook said.

“I suppose a captain always goes down with his ship?” Regina shot back, but the cynicism was lost in the violent rush of air around them.

“Not usually quite this literally!”

Regina’s magic was holding the ship together, but only barely, and another splinter of wood from the mast came loose with a crack. She had a split second to make the decision, and throwing her other hand up to destroy the sharp shard of wood that was about to skewer her was her instinctive action. It saved her from being impaled upon the splinter, but it also lost her tenuous grip; her magic the only thing keeping her on the ship. The recoil from the pulse of magic caused her to lose her footing, and before she could grab anything to stop herself falling or cast any kind of spell to anchor her, she had tumbled over the side to land heavily and painfully in the thick forest.

Hook waited until the very last moment before cutting his losses and jumping clear of the ship onto the sand, rolling away and flinging his arms up to cover his head as the Jolly Roger ploughed into the beach. He closed his eyes, grimacing as he heard the cracking and splintering of wood as the ship continued to break apart without Regina’s magic keeping it in one piece. Eventually, when all was quiet, he dared to look up and survey the wreckage.

The main mast was broken and splinters were hanging off it and scoring huge rents in the sails, and there were stress cracks in the decks and the other masts. Loath as Hook was to admit it, Gold was right; ships were not designed for flight, or at least, not designed for falling out of the sky when their powers of flight failed them.

Staring at his broken ship, Hook smacked his fist against the sand and swore violently.

**Enchanted Forest - Present**

Philip looked out of the narrow window across the wide expanse of fields that lay before them. The ground was blackened and barren; the townspeople who had fled so recently had elected to burn their crops rather than have them looted and destroyed by the marauding ogres, but the raging flames had done nothing to slow the progress of the brutes across the land. He pulled his small telescope from the pocket of his cloak and extended it, scanning the horizon. They were safe for now, but no one could guarantee for how much longer. Night was closing in, and the ogres, near blind as they were, always seemed to be at their most active and bloodthirsty at night. Philip stowed the telescope again. There was no point in trying to look for anything in the misty half-light. For now they’d simply have to content themselves with knowing that the coast was currently clear.
“You should get some rest.”

Philip turned to see Mulan standing beside the window. Her arms were folded and her expression was stern, but there was genuine concern in her eyes.

“I can take over the watch for the next few hours,” she continued. “We all need to be as alert as possible during the coming days.”

Philip nodded his agreement.

“I don’t want to have quite as narrow an escape as the last one.” He paused and scanned the horizon again as a pink sun began to sink fully out of sight behind the trees. Everything still seemed to be quiet. A great advantage to ogres was the noise they made by dint of their huge bulk and irrepressible natural rage. It was hard to be taken by surprise when one’s attacker could be heard a mile away, but their speed could be uncanny at times, and Philip and Mulan could not hold off more than a couple of the beasts at a time. “Do you think they’ll come this far west?” he asked Mulan.

The other soldier shrugged.

“They’ve been concentrating their attacks on the remaining populated areas, but this is the Frontlands,” she said. “This is the heart of traditional ogre territory. All of the old accounts of ogre wars always begin here, in the triangle of Marchlands, Frontlands and Avonlea.”

“They always stop here, too,” Philip muttered drily. “But this time we don’t have a handy sorcerer to make them all vanish.”

Mulan did not respond to this comment, and Philip relinquished his spot on the windowsill. Mulan took it up, making herself comfortable on the narrow stone ledge so that she could observe the panorama at leisure.

“I’ll wake you at dawn,” she assured him, and Philip gave another nod of understanding before making his way down the rickety wooden ladder that served as the only way up to their vantage point. Their current hiding place was a long-abandoned hall, left either half-built or half-rebuilt; it was just the bare bones of the structure supported with sturdy wooden scaffolds, and all but one of the high windows were boarded up securely. It made for an excellent hideout from the ogres, but it really wasn’t viable as a long-term place of residence.

Philip crossed the floor softly, moving as quietly as he could as he approached their small encampment in the centre of the room. Aurora was sitting there, watching over her charge. Ever since they had found the strangely dressed newcomer on the beach just a few miles south, Aurora had become his nominate nurse and protector.

“How is he?” Philip asked, indicating the sleeping man.

“He’s doing well,” Aurora replied. “The wound is healing nicely although he’s taken a slight fever.” She dipped the cloth that she had been worrying between her fingers into the small bowl of water beside her and carefully positioned it on the man’s brow. “I think Mulan’s sleeping draught may have been a little too strong. All we can do now is wait for him to wake up.”

She wiped his lips with a second cloth before accepting a long swallow from the water-skin that Philip offered to her. “We’re running low,” she said, shaking the container with a grimace. “We’ll need to find somewhere to replenish our supply soon. I’ve checked our rations as well; everything could do with a top-up.” Aurora sighed and lapsed into silence for a little while before she spoke again. “Philip, do you think we’re ever going to get home? And even if we do get there, what’s the
chance that the ogres have got there first and all that’s left will be rubble?”

Philip shuffled closer to Aurora on their pile of bedding and put his arms around his princess.

“We will make it home,” he said as she leaned into him. “We will find a way home, and if it’s gone when we get there, then we will make a new home, it’s as simple as that. Now, we need to get some sleep. We aren’t sure how long we’ll be able to stay here and we need to make the most of the opportunity to rest whilst we have it.”

Aurora gave a soft hum of acquiescence.

“I always sleep better when you’re here,” she said, resting her head against his shoulder and closing her eyes. Philip narrowed his own.

“Are you having nightmares again?” he asked.

“No.” Aurora yawned and shook her head minutely. “No, I don’t really dream, not since we got you back. But it’s always easier when I know I’m not alone.”

Satisfied with this explanation, Philip leaned back against the packs, making himself comfortable with Aurora by his side. Above, he heard the creak of leather shifting and out of the corner of his eye he saw Mulan changing position in her lookout spot, barely more than a silhouette against the stark moonlight. Philip closed his eyes, but he could only have been dozing for a minute or so when he heard a groan beside him, and then felt Aurora’s presence suddenly move away. He jumped up to find her kneeling beside her patient, who appeared to be coming round a little.

“Easy now,” Aurora soothed, helping him to drink some water. “You’re still groggy from the sleeping draught, just rest. You’re safe here with us, you have my word.”

“Emma?” the man mumbled, his voice slurred and woozy.

“My name is Aurora. Go back to sleep for a while longer. You’ve been hurt and you need to rest.”

The man nodded sleepily and closed his eyes again. Aurora readjusted the cloth on his forehead before returning to Philip.

“He’s stirred like that a few times,” she explained. “He always asks for Emma.”

“Could it be the same Emma you met before?” Philip asked.

“It’s likely,” Aurora conceded. “He’s dressed in the same style as those from the Land Without Magic, and his mysterious arrival was not dissimilar to Emma and Snow’s sudden appearance after the wraith came.”

She glanced across at the newcomer, who had fallen back into slumber again, Mulan’s potent powders taking effect once more. Her expression was worried. “I hope everything’s all right, back where he came from. I’d hate for anything to happen to them whilst they’re trapped somewhere so unpredictable. Lands without magic should not have magic added to them.”

“I’m sure he’ll be able to tell you everything you want to know when he wakes up properly,” Philip said.

Aurora nodded and they resumed their previous aspect, although perhaps due to the sudden disturbance, neither of them made any concerted effort to sleep. Aurora kept her eyes on the unconscious young man; Philip’s gaze flitted between the woman snuggled under his arm, the
newcomer, and Mulan in the window. Presently he saw the latter stiffen, then peer out of the small hole in the stone wall, shielding her eyes against the bright white moonlight. That did not bode well. The warrior jumped down from her perch and flew down the scaffolds on light feet, making no sound as she ran across towards Philip, her hand outstretched, and he handed over his telescope without needing to be asked. Mulan took off again like a flash and Aurora, fully awake again, got to her feet. Philip did likewise.

“This does not appear to be good news,” Aurora murmured, and Philip could only shake his head. At length, after a few more agonising moments, Mulan returned to the ground.

“There’s a small group about forty miles out,” she reported. “There aren’t a lot, but there are more than we can manage between us and they’re travelling quickly. I wouldn’t want to wait until morning to make a move.”

“Where can we go?” Aurora asked. “There’s no shelter for miles around, most of the smaller buildings have already been ransacked.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Mulan said. “If we can get to the other side of the mountain pass, we should be able to make it to the Dark Castle. We’ll practically be on the doorstep.”

“It takes us miles out of our way.” Aurora was not convinced as to the efficacy of her friend’s plan.

“I know,” Mulan replied levelly. “But it’s safe, and it will be safe for a long while yet. It’s the one place in this part of the land that remains untouched. The ogres are scared of the Dark One, rightly so when you consider that he was responsible for ending their last two wars here. They don’t know that he’s no longer in residence, and it would give us somewhere fortified to hold out in until…” She tailed off, looking at the newcomer who still lay prone beside them.

Philip nodded. “It’s a sound plan.”

Aurora took a while longer to ponder the idea before she too gave a slow nod.

“All right,” she said eventually. “We’ll go to the Dark Castle.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle stayed staring out to sea long after the final ripple from the whirlpool had died away to leave the water eerily calm, with no trace of the maelstrom that it had just seen. She sat on the edge of the landing stage where she and Rumpel had shared their tearful farewell, dangling her feet over the side and turning the scrap of paper and vial of magical potion over and over between her fingers. Occasionally she looked down at the spell that Rumpel had entrusted to her, but although she understood the basic meaning of the words and could translate the long-forgotten tongue that they were written in, they might have been gibberish for all the sense that they were making to her.

“Hey, sister.”

It was Leroy’s voice, but Belle did not look up from the magic in her lap until she saw him sit down on the landing stage beside her, and she glanced sideways at him, squinting against the sun that was now hanging low in the sky. He was staring out at the horizon too, but presently he turned to face her and nodded to the spell.

“Parting gift?” he asked. Belle gave a quiet huff of melancholy laughter.
“Not exactly. It's a spell, to protect the town from the other Gregs and Tamaras of this world.”

Leroy considered this for a moment and conceded the practicality of the notion with a shrug.

“He’s got a point. We don’t want Storybrooke becoming a tourist attraction for anything other than the canned seafood.”

“I know.” Belle sighed. “But closing off the town again, sealing it all up in a little magical bubble… It feels so final. He’s not expecting to come back and he’s trying to make sure that he can still protect me after he’s gone.”

“Surely that must be some kind of comfort,” Leroy said gently. “He wants to make sure that you’re safe, and happy.”

“I’d be happier with him here, though.”

Belle set the spell on the ground beside her and leaned back on her hands, looking out to sea again. “I suppose it’s too much to ask for them to come back right now.”

“Maybe it’s a bit soon. Give them a couple of days.” Leroy picked up the spell, read the paper and made a face of slightly unimpressed incomprehension before putting it back down. “In the meantime, Rumpelstiltskin is relying on you to keep the rest of us out of harm’s way.”

“I don’t know the first thing about magic,” Belle muttered. She drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees.

“Nonsense,” Leroy said firmly. “You just need to have a little faith in yourself. If Rumpelstiltskin thinks you can do it, then you can do it.”

“Leroy, I’m really not sure, I don’t understand the spell.”

“Well, I can’t help you there. I’m a man of action, no great literature scholar. But I’m sure the fairies would help if we asked them. No-one knows magic better than the fairies.”

Belle gave a small nod.

“I guess not. We’d have to do it somewhere central, so that the magic could spread evenly over the town. That seems like the most logical way to protect us efficiently. That’s how I would do it if I was creating a spell.”

“Now you’re talking,” Leroy encouraged. He leaned over her shoulder as Belle picked up the paper and re-read it. “Do you need any extra ingredients?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. Everything should be in the potion already. Just uncork it and let it work its magic.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for? Let’s protect our town.” He scrambled to his feet and offered Belle a hand up off the ground. She drew herself a cursory brush-down and together they made their way towards the clock tower, picking up a few more spectators and possible helpers along the way.

“Do you want me to get the fairies?” Leroy asked as they passed the end of the road that would eventually lead to the convent on the edge of the town. Belle looked down at the spell in her hands again. She didn’t know the first thing about magic, that was true, but she knew that true love was the most powerful magic of all, and she knew that was something that she definitely had.

“No,” she said. “No, I’ve got this. If Rumpel has faith in me then I can have faith in myself.”
“That’s the spirit,” Leroy agreed. They reached the clock tower without any further conversation and Belle let the small crowd into the library and up into the tower above. Through the glass clock face, she could see the majority of the rest of the town. Yes, this was definitely the correct vantage point from which to cast. She looked at the paper scrap again, reading and rereading Rumpel’s elegant if almost illegible scrawl, the words sorting themselves into a little more semblance of order.

“Open it up and let it go,” Leroy said. “You can do it.”

Belle was about to ease the cork out of the vial when a shout from the bottom of the staircase stopped her progress. She and Leroy leaned over the railing to see the Mother Superior and a couple of junior nuns rushing up towards them.

“Stop!” the Mother Superior cried again. “You have no idea what you’re doing! You can’t just go around uncorking spells, the effects of which you cannot hope to predict, in the middle of the town!”

“It’s all right, I know its effects,” Belle assured the fairy. “It’s a spell to protect the town; Rumpelstiltskin gave it to me.”

“All the more reason for us to be extremely wary of it then,” the Mother Superior snapped, snatching the spell from Belle’s hand. “You cannot trust anything that the Dark One gives you, especially not if he gives it for free.”

Belle narrowed her eyes and held out a hand for the spell. The Mother Superior ignored her and stowed it in the folds of her cape.

“I might not know much about magic, Mother Superior, but I do know Rumpelstiltskin, and I know that he would never give me something that would cause me any harm.”

“Shes got a point, Blue,” one of the other fairies murmured. “No-one would intentionally harm the one they loved, not even the Dark One.”

“Be quiet, Theresa, this does not concern you, and you have far less experience in these matters than I,” the Mother Superior snapped, before returning her attention to Belle. “I don’t think you know the Dark One as well as you would like, my child.” Her voice had taken on a calm, honeyed tone, condescending and sickly sweet, and both Belle and Leroy were immediately set on edge. “I have known him and his methods quite a few centuries longer than you have.”

Belle shook her head.

“No,” she said, her voice hard, and she pointed an accusatory finger at the senior fairy. “You are the one who doesn’t know him as well as you think you do. You may have known him longer, but you do not know him well. You have never seen the man he is underneath.”

The Mother Superior shook her head. “There is no man underneath.”

“Yes there is, and his name is Rumpelstiltskin. Now give me back his spell, please. He has entrusted me with a job and I am proud to do it. And I am not a child.”

The Mother Superior turned on her heel and began to descend the stairs again; Belle ran halfway down after her but stopped short when the fairy drew her wand and Leroy rushed round in front of Belle to block the course of anything magical that the Mother Superior might throw at them.

“We will work out what the contents of the spell are, and then you can have it back,” the fairy said coolly. “In the meantime, the fairies and I will work out a way to protect the town; in the absence of our other magic users this is a task that necessarily falls to us.”
“Rumpel gave that task to me,” Belle said. “I trust him, and he trusts me, and you are doing me a great disservice in not doing the same.”

The Mother Superior stopped at the foot of the stars and looked back up at Belle.

“You are young, and you are infatuated, and you are allowed to be foolish in such a state,” she said. “But I will give you a piece of advice that you would do well to heed. A man like the Dark One does not, and cannot, love.”

Belle snorted and shook her head sadly. “You really don’t know him at all.”

The fairies left the clock tower without another word, and there was silence among the dwarfs for a few moments.

“We’ll think of something,” Leroy said. “Don’t despair.”

“I’m not despairing,” Belle said. A few moments before, down by the seafront, she had been despondent, but now she only felt anger. “And I have thought of something.”

“So what’s the plan?” Leroy asked.

“We’re going to get that spell back,” Belle said, determined. The dwarfs looked at each other before coming to a mutual unspoken agreement and nodding as one.

“All right, let’s do it,” Leroy said. “And I know just the person to help us out.”

**Neverland – Present**

There was a flash of green light and a rush of magic, and three figures dropped onto the soft forest floor. Henry was the first to get to his feet, despite his hands being tied together, and he scrabbled backwards, a few yards away from Greg and Tamara who were still picking themselves up and dusting themselves down. Tamara had landed badly and her knee buckled under her as she tried to put weight on it.

“Are you ok?” Greg came over and knelt down beside her; she batted him away with an air of frustration, like she was swatting a fly.

“I’ll be fine, let me take care of it.” She hobbled over to a fallen log nearby and sat down on it heavily, gingerly pressing her fingertips into the injured joint.

“Ugh,” Greg groaned. “I am never doing that again.”

“Well, you’ll be staying here for a long time then,” Tamara snapped. “Come on, we need to make a plan, we’re working to a deadline.”

Henry looked around his surroundings: the dense jungle-like trees and the full moon peering through the canopy above them.

“Where are we, anyway?” Greg was asking. “I thought we were going to see the boss?”

“We are,” Tamara said through gritted teeth. “Different boss.”
Greg raised his eyebrows. “I hate to say it, Tamara, but this really doesn’t look like the Home Office.”

“It’s not,” Tamara said. “The plans have changed.”

“I know the plans have changed, that’s why we’ve got the kid,” Greg said. “What I want to know is what the plans have changed to, because you haven’t been completely straight with me from the moment that we started this whole venture.”

Tamara looked up at Greg, her arms folded.

“You really don’t get it, do you?” she said. “So wrapped up in your own little visions of vengeance against the Evil Queen that you can’t see the bigger picture. This is so much bigger than you realise, Greg. We’ve been preparing for this opportunity for decades. You just gave us a way into Storybrooke but this…” She gestured around herself at the forest. “This is the place we’ve been aiming for. Storybrooke, August Booth, Regina, they were only ever a stepping stone. And then we found him and everything fell into place so neatly.”

They both turned to Henry, who had been backing up away from them until he hit a tree and could go no further.

“There’s no use running, kid,” Tamara called to him. “There’s nowhere to run to.”

Greg pulled out his phone. “I’m calling the Office.”

Tamara rolled her eyes.

“Do you really think that’s going to work out here?” she said. As expected, the phone was dead. Greg smacked it a couple of times but it still did not turn on, and he rounded on Tamara.

“Where even is ‘here’?” he shouted. “We’re in a jungle, in the middle of nowhere, with no means of communication with the outside world, and I’ve got no idea what’s going on! And we have a tied-up kid!” He pointed to Henry, who was trying to make himself as unnoticeable as possible. He was looking around the trees for possible exit routes, still trying to work out whether or not running away was a particularly good idea. On the one hand, he believed Tamara when she said that there was no way out. On the other hand, he really didn’t want to spend a moment longer with his kidnappers.

Tamara gave Greg a look of annoyance. “Where do you think ‘here’ is, Greg? We’re in Neverland. This is the place that we were always meant to find. Even if you could call the Office, they’d tell you exactly what I’m telling you now. It’s time to stop wasting our time with little pockets of magic here and there that we happen to stumble across. We’re here, and we take the kid to him.”

Immediately, recognition dawned on Greg’s face and he smiled.

“So this is it then? The big one?”

Tamara nodded.

Henry didn’t stick around to find out any more of the details of Greg and Tamara’s plan, well, Tamara’s plan from the sound of it. He saw his chance to flee whilst Tamara was occupied with her knee and Greg had begun an impatient pacing around the clearing that they had landed in. Henry peeled around the tree that he had been pressed against, running through the forest as quickly as he could. Whatever his kidnappers were planning to do to him, he knew he’d far rather take his chances in this dense undergrowth than wait around to learn more.
He didn't get very far before he stumbled on the rough ground, slimy from the fallen leaf mulch that no sunlight had touched to dry, and it took him a while to get back onto his feet with his bound hands. Greg had caught up to him at that point and Henry felt the man grab the back of his jacket, pulling him back. Had he been able to tear the garment off, he would have done so, but Henry knew that there were some battles that were destined to be lost and that this was one of them.

“We did warn you,” Greg said with a sigh. He called back to Tamara: “I’ve got him.”

“Good, he’s our only leverage in this godforsaken place,” Tamara muttered, back in the clearing where she was winding a bandage from her small first aid kit around her knee to keep it aligned.

“What are you going to do to me?” Henry asked. He was certain that the two adults weren’t actually going to kill him, but he didn’t hold out much hope for mercy from the other inhabitants of the forest, as yet unseen.

“We’re taking you to meet someone,” Greg said. “He’s been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Who is he?” Henry asked, although considering that they were in Neverland, he didn’t need more than one guess at his ultimate destination. “What would Peter Pan want with me?”

Greg opened his mouth to answer, but before he could do so – and Henry wasn’t certain from the look on his still slightly confused face that his response would be particularly satisfactory – the man jumped back with a yelp of alarm.

“What the hell is that?” he exclaimed as Henry felt something cold and soft brush against his shoulder. He turned sharply, but there was nothing to see. He felt it again on the other side, a bit like a hand, and this time when he turned he saw it. There were human shadows drifting past him, seemingly without owners. Bright points of light were twinkling where the eyes should have been. Suddenly, he felt one of them take hold of the back of his collar; the phantasmic fingers were surprisingly strong considering the lack of substance to them.

The shadows were beginning to converge on Greg.

“What’s happening? What are you doing?” He was being herded back, away from Henry. There were at least five shadows encircling him now, beginning to pull and paw at him, but it was hard to pick out the individual shapes with no distinguishing features. They just seemed to be denser pockets of darkness in the already dim night, melting and merging into each other. Greg attempted to fight them off but they seemed to be semi-intangible, and half his desperate blows went straight through the swarming shapes.

“Tamara!” he screamed. “Tamara, do something!”

For a moment, Henry wondered if Tamara had also been caught by the shadows, but then there was a sudden burst of light from the clearing, and Tamara limped towards them carrying a flaming torch made from a tree branch with a length of bandage soaked in antiseptic spirit. The shadows shrank back at the bright light and Henry felt the grip of the one holding him begin to lessen. Tamara continued towards him, holding up the torch and ignoring Greg, who was still surrounded by a sea of swarming black shapes.

“The boy stays with me,” Tamara said firmly. When the shadow did not relinquish its hold on Henry, Tamara waved the torch in its face and Henry screwed his eyes shut; he could feel the flames dangerously close to the top of his head. The shadow let go and Henry stumbled forward as his spectral captor was forced back by the light. Tamara caught him with her free arm, but a second later, that arm was around his neck, holding a penknife to his throat. Henry gulped, beginning to panic,
and he looked from Tamara to the gathered shadows, wondering which of the equally unpleasant options was worse.

“I know he wants the boy alive,” Tamara continued, addressing the shadows. “So take us to your master.”

The shadows in front of them parted, pointing the way into the depths of the forest, and Tamara gave Henry the torch before prodding him forward in front of her.

“Go on, you’re safe. They don’t like light.”

“It’s kind of hard to believe that I’m safe when you’re pointing a knife at me,” Henry said bluntly.

“Just watch it, kid, I’m saving both our skins here,” Tamara muttered. “Let’s just get to Pan in one piece.”

“Tamara,” Greg yelled from behind them, still cornered. “Tamara, you can’t just leave me here!”

“Sorry, Greg,” Tamara said under her breath. “You were useful for a while, but now you’re just a liability. I have a job to do and I’ve waited a long time to do it.”

She didn’t turn round as Greg yelled again.

“Tamara, please!”

Once Tamara, Henry, and the all-important light were no longer in sight, the shadows began to move again, more vicious than they had been before. Greg felt in his pockets for a lighter or match, but he came up empty handed.

Henry heard Greg’s scream cut off sharply and suddenly, and the sound made him feel sick, but Tamara did not break her slow, limping stride.

Neverland – Present

Emma fought her way to the surface and took a huge gulp of air, swallowing not a little sea water with it and choking against the burn of the salt in her throat. She paddled or a while, taking in her surroundings as best she could with her wet hair plastered over her face and getting in her eyes. Above her there was no sign of the ship and she assumed it must have come down on the other side of the island, leaving an eerily calm night sky, the full moon stark against the blackness and showing no sign of the tense scene that had taken place in the air only a few moments before. Still treading water, she looked around for Gold, shaking her hair out of her eyes. She couldn’t see him, so she decided to cut her losses, swimming towards the shore. It was not a particularly long distance to traverse, but the sea had become choppy since she’d landed in it, or perhaps it had always been rough and she just hadn’t appreciated the waves from the height of the flying ship. Eventually she made it to the shingle and collapsed on the smooth pebbles with a groan, closing her eyes against the moonlight whilst she got her breath back.

She heard another human-sounding groan a little way to her right and opened one eye, making out a bedraggled suit-clad shape a few yards away.

“You ok, Gold?” she called.

“Well, I’m not dead,” he replied.
“Ok, that’s a good sign. I think.” Emma’s brow furrowed, because there was something wrong about Gold’s voice. It seemed higher than normal, fluting and twittering beneath the weariness. She sat up and looked across at him properly as he heaved himself into a sitting position and set about emptying water out of his shoes, lamenting the irretrievable ruin of genuine Italian leather.

“Are you all right, Emma?” he asked eventually, turning to face her and running a hand through his sodden hair to get it out of his face.

Emma didn’t scream, but that might have been because she was simply too surprised to do so. She scrambled up and tripped a couple of steps backwards over the stones.

“Jesus Christ!”

“What?” Gold asked, looking around to see the cause of her alarm before realising that it was himself.

“What the hell happened to you?” Emma exclaimed, still not quite able to believe her eyes. Gold’s skin was green, a dark greyish green speckled with flecks of gold-dust and looking almost lizard-like in appearance, his brown eyes now an unnatural slate grey. For a terrible moment, Emma wondered if it was something in the water that had caused the change and she looked down at her own hands, relieved to find them still the same pink colour.

Gold looked down at himself, turning his hand this way and that with what appeared to be utter fascination.

“Well, that’s unexpected,” he said.

“Unexpected is an understatement,” Emma snapped back. “What happened?”

“Although, perhaps not entirely unexpected. It must be the magic; kicked in when I landed.” Ignoring Emma, Gold licked one clawed finger and held it up in the air like a sailor testing the wind direction. “Yes, definitely the magic,” he said, before looking over at Emma, who was still having a little difficulty processing the sudden change not only in his appearance but also in his manner. Rumpelstiltskin had always been a shadowy figure in Henry’s storybook, popping up in passing here and there but never really getting his own tale, and as such there were comparatively few pictures of him. Now that she thought about it though, she could see him in the illustrations as she was now. The man sitting on the shingle bemoaning the loss of his shoes was Rumpelstiltskin as he had been in the Enchanted Forest, not the Mr Gold of a magic-less Storybrooke. Because Emma too could feel something in the atmosphere. She gave a tentative sniff but couldn’t smell anything even though she felt like she ought to be able to.

“You can sense it too, can’t you?” Rumpelstiltskin was looking remarkably smug as he looked up at her, and the expression, coupled with the mismatch of his half-reptilian complexion and Gold’s sedate and expensive suit made him look a little bit ridiculous. “You’re a powerful magician, Emma, more powerful than you want to admit.” He got up and picked his way over to her, barefoot and light of step across the stones. There was no sign of his limp, which was probably just as well given the state of his cane; lying washed up beside his discarded shoes in three pieces.

“This is a land with magic, he continued as he approached her. “A lot of magic.”

Emma backed up a step and Rumpelstiltskin obediently stopped short. “You and I can feel that magic, that power. The magic in the air reacts to the magic in your veins. Don’t fight it, dearie, it’s going to be useful.”
“I still don’t understand why you’re green,” Emma murmured faintly.

Rumpelstiltskin gave a huff of annoyance. “Land with magic, green, land without magic, not green. Sorcery works wonders for the complexion, better than any face cream on the market. Now, I don’t know what you plan to do now that we’ve arrived at our destination, but I came here to find my grandson and that’s what I’m going to do.” He moved away from her, heading towards the trees at the edge of the shingle.

Emma nodded warily and began to follow him up the beach towards the jungle. As unnerved as she was by Rumpelstiltskin’s new look, she appreciated the need to stick together, at least until they found the others. Part way, Rumpelstiltskin stopped and with a finger-snap, his soggy and likely ruined suit was gone, replaced with dark leather and what appeared to be dragon hide from top to toe. Emma stopped in her tracks; whilst she was already having trouble equating the slightly mad magician to the scheming man she had known in Storybrooke, this put the icing on the proverbial cake.

“Much better,” he said to himself before continuing his trek up the beach. He flexed his fingers. The pull of the magic in the air here was intoxicating and he took a deep breath, feeling it coat his lungs. It was too long since he’d felt this kind of raw power bristling in the atmosphere around him; it was stronger here than it had been in the Enchanted Forest and he’d had three hundred years to acclimatise to it there. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He was here for Henry. That was the only aim of this trip, a trip that would likely be one way for him. He had to save Henry. He shook his head against the creeping thoughts and continued on his path. At the edge of the jungle, Emma stopped him.

“Hey, wait.”

He turned and looked at her over his shoulder. She looked fierce and determined, the same Emma that he had seen briefly when he had been dying in his shop: not happy with her situation but determined to do the best thing.

“We’re finding Henry,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And then we’re finding a way home.”

“Well, I doubt you want to stay here, unless you’ve discovered a hitherto hidden desire to spend the rest of your days in a treehouse,” Rumpelstiltskin pointed out. “Yes, you’ll need to find a way home.”

Emma noticed that he said you and not we, and she narrowed her eyes but made no mention of it, and she kept pace beside Rumpelstiltskin as they continued through the trees. She plucked at her wet top where it was sticking to her.

“Don’t suppose you could snap your fingers and get me some dry clothes too?” she asked, only half-joking. “Perhaps not what you’re wearing though,” she added hastily on seeing him raise his hand. Rumpelstiltskin gave an explosive giggle, the likes of which Emma could categorically say that she had never heard come out of Gold’s mouth, and the sudden noise made her jump. There was something about the air on the island, and the all-encompassing night, that made her instinctively on edge.

“Please don’t do that again,” she muttered.
Rumpelstiltskin shrugged.

“You’ve got magic of your own, dearie. Isn’t it time you put it into practice?”

Emma took in Rumpelstiltskin’s skin once more and shook her head.

“I’d really rather not,” she said.

“Afraid you’ll end up looking like me?” The maniacal glee had gone from his voice now, he just sounded bitter. “You’re a child of true love, Emma, the most powerful magic of all, and you’re filled to the brim with pure, light magic.” He laughed again, a harsh, hollow bark this time. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. Unless you start breathing in magic from my books, like one of my pupils.” He gave a wistful sigh. “Oh dear, that really was a particularly virulent shade of green. It clashed horribly with her hair.”

“I was more worried about it going wrong and ending up with no clothes at all,” Emma interrupted.

“You’re right, that wouldn’t be good.” He snapped his fingers and Emma instantly dried out, her clothes feeling like they’d just come out of the tumble dryer.

“Thank you.”

“Consider it an insurance policy. You’re no use if you catch your death of cold.”

He continued on, and Emma followed with a small smile, still not entirely trusting, but knowing that she had no other real choice.

**Storybrooke – Present**

“Are you mad?”

Evening had fallen in Storybrooke and crickets were chirruping in the twilight. The sun was little more than an orange streak on the horizon and it lit up Astrid’s face with an unnatural glow as she leaned out of one of the upper windows of the convent.

“Quite possibly,” Leroy replied to the fairy’s question. He and Belle were standing in the shadows of the building, out of sight of any prying eyes, and anyone who was looking on would think that Astrid was simply leaning out of her bedroom window to get a breath of fresh evening air. She leaned heavily on the windowsill and shook her head.

“I don’t know, Leroy, it seems fraught with danger to me.”

“It’s not dangerous,” Belle said, “just a bit awkward. And the aim of the mission is a noble one. We have to protect the town.”

Astrid sighed. “I know, Theresa told me what happened in the clock tower. I don’t know, Leroy,” she repeated.

“Please, you’ve got to believe us that this is the right way,” Belle said.

“I don’t doubt the spell,” Astrid replied. “It’s the part of the plan involving sneaking around behind Blue’s back and stealing things from her room that I’m not so sure about.”

“Please, Astrid,” Belle pleaded. “Just let us in, you don’t have to do anything else. We’ll take
responsibility from there.”

Astrid was visibly torn, and the moment when she caved was clear to see.

“All right, I’ll help,” she said. “Because I know you’re right about the spell and Blue’s attitude. Go round to the side and wait by the kitchen door; I’ll sneak down and let you in.”

Belle and Leroy picked their way through the convent’s small vegetable garden, trying to avoid stepping on any shoots and leaving too many clear footprints in the pitch blackness.

“Is she going to be all right?” Belle asked quietly.

“We can trust Astrid,” Leroy said. “She won’t rat us out to the Mother Superior.”

“I’m not worried about her loyalty,” Belle whispered. “More her ability to sneak.”

“She’ll be fine,” Leroy replied, although he didn’t sound quite as convinced this time. They leaned against the wall, waiting for the door to open.

“Breaking in like this still feels really wrong,” Belle said. “Especially with the nuns. If it was anyone other than the Mother Superior, I might be having second thoughts.”

“You can’t back down now,” Leroy interjected with alarm. “We’re nearly there.”

“Oh, I don’t intend to back down. I intend to prove her wrong and prove Rumpel right.”

There was a loud clang, hastily muffled, from the kitchen, and the sound of voices speaking in a frantic although very quiet hissed whisper. Leroy and Belle looked at one another with worried expressions. At length the door opened a fraction and Astrid’s face appeared around it, blinking in the dark.

“I knocked over a bowl,” she said sheepishly by way of explanation. “Come on in. Blue’s in the chapel at the moment so the coast is clear for another few minutes.”

Belle and Leroy entered the kitchen; it was illuminated solely by a couple of candle lamps flickering on the central table. Belle started on seeing that they were not alone in the room. Another nun was carefully – and silently – putting a metal bowl away in a high cupboard. As she turned, Belle recognised her as the fairy who had tried to reason with Blue in the clock tower earlier in the afternoon.

“You can trust Theresa,” Astrid said, following Belle’s gaze to the other nun. “She’s a lot better at sneaking around than I am.”

“You’re doing fine,” Leroy said chivalrously. “So where do we find this spell?”

“It’ll be in Blue’s room, she keeps all the magical things in there under lock and key,” Astrid said. They left the kitchen without further incident; Astrid leading the way.

As they moved through the corridors, Belle kept a watch out on either side for any signs of movement from the other quiet rooms in the convent. The nuns were early to bed and early to rise, and those who were not in the chapel with the Mother Superior appeared to be sound asleep. Still, it made no sense for them to be drawing any more attention to themselves than absolutely necessary.

“It’s this one,” Astrid said, stopping abruptly in front of a door on the first floor. Theresa had peeled off and was waiting by the staircase ready to rush back and warn them of anyone’s imminent arrival.
Belle tried the door handle tentatively. It was locked, which was to be expected, but there was no harm in hoping for a miracle.

“Can you zap it?” Leroy asked, miming blasting the door lock with a wand. Astrid shook her head sadly.

“No, our wands are in there.” She indicated the Mother Superior’s door. “She doesn’t let us have them unless we need to leave the convent for any reason.”

“Fairy dust?” Leroy asked, but it was clear from his tone of voice that he knew it was a long shot but he couldn’t bear to overlook any possible angle. Again, Astrid pointed to the door they were standing beside.

“I’ve got this.” Belle knelt down to bring her to eye level with the door and she felt around in her handbag for the set of picks that she had taken from the shop before coming up to the convent with Leroy. “They’re Rumpel’s,” she said by way of explanation.

“Did anyone ever teach you how to use them?” Leroy asked.

“No. I’m teaching myself as I go along.” She slid the probes into the lock and began to feel around for the tumblers. “Could I have some light please?”

Astrid obediently held up her little lantern over the lock and Belle continued her work. A particularly loud scrape of the probes within the metal lock made them all jump and fall into a statue-like stillness, but there was no sound from the rest of the convent and Belle began again. She tried the door handle again, gingerly, and this time the door swung open without any effort. She got to her feet and crept inside, followed by Leroy and Astrid. Immediately Belle’s eyes were drawn to the cape that was draped over the sparse metal bedframe, but a quick feel through the pockets left her empty-handed.

“The wands and fairy dust are kept in here,” Astrid whispered, opening a small wooden cabinet on the wall above the desk. Belle came over and stood on a chair to peer into the cupboard, but Rumpel’s spell was nowhere to be found, and a search of the desk and drawers proved similarly fruitless.

“It’s got to be here somewhere,” Leroy hissed.

“She wouldn’t leave it lying around where anyone could get to it,” Astrid agreed. “It has to be hidden in here.”

Belle spotted the bible on the nightstand beside the bed.

“I wonder… My father used to use books as hiding places,” she said. “I was horrified that he’d abuse good books like that.” She snatched up the bible and opened up the front cover, quickly flicking through the first few leaves until, sure enough, she found a hollowed out section. In it were several different vials of varied unknown magics, but most importantly, Rumpelstiltskin’s protection spell was there. Belle pocketed it and put the book back in the same position on the nightstand.

“All right, let’s get out of here,” Leroy said. He moved towards the door but stopped on hearing pattering footsteps along the corridor. Theresa’s face appeared in the door frame.

“She’s coming,” the other fairy said.

“How do we get out now?” Leroy asked. Belle went over to the window, opening it and looking out. Below them was the vegetable garden that they had walked through earlier.
“We can jump, it’s not too high,” she said. “The ground will be soft to land on, although we might squash a few carrots.”

Leroy looked worried but nodded his agreement, and Belle wasted no time in swinging her legs over the edge of the windowsill and jumping out.

“What about you two?” Leroy asked the fairies. Theresa and Astrid looked at each other, then Astrid looked at Leroy.

“You go,” Theresa said. “I’ll cover for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I used to do it for Tink all the time. Now scram before she gets here!”

Leroy jumped first, landing heavily in the cabbage patch, and he held out his arms to catch Astrid as she followed him down. They staggered a little on the uneven ground before finding their footing and glancing back up at the window. Theresa gave them a friendly wave and then bolted the glass shut, and Leroy and Astrid crept through the garden to catch up to Belle, who was waiting out of sight beyond the boundary of the convent’s grounds. Together, the three of them made their way back into the town towards the clock tower.

Neverland – Present

Snow and David had jumped from the ship together as it had tumbled out of the sky, and they clung to each other until the rapidly oncoming ground forced them to part by necessity in order to each break their fall as best they could. The earth was soft where they landed, covered in a thick bed of slimy, half-rotting leaves, and apart from a few bruises, Snow ascertained that no damage had been done from the impromptu leap.

“Are you all right?” she asked David, who had landed a few feet away and was patting himself down for injury.

“I think so.”

Snow checked her bow where it had been slung over her shoulder; she’d lost a couple of arrows that hadn’t been fastened securely in her quiver, but the weapon itself was intact and not too bent. Sensibly, David had tossed his sword away from him lest he land on it and it was half-buried under the leaf cover a little way off. He got to his feet and moved towards it, and Snow heard a tiny snap, almost inaudible, but enough to put her on her guard.

“David wait, don’t…”

But the words came too late; David had taken another step towards his sword and in a ferocious rustle of leaves, he was pulled up into the trees in a net trap.

Snow immediately drew an arrow and looked around the trees.

“Who’s there?” she called. “Show yourself!”

There was no sound or movement in the jungle and Snow continued to look around, moving cautiously with measured steps to avoid springing another trap that might have been laid close by.
“This isn’t right, people normally stay close to traps,” Snow muttered.

“Only if they want to catch something alive,” David said, looking around as best he could from his awkward position in the tree canopy. “Otherwise they might just leave it to do its work and check back later. At least we know now that this island is definitely inhabited.”

“Yes, but are the inhabitants friend or foe?” Snow asked. “That’s what I’m more worried about.” She picked up David’s sword and fastened the belt around her waist before taking up her bow again and performing another sweep of the immediate area. “Will they help us find the others or not? In my experience, locals aren’t usually too happy about newcomers dropping abruptly out of the sky.”

“True.” David peered through the treetops in case any assailants were concealed above the ground. “I think we’re safe.”

Snow nodded and moved over to the tree that David was dangling from, looking around it for the guide rope that would release him. Above her, David gave a snort of laughter.

“You know, I can’t help but be reminded of our first meeting,” he said. “Things have changed a bit since then.”

“Yes, back then if I’d seen you in a net I wouldn’t have hesitated to leave you there.” Snow found the guide rope. “Brace yourself, I’m going to cut you down now.”

She drew the sword but caught flickering movement out of the corner of her eye. She whirled around to face it, sword outstretched, but there was nothing there.

“Snow?” David called down to her. “Snow, what’s the matter?”

“I thought I saw something.” She narrowed her eyes and peered through the trees again, but it was impossible to see very far in the dull night. It was odd that the jungle should seem so dark, despite the bright full moon and the many twinkling stars above; there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

“There’s something very wrong with this place.” Snow shivered. “Ok, I’m cutting you down now.”

She cut the thick rope with one sharp chop of the sword blade, and the net fell from the tree in a flurry of leaves. Snow rushed round to help David untangle himself.

“Well, you can’t deny that was an eventful start,” he said. Free from the ropes, he looked around. “I know what you mean. This is a very strange place. We should move on.”

Snow handed back his sword and he strapped on the belt.

“How are we going to find Emma?” she asked. “And Henry? How do we even know where to start looking? Hook’s been here before, and I get the impression Gold has as well, but that doesn’t help us right now. Oh, I hope Emma’s all right.”

“She’ll be fine,” David said. “She can swim, and she’s got magic to defend herself, and she’s with Gold.”

“You trust him?” Snow asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not as far as I could throw him, but I know that he cares about Henry, and I trust that.”

“And she’s barely used magic,” Snow continued. “This time last year she didn’t even know she had magic. We’ve got no idea what we’re going up against.”
“Emma can take care of herself,” David reassured his wife firmly. “She’s done it before and she’s good at it.”

“Don’t remind me,” Snow said sadly. “I just don’t want to think of her alone again now that we’ve found her. Can this family ever stop being separated?”

“Maybe not just yet, but Snow, we always find each other, against all the odds.” David heard a rustle in the trees behind them. “We really need to keep moving, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Snow nodded and took David’s hand, and they walked on through the forest.

“We’re all here looking for the same thing,” David said once they were assured, with several looks around and false starts, that they were not being followed. “All we have to do is keep our eyes open for Henry and the others. Whilst we may not all be looking for each other, we are all looking for Henry, so sooner or later our paths will converge.”

“I can’t understand how you’re so calm,” Snow said.

“Because nothing is ever gained by panicking,” David replied. “I’ve learned that. We have to keep a clear head. Especially here.” He looked around again, still uneasy at his surroundings. There was something in the trees, he was sure of it, but it was not showing itself. He could only hope that whatever it was, it was more scared of them than they were of it.

“No, I mean about Emma,” Snow said quietly again. “I can’t believe we lost her again.”

“Don’t think that I’m not worried about Emma.” David stopped and Snow turned to face him. “I am worried about Emma. I’m worried about everyone. But I’m just trying to keep some perspective. In the circumstances that we’re in, I’m most worried about Henry.”

“She’s our baby, David.”

“She’s not, though, Snow. Not anymore. She’s our daughter, and she’ll always be our daughter, but she’s not a child anymore. She’s an adult, and she’s a mother herself. In this situation, I think she’d far rather that we focussed our energy on finding Henry.”

“What kind of parents lose their child as often as we have, David? This isn’t a question of leaving a baby in a supermarket, this is a question of crossing worlds.”

“Parents who have to deal with dark curses, evil queens, soul-sucking wraiths and magic beans on a regular basis,” David pointed out. “Those kinds of things don’t happen every day.”

Snow raised a despairing eyebrow.

“Well, they happen to us more regularly than they happen to other people,” David amended. “Snow, none of this makes you any less of a mother.”

“How do you know that, David?” Snow broke away with a soft sigh and continued to pick her way through the forest. David closed his eyes and gave a long exhalation before catching up to her.

“Snow…”

“I have no idea how much of a mother I am. I’ll never know. Because I never got to chance to be a mother. I never got the chance to raise my child. I held her for five minutes and then she was grown. It’s different for you. You knew that you wouldn’t see her till she was an adult. You were prepared for that. But I thought I’d be with her. I thought I’d raise her, and now I can’t, and you tell me that
she’s grown up now and she can take care of herself, and I know that, but I can’t help wanting to be her mother. I can’t help wanting my baby girl!”

There was silence for a while after Snow’s outburst, broken only by the chirruping of the crickets. The sound was comforting, a shred of normality in this strange place, and it helped to ground them.

“I’m sorry,” Snow said eventually. “Not sure where that came from. I think it’s this place.” She looked around at the densely packed trees around her. “It’s bringing out the worst in me.”

“It’s ok, I understand. You don’t need to apologise for being worried.”

David pressed a light kiss to her cheek and Snow gave a weak smile before taking his hand again.

“Let’s find the others.”

**Enchanted Forest – Present**

None of the gathered company had ever had cause to visit the Dark Castle before, and although they had heard many tales about it and its inhabitant, they had never seen the grand building nestled in the foothills of the mountains. It was certainly an impressive structure, looking no worse for wear for having been abandoned for so long. Mulan looked up at the gates in front of her. There was something foreboding about the tall iron, and she could well see why most people thought that coming to the Dark One for assistance in a crisis was a very last resort. Although the magician himself was not in residence, the air of power and darkness remained, and she gave an inward shiver.

“How do we get inside?” Aurora asked plainly. They’d had a hard night’s ride through the mountain pass and they were all tired, and the horses needed rest and shelter. Getting inside was paramount, but it was proving easier said than done. Philip was crouched in front of the gates, looking at the lock. When he reached out to touch it tentatively, a red spark of magic shot out, burning his fingertips even through his gloves. He took a step back, rubbing his sore hand.

“The place is sealed magically. Normally the gates would be open all the time; I assume that they’re closed because the Dark One isn’t here. They’re protecting the castle for his return.”

“Is there anything we can do to counteract it?” Aurora asked.

Mulan drew her sword and touched the blade to the heavy lock, but the reaction from the metal was the same, a shower of violent magical sparks.

“Normally magic weakens over time,” Aurora mused. She came over to the gates from where she had been making sure that her patient, still sleeping despite their journey, was well and on the mend. “When I was in hiding, the fairies began to worry that their protective enchantments were starting to wear off before my birthday arrived. But this magic seems to have become stronger over time.”

“Blood magic is strong,” Philip said. “And often used for sealing things off against intruders. I wonder.”

He went over to Mulan, who still had her sword drawn, and he pulled off one glove, carefully holding the blade steady and nicking his thumb on the edge so that a drop of blood welled there. He went back over to the gates and let the ruby droplet drip onto the metal. It fizzed and hissed like fat over a fire, eventually absorbing into the dark iron until there was no trace left, but the gates still did not move.
“Yes, it’s a blood lock,” Philip said. “Probably getting stronger because he’s been away for so long. Unless we find a long-lost relative of the Dark One, we won’t be getting inside.”

Mulan put her sword back in its scabbard.

“I still say we should stop here,” she said. “We’re close enough to the castle that the ogres shouldn’t come near, and we really can’t travel any further today. We’ll be safe here until we work out what to do next.”

The other two nodded their agreement and began to set up camp in the shadows of the forbidding castle.

Taking the first watch, Mulan leaned back against the gates. They felt warm against her back, although it was not a particularly hot day and the sky was overcast, and she assumed it was the inherent magic trying to ward her off. Still, she was comfortable for now, so she continued to keep a look out. Just because they were not expecting ogres in this part of the land did not mean that there weren’t other threats out there; bands of thieves roaming the country and causing unrest in the small pockets of society that had escaped Regina’s curse and were trying to continue functioning as best they could in the absence of any kind of power structure. Added to that, of course, there were the usual dangers from wild animals. Mulan rested her hand on her sword hilt, ready to spring into action if necessary. Aurora and Philip were sleeping peacefully in the shade of a tree, and she gave them a wistful smile. Something caught her eye, it was the mysterious man from the beach. He was waking up. She put her sword down and went over to him as he sat up.

“Hello.”

He startled slightly, and Mulan stopped at a safe distance.

“You’re safe here,” she said. “My name is Mulan.”

“Neal.”

“How are you feeling, Neal?”

Neal looked around him, bewildered. When he had fallen through the portal, clinging onto consciousness by the barest thread, he hadn’t really had any kind of destination in mind. He had been occupied solely with one thought, that of home, the home of his childhood, before everything went to hell. Back when his father was still Papa.

“Where am I?” he asked Mulan.

“This is the Enchanted Forest,” she replied. “We found you washed up on the shore several miles south-east of here, near the Frontlands.”

“We?”

“Myself, Aurora and Philip.” Neal looked around and saw the two sleeping figures pointed out to him. “You were injured when we found you, we thought it best to let you sleep it off.”

Neal grimaced and pressed a hand to the aching place where Tamara had shot him. He was never not trusting Emma’s character judgments again. Still, it had all seemed so far-fetched at the time. Then again, he could hardly talk, not given his own tumultuous history that spanned three realms and three centuries depending on whose timeline you used. His thoughts came full circle to Emma. He had to let her know that he was ok somehow; he had to get back to Storybrooke, for Henry’s sake even if not for hers.
“Here.”

Mulan offered him some water which he accepted gratefully.

“You’re from the Land Without Magic, aren’t you?” she asked.

Neal nodded. “Yes. From here originally, though. Not too far from where you found me, actually. But I generally think of back there as home. Most of the time.”

“How did you end up here?” Mulan asked. She sat down next to him, still maintaining a respectful distance.

“It’s a long story.” Neal sighed. “But I have to get back.”

Mulan shrugged. “We’ve helped people cross worlds before, we can do it again.”

The simple statement gave Neal hope, and he gave a small smile.

“Are you hungry?” Mulan asked. “We don’t have much, but you’re welcome to share.”

“Thank you.”

They stayed in silence for a few minutes whilst Neal nibbled his fruit, and presently he looked up at the gates that they were camping beside.

“I’m going to assume that there’s a reason why we’re outside the gates and not inside?”

Mulan nodded.

“We can’t get in.”

“Locked? I’m good with locks, maybe I can help.”

“Blood locked,” Mulan said. “The Dark One has gone but his magic remains.”

“The Dark One?” Neal was not quite sure what emotion he felt on hearing the name spoken so casually. Mulan, evidently mistaking his surprise for lack of knowledge, continued.

“The Dark Castle,” she said, indicating the huge building behind them. “Home to the most powerful sorcerer in all the realms. At least, it was, until Regina’s curse came. We came here to be safe from the ogres, they never venture near here.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” Neal muttered. Gingerly, he got to his feet. He did not know a lot about magic, indeed he actively tried to avoid it as much as he could – although somehow it seemed inevitably to find him again. But blood locks weren’t so far-fetched an idea, like biometric locks back in the Land Without Magic.

“What are you doing?” Mulan asked. “I wouldn’t touch the lock if I were you, it burns.”

Neal paid her no heed and hovered his hand over the heavy metal. Nothing happened. Gently he inched closer; he could feel the warmth radiating off it. It felt welcoming almost, like it was inviting him in. He touched the lock and it sprang under his fingers, the heavy iron gates creaking open.

“What’s going on?”

Aurora and Philip were startled awake by the sound, and they looked up at the sight of Neal framed
by the gates.

“What were you saying about long-lost relatives of the Dark One?” Aurora murmured.

**Storybrooke – Present**

“Ready?”

Belle, Leroy and Astrid were standing at the top of the clock tower, looking out over the town. The sun had set fully, but it was not yet very late in the evening and there were still people around on their way home or to Granny’s. Belle wondered if any of the pedestrians below could see them up in the tower, and she wondered how many people realised what they were doing.

Astrid and Leroy nodded.

“Go for it, sister,” Leroy said. “The sooner the better.”

Belle eased the cork out of the vial and a small wisp of gold-coloured magic wafted out. She reread the instructions on the scrap of parchment. *Think about what you want to protect.*

“Is that it?” Astrid asked, her voice worried. “I don’t think that’s going to protect the whole town.”

“No, it needs a little encouragement.” Belle closed her eyes, visualising the town and all its inhabitants, snug and safe under Rumpel’s spell, hidden away in this remote corner of Maine where no prying eyes could enter. And then she thought of Rumpel and all the others on the Jolly Roger. There had to be a way to counteract this spell. Even if Rumpel himself was not planning on coming back, surely he planned on everyone else coming back.

She blew a little puff of breath into the wisp of magic, and the rest of the vial emptied into a large shimmering cloud in the air. This, Belle knew instinctively, was good magic.

“Look at it,” Astrid breathed in wonder. “It’s so pure and bright.” She reached out and moved her hand through the glittering cloud, and Belle had to smile at the look of joy on her face. “This is a spell created from love, anyone can see that,” the fairy continued. “I don’t know why Blue was so set against it.”

“I don’t think she’s against the magic so much as the man who created it,” Leroy muttered drily. “Only the good can be good, so it would seem.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Astrid said mildly. “Go on,” she said to the cloud in a happy, encouraging tone. “Show us what you can do.”

Belle blew into the cloud again and the bright, golden light burst forth from the clock tower to the astonished gasps of the people on the street below. It continued to climb before spreading out and slowly creating a blanket over the town. Anyone looking on from the sky would see a bright golden dome slowly creeping down until it encircled the whole of the town before vanishing completely, and taking the town with it. From overhead, all that could be seen was thick woodland. Anyone coming into the town on the ground would simply see a road that led to nowhere. Storybrooke was once more off the map.

“Well, that was easy,” Leroy remarked as the last vestiges of light from the spell grew dim and faded altogether. “I wonder why no-one did it sooner. Then we wouldn’t have had this problem in the first place.”
“I think there were too many other things happening,” Belle said. “We didn’t realise how dangerous a position we were in until it was too late.”

“Well, better late than never,” Astrid said brightly.

Together the three began to make their way down the steps of the clock tower again, Astrid leading the way and Belle bringing up the rear.

“How now?” she asked as she locked up the library. Having completed the task that Rumpel had entrusted her with, she really wasn’t sure what to do now except wait for his return.

“Now, I say we go to Granny’s and celebrate our success with beer,” Leroy said.

“Seems like a sound plan to me.” Perhaps beer would help ease the loneliness of being separated from Rumpel for what seemed to be the umpteenth time. “Lead on.”

“I don’t know,” Astrid replied sadly. “I really should be getting back to the convent.”

“You don’t sound too thrilled by the prospect,” Belle laughed as they all began walking in the direction of Granny’s. Astrid hung back a little and Belle broke step to remain beside her.

“It’s not that I don’t like being a fairy,” Astrid said. “All I ever wanted was to be a fairy godmother. But sometimes I feel like there are other important things in life, and I don’t see why I have to choose between them.”

Suddenly it all clicked into place in Belle’s mind.

“You’re Nova, aren’t you?”

Astrid nodded. “Yes, that was my name in the Enchanted Forest.”

Belle looked between the two, Leroy in front just out of earshot, and Astrid next to her.

“You never got your boat.”

“No, it wasn’t to be. But sometimes I can’t help wondering, you know? What could have been if things had gone a little differently?”

Belle smiled. “If there’s one thing that life has taught me, it’s that sometimes, you do get second chances, and you have to grab them with both hands. Maybe this is your second chance. So I’d take it. The Blue Fairy may have stopped you before, but there’s no reason for her to do so again. You have the right to love and be loved. No-one should be able to stop you.”

Astrid smiled. “You’re right. But what if…”

She nodded towards Leroy.

“You’ll never know if you don’t try,” Belle said.

They had reached the diner at that point, and Leroy held the door open for the two ladies before going over to the bar to order their drinks. If anyone was surprised to see a dwarf, a fairy and a librarian sharing a booth and drinking beer, then they didn’t show it, and the three were left in peace to toast the success of Belle’s spell-casting.

“It’s good to have you back, Belle,” Leroy said presently. Belle blushed, remembering Lacey’s antics, and she wondered what would have happened had Leroy not procured the potion for her.
Would true love’s kiss have restored her memories if she had fallen in love with Gold and vice versa? And what if she hadn’t? She shook her head, not wanting to think about it.

“It’s good to be back,” she said. “And thank you. For squaring it with the fairies.”

Leroy shrugged. “Just doing a favour for an old friend.”

Presently, Astrid excused herself to the bathroom, and Leroy sighed as he watched her leave the room.

“You know she still loves you,” Belle murmured, leaning in so that anyone who was within eavesdropping distance could not overhear.

Leroy shook his head. “I broke her heart.”

“I think a certain superior fairy broke both your hearts,” Belle said sagely. “But you’ve got a second chance here in Storybrooke.”

“She’s a nun,” Leroy pointed out.

“That’s just the calling that the curse gave her, like all of the fairies,” Belle said. “But Nova was never an ordinary fairy.”

Leroy smiled. “No, she wasn’t.”

“So… do you think you might want to try again?”

Leroy didn’t respond, studying the depths of his beer, before he eventually nodded.

“Yeah. I think it might work.”

“Don’t worry about what anyone else thinks,” Belle said. She thought of her father and his reaction to her relationship with Rumpel. “And go for it. Life’s too short not to take these chances.”

A look of understanding passed between them then.

“He will come back, Belle,” Leroy said. “He loves you.”

Belle smiled. “I know he does. I just don’t quite know what to do with myself now that he’s gone. All the time I’ve been in Storybrooke has been defined by my relationship with Rumpel, and now I have the chance to redefine things. I just wish that it hadn’t come so abruptly, and in such unfavourable circumstances.”

“You’ll work it out,” Leroy said. “And we’re all here for you. Me, Astrid, the rest of the dwarfs. If you need anything, just yell.”

“Thank you, Leroy.”

“Hey, that’s what friends are for.”

Astrid had returned to the table, and Belle chose that moment to make a strategic exit and leave the two to take their first little steps back towards each other. She meandered down the street towards the harbour, looking out over the calm sea, out across the many realms to where Rumpel was, off finding Henry. She wondered if he missed her as much as she was missing him.

“Come back to me, Rumpel,” she breathed, before tearing her gaze away from the horizon and
turning towards home.
Enchanted Forest – Past

Mulan woke with a start from an uneasy dream that she immediately forgot the content of and sat up, looking around to see what had woken her. Nothing seemed to be particularly different to how it had been when she had gone to sleep. Aurora was still awake, sitting by the fire and occasionally stirring the embers with a twig to keep it burning. Looking up at the night sky out of the snug alcove that they had found to make their camp in, tucked away at the bottom of a hill, Mulan could tell from the position of the moon that it was long past when Aurora should have roused her to take over the watch for the remainder of the night.

“You should have woken me,” she admonished.

Aurora looked over and gave a weak smile. “I wasn’t tired, and you need your rest.”

“So do you,” Mulan pointed out. There were dark circles under Aurora’s eyes and whilst she might claim not to be tired, she was very obviously in need of a long, deep sleep.

“I can’t sleep,” Aurora admitted finally. “I don’t want to sleep. I don’t want to drop into the Netherworld again.”

“I’m right here,” Mulan assured the princess. “And I’ll wake you if it seems like you’re having a nightmare.”

Aurora nodded and came over to sit beside Mulan, watching the flames flickering as the sky began to lighten in the east.

“You’ll stay?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Aurora curled up and after a moment, shuffled a little closer to rest her head in Mulan’s lap. She was less afraid knowing that she was with someone like that, and that whatever happened in the depths of her mind whilst she slept, she would not be alone. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift until it reached its ultimate destination, the abandoned fortress where they had laid Philip to rest.

“Do you think we’ll be able to bring Philip back?” she asked Mulan. “Cora said that it was possible, but Cora said a lot of things. I was so desperate for this one to be true though. They always say that magic can’t resurrect the dead.”

Mulan sighed. “Philip isn’t really dead, though,” she said. “His body was not physically killed, but his soul was separated from it. If we can reunite his soul and his body then perhaps he can live again.”

“How do we go about finding his soul, though? The wraith has it.”

“Where does a wraith take the souls it steals?” Mulan pondered the question in silence for a while, and against her better judgement, Aurora felt herself dropping off to sleep. She felt Mulan shift a little, and she did not fight the oncoming oblivion.

Once Aurora’s breathing had evened out and she seemed to be sleeping peacefully without any signs of her slumber turning against her, Mulan reached across for her pack and pulled out the small book
that Belle had left with her after the other woman had defeated the yaoguai. It was a collection of myths and legends and other not-so-fantastical beasts, and maybe the wraith could be found within its pages.

Absentmindedly she stroked Aurora’s hair, and she thought she saw the princess smile in her sleep. Hopefully she was having pleasant dreams of reuniting with Philip. Mulan was certain that it was going to be possible, she just wasn’t sure how. Had anyone even tried to reunite a soul with a body before?

Mulan flicked through the book’s pages, coming to a stop by an illustration that seemed particularly pertinent. The chapter was entitled souls, shades and shadows.

“Well, that looks promising,” she murmured.

“Found something?” Aurora asked sleepily.

Mulan looked down at her friend with an unimpressed expression, but Aurora’s eyes were still closed, so the effect was somewhat lost.

“I thought you were asleep,” she said.

“I am. I was. Sort of. Have you found something?”

“I’m not sure.” Mulan skim read over the page. Not all of it was as useful as she’d hoped for. “Nine precincts of death…. Banishing escaped souls… No, this is all about how to put stray dead souls back where they belong, not the other way round. It’s for exorcising malevolent ghosts.” She turned the page. “Shades becoming unbound from their corporeal counterparts… retrieving unbound shadows and souls… This seems better.”

Aurora shifted around and finally sat up with a yawn, resting her chin on Mulan’s shoulder to read the book. She couldn’t make any sense of the text, but the picture was clear enough, a pair of shadows holding hands.

“What does it say?” she asked.

“When a soul or shadow enters the realm of death when separated from its owner by great force, it will remain in the Well of Lost Souls,” Mulan read aloud.

“Do you think that’s where Philip’s soul would be?” Aurora murmured, more to herself than to Mulan. “You can’t deny that it was separated from his body by great force.”

Mulan nodded. “I think it’s likely.” She read on. “In these cases, the soul will remain trapped until it is collected by its owner – when the owner’s physical body also dies – or by another soul or shadow that it recognises as its own deepest desire.”

“When that person dies too?” Aurora asked. Her stomach was churning and she was suddenly very awake and aware of her surroundings where she had been drowsy before. She sat up straight and looked at Mulan in fear.

“I don’t think so,” Mulan said. She flicked forward a few pages in search of more information. “It doesn’t specify that the collector has to be dead.”

“But how would we get to the realm of death without dying?” Aurora pointed out.

“I’m not sure, I’m just looking. It started talking about life-bound entities and things that can’t die that
are also part of the Well,” Mulan said. “I’m having to skip forward a lot.” She turned over a couple more leaves and found what they were looking for. “There were are. The entrance to the realm of the dead is beyond the Netherworld.”

Aurora let out a long breath. “I’d really not go there again.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to,” Mulan continued. “It gives instructions for a heavy sleeping draught. One that would knock you out enough to take you straight to the gate, but only gives you a limited time before it drags you back.” She peered at the recipe again. “It looks a lot like the sleeping draught I made for you once, but stronger. And it uses burned tea leaves in it to wake you. It’s like a standard sleeping spell, I suppose, but more potent.”

“Sleeping spells don’t work on people who have been under a sleeping curse,” Aurora said.

“No, but my medicine worked, didn’t it?” Mulan said. Aurora had to concede that; the draught had worked a little too well and she had been groggy for several hours after waking and had declined to try the brew again.

“Besides…” Mulan looked across at Aurora but the other woman shook her head before Mulan could continue.

“I’m going,” she said stubbornly. “I don’t care how dangerous it is. Philip is my True Love, and I’m his, and the book says that a lost soul has to recognise another as its soul’s desire.”

Mulan gave a sad nod. “Yes, you are Philip’s True Love. I just don’t want to put you in harm’s way; I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you.”

“I trust you,” Aurora said simply. “I trust you to make a draught that will wake me.”

Mulan smiled minutely. “Thank you. I’m honoured. I wish I had the same faith in myself.”

“It’ll be all right,” Aurora said, although she could not deny that she too was nervous at the prospect of venturing into the place between life and death, a place she had come so close to before in such terrifying conditions.

“We’ll need to move on,” Mulan said. “We should return to Philip’s body, as his soul will return to it when he wakes. We should be there, ready for him.”

Aurora nodded her agreement. “Let’s move.”

“Aurora…”

“Mulan, I’m about to have a very deep sleep when I get there,” Aurora said. “I’d rather arrive as soon as possible. Now that we have a way, I want to use it.”

Together they packed up their small camp and began to move in the direction of the dawn that was beginning to break over the horizon, back towards the abandoned citadel where first Aurora, and now Philip lay, waiting patiently for their True Loves to come and free them from wherever they were trapped.

**Neverland – Present**

“We should probably think about setting up camp.” David looked around and the trees. “Time
moves differently here, I think. The sun should have risen hours ago but it’s still as dark as ever.”

“My watch has stopped,” Snow agreed. “Do you think time even exists here? If Neverland is the place where people never age, maybe it’s because time just doesn’t move here whilst it moves everywhere else.” She shuddered. “Who knows how much time will have passed in Storybrooke by the time we return.”

The idea made David uneasy. “Let’s not think about that,” he said quickly. “Let’s just focus on what we have to do here and cross that bridge when we come to it. Concentrate on one problem at a time.”

“I can’t help planning ahead,” Snow said. “Has anyone given any thought to how we’re going to get home? That was the last bean that we used to get here.”

“There are other ways to cross realms. We need to find Henry and the others first.”

Snow nodded and they continued on in silence for a while.

“Have you heard any birds?” she asked presently.

“No,” David replied. He hadn’t heard any sounds of natural fauna except for the crickets now that he came to think of it, and the more he thought about it, the more uneasy it made him. What kind of a place was this with no wildlife? Was it naturally so desolate or had something happened to dispose of any creatures that there had originally been?

“I thought that if there were birds, they might be willing to act as messengers like they do in the Enchanted Forest. I thought we could perhaps get a message to Henry, telling him that we’re looking for him.”

David nodded his agreement. Whilst it was going to be somewhat impractical to try and pull off in the absence of any birds, it was a good idea in theory. Perhaps Henry had seen the ship flying overhead or perhaps one of the others had already found him, but he knew that the chances were slim and Henry had no idea that his family had come after him and were actively attempting a rescue. He didn’t know that he was not alone in this worrying new world.

“It looks like there’s a clearing up ahead,” Snow said. “It’s as good a place to rest for a while as any.” They reached the clearing and Snow dumped her bag beside a fallen log. “It’s a shame that the ground is so damp. Do you think we’ll be able to find any dry wood for a fire?”

“I’ll go and look for some.”

David drew his sword and set off through the trees again, but Snow’s voice pulled him back.

“Wait, David, come and have a look at this.”

He turned and made his way back towards Snow. She was crouched by the log, evidently in the process of getting something out of her bag, but whatever it was had been forgotten and her attention was fixed on the ground.

“What is it?” David asked.

Snow picked up a small piece of transparent film.

“It’s the wrapper from a roll of crepe bandage,” she explained. “I recognise them from the first aid kits in the classrooms at school.”
“Something tells me that it’s not meant to be there.”

“No, and I’ve got the first aid supplies in my bag, so this isn’t from one of our party.”

“Henry and Greg and Tamara,” David concluded. “They must have been this way at some point. Is there anything else?”

They scoured the area, but there was no sign of anything else that might give them a clue as to Henry’s whereabouts or the direction that he might have gone in.

“I don’t like this, David,” Snow said. “This means he might be injured. What if he’s badly hurt?” She was clutching the plastic bandage wrapper tightly in her fist.

“Well, that’s all the more reason to find him quickly,” David replied levelly.

Snow nodded, and with the action some of her conviction appeared to return, so that she was once more the warrior and tactician that David had known in the Enchanted Forest when they were taking back their kingdom.

“We have a place to start from now,” she said, grabbing a stick and shoving it in the ground beside the log as a marker. “We start here and work our way in a circle outwards until we find something, or someone.” She turned sharply, narrowing her eyes and watching for a moment before shaking her head. “I’m seeing things again,” she muttered. David was not keen to agree with that assessment. Ever since they had landed on the island he had been certain that there was something there, but it was simply not revealing itself. The things that Snow was seeing; he was sure that they definitely did exist.

Snow went to say something but then decided against it and shut her mouth for a while before eventually speaking.

“Let’s make a fire and rest. We won’t be as observant if we’re half-asleep.”

David agreed and went to find some viable firewood. He kept his sword out as he crept through the trees in case he should meet something native to the island. On the ground a little way in front of him he saw a pale shape, and he made his way over to it cautiously. The closer he got, the clearer the shape became until David realised with horror that it was a human body.

“Snow!” he yelled back to his wife through the trees, and he heard her come running through the undergrowth as he dashed across to the body.

It was Greg, lying flat on his back with his eyes open. They were glassy, staring, and very, very dead, and the expression on his lifeless face was one of anguish.

“What is it?” Snow asked as she arrived on the scene, bow at the ready, but she dropped the weapon and clasped her hands over her mouth when she saw David crouched down beside Greg’s corpse. “Oh David,” she breathed, kneeling down next to him. “What do you think happened?”

David closed Greg’s eyes; the picture immediately seemed less horrific now that he was no longer looking up at them. Together they cast an eye over his body for any obvious cause of death. Snow’s brow furrowed. There were no marks of a weapon anywhere, no blood at all, and his neck was not broken. There was no sign of him having been hit on the head.

“Poison?” David suggested. “Maybe some of the foliage here is more dangerous than we think.”

Snow shook her head. “You’d think that there would be some kind of physical sign.” Gingerly she
looked into Greg’s mouth. “His airway is clear. I don’t see what it could have been, unless he was literally scared to death.”

“Don’t dismiss it out of hand,” David muttered. “This place would give the most courageous of souls the creeps.”

He picked up Greg’s arms and made to cross them over his body with the intention of covering him with some of the leaf bed in a hasty burial, but Snow reached out and stayed his hands, staring at a point a little way from them.

“What is it?” David asked.

“Look.”

He followed Snow’s gaze.

“He has no shadow, David. His shadow’s gone.”

David blinked. Against the back drop of the trees he could just about make out his own shadow in the moonlight, but there was nothing where the shadow of Greg’s arms should have been.

“This just keeps getting stranger,” he said, quickly putting Greg’s arms down. “Let’s move on, I don’t like it here.”

They got to their feet and they were about to make their way back to the other clearing, the place they had nominated as their starting point, when Snow felt David tense up beside her.

“Snow…” he began, but he didn’t need to say anything else. Snow could see it too; several pairs of glowing yellow eyes watching them from between the trees. The eyes did not appear to be attached to anything, and it was only when Snow saw the slight rippling motion in the darkness that she realised that they weren’t attached to anything, at least not anything physical. They were shadows, and they were closing in.

“Run,” David said simply. Snow did not need any further encouragement and grabbed David’s hand as they began to tear through the forest. The shadows gave chase, moving silently through the trees. It was an eerie feeling, running from a pursuer that they could not hear, and dangerous too, as they had to keep looking back over their shoulders to check the distance between them and the shadows.

“We should split up,” David panted as they continued their sprint.

“What?” Snow exclaimed. “In a place like this?”

“Divide and conquer,” David replied. “It’s always worked for us before.”

“All right.” Snow acquiesced reluctantly and let go of David’s hand. “We’ll double back and meet back where we started.”

David nodded and turned a sharp left; Snow went right. She could see some of the shadows break off from the pack and follow her whilst the rest went after David. It was going to be hard to shake them off or lose them; without physical bodies they would not tire. She was going to have to face them, but how did one go about attacking a shadow?

The first thing that sprang to mind was of course light, but that was going to be somewhat hard to come by.
Snow stopped abruptly and notched an arrow to her bow, turning and firing at one of the three spectres that were following her. To her surprise, the arrow hit its mark, pinning the shadow to a tree. It writhed and wriggled, trying to pull the arrow out, and the other shadows hung back.

“Don’t come any closer or you’ll get the same treatment!” Snow yelled, readying another arrow.

The threat worked; whatever the shadows were and whatever their motivations were, they did seem to have some sense of self-preservation. One of them floated over to its comrade and began to help it get the arrow out.

Snow realised then that she was stuck in a stalemate. As long as she was threatening them, the shadows would not attack her, but she did not want to waste arrows that she might need to use against something to which they could actually cause injury as opposed to simply slowing down. The shadow seemed no worse for wear for being pinned to the tree, just incapacitated. She also knew that as soon as she turned her back to run, they would come after her again.

They stayed in the tense stand-off for about a minute before a low noise could be heard coming through the trees. It sounded like a horn or bugle being blown, a summons. Immediately the shadows heeded its call, finally succeeding in freeing the one that had been stuck and tossing the arrow away before flying up into the black sky. It was hard to make them out; they were only visible when they passed across the stars and hid them from view, but as she squinted to see them, Snow thought that she caught glimpses of the same shadows rising from other parts of the island, all heading towards the mountain at the centre.

With any luck, the shadows chasing David would have gone as well.

Snow went over and picked up the discarded arrow, and she put it back in her bow, ready to shoot in case anything, spectral or otherwise, decided to come after her.

So much time spent living in the forest when she was younger had honed Snow’s navigational abilities, so much so that finding places in woods and thick underbrush was almost second nature to her. She could map forests in her head from only a few distinct markings of trees, having spent so many hours moving from hiding place to hiding place to avoid the guards, and it did not take her long to find her way back to the clearing with the fallen log that she had marked with a twig. It would take David a little while longer, but he too was no stranger to having to fight his way through thick forests. Some of their most effective attacks against George and Regina’s forces had taken place in the heart of the woods. Snow sat down on the log to keep a look out, and it was only a few moments later that she heard movement in the trees. David came into view; Snow put down her bow and ran over to throw her arms around him.

“The ones chasing you vanished too?” she asked. David nodded, but his face still looked concerned.

“Snow, look.”

He held up a length of dark thread; Snow recognised it as having come from Henry’s jacket.

“Oh David…”

“It was caught on a branch about fifty yards that way.” He pointed back in the direction that he had just come from.

Snow nodded. “Then that’s the direction we take until we find him.”
Once they were all safely within the walls of the Dark Castle, Neal, Mulan, Philip and Aurora took a moment to look around at their new hideout and get their bearings.

“We should be safe here,” Philip said. “We can take a few days to regroup and plan the next stage of our journey.”

“And find Neal a way back to the Land Without Magic,” Mulan added.

“Yes. Are you all right, Neal?” Aurora asked, coming over and fussing over his bandage. “You seem to be much improved to when we found you.”

“I’m ok, thank you.” Neal was still having a little trouble coming to terms with the fact that this trio of people whom he’d never met before had taken him under their protection and cared for him despite their own dangerous circumstances. They moved through from the entrance hall into what was presumably the main room of the castle, a vast chamber full of mostly empty display cabinets and pedestals. The place had obviously been unoccupied for several years; every surface was covered in a thick coating of caked-on dust, and large, intricate spiders’ webs hung abandoned in the corners of the high ceiling and around the chandeliers. The place gave an impression of having been packed up and moved on, with so much conspicuous empty space, but at the same time there was still the air of a sudden departure, as if the owner had left one day expecting to return, but had not done so.

“Where is everything?” Mulan asked in disbelief. “Maybe the looters have come after all.”

Neal shook his head. “No, I don’t think anything’s stolen,” he said. “Everything magical or potentially useful got taken to the Land Without Magic.” He remembered the curios packed into the pawn shop, some legitimate junk but others definitely more sophisticated and altogether magical things that were not at all native to Maine. “It was a powerful curse, he didn’t want to leave anything to chance.”

The other three looked at each other, no-one really sure how to broach the subject that was forefront in everyone’s mind. Philip eventually opened his mouth to say something, but Neal had already moved on, poking around in cupboards and chests and opening doors.

“I’m going to see what state the kitchen is in,” Aurora announced unnecessarily loudly. “It’ll be nice to have a meal that isn’t cooked over a campfire.”

She left the room and the others listened to her footsteps growing quieter along the corridor.

“I’ll go with her,” Mulan said. “I’m not entirely sure I trust this place not to spring any more surprises on us.” The Dark One himself was not in residence any more, but as the blood-locked gates had already proved to them, the castle itself had some degree of magical sentience to it. Even if someone had been able to fool the gates, it was possible that there were more traps within the walls themselves, even if most of the enchanted objects had been removed.

Philip was left alone with Neal, and he took a moment to watch the other man. There was no kind of method in his search, it was obvious that he had never been inside the castle before, but he was familiar with the Dark One from the Land Without Magic, and he had been able to open the gates…

There were all sorts of rumours that floated around the realm regarding the Dark One and his fearsome reputation, but it was almost unanimously thought that he was alone, and had been for the majority of his long existence. Philip was not quite sure where Neal fitted into the picture. He went over to join him.
“Would you like some help?” he asked. “What are you looking for?”

“I’ve got no idea,” Neal admitted. “Something that can take a message across worlds. I need to let my son and his mother know that I’m all right, and I’m on my way home. That part might prove a bit more difficult. But as long as I can give them hope, that’s the key thing.” He paused and shook his head. “Hope. That’s the difference.”

“The difference to what?” Philip asked.

Neal shut the chest that he had been rifling through and sat down on the lid, looking up at Philip.

“You’ve all already guessed that I’m related to Rumpelstiltskin,” he said. “The gates made that pretty obvious.”

Philip nodded. “I was going to ask about that. I wasn’t sure if I might cause offence.”

Neal shrugged. “We can’t change our relations, however much we might want to.” He paused. “He’s my father.”

Philip drew up a chair, sensing that this might take some explaining, and he sat down opposite Neal.

“I never knew that the Dark One had any family, let alone a son,” he said.

“All things considered I’m not exactly surprised that he didn’t make it common knowledge. He wasn’t proud of how things happened.” Neal’s voice was clipped, bitter. “But he did spend centuries trying to find me again. The trouble was that I didn’t know. All that I knew was that he’d abandoned me to a completely new world. I had no hope. I need Emma and Henry to have hope.”

Philip pondered the things that he had just been told.

“From what you tell me, you and your father’s circumstances are very different. You don’t appear to have had much of a choice when you returned to this land.”

“No,” Neal agreed. “I didn’t. But the principle is the same.”

He gave a snort of laughter. It was truly ironic that his own life was now mirroring his father’s. Separated across worlds from his son and willing to stop at nothing to find him again. A particularly painful case of history repeating itself.

Presently Mulan and Aurora returned to the room, the latter carrying a steaming teapot.

“We found a teapot and a kettle but no cups,” she said. “What kind of a person takes the cups but not the rest of the tea set?”

“There are some cups in that cupboard over there, I think.” Neal pointed to the cabinet in question, one full of random oddments of junk that had evidently been deemed useless to take to the Land Without Magic, and Philip went over to retrieve them whilst Mulan added tea leaves to the pot of hot water.

“It’s so nice to use a proper teapot again,” Aurora sighed. “If I’m not careful, I’ll get used to this.”

“You have your own castle,” Mulan pointed out.

“That may or may not still be standing by the time that we get back to it,” Aurora added drily. She poured out the brewed tea into the cups that Philip was cleaning with the edge of his cloak. “We reach safety and the first thing that we do is have a cup of tea. I wonder about my priorities.”
“We need to make the most of these moments of respite whilst we have them,” Philip said. “Who knows when we might have access to a teapot next?”

“There’s nothing wrong with finding small moments of pleasure in a difficult existence,” Neal added. “My father always used to say that a cup of tea can make everything brighter.”

“Father?” Mulan mouthed to Philip, giving a minute gesture around the room to indicate the idea of the Dark One in general. Philip nodded, and Neal smiled wanly as he caught the silent communication between the two of them.

“It’s a very long story,” he said.

Aurora shrugged. “We’ve got time, if you want to tell it.”

Neal shook his head.

“Maybe later, I need to try and contact Emma and Henry as soon as I can.”

“Would your Emma be an Emma Swan, by any chance?” Mulan asked. “And your son, Henry?”

“Yes… How do you know?”

“We met Emma a little while ago; she travelled with us briefly. She was looking for a way home like you are,” Aurora explained.

“How did she get back?” Neal asked eagerly.

“A portal was created using ash from a magical tree. Sadly there’s none left, but there are other ways to cross realms,” Mulan said on seeing Neal’s face fall. “If you’re half as determined as Emma was, you’ll find a way.”

Neal nodded, his hope renewed. Emma had been in his position before and she had come home, and he could too.

Enchanted Forest – Past

“Are you ready?”

Aurora nodded. “Are you?”

“Nearly.”

After a day of travelling, the two ladies had returned to the empty citadel where Philip lay in state just after the sun had set behind the trees. Mulan was sitting on the floor, carefully measuring out the ingredients of her sleeping draught and charring a few of her precious tea leaves over a small fire.

Aurora did not voice her innermost thoughts to Mulan as she did not want to worry her, but she had a small consolation in the back of her mind telling her that even if she never woke, it would not be so very bad as she would be with Philip. At the same time, however, the thought of never seeing Mulan again was not at all a pleasant one. They spent the next few minutes in a companionable silence as Mulan continued to prepare the potion. Aurora had seen her do it before, but this time there was an extra element of mystery and magic to it. She looked around, checking that everything was prepared. They had moved Philip’s body from the pedestal down onto the floor, and Aurora had set up her blankets beside him. Although there was nothing to say that physical proximity had any bearing on
metaphysical proximity, it had made sense to them both at the time.

Mulan ground up the burned tea leaves and added the resulting powder to the sleeping draught, and she blew the steam away from the cup before handing it to Aurora. The fear in the other woman’s eyes was very visible, but Mulan knew better now than to ask her if she wanted to back out. Aurora had made up her mind and Mulan had to respect her decision, even if she did not like it.

She swallowed the brew and made a face. “I have to say it, that’s absolutely disgusting.”

Mulan laughed.

“Well, hopefully, you won’t have to taste it again,” she said.

Aurora lay down, making herself comfortable as she dropped off to sleep. Mulan sat cross-legged by her feet, watching over the two still forms in front of her. Too still. It was clear that this was no ordinary sleep. Time continued to pass and the night became darker and darker until finally the first light of dawn could be seen peeping over the top of the hills in the east. Mulan looked again at Philip and Aurora. Neither one of them had moved and they showed no signs of stirring, although Mulan was sure that the effects of the tea should have worked by now.

“Something’s wrong,” she muttered. She left her lookout spot and took up the cup that rested beside Aurora’s hand, and she looked down into it. There was still enough for another dose, and she weighed up the risks. It would leave them completely undefended in the waking world if Mulan were to venture into the Well of Lost Souls as well, and there was the real danger that none of them would make it back.

On the other hand, if Philip and Aurora were somehow trapped and needed her help…

Mulan drained off the last of the sleeping draught (Aurora was right, it tasted vile), and leaned back against her pack, closing her eyes.

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Aurora looked up at the heavy gates in front of her. If all had gone to plan then beyond them lay the Well of Lost Souls. Should she knock? Should she just try to open the gates?

She reached up to knock, but the moment her hand touched the ornately carved wood, the gates began to open silently. Perturbed, Aurora took a step forward. Beyond the gates, the world was dark and misty, almost like clouds of steam rising from the wet ground, but the air was cold and dry rather than damp. Aurora shivered and cast a glance around to get her bearings. There wasn’t much to look at, just a vast expanse of water and mist as far as the eye could see. As her vision adjusted to the darkness, she became aware of shapes floating between the puffs of mist. They seemed to be human, but there was no substance to them, just shadows. She reached out towards one as it brushed past her, but her hand went straight through. The spectre, however, must have felt her, as it turned sharply and Aurora saw bright lights flickering angrily, like eyes.

“Sorry,” she gasped, and withdrew her hand. The shadow moved on past and did not look back. These must be the lost souls that were trapped. How was she going to find Philip if the only reference she had were these strange shapes? Still, she was here and she had to press on; she didn’t know how long she had before the draught would pull her back into wakefulness. She continued her slow progress through the water. It didn’t seem to be getting any deeper than her ankles, which was encouraging.

“Philip?” she called. “Philip, where are you?”
She got no response, but she felt something brush past her and she turned quickly. There was nothing there, except her own shadow, which was bobbing along beside her as if it had always had a life of its own.

She put out a hand and was surprised when she encountered resistance instead of going straight through like she had done before. The shadow felt warm and soft, a little like human skin but not quite similar enough, and it unnerved her somewhat.

“Philip?” she called again, still to no avail. She went on along through the mist, her shadow silent next to her, until it stopped and went very still, prompting Aurora to do the same.

“Are you ok?” she asked the shadow, although she expected a response from that even less than she expected a response from Philip. Unsurprisingly, the shadow did not speak, and instead simply raised its right hand. Unsure of what else to do, Aurora copied the action. They remained still for a while, until another shadow came through the mist towards them. Carefully, it reached out for Aurora’s shadow, touching fingertips together before clasping Aurora’s shadow’s hand tightly.

“Philip?” Aurora breathed. “Is that you?”

The shadow nodded, and Aurora startled as another shape suddenly appeared in the mist, a pale, slightly translucent shape, not a shadow.

It was Philip.

“Aurora?”

“Philip!”

She ran towards him, stumbling in the shallow lake, and she felt his arms come around her. They were not quite solid, but they were tangible enough.

“Why are you here?” Philip asked. “Did you come to find me?”

Aurora nodded. “Yes, Mulan found…” She broke off as a sudden shiver ran over her whole body, keeping her rooted to the spot.

“Aurora, what’s happening?” Philip asked, alarmed.

The chill passed, but Aurora found that she still could not move her feet, and when she glanced down, she saw that her skin was the same translucent white as Philip’s. She looked up in horror.

“Philip, I’m stuck.”

Neverland – Present

Emma gave an incomprehensible grumble and smacked Rumpelstiltskin’s hand away as she felt a sharp, claw-like fingernail jab her in the ribs to wake her. Instead of having the desired effect, however, she simply received a giggle and another prod.

“Do that again and I’ll take your hand off,” Emma growled. Finally she opened one eye and looked up at the stars. “What the hell? Gold! Why have you woken me up now?”
“If you were expecting to wake to the pale light of dawn breaking then you’d be sorely disappointed, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin said mildly.

Emma looked at her watch but it appeared to have stopped.


Somewhat grudgingly, Emma pulled herself into a sitting position and leaned back against the rock that they had chosen to take shelter behind, stirring the fire with a twig.

“Anything I ought to be on the lookout for?” she asked Rumpelstiltskin. “Lions? Tigers? Bears?”

“Oh my,” Rumpelstiltskin finished. “No, as long as you keep the fire nice and strong we’ll both be fine.”

“And if the fire goes out?”

“In that case I’ll be fine and you’ll be slightly… deceased.”

Emma pinched the bridge of her nose. “Deceased at the hands of what? And how come you won’t end up slightly deceased as well?”

“Look around you, dearie.” Rumpelstiltskin was lying flat on his back with his hands pillowed under his head, paying his surroundings absolutely no attention whatsoever and ignoring her second question. “Our would-be assailants are mere yards away.”

Emma looked around and startled at the many points of yellow light watching them through the trees. At first she thought that they were twinkling stars, but then she realised that they were blinking eyes, staring at her. She scrambled to her feet, pressing herself flat against the rock.

“Gold! Do something!”

“We’re fine, they don’t come near the light,” Rumpelstiltskin said airily. “They’re shadows, light defeats their object somewhat. No, they won’t come within reach of the flame unless they absolutely have to.”

“That’s hardly reassuring!” Emma yelled. “And why are they a hell of a lot more interested in me than they are you?”

“Maybe because you’re the one waving your arms around and panicking. They can smell fear, you know.”

“Gold!”

He sighed. “They are more interested in you because you are more interesting.”

Emma looked down at Rumpelstiltskin’s glittering skin and dark leather ensemble.

“Somehow I find that difficult to believe.”

Rumpelstiltskin sighed and opened his eyes. “Fine. They are more interested in you because you have something that they want. Something that I do not have.”

“There are so many responses to that, but I’ll refrain,” Emma muttered. “This may well be a ridiculous question, and I may well regret asking, but what do I have that you don’t?”
“A shadow of your own.”

Emma’s brow furrowed.

“Everyone has a shadow, Gold,” she said. “Even you.”

“Yes, everyone has a shadow. Not everyone’s shadow is attached to them.”

“That’s impossible,” Emma said flatly.

“Is it really?” Rumpelstiltskin replied, his voice annoyingly calm and matter-of-fact. “Those shadows over there don’t appear to be attached to anything.”

Emma had to concede that point.

“But what about yours?” she continued. Rumpelstiltskin sighed and waved one hand in the air above him. Sure enough, he cast no shadow against the smooth rock.

“Right. Ok.” Emma slid back down the rock and sat down on the ground again. “Why isn’t your shadow attached to you?”

“Because I cut it off,” Rumpelstiltskin said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Of course you did,” Emma murmured faintly. She looked again at the shadows hovering in between the trees, still staring at her. “So, if I had no shadow, or at least no shadow attached, they wouldn’t follow me?”

“No. They wouldn’t be able to see you clearly. They see shadows first, then physical forms.”

“How do you know these things?” Emma asked.

“I think it is known in common parlance, dearie, as having been around for three centuries longer than you have.”

“All right, all right. So, you cut your shadow off.” She paused. “Can you cut mine off too?”

“No.” Rumpelstiltskin’s reply was flat and forceful.

“Gold…” Emma began.

“You can cut your own shadow off, but I can’t do it for you. It’s too risky. If you free your shadow, you have to free it yourself.”

“Ok.” Emma took a deep breath. “Show me how.”

Rumpelstiltskin raised one eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

“As long as it’s not going to cause me any physical damage.”

“No physical damage at all. It stings a little when you first cut though.” Rumpelstiltskin sat up, a ponderous expression on his face. “Actually, I think it might be incredibly useful to us. Yes, yes, very useful.”

“What will be useful?” Emma asked warily.

“Detaching your shadow. Now, first things first.” He sprang to his feet and indicated for Emma to
stand too. “You will need magic and a knife. I trust you have both of these things.”

Emma nodded and took out a pocket knife. She was slightly less confident about the magic part of
the equation. She hadn’t really had enough practice on that to suddenly start on removing her own
body parts. Did a shadow count as a body part?

She turned to the rock so that she could see her shadow. Nothing seemed to be any different about it,
it still looked to be the correct size and shape and it moved at the same time as her body did. It wasn’t
showing any signs of eerie yellow eyes, either.

“First, you need to freeze your shadow,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “Concentrate on what you want to do
and then do it. You need to put will into the action. Visualise what you want to happen, then put all
of your force into making it happen.”

Emma closed her eyes and held out her hands, wrinkling her nose in concentration as she visualised
the shadow remaining still as she moved. She felt the smallest tingling sensation at the tips of her
fingers and dared to open her eyes, waving tentatively. The shadow stayed put.

“Excellent.” Rumpelstiltskin gave another high snicker and clapped his hands. “Don’t tell Regina,
but you’re a much quicker learner than she and her mother were. Soon you’ll be able to do it with
your eyes open and not look as if you’re trying to lift an elephant at the same time.”

Emma raised her eyebrows. “You can hardly talk about looks,” she snapped.

Rumpelstiltskin did not reply to the barb. “The more effort you put into the magic and the less into
contorting your face into odd positions, the easier it will be.”

Emma had to snort; she’d received similar advice whilst giving birth and she’d taken no more notice
of it then than she intended to do now.

“Now that you’re moving independently of your shadow, you can cut it away,” Rumpelstiltskin
continued. “Just trace the outline of your foot.”

He was right, it did sting, even through her boots, but after a moment the pain faded to the same kind
of tingling as at the tips of her fingers. As soon as she’d traced around both feet, she saw the shadow
raise up a little, flexing and stretching all its joints, and the bright lights where the eyes should be
blinked into life.

“That is quite possibly the creepiest thing that I have ever seen.” Emma shuddered and
Rumpelstiltskin just gave a huff of laughter.

“Welcome to Neverland, Emma. Everything’s creepy here.”

She glanced sideways at him, still not quite used to his new appearance, and gave a small nod.

“Now what?” she asked, looking back at her shadow.

“Now we let it go,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

“Let it go where?” Emma’s shadow turned this way and that, almost as if it was sniffing the air.

“What’s it doing?”

“It’s doing what it’s supposed to do,” Rumpelstiltskin snapped. “Now calm down and let it get on
with it. And watch where it flies to.”
Suddenly the shadow flew off in an easterly direction.

“East. That’s where we have to go.” Without any further ceremony, Rumpelstiltskin lay back down on the ground and closed his eyes.

“Gold!” Emma prodded his shoulder. “Gold, I’m not going to let you sleep until you tell me what the hell just happened!”

Rumpelstiltskin sighed. “Why don’t you work it out for yourself, Emma?”

“Because…” Emma gave an exclamation of frustration.

“All right, all right. Shadows are manifests of the soul, like hearts are manifests of the heart.”

“What you do mean, hearts are manifests of the heart?”

“When you rip out someone’s heart, you don’t rip out their actual heart,” Rumpelstiltskin explained.

“I don’t intend to do any heart-ripping,” Emma muttered. Rumpelstiltskin ignored her.

“Not only would that be instantly fatal,” he continued, “it would also be extremely messy.”

Emma nodded her understanding, sitting down beside Rumpelstiltskin once more.

“It still functions like a heart,” he went on. “It still pulses all bright and shiny with love. It can still control you. And if it’s crushed, you’ll still die.”

Emma pressed a hand over her mouth. “Graham,” she mumbled. He’d said that he felt numb, like he didn’t have a heart, although she had felt it beating beneath her fingers.

“Yes,” Rumpelstiltskin said. For the first time he sounded sombre. “Yes, like Graham.”

They fell into silence for a while, in memoriam almost, until at length Rumpelstiltskin began to speak again.

“Shadows are a little like that, but they represent the soul, not the heart.”

“I thought that eyes were the windows to the soul,” Emma said.

“Why do you think that the shadows have eyes, dearie?”

Emma shivered, bringing her knees up and hugging them.

“So if shadows represent the soul, then where has mine gone?” she asked.

“In search of your soul’s deepest desire,” Rumpelstiltskin replied. Immediately, Emma realised what had happened and everything fell into place.

“Henry. My shadow’s gone to find Henry.”

“Precisely.”

Emma pondered for a moment. “I suppose yours is searching for Belle.”

“It seems highly probable.”

Something in Rumpelstiltskin’s voice made Emma think that perhaps it was not as highly probably as
he said it was, but she didn’t push the point. They were not quite on good enough terms yet to be revealing deep and dark desires.

“Gold,” she began again presently. “Or do you prefer Rumpelstiltskin now that you’re…” She wasn’t quite sure what adjective to use so she just tailed off.

“What ever works, dearie. I’m both, after all.”

“Can shadows be controlled?” she asked. “Like hearts?”

“Not as long as you remove it yourself,” he replied with a yawn. “That’s why I couldn’t do it for you. Only you have dominion over your shadow now.”

Emma nodded. “And if you did do it for me?”

“Then someone with malevolent intentions might take advantage of a shadow that its owner can’t control.”

His voice was clipped, its tone signalling the end of the conversation, and they lapsed into silence once more. Looking through the trees again, Emma saw that the shadows had gone. She almost asked Rumpelstiltskin why they were still keeping watch if the shadows didn’t want to attack them anymore, but then she realised that the shadows were not the only things in the jungle. For one thing, the shadows probably had owners, and they would not be so easily put off by a simple fire.

Enchanted Forest – Past

Mulan did not often feel dear at her surroundings; it was rare for the atmosphere to make her shiver. She felt fear for other people and their fates, but she was not often afraid for herself. This place, however, sent a horrible chill down her spine, and made the hairs of the back of her neck stand on end. She felt like she was being watched on all sides, indeed, everywhere she turned, she thought she saw pairs of yellow eyes blinking at her through the heavy mist. She was wading in murky water that was about ankle-deep, and she wasn’t sure why it surprised her. It made sense, after all, it was a Well of Lost Souls. She looked back over her shoulder at the gate she had come through; looking at the foreboding wooden arch now, it seemed like it was free-standing in the middle of the lake and going through it would not lead her anywhere. She hoped that this was not the case as that was the way she planned to return to the waking world.

Mulan looked down at her feet but she couldn’t see them, only a vague reflection of herself in the dark water. It was more like a shadow than a true reflection, with points of light sparkling in the indigo head. Mulan stopped walking for a moment.

“Shadows are manifests of the soul,” she murmured, repeating a line from the book. She shuddered again as she looked around at the many eyes watching her progress. All these shadows – were they all lost souls waiting to be rescued? Mulan pushed the unnerving thought to the back of her mind and kept walking, keeping an eye on her own shadow in front of her. It still seemed to be attached, but every so often it would make a move that Mulan would have sworn blind that she hadn’t made.

“Aurora?” she called. “Philip? Aurora?”

There was no response. The grey mist stayed as silent as ever. She kept wading further into the great lake; it wasn’t deep but the more she moved the harder it became to do so. It was almost as if the lake was trying to hold her back. She stopped again and looked down at her shadow. The book had been quite vague about how souls and shadows interacted, seeming to use the two words interchangeably,
but it had mentioned that shadows were naturally drawn to their soul’s desire.

“I wonder…”

She bent to look more closely at her silhouette in the water, and tentatively put a hand down to touch the shadow’s fingers. They felt warm and dry, not like how an image on water should have felt, and as Mulan brought her hand back up, the phantom hand stayed with it, slowly pulling its form up out of the water until it was floating in front of her, bright eyes blinking.

“Hello,” Mulan said to her shadow. It was a pointless pleasantry, she knew, but how else was she going to start a conversation with a manifest of her own soul?

The shadow did not reply, but turned towards what Mulan presumed to be the centre of the lake and floated along ahead of her as she continued to move away from the large gate. She didn’t like the way it got rapidly smaller the further she went away; there were no other reference points for distance and she had no idea how far she had travelled, whether it was yards or miles. At least the going seemed easier with her shadow unattached.

Suddenly, the shadow took off, picking up speed and flying rather than just drifting. Mulan had to run to catch up to it. It was on the track of her deepest desire, and hopefully she would find Aurora and Philip when it stopped.

“Aurora!” she yelled, unconcerned for the shadows in her way as she passed through some and pushed others to the side. “Aurora! Philip!”

“Mulan!” she heard Aurora’s voice call back, still sounding horribly far away. “Is that you?”

“Hold on, I’m coming!” She continued to splash blindly through the lake, hoping that she could reach them not too far behind her shadow. Suddenly, she saw them, and she explained away their appearance out of nowhere with the fact that the thick mist all around was disorientating her. They looked pale and ghostly almost, just shades of their physical selves, and Mulan wondered if she looked the same to them.

“Mulan, I’m stuck,” Aurora said as Mulan finally approached them. She gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I came to save Philip from being stuck and now I’m stuck myself.”

It was at that point that Mulan saw the shadows, undeniably Philip and Aurora’s. They were a little way off from where Aurora was rooted, and whilst in their more physical forms, Philip held Aurora in a close embrace, their shadows showed a completely different aspect. Philip’s shadow was clutching Aurora’s shadow’s right hand tightly with both of its own, but the left hand was hanging limply by its side.

Mulan felt a rush of air beside her as her own shadow sped away, moving towards the other two. She felt a small knot of fear begin to climb up the back of her throat. Her shadow had led her to her soul’s desire, but the revelation of that desire was now unavoidable.

Mulan’s shadow touched the shadow Aurora’s face gently, and pressed its forehead against the other silhouette’s before taking her free hand. Aurora’s shadow rose a few inches, bringing it clear of the water, and in the same moment, Aurora herself staggered as her feet were released.

“Mulan?” she began softly, turning to her friend.

Mulan swallowed.

“Come on, we need to go before we’re all stuck here.” She turned and led the way back towards the
gate that they had originally come through to arrive in this strange world.

“You’re right, I don’t want to spend a second longer than I have to here,” Aurora said with a shiver. She glanced over her shoulder at the three shadows that were following their owners. A lost soul could only be freed if it recognised and found the soul that was its deepest desire. But what if a soul had two desires, both of equal value? She had rescued Philip, but she had needed both Philip and Mulan to rescue her.

“Is it just me or have we gathered a crowd?” Philip asked. Aurora looked around. The shadows that had left them alone until now were closing in.

“They don’t want us to leave,” Mulan said grimly. “They’re going to try and pull us back, make us wait for death.”

Aurora looked up at the gate in the distance.

“Everybody run!” she yelled. The other two needed no further encouragement, and they careened towards the gate, thoroughly soaked by the splashes and spray that they were kicking up as they ran through the dark water. Aurora could feel the shadows pulling and pawing at her, but she kept going, her lungs feeling like they were on fire; dragging Philip along with her, Mulan keeping pace on her other side.

At last they made it to the gate, and they rushed through it into a flash of green light.

Neverland – Present

Killian walked around his beached ship several times, trying to ascertain the damage before actually beginning his repairs. Ideally he would need a magician; they would be able to do the thing in a finger snap. But the magicians were elsewhere and there were tools below the deck, so his limited knowledge of ships’ carpentry would have to come to the fore. The mast was the main problem. Killian clambered onto the ship and ran his hand down the beam, jumping back quickly when it gave an ominous creak. Although it had not broken in two completely, it was so splintered halfway up its length that it seemed like the slightest gust of wind might tear the thing apart. There wasn’t a lot he could do about that. Then there were the ripped sails. Those he could do something about, so feeling like he was at least achieving something, no matter how small, he set about taking down the sails and preparing to sew them up again.

It was a task easier said than done. Neverland’s perpetual night still had not shown any signs of daybreak, although Killian lived in hope, and trying to perform fiddly manoeuvres like stringing an awl with only one functioning set of fingers was nigh-on impossible. Killian leaned back against the ship from his position sitting on the sand beside it. It had landed on an angle, the starboard side higher than the port side, and the side nearest the sea was in shadow. Killian was not altogether happy with this turn of events as he would have much preferred to stay on the side of the ship that was as far away from the jungle as possible. Still, at least on this side he could see anything coming and could come up with a plan of attack before it arrived. He wondered if the cannons still worked. Feeling rather nervous at the prospect of his already bruised and battered ship being a sitting duck, he climbed aboard to check the cannons.

The Jolly Roger’s gun deck was a mess; during the flight the cannons had all broken loose and the starboard side guns were now tucked in amongst the port ones. Killian wondered for a moment whether firing the port side cannons would right the ship with the recoil, but then decided not to risk it and wait for a magician to find him. Surely one of them would find him sooner or later. He had a
certain sense of self-preservation left over from his last excursion in this realm that told him that going into the jungle to look for them would not be a good idea as he might never come out again. The last time he’d been here, he’d had a full compliment of crew with him, and they’d only just managed to make it out alive as it was. He did not fancy his chances alone, especially with several of the island’s inhabitants out for his blood.

Killian returned to the deck and searched the forest for any signs of life. There was nothing to see, and he was just about to jump back down onto the sand and continue with his repairs when he caught a glimpse of something moving between the trees. He squinted; there was nothing but empty darkness there now, but Killian could have sworn blind that he had seen an extremely familiar tricorn hat.

He jumped down off the ship and struggled to his feet again in the thick sand, ignoring his own earlier mental warnings about staying away from the jungle and setting off in the direction of the hat. Presently he saw it again, a dark blue tricorn hat with a very bedraggled and worse for wear peacock feather tucked into it.

“Pa?” Killian murmured in disbelief.

Killian’s father had been drowned at sea after his ship collided with rocks in a freak storm, and his body had never been recovered. He had always worn that hat, a blue tricorn with a peacock feather. It had been his trademark. And now Killian had just seen it again.

“Pa?”

He increased his pace through the trees, unconcerned with anything except catching up to the hat that was moving along in front of him. It was too dark to see the owner of the hat, he could only make out the brief flashes of moonlight against the blue fabric.

“Pa, wait!”

Killian had always known that his father was dead, drowned, and that the storm had been just that. But what if it hadn’t been? What if the freak storm had been magical? What if the hurricane and swirling waters were in fact a portal to another world? What if his father wasn’t dead, hadn’t abandoned him at all but had been here in Neverland for centuries?

He ignored the nagging little voice in the back of his head that was telling him that surely, if his father had been here all this time, he would have crossed Killian’s path during the years he spent in Neverland before. It was not the largest of places in which to bump into someone by any manner or means. But Killian didn’t think about that, too consumed with the idea that maybe his father wasn’t lost to him.

He caught up to the hat in a clearing, seeing clearly now that the hat was attached to a body that was wearing a moth-eaten blue coat and brown boots.

“Pa?”

The figure did not turn.

“Pa, it’s Killian.”

Still no movement. Perturbed, Killian went up to the figure and lightly touched his shoulder. The man turned and Kilian screamed; it was not his father beneath the tricorn hat, just a skeleton, its empty eyes staring at him. He tripped as he took a step backwards and scrabbled on the floor; the skeleton made to move towards him but then collapsed within its coat and boots into a pile of bones.
Horrified, Killian looked around, realising that he’d managed to get himself lost in the jungle. Before he could dwell on the fact any further, a fireball came roaring through the trees towards him and he threw himself down on the ground to avoid it.

“Oh,” said a voice above him. “It’s you.”

Regina could safely say that she had no idea where she was going or what she was doing, but she knew that she had to find Henry and that thought supplanted all others in her mind. Having picked herself up and ascertained that she had not caused herself any lasting damage during her fall from the ship, she had set off through the trees in search of her son. It was only once she had passed the same gnarly tree stump three times that she realised that she was going round in circles and she probably ought to go about her search in a slightly more logical manner. The problem was, she kept seeing things. Just shadows, really, and reflections of moonlight when she actually got a proper look at them, but out of the corner of her eye, she thought that they were images of people in between the trees. Once or twice she thought she saw her father, or Daniel, or others long since passed. She shook her head crossly; it was the chilling atmosphere, causing her fraught imagination to play games with her, and she couldn’t and wouldn’t succumb to it.

It was like a maze, Regina thought. The entire island was one huge maze. There had been a small hedge maze in the gardens of the summer palace back in the Enchanted Forest. Apart from riding, it had been one of Snow White’s favourite pastimes when she had been a little girl. Regina searched in her pockets for anything that might be of use and came up with a tube of lipstick. Well, it was better than nothing. She started to draw markings in shiny red on each tree that she passed, colouring in her route as she went. Light, or the lack thereof, was not so much of a problem for her. She kept a handful of flames flickering, both a source of illumination and a ready weapon, and the heat licking her fingertips was something of a comfort to her. The fire, however, could not do anything for her ears and the strange sounds that made her jump at every turn. Presently she came across a tree she’d already lipsticked and sighed, setting off in the opposite direction before stopping abruptly and whirling round, lifting the fireball to illuminate a bigger area.

“Henry?” She could have sworn that she had just heard his voice.

The sound came again, the sound of a child’s laugh that she was certain was Henry’s, once more behind her, accompanied by a rustle of leaves, but when she turned there was nothing.

“Henry, is that you?” No response. “Henry, this is no time for games!”

She thought she caught a glimpse of him then, running through the trees in the distance, and even though her mind was telling her that this was impossible and it was just the island playing tricks on her, instinct had her running before she could think rationally about it.

“Henry!”

She vaulted over a tree stump, possibly the same one she’d seen so many times before, and she heard a scream. She saw a dark shape in front of her, one that was obviously not Henry, and she’d launched the fireball before she knew what she was doing.

Everything went quiet then, no signs of Henry, no childlike voices just out of sight, and Regina took a moment to come back to herself. It was clear now that someone had sent her on a wild goose chase. But the scream she had heard, that had been real, not something echoing in the caverns of her mind. Cautiously she made her way towards the dark shape that she’d so nearly charcoaled. She wasn’t sure why she was so surprised to see Hook lying there.
“Oh. It’s you.”

“Well observed,” Hook said faintly. She offered a hand to help him up, and once they were both on their feet, Regina cleared her throat awkwardly.

“Sorry about the fireball. Didn’t realise it was you.”

“I didn’t think you wanted to kill me that much,” Hook said.

“Was it you who screamed?”

“Yes, yes it was.”

They remained in an uncomfortable silence for a while.

“Have you been seeing things too?” Regina asked.

Hook nodded and looked back over his shoulder quickly before nodding again. The pile of bones and hat had vanished, as if they had never been there.

“I was looking for Henry,” Regina continued. “I thought I’d heard him.”

“It’s the island,” Hook said. “It does things to you. I’ve never been here alone, I’ve always had the ship’s crew with me. But some of the things they saw when they went off alone… Everyone stayed in pairs after that. I should have learned my lesson, really. But sometimes you see things that you’re desperate to be real.”

Regina nodded her understanding. “We should probably stick together too.” She did not sound at all thrilled by the prospect, and Hook was equally reluctant as he nodded, and he looked around at the dense jungle. “Two pairs of eyes are better than one, at any rate.”

“Yes, I don’t suppose you happened to pass my ship on your way here, did you?” Hook asked.

“Your ship?”

“It crashed on the beach and I’m trying to remember the way back.”

“I’m not talking about finding your ship, I’m talking about finding Henry!” Regina exclaimed.

“If we don’t fix my ship then there’ll be no way to get home even if we do find Henry! I came on this venture to provide transport, transport that is in dire need of magical repairwork!”

“If we don’t find Henry then there’s no point in taking us back!” Regina screamed.

They stayed staring at each other for a long time, at the grab-ready, both very eager to turn tail and continue on their separate ways but neither willing to succumb to strange hallucinations again.

“All right, I’ll help you find Henry. The Jolly can wait. But she will need a magical fix.”

Regina nodded. “I’ll fix her as best I can, once we’ve found Henry.”

Hook held out his hand and Regina shook it. A tentative truce had been reached.

“I still don’t trust you,” she muttered.

“You left me to die in an underground cavern!”
“You sold me out to a couple of magic-fearing lunatics! I was tortured!”

“Guess we’re even then, Your Majesty.”

They continued on through the forest together, conversation having run dry already.

“You say you’ve been here before,” Regina said presently.

“Aye.”

“Could you map the island? Maybe that way we can find Henry and find our way back to your ship quicker.”

Hook nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

Regina handed him a stick, and Hook set to work drawing in the soft earth.

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

Aurora sat bolt upright with a start, and it took her a few moments to get her bearings and realise where she was, why she was there, and more importantly, that she was awake. She looked to her left and saw Philip stirring from his own long sleep.

“Philip?” She shook his shoulder gently, then a little harder when he did not stir fully. “Philip!”

Finally he opened his eyes, blinked a couple of times, and came round properly.

“Aurora.”

Aurora threw her arms around him. “You’re back! We did it! We really did it! Oh, I missed you so much.”

“And I missed you. I thought my chances of seeing you again had gone for good that time.” Philip tilted Aurora’s chin up towards him, slanting his mouth over hers, and Aurora smiled against his lips, giving a giggle of slightly disbelieving joy when she broke away. She opened her mouth to say something, then decided that it could wait, and pulled Philip in for another kiss.

“How did you find me?” Philip asked once she had finally relinquished her hold on him and let him speak, content to rest her chin on his shoulder and enjoy his embrace. “How did you get to the Well of Lost Souls?”

“It was Mulan. She has a book of ancient lore, and there was a potion to get us to the gate, wasn’t there…”

Aurora tailed off on looking round to find that Mulan was nowhere to be seen.

“Mulan?” Philip called.

“All her things are gone,” Aurora said, a cold feeling of dread beginning in the pit of her stomach as she realised that Mulan’s belongings had vanished from the place that they had been when she had fallen asleep. Had someone attacked whilst they had all been in the Well of Lost Souls?

“She’s there,” Philip said, pointing out Mulan’s silhouette leaving the citadel grounds. “Mulan, wait! Why is she leaving?”
“I know why,” Aurora whispered, and it all fell into place. “She’s leaving because she doesn’t want to get in our way. It would break her heart too much.” She turned to Philip. “You saw what happened in the Well. She belongs with me, with us.”

Philip nodded. “Go after her.”

She kissed his cheek in gratitude and scrambled to her feet, running down the steps of the ruined fortress.

“Mulan, wait! Please don’t go! Wait!”

Mulan stopped and turned to her, and Aurora could see the tear tracks glistening on her face although the other woman tried to hastily wipe them away. They made Aurora want to cry herself.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

Mulan took a deep breath and swallowed the lump in her throat.

“You’re reunited with your prince now,” she said. “My work here is complete. I helped Philip to find you when you were under Maleficent’s curse, and I helped you to find Philip when his soul was lost. You’re together now, and there’s nothing more for me to do.”

“There’s so much more,” Aurora said softly. “There’s an entire life ahead of us.” She paused. “And to think, all this time, I thought it was Philip that you loved.”

Mulan shook her head.

“No, Aurora, it’s always been you. Not from the very beginning, but from very near the beginning.” She sighed. “So now you know. You should go back to Philip, you have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“Only if you come too,” Aurora said. “I think that our paths crossed for a reason. I think we’re meant to be together.”

“You and Philip have True Love!” Mulan exclaimed. “I can’t, and I won’t, come between that.”

“Yes.” Aurora’s voice was calm and matter of fact. “Yes, Philip and I have True Love. But who says that there’s a finite amount of love in the world? Philip is the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. You are the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Really?”

Aurora nodded. “It was a little strange at first, I’ll admit. The feeling. I thought it must be because you were my last link to Philip that I felt so strongly. But then I realised that there’s nothing to say that you can only love one other person at a time for the rest of your life.”

“Aurora…” Mulan began, but she didn’t know what to say in response to her friend’s forthright remark.

Aurora brought her hand up to cup Mulan’s cheek, brushing away the silvery tear tracks with her thumb.

“You saw what happened in the Well,” she continued.

“My shadow ran to yours as my soul’s desire,” Mulan said flatly.
“And my shadow couldn’t return from beyond the gate until yours was with it,” Aurora added, her voice firm. “I needed both of you. My soul wanted you and Philip equally.”

For the first time, Mulan gave a small smile, and Aurora gave a bigger one, almost as if she was trying to encourage the tentative expression on Mulan’s face to grow.

“It’s always said that people are in two parts, and everyone will find their other half, their True Love,” Aurora went on. “But what if some of us are in three parts? What if you, Philip and I are all three parts of the same heart?”

Mulan’s smile widened a little. “I like that idea.” Then her happy expression faded. “What about Philip? Will he understand?”

Aurora nodded. “I think he will. He was there too, after all.” She looked back over her shoulder to the fortress. Philip was standing in the entrance, watching them, and she waved to him before turning back to Mulan. “I’m not saying that it’s going to be easy, and I’m not saying that everyone will understand as well as we do. But we’ve seen each other’s souls. We know the truth. So, if you’d like to try, I think we can find a way.”

Mulan nodded.

“Let’s try.”

Aurora positively beamed, and she leaned in to press her lips against Mulan’s. The other woman was rather surprised by the action, as evidenced by her small squeak, but she relaxed then, breaking away and pulling Aurora into a close hug. They stayed like that for a few long moments before walking back to the fortress hand in hand. When they reached Philip at the top of the stairs, Aurora took one of his hands in her free one, and for a second, their shadows in the pale, early morning sunlight looked like they had done in the Well of Lost Souls.

“So what now?” Philip asked. “Where shall we go next?”

Aurora looked at Mulan, who shrugged. “I’m happy to follow your lead.”

She had already followed Aurora into the Well of Lost Souls, and nothing could be worse than that.

“In that case,” Aurora said, “I think I would like to go home.”

Enchanted Forest – Present

Neal stood at the entrance to the room that he had just discovered, upstairs in the castle, tucked away and almost unnoticeable, and he stared at the contents. His entire childhood was in this room, or as good as. Everything he remembered from the cottage before things had gone south, everything so neatly and reverently kept. He ventured a little further inside and opened a box that stood on a small table near the door, blowing away the dust that had settled on the lid, and inside he found a pile of paper scarps: all of his childhood drawings and sketches. His father had kept everything. Packed away neatly elsewhere were old clothes, and the soft sheepskins that they had used to sleep under. The spinning wheel was nowhere to be found, but that was somewhat understandable; of everything that would have been taken over to the Land Without Magic, that was the most likely thing.

In the corner, propped up beside an old dresser, was his father’s walking stick. That had been one of the things that had been the hardest to get used to after he had become the Dark One; seeing him without his stick. Neal had been so used to taking his father’s injured leg into account whenever he
was doing anything that it seemed strange not to have to worry about it anymore. It was odd that he’d kept it, Neal thought. A reminder of the weakness that he’d once had. He went over and picked up the stick; the feel and weight of it still familiar after so much time. He ran his hand over the smooth wood, feeling the little notches in it where they’d marked his height. He smiled at the memory of drawing himself up as tall as he could and standing with his back straight as Papa held the stick, sitting on the spinning wheel bench and carefully carving out a nick. They measured him every year on Midsummer’s Eve, sometimes sooner if Neal felt that he had definitely grown a lot in the last week and wanted to make sure. He’d always been much smaller than his peers whilst he was growing up and there were a series of notches very close together from a time when he’d insisted on being measured every month to reassure himself that he was actually growing. Looking back, Papa had probably added an eighth of an inch’s license every time to make him feel better. Papa used to do things like that.

Neal sat down heavily on the chair that had once been Papa’s and looked around again, still holding the stick and still having trouble taking it all in.

“Are these all your things?”

Neal turned to see Aurora standing in the doorway.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude, but the door was open and I thought you might want companionship. May I come in?”

“By all means.”

Aurora entered the room and looked around respectfully. “It’s like another world in here.”

“I think that’s the whole point,” Neal said. “All the memories of me, of the time before.”

“Out of sight, out of mind?” Aurora suggested.

Neal shook his head.

“No. Out of sight, but not out of mind. Not at all.”

It was more like a memorial, the room, a eulogy for an existence that had been lost, remembrance of Baelfire. The room was carpeted with same thick layer of dust that coated everything else in the castle, but it did not appear to be forgotten or unused. His father had spent lifetimes trying to find him, and this place was a reminder of the things that he had let go and the goal that he was working towards. Neal wondered what would happen when their paths crossed again, for he knew that they would. They hadn’t really had chance to speak to each other properly. After near death had come a murderous evil queen, and after that had come Lacey, and after that, Tamara, and all the while Neal was trying to come to terms with other revelations.

“He must have loved you very much,” Aurora said presently, coming to sit beside him.

Neal nodded and took another look at the stick, running his fingers over the carvings again.

“Yes, he did. He used to mark my height on his stick. It’s strange seeing it again now that I’m taller than him.”

Aurora smiled. “We’ll find a way to get you back to your own son,” she said brightly. “Even if it takes a little while. Don’t give up hope. From what you say and from what Emma and Snow told us, your family has endured several separations over the years, but you always find each other in the end.”
Neal nodded. “I’ve missed enough of Henry’s childhood already, I don’t want to miss any more of his life.” He sighed. “I don’t think that there’s going to be anything in here though,” he said. “If there was any means of crossing worlds here, he would have already used it to come and find me as soon as he could. I’ll have to look further afield. Magic beans perhaps. Many years ago I was told that I had the last bean but I’ve just been rather abruptly proved that’s not the case.”

“The beanstalks were all destroyed,” Aurora said sadly, “and the remaining shoots were taken to the Land Without Magic. There are other ways to cross worlds. We’ll think of something.”

“Shadows,” Neal said suddenly. The sun was setting and pink light was pouring into the room, casting his and Aurora’s shadows long against the walls. “Shadows can cross realms. At least, one particular shadow can. The only problem would be summoning it here.”

Neal lapsed into silence, lost in thought, and Aurora gave his shoulder a friendly pat before leaving him alone in the midst of his childhood memories. Neal watched her shadow leave the room, not really paying the movement much mind until he saw something out of the corner of his eye by the window. He turned, but there was nothing to see. Perturbed, he went over to the window and opened it, leaning out and looking all around. There was nothing out of the ordinary, but he still couldn’t help the feeling of being watched. Perhaps it was his surroundings making him uneasy, finding this preserved microcosm of his early life inside a castle so steeped with inherent magic.

He tried to put it to the back of his mind as he closed the window again and replaced his father’s stick where it had been leaning before. Just about to turn back and face the main room, he caught another glimpse, but this time he did not move and he tried to ascertain the shape without actually looking at it. Someone had once said that you had to look out of the corner of your eye to see the truth.

He could just about make out two twinkling points of light, but he couldn’t tell if that was the sunset catching on something metallic in the room or if they were the eyes that he was looking for. Neal had caught shadows before, with much less equipment than was currently available to him in the castle, but if he couldn’t be sure then there was no point in trying to cook up any kind of plan.

It was not Pan’s shadow, if it was a shadow at all. He had long since learned that Pan’s shadow was not at all subtle. If it was Pan’s shadow, then he would definitely know about it and he’d be halfway home by now. Besides, it wasn’t clear if Pan’s shadow only abducted young children to take them away to Neverland, or whether it could be used by adults as a makeshift taxi service.

He turned very slowly, but the shadow had gone. He was determined that it was a shadow now; there was nothing in the room that could have caused the light to reflect like that.

One possible conclusion battled its way to the forefront of Neal’s mind. It seemed completely impossible, but after everything that had happened to him in his long and eventful life, Neal was beginning to re-evaluate his definition of impossible.

“Papa?” he asked softly. “Is that you?”

There was no response. He had not expected one. All the same, he opened the window a crack before he left the room, just in case.

Once the coast was clear, Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow slipped inside the Dark Castle. It would give the knife to Baelfire in due course – Rumpelstiltskin had told it to take it somewhere safe or give it to someone trustworthy – but there was no hurry yet. As soon as it had been freed, the shadow had flown through the realms to determine Baelfire’s state of life or death for itself, unable to truly believe that he was gone forever. It was good to see that he was safe and well again. Rumpelstiltskin would
be pleased when he found out. The shadow considered trying to take a message, but decided against it. Its place was here with Baelfire, and that was where it would stay.
“There’s no use trying to run, kid.” Tamara’s voice was heavy and somewhat resigned; she sounded tired as she sat down in the shelter of a large, broad-leafed tree. She grimaced as she stretched her injured leg out in front of her and unwrapped the bandage to take a look at the swelling. It was worse than she’d hoped for, but at least it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.

Henry sat down a little way off, out of her reach but still within the warmth of the small fire that Tamara had built. The eternal night around them seemed to have become colder and darker in the last few minutes and he shivered, glad of the flames.

“I know,” he replied to Tamara. He was desperate but he wasn’t stupid. The shadows that had flanked them ever since they had arrived on the island showed no signs of leaving them and he knew that they could outrun him easily. Without Tamara’s threats… Henry shuddered again at the thought of what had happened to Greg. If the shadows caught him, he would meet a similar fate. Either that, or they would simply bring him back to Tamara. Whatever happened, escape was currently impossible, and Henry knew better than to attempt it. He was still working on a plan for getting away from the shadows and Tamara, but he had no idea where she was taking him or what would happen to him when he got there, or even why he was here. Henry flexed his wrists; Tamara had untied him once it had become clear that he wasn’t going to be able to get away from her or from their spectral escort in a hurry.

“Hey, kid.” Tamara tossed him a package of crackers and a bottle of water from her bag. “I don’t want you starving to death before we get there.”

Henry dug into the food gratefully. He was not so proud as to refuse sustenance from his captors and he was really very hungry, but one question remained in the back of his mind.

“Where is ‘there’?” he asked Tamara.

“Where we’re going,” she replied shortly. Henry rolled his eyes but she wasn’t looking at him, so the effect was lost.

“What is ‘there’ then?” he continued.

Tamara gave him an unimpressed look. “We’re in Neverland kid. What do you think?”

“My name’s Henry,” he pointed out. “And I know we’re in Neverland and I know you’re taking me to Peter Pan. I just thought maybe you had some more details.”

“All right Henry, I don’t know any more details. We’re going to Pan, wherever he might be,” Tamara said. She paused. “You’re a lot like your dad.”

The mention of his father riled something inside Henry. Why should Tamara get to talk about him so casually after what she had done?

“Why did you kill him?” he asked.

“Because he was in the way.” Tamara’s voice was brittle. “He’d outlived his purpose.”

“Just like Greg outlived his purpose?” Henry snapped sourly. “Is that what you do to everyone
who’s no longer useful? You just let them die? What about me? Will you kill me when I’ve outstayed my welcome?”

Tamara pinched the bridge of her nose with a sigh. “Kid, it’s not like that.”

“It’s exactly like that.”

“You don’t understand,” Tamara said.

“I’m in Neverland. I’ve been kidnapped by the person who shot my dad, apparently under orders from Peter Pan, who I always thought was a good guy…”

Here Tamara snorted. “You are seriously misinformed,” she muttered.

“…and I’ve got no idea why I’m here or what’s going to happen to me here. No, I don’t understand.”

Tamara looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“They said you were the truest believer,” she said cynically.

“I believe,” Henry replied, exasperated. “I just don’t understand. Why is this happening? Why did you have to shoot my dad?”

Tamara groaned and scrubbed a hand over her face.

“I have a mission, kid. I’ve been working towards this for as long as I can remember. And now I have this opportunity and I’m not going to let it go, and nothing is going to stop me or slow me down, and nothing is going to get in my way. Do you understand that?”

Henry nodded. He knew that mindset all too well, the idea of being so completely focussed on something that the ends always justify the means. He thought of Regina and her own single-minded determination, and he wondered if he would ever see her or Emma or any of his grandparents again. Presently his thoughts turned back towards Tamara and her dogged perseverance, calmly disposing of any obstacles in her path, and he thought about her words: *you are seriously misinformed.*

“So, if you agree that Peter Pan is not one of the good guys, why are you working for him?”

“Keep your voice down!” Tamara hissed, looking around at the shadows standing like sentinels between the trees around them. “Who knows how much they can hear?”

Henry just raised an eyebrow; at that moment he was not feeling exactly charitable towards his kidnapper. “At any rate, don’t you work for the Home Office, or whatever you call it?”

Tamara sighed. “Well, in for a penny, in for a pound as my grandpa always used to say.” She indicated for Henry to come a little closer and he obliged, still stopping a little short.

“All the fairy tales, all the stories, you believe in them?” Tamara began.

Henry nodded slowly. “My grandparents are Snow White, Prince Charming and Rumpelstiltskin. I believe all right.”

“Peter Pan is no different,” Tamara continued.

Henry gave his surroundings a cursory glance. “Since we’re going to see him I’d kind of gathered that.”
“The Darling family exist,” Tamara went on in a hushed undertone. “Wendy, John, Michael Darling, they all existed; they were the first contact between magical worlds and non-magical worlds.”

Henry gave another nod of understanding.

“The Darling family have been trying to get to Neverland for generations,” Tamara said. “I’m the last living member. My name is Tamara Darling, Michael Darling was my great-grandfather. I have to finish what the family started, and then you arrived and you gave me the perfect opportunity.”

“So I’m bait,” Henry said flatly.

Tamara shrugged. “I’ve been waiting for this for a long time and I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Including using me as bait?”

Tamara ignored his words. “I have to finish what the family started,” she repeated.

“What did the family start?” Henry asked.

“The Home Office. Our mission has always been to destroy magic.”

“Why?”

“Have you any idea of the heartbreak magic causes?” Tamara hissed.

Henry nodded. “Yes. I nearly tried to destroy it myself once. But magic can do good too.”

Tamara shook her head. “Magic is the root of all evil.”

Henry didn’t have a response to that one, but he knew that it was nowhere near as clear-cut as Tamara saw things.

“We have to destroy magic and that will bring things back into equilibrium,” Tamara continued.

“You used magic to get here,” Henry pointed out.

“Sometimes you have to employ the enemy’s methods,” Tamara muttered.

“You’re making it sound like a war.”

“It is a war!” Tamara raised her voice involuntarily then looked around furtively at the shadows. They appeared to be out of earshot and paying no attention to the whispered conversation, and she continued. “Mary and George Darling set up the Home Office to fight a war no-one else believed existed.”

“But why?” Henry pressed. “Why do you think that magic is evil, and why were you so desperate to get here to Neverland, a place full of magic?”

There was a long pause.

“Vengeance,” Tamara said eventually. “Justice.” She paused. “There was a fourth sibling, older than the other three Darlings. He was adopted into the family. Peter Pan abducted him. Shortly after, he took Wendy Darling as well. Neither of them were ever seen or heard from again. That’s why we’re here. To avenge them.”

“So you kidnapped a child in order to avenge the kidnapping of a child?” Henry said. “Do you see
what you’ve done? You’re no better than Peter Pan.”

“I have to do whatever it takes,” Tamara said grimly.

“I don’t think your family would be happy that you’ve just done exactly what was done to them in order to get revenge,” Henry retorted.

“That’s not the point,” Tamara hissed. “We’ll never know whether Wendy and Baelfire would have been happy because they were taken, they were stolen from us.”

“Baelfire?” Henry’s stomach was turning itself in knots.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t read any of the book, did you?” Henry continued. “Back when you first came to Storybrooke; you had to pretend that you didn’t know anything about it and that you didn’t believe a word of what my dad was telling you. But you really should have listened. My dad was Baelfire. That was his name before he came to the Land Without Magic for the first time.”

“What?” Tamara’s voice was somewhat strangled.

“Neal Cassidy’s real name, when he was young, was Baelfire. And I really don’t think that he’d be happy that you shot him and kidnapped me in order to avenge him.”

Tamara felt her blood turn cold in her veins and no more was said. She had been on her single-minded quest to rid the world of the magic that had caused her family so much pain, and she had not let anything dissuade her from her cause. In doing so, she had committed the very crime that her ancestors had sworn to bring Peter Pan to justice for – the loss of Baelfire. Still, she thought with grim determination, she had already come past the point of no return. There was to be no going back now. They could only continue on.

London - Past

Wendy sat on the window sill of her bedroom, looking out across the city and further, off towards Neverland and Bae. “He’s not coming back,” her parents had told her when she had explained that Bae was gone and they needed to try and rescue him. They’d said some very uncharitable things about him taking advantage of their hospitality and then running away, and no matter how many times Wendy had tried to tell them that Bae hadn’t run away, he’d been taken by the shadow whilst trying to protect them, she couldn’t make them see. Still, they were correct in one respect: it didn’t look like Bae was coming home any time soon. The shadow had brought Wendy back because Pan didn’t need or want her. She was a girl, and he was looking for Lost Boys, one specific boy in particular. She wondered if that boy was Bae. At any rate, the shadow would not bring Bae back. But perhaps, if Wendy could get to Neverland again, then the shadow would bring her back to London again, and she could bring Bae with her. The only problem was getting the shadow to come back in the first place. Ever since it had taken Bae, it had not returned to the Darling house, despite her watching out for it every night.

“He’s not coming back, Wendy.”

John was sitting up in bed, hugging his knees.

“No,” Wendy said levelly. “He’s not going to come back. Which is why I need to go and get him.”
“But how?” John’s voice was forlorn. “The shadow hasn’t been back since it took him. I’m starting to think that maybe Mother and Father were right. Maybe it was all just a dream, and Bae really did run away in the night.”

Wendy shook her head. “A dream that all three of us had for so many nights, John? That’s a more far-fetched idea than a shadow stealing children from their beds at night. We all saw what happened, and we were all awake at the time.”

“Well, if it did happen, and if Bae really is trapped in Neverland, the fact still remains that we can’t get him back.” John was still melancholy, his tone disbelieving.

“There has to be a way,” Wendy said firmly. “We just have to have faith.”

“What are you talking about?” Michael had woken with the sound of their voices and was rubbing his eyes.

“We’re planning to rescue Bae,” Wendy said.

“Oh, good,” Michael replied. “I miss him.” He paused. “How are you going to rescue him?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Wendy admitted.

“You’re not sure yet,” John corrected. “I don’t know, Wendy, I just don’t believe it’s possible.”

“I believe!” Michael said, eagerly scrambling out of bed and going over to the window sill to sit with Wendy, who pulled him up beside her. “I believe we can rescue Bae! When do we start?”

“You and John won’t be coming,” Wendy said, ignoring Michael’s pout on hearing that he wouldn’t get to come on the adventure. “It has to be me, because the shadow will bring me back. And it has to be tonight.”

“Wendy…” John began, but Wendy interrupted her brother.

“You heard what Mother and Father said last night. They think I’m now old enough to have my own room, and this is the last night that I’ll be spending in the nursery with you two. If Neverland is the Land of Eternal Youth, I might be too old to go back there tomorrow. Whatever I do, I have to do it tonight.”

“And what if the shadow doesn’t bring you back this time?” John asked. “Then we’ll have lost both of you.”

“You just have to believe in me,” Wendy said.

“I believe,” Michael muttered, his hands pressed up against the window and his breath creating a misty patch on the glass. “I believe.” His brow furrowed and his head turned on one side. “Look, Wendy…” he began, tugging on her sleeve nervously. “It heard you. It came back.”

Wendy looked out of the window and sure enough, the shadow that had taken Bae was floating outside.

“Michael, get back,” she warned, pulling him away from the window and setting him on the floor once more. “John, hide him, and yourself. I don’t want it to grab either of you when I let it in.”

“Wendy, don’t open the window,” John pleaded, getting out of bed and pulling Michael further away from the glass, towards the secret cubbyhole. “Please, you might not come back!”
“And if I don’t do it, Bae might never come back,” Wendy replied. “He went with the shadow to save all of us. It’s our duty to help him, to get him back! He’s part of our family!”

John looked back at the window, at the shadow that was watching them with its unnerving, unnatural eyes. How they could ever have thought that it was benevolent was beyond him. He shivered. There was something hungry in its gaze as it floated outside the window, never making any move to try and get through the glass but never showing any signs of giving up its quarry. It was not going to let a single pane of glass get in the way of its hunt. Like a bloodhound following a scent, it had been summoned and it was not relenting.

John pushed Michael into the crawl space and climbed in after him, shutting the door.

Wendy took a deep breath, and shoved the sash window up. A huge gust of air blew into the room, one that she was certain could not have been caused by the wind outside under the mild moonlight, and the shadow was borne inside upon it, hovering near the ceiling, looming above her and staring down with flickering eyes.

“I know what you want,” Wendy said to it, as bravely as she could, determined that her voice wouldn’t tremble. “You can’t have them. You’ll have to take me instead. Take me to Bae.”

The shadow ignored her and swooped down; Wendy stood her ground but the spectre flew straight over her, leaving her gasping for breath at the horrible sensation that it coming so close so fast had caused. It focussed its attention on the hidden door to the crawl space where John and Michael were hidden away. Wendy could hear their quick, frightened breaths through the wall and she wondered whether the shadow could hear them too as she ran over, putting herself between the dark shape and her brothers.

“You can’t have them,” she repeated, grabbing a hold of the shadow’s arm. It didn’t feel quite solid but not like walking through a shadow on a normal summer’s day either. There was a thick, almost liquidy substance to it, although Wendy’s hands were dry where they touched it. “Take me to Bae.”

Angered, the shadow rose up towards the ceiling, thrashing violently as it tried to rid itself of its unwanted passenger. Wendy held on tight despite being thrown around through the air.

“What on earth is going on in here…”

Wendy’s father’s angry voice faded out as he flung the nursery door open, the admonishment on his lips to his children for making too much noise in the middle of the night dying into nothing. When the powers of speech returned, his first thought was to intervene, his second to call his wife.

“Mary!” he shouted down the landing towards Wendy’s mother in their bedroom. “Alert the police!” He had no idea what the police could even hope to do against the abomination that was flying around the ceiling of his children’s nursery, but it was the only source of help that he could rely on. Knowing simply that he needed to stop the shadowy interloper, he rushed into the room without any thought or plan.

“No!” Wendy cried from her position, the increasingly frantic shadow still trying to loosen her grip on its arm. “I need to rescue Bae!” she continued. “I need the shadow to take me to Neverland!”

It was chilling, knowing that his daughter’s farfetched stories of malevolent shadows kidnapping the newest member of their family were completely true.

Just as Mary entered the room and screamed, fainting dead on the floor at the sight that met her, the shadow decided to cut its losses and it flew out of the window, Wendy still clinging steadfastly to its
arm. It did not stop or try to throw her off as they flew towards the second star to the right, and Wendy did not see the horrified expression of her mother, father and brothers as they watched her fly away, until she was no more than a faint speck in the night sky, easily mistaken for a shooting star.

**Enchanted Forest - Present**

Neal stopped in his tracks and slowly turned full circle, carefully taking in every inch of his surroundings before he ended up facing in the same direction as before. There was nothing to see, at least, nothing that he was looking for. There was plenty to see if one wasn’t looking for something. He had ventured into the part of the castle that was undeniably his father’s domain, the West Wing filled with dark and dangerous treasures and the odd incredibly conspicuous gap where something should have been. Neal shuddered at the thought of what had been deemed necessary to take to the Land Without Magic. If there was anywhere in the castle where a way to contact Emma and Henry might be found, it was here, amongst the artefacts steeped in magic and mystery.

Still, his impromptu pirouette had not shown him what he had wanted to see.

“I know you’re there,” he announced to the seemingly empty air. “One of these days I’ll catch you.”

The feeling of being watched and tracked was weighing heavy on his mind and it had not let him go ever since that moment in the room where all his old things had been kept. He was certain that there was a shadow following him around, observing him from a distance, and he was beginning to feel rather a lot of unease about the situation. He was half-convinced that the shadow was his father, but his conviction was waning the longer that time went on. Surely if it was Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow, it would have announced itself and made its intentions clearly known by now. Playing this game of cat and mouse as it was, it began to make Neal think that it was planning something nefarious. He wouldn’t put anything past his father, especially when it came to self-preservation. Had Rumpelstiltskin sent his shadow to the Dark Castle to make sure that Neal didn’t stumble upon something that his father wanted to keep hidden? And there was the small matter of the shadow, whoever its owner might be, not being attached to anything in the first place. In Neal’s experience, unattached shadows had malevolent bodies and malevolent intentions, and the longer he went without seeing this particular shadow that was following him around, the more suspicious he became.

But even in spite of his natural aversion to all things remotely magical, he couldn’t help but hope, fiercely, that this shadow was a benevolent one and that it could perhaps take him home. If Pan’s shadow had been able to cross realms, there was no reason why other shadows shouldn’t be able to. So his frustration with the unseen spectre stemmed in equal parts from suspicion and desperation. If he could only catch the damn thing, then he might be one step closer to reuniting with his family. As it was, he was stuck speculating.

Still, there was no use standing around and waiting for a shadow that evidently did not want to be found to show itself. Neal moved on along the corridor with a purposeful stride and the shivering sensation of unblinking eyes on the back of his neck that he chose to ignore. Perhaps he could lull the shadow into a false sense of security.

Neal had discovered an awful lot during the couple of days that he had spent at the castle, and he wondered dryly how much of it used to be human. The candelabra and the carriage clock looked particularly suspect to Neal’s eye, but maybe he was just being influenced by too many Disney movies over the years. And even if the objects had never been creatures of flesh and blood, there was always the distinct possibility that they had undergone a magical makeover of sorts and were now used for a purpose entirely different to their intended one. It was in many ways a double-edged sword. He had not really spent enough time around his father’s magic to have developed any kind of
instinct for these things but although every nerve was screaming at him to leave well alone, he
couldn’t help but wonder if the next supposedly benign and useless trinket might provide him with
exactly what he was looking for.

He gingerly placed his hand over the knob of the nearest door; it was not locked, nor even closed
fully, standing just ajar, but Neal was still nervous about any and all doors in this part of the castle, or
rather, what might be behind them. It opened silently, and Neal gave a start to find that the room was
not, as he had first suspected, unoccupied. Mulan and Aurora were standing in the window together.

“Oops, sorry…” Neal made to back out of the room awkwardly, and Aurora just burst into a fit of
the giggles.

“It’s all right, I should probably go and check that Philip hasn’t been attacked by any sentient
kitchenware,” she said and she left Mulan with a fond smile; Neal took a step back to allow her to
exit the room. So far he had not had any trouble with feeling like he was a third (or in this case
fourth) wheel. None of his three saviours-turned-companions were overly demonstrative in their
affections towards each other, indeed it had taken him a while to realise that they were in a
relationship, but on occasions such as this he was reminded that he was an unintentional observer.

“You look confused,” Mulan said from the window.

“Hmm.” Neal’s voice was non-committal. “It was just a bit of a surprise when I found out about you
all. I had assumed that Aurora and Philip were engaged.”

“They are,” Mulan pointed out levelly, “but this is a slightly different relationship.”

“I’d gathered that.” Neal shrugged. “It’s not my place to pass comment on other’s people’s
relationships. Yours are looking far more successful than my own at the moment. If you love each
other, then why should anyone else judge?”

Mulan smiled. “I hope everyone sees things in the same way that you do,” she said. “I love Aurora,
and Philip loves Aurora, and she loves both of us, and that should be all that matters. But I can
foresee some problems when we eventually reach her home.”

“I don’t know. I mean, Aurora seems like she could be pretty fierce if she wants to be.”

Mulan laughed. “She is. She looks so delicate but she’s steel on the inside.”

Neal came over and perched in the windowsill beside Mulan. “I think you should be all right,” he
said. “Better than you’d be in the Land Without Magic at least. I haven’t been a part of this land for a
long time and most of the things I remember about it are the bad things. But there’s one thing that is a
constant throughout all the fairy tales, and that’s the importance of love.”

Mulan’s brow furrowed. “Fairy tales? Tales told by fairies?”

“No, it’s sort of complicated. In the Land Without Magic, they see the Enchanted Forest as a make-
believe, fantasy place. You, Philip and Aurora, you exist over there as characters in books and
movies, no-one knows that you really exist over here in this world.”

“Movies?”

“They’re… ok, too difficult to explain, you’ll have to take my word for it, but they’re really good. At
any rate, the thing that’s always stressed in these books is that love conquers all. Now, no-one in the
Land Without Magic really believes in fairy tales and they don’t tend to set much store by love, but I
know that here, it’s a heck of a lot more important and taken a lot more seriously.”
“True love is the most powerful magic of all, in all its forms,” Mulan agreed. “I can see why it doesn’t have as much presence in a world where magic doesn’t exist. I suppose that to us the two are so intertwined that it seems strange to imagine a place where they aren’t. But doesn’t love transcend all boundaries? It doesn’t change between realms. Magic might not exist in the Land Without Magic, but surely true love does.”

Neal nodded sadly. “Yes, it does.”

“So if love transcends all boundaries and is the same in all worlds, maybe this is how you could get back to your son…” Mulan tailed off, staring hard at the dark far corner of the room, past the shelves of potion and lotions. “Did you see that?”

“What?”

“I think something moved over there.” She turned away but her expression still remained uneasy. “Probably just a shadow.”

“Hmm.” Neal didn’t make any other comment, but continued to glance into the corner where Mulan had seen the shadow, more convinced than ever that the thing was following him, biding its time for some reason as yet unknown. “I love Emma and Henry but I don’t think that love’s going to be enough to get me home.”

“Perhaps not,” Mulan conceded. “But if you love them and they know that, then surely they know that you would never stop trying to return to them until you succeeded?”

“I know. But I still want to send them some sort of message. They don’t even know if I’m alive or not.”

They fell silent for a moment, then a smile broke over Mulan’s face.

“I think I know a way,” she said. “Follow me.”

“Ok… What are we doing?”

“Sending a message,” Mulan replied. “Via the only method that transcends all realms. True love.”

**Neverland – Past**

The journey to Neverland this time around was nothing like her first excursion there. Before, Wendy had been mesmerised by the shadow and the sensation of flying, swooping and whirling in the air. She had felt so young and carefree and she could quite happily have done it forever. But it was different now. The shadow flew straight, with grim purpose, no detours. It had a job to do, and Wendy’s insistent grip on it was slowing it down, but it had decided that trying to free itself would waste more time than continuing onwards with its unwanted passenger would. The air was colder tonight and Wendy shivered against the wind chill that she was flying through, her fingers red where they dug into the shadow’s arm, but in spite of her discomfort she refused to relinquish her hold. She was on her way now, it would only be a matter of time before she and Bae were reunited, and then she could bring him back home to his family. She had to stay positive; there was no use getting cold feet now, however chilly her toes might be on her flight. She had to stay strong for John, and Michael, and their parents.

As dawn was beginning to break behind them, Wendy knew that they were nearing their destination, although the sky that they were travelling through remained as dark as ever, showing no signs of
becoming a morning. Squinting, Wendy could just about make out the shape of the Neverland isle beneath them and at that moment, the shadow tried once more to throw her off, no doubt attempting to dump her in the sea and wait for her to drown before they reached land.

Wendy clung on for dear life, ignoring the shadow’s cold, spidery fingers yanking at her hair and trying to prise her hands away from its spectral form. She closed her eyes against the wind as it jerked violently this way and that, and only opened them when she felt a sudden drop in their altitude. The shadow, no longer trying to get her off, was nosediving towards the island at incredible speed; it was hoping to crash her head against the rocky side of the mountain in the centre of the island and finish her off once and for all. Wendy gulped. She had to time it just right: too soon and she would fall into the sea, too late and she would end up on the rocks anyway. She had to aim for the thick forest canopy which might stand a better chance of breaking her fall.

She let go of the shadow, as close to the mountain as she dared, and she continued to tumble head over heels towards the ground, landing heavily on the damp leaves. It was a painful landing, but she didn’t think that anything was broken, and she got to her feet tentatively, testing out each of her limbs in turn to assess the damage. She ached all over but her injuries were all superficial, some bruises and minor cuts that would stop bleeding of their own accord. She looked around at her immediate environs. When she had come to Neverland before, the shadow had taken her directly to one of the Lost Boys’ camps, but now there were no Lost Boys to be seen, nor was there any sign of Bae. She looked up at the starry sky above her, but there was no sign of the shadow either. Perhaps it had gone to warn Pan that she was on the island.

Wendy’s first instinct was to start running and keep moving, but on the other hand, being discovered could prove quite advantageous to her. If the Lost Boys were despatched to find her then she might find Bae amongst them, and then all they would have to do would be to find some kind of escape route. In the absence of Pan’s shadow, this might prove easier said than done. Truth be told, Wendy had concentrated most of her plan on getting to Neverland and finding Bae, not on what came after. She had assumed that the shadow would return her to London, but now that she was separated from it, she wasn’t so sure.

In the distance, a horn sounded. That would be Pan, summoning the Lost Boys. His shadow had obviously broken the news. Wendy set off through the dense jungle, making no attempt to hide or flee, and soon enough, she heard the rustle of movement in the trees beside her. When she looked, though, she found nothing there. The noise came again on the other side, and then again behind her, but she still could not see the shapes of boys moving swiftly through the undergrowth.

“It’s me, Wendy,” she called; they knew her by name from the last time that she had been in Neverland. She didn’t receive a response but the noises around her grew ever louder and closer, seeming to completely encompass her until she was certain that at any moment, the boys would suddenly jump out of the trees to scare her. No boys jumped from the trees, and what happened was far scarier than their attack would have been. Instead of the boys, several shadows slipped through the overhanging branches. Unattached shadows like Pan’s was, with their staring yellow eyes all fixed upon her.

“Boys?” she began, fear choking her voice in her throat. Where these the Lost Boys’ shadows or something else entirely? Had Pan turned the boys into shadows somehow? For the first time since arriving on the island, Wendy thought that running would be an excellent idea, but all her escape routes were blocked by these silent spectres. She ran at the nearest shadow but like Pan’s, it was solid. She was surrounded.

“Boys?” she asked again, hoping that perhaps she could reason with them. The shadows did not reply; they gave no indication of having heard her at all.
“Bae?” Wendy tried. She hoped that he was not one of the shadows, but she had to try and get through to him, even if he was. “Bae, it’s me, Wendy! Where are you?”

There was no response, and Wendy knew in her heart of hearts that she had not expected one. The shadows made no move towards her, but they did not retreat either. They appeared to be waiting for something, keeping her contained until reinforcements arrived. Was Pan himself coming?

Presently Wendy heard the sound of footsteps coming through the trees. Unlike the vague noises of movement prior to the shadows’ arrival, these were definitely made by people tramping through the underbrush, and sure enough, the Lost Boys appeared on the scene a few moments later. Against all the odds, Wendy was heartened to see that they were still alive and they had not become the grim spectres that they walked past in order to approach her. Not a one of them spoke to her, although she could see the melancholy looks on their faces as the two eldest boys came forward with a rope and began to bind her hands together. She was being taken prisoner, taken to Pan…

Neverland – Present

“David! David!”

David jerked awake from the doze he had fallen into beside their small fire whilst Snow kept watch. It had taken a long time for sleep to come, his mind full of worries about Henry and Emma, and to only a slightly lesser extent the other members of their rescue party, and he was momentarily disorientated on his sudden return to consciousness.

“What’s up?” he whispered. Snow was listening intently, her hands paused in the motion of sharpening one of her arrows, and she slowly turned to him.

“What’s coming,” she hissed, and then David heard it too, the soft sound of feet moving carefully over the forest floor, wishing to avoid discovery.

Keeping her movements measured and quiet, Snow picked up her bow from where it lay next to her, ready for action, and she notched the arrow, standing up and taking aim through the trees. David also stood, drawing his sword.

“I think it’s coming from over there.” Snow indicated a patch of trees off to her left, and David followed her around the log they were camped alongside to get closer to the rustling noise.

“You know, I’m rather disappointed.”

David and Snow both whirled round on hearing the voice behind them, and Snow shot on instinct. The person who had spoken was a boy, sitting cross-legged on the log that they had just left and looking for all the world as if he had been there the entire time. Snow shivered at the thought, in a place as creepy as Neverland, he probably had been. He had caught the arrow an inch or so before it hit his chest. He raised one eyebrow at the projectile and snapped it in two before jumping off the log and coming towards them. David could see other boys hiding in the trees all around; they were surrounded.

“The famous Snow White and Prince Charming,” the boy continued. “Tales of your exploits even reached us here in Neverland. Although I must admit that I was expecting someone more…impressive. As it is, I’ve got a school teacher and a…” he looked David up and down “…whatever it is that you do. How long is it since you really did battle with that sword, Prince Charming? Aren’t you worried that you might be a little rusty?”
David moved the sword, itching to swing it, and the boy shook his head. “I really wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

The other boys hiding in and between the trees moved, and suddenly Snow and David found themselves with several spears and arrows aimed at them.

“I’ve just realised that I haven’t introduced myself,” the boy said. “My name is Peter Pan, and as you can see, I’m in charge of things around here.”

“So what happens now?” Snow asked. She had not lowered her bow despite the myriad other weapons around, and she kept her arrow trained on Pan.

“Well, I could advise you to give up now and go home, but where would be the fun in that? Also, I believe you are currently without any means of leaving the island, if the state of the good captain’s ship is anything to go by. So, since you’re going to be with us for a while, I think it would be more interesting if I just let you be and watched you struggle with your hopeless task, looking on as you get further and further away from your goal and you slowly spiral into despair.”

“What have you done with Henry?” David asked through clenched teeth.

“Oh, nothing yet. I’ve got something very special planned for Henry. I’ve been trying to get my hands on him for what feels like centuries. He’s a very unique boy,” Pan said. “One of a kind, I would say. He should be just what I need.”

“What are you going to do with him?” Snow snapped. “What do you need him for?”

“Well, to stay young forever, of course. Neverland requires a lot of maintenance, a land fuelled by belief. What better fit than the truest believer of them all, Henry? It’s going to be spectacular to witness. Almost as spectacular as your pathetic attempts to rescue him. Face it. You’re adults. Grandparents, even. And this is a game for children. The odds are against you, and you have no way of turning the tide. You don’t understand how we play, but you’ve jumped straight into the middle of the game anyway. It’s your move, but you’re playing to lose.” Pan gave a nasty smile. “Just remember that I make the rules. You’ll never find Henry. In fact, you’re losing him as we speak. Do you think he’s not wondering where his rescuers are? And the longer it takes you to find him, the more time is ticking away, the more he’ll start to believe that no-one has come after him, and that his family doesn’t care about his fate, and when that happens, well, he’s already mine, and it’s too late for you. But it’s so amusing to watch you try, and I like to be entertained. So have fun on your journey. This is Neverland, after all. Everyone has fun here.”

He left them then and made his way towards the nearest boy concealed behind a tree, thrusting the broken arrow towards him. The boy looked like he’d been handed a poisonous snake for a moment but then tucked the arrow into his belt and followed Pan into the darkness. Snow and David remained with their weapons ready for a long time after they were certain that the other boys had gone from their hiding places, and finally Snow lowered her bow.

“Well, that was encouraging,” David said drily. “If it really is as much of a race against time as he made it out to be then we have to find Henry, or at least send him a message, as soon as possible.”

Snow nodded and they put out their fire before beginning their walk through the trees again, this time keeping an eye out for armed boys as well as eerie shadows following them about.

“One good thing happened though,” Snow said eventually, “which makes me think that we’ll be able to beat Pan at his own game, maybe.”
“What’s that?” David sounded far from convinced.

“That boy has one of my arrows now,” Snow said. “If Henry sees it, he might recognise it. It’s got white swan feather fletches, and I don’t see any white swans on this island.”

“He’ll know you’re here.” David smiled. “Come on. Let’s find him.”

**Neverland – Past**

No-one spoke as they made their way through the trees. Wendy was already hopelessly disoriented but the Lost Boys seemed to know where they were going. She noticed that each boy was being trailed by a shadow, and in the rare moments when the silver moonlight managed to break through the trees, it was clear to see that the boys themselves did not cast any shadows. Wendy wondered how the dark shapes had become detached, but when she thought of the uncanny strength of Pan’s shadow, she shuddered and decided that she’d rather not know, and she concentrated on surviving the coming confrontation instead. The one thing that gave her courage was that Bae was not amongst the boys who were escorting her to Pan. Although, she didn’t know if that meant that he had escaped or if he had met a fate even worse than that of the Lost Boys around her.

They walked straight past the small camp – long since abandoned – where the shadow had taken her the first time, and continued on towards the centre of the island. Wendy could hear rushing water, and she guessed that there must be a waterfall nearby. Sure enough, when the leader of the group parted the overhanging vines in front of them, they revealed a large lagoon in the shadow of the mountain with a cascade feeding into it. There was a big rock in the centre of the lagoon, in the chilling shape of a skull, and Wendy could see light and movement through the large eye holes.

A fleet of coracles was moored at the water’s edge closest to them, and the Lost Boys began to enter the small boats in pairs, casting off from the shore and paddling towards the skull rock at the centre. Wendy slipped as she was climbing into her coracle, her bare feet sliding on the wet pebbles at the water’s edge, and one of the Lost Boys grabbed her and helped her into the boat before she could fall into the water.

“Don’t want to give the mermaids any fodder,” he said grimly, before beginning to row away behind the other boats. Wendy looked down into the water to see dark shapes moving beneath the calm surface. There was not enough light to make out much detail but Wendy could see long, flowing hair and powerful fish tails. They were circling under the group of boats like sharks or other sea monsters ready to strike at the first sign of trouble, and even though she had not seen them up close, Wendy could already tell that mermaids were not the sweet creatures of fairy tales that she had always been led to believe.

When they reached the rock, two of the Lost Boys lifted her bodily out of the boat whilst the other younger ones rushed to secure the vessels. From inside the skull, Wendy could hear drums and pipe music, and it gave the night around her a haunted air.

They entered the hollow rock through one of the gaps where a tooth should have been, and Wendy looked around at what was obviously Pan’s prime base of operations. The only illumination came from a single lantern in the large cave, but it seemed to be emitting far more light than a solitary candle should have done, and the stark light threw grotesque shadows over the walls of the cave, unnerving Wendy more than the sudden appearance of the spectres in the forest had done. It was impossible to tell what was a natural shadow and what was moving of its own accord. The music and movement stopped once the Lost Boys entered with Wendy, and all the eyes within the cave turned to the new arrivals. There were several ledges and sills within the rock with more boys
perched on them, but there was no sign of Bae anywhere. Whilst Wendy was grateful to know that he had not been made into one of Pan’s reluctant lackeys, she was still worried as to what had become of him.

“Well well well, if it isn’t the Darling daughter.” It was Pan’s voice, Wendy recognised it from the first time that she had been to Neverland. She held her chin up, determined not to show any fear to her captor, even though she could not yet see him. Suddenly, a rope dropped from somewhere near the ceiling and a figure could be seen swarming down it; it was Pan. He jumped the final couple of feet to the floor and clapped his hands, and the rope receded back up without any kind of outside influence. He came over to Wendy and stopped, regarding her with scrutiny, head on one side.

“I was certain that we’d got rid of you for good,” he said conversationally. “As I recall, you weren’t very enamoured with the place on your first visit. It was a surprise to find you so eager to return. I wonder what could have caused this sudden change of heart.”

“I have come to find Bae,” Wendy said firmly, her jaw set to try and mask the quivering in her voice. “Where is he?”

“A rescue mission?” Pan scoffed. “How very noble, especially for a girl. But, how do you know that Bae wants to be rescued? He seemed almost as eager to get here as you were just now.”

“Bae came here to protect his family,” Wendy said boldly. “You took him from us. And girls can be just as dangerous as boys.”

“You’re tied up,” Pan pointed out. “And you’re wearing a nightie. Much like my maiden aunt. Hardly dangerous.”

“And the mermaids in the lagoon outside that your Lost Boys fear so much?” Wendy said. “Aren’t they female?”

For a split second, Pan narrowed his eyes and Wendy knew that she’d caught him out for a moment, but only a moment. His previous demeanour quickly returned.

“Mermaids are a brutal species unto themselves,” he said. “But I have no use for girls on this island. It really is most irritating the way you insist on returning.”

“I’ve come for Bae,” Wendy said. “Let him go and I won’t come back here again.”

Pan appeared to consider her proposition for a moment before shaking his head.

“No, you see, then there would be no repercussions. You’re trespassing, Wendy Darling, and you need to be punished. I can’t just let you go free.”

“You let me go before.”

“Yes, but last time you were invited, you see. No-one asked you to come back. In fact, I don’t think even Bae asked you to come back for him, did he?”

“I don’t know, you took him away from us,” Wendy said through gritted teeth.

“Well, was he shouting ‘Wendy, Wendy, please come and rescue me’ before he left? If not then he didn’t ask you to come back for him.”

“He was saving my brother, our brother! Family!” Wendy exclaimed. “But you don’t care about families, all you do is rip them apart!”
“Me?” Pan looked shocked. “I don’t take boys from their families, Wendy. I liberate them. You’ve seen Neverland. It’s a paradise. No rules, no responsibilities. I take them from their boring lives and I bring them here and I make them into my own family, a better family, where no-one has to be an adult ever again.”

“You make them into your slaves!” Wendy retorted. The Lost Boys remained silent, standing like sentinels around the cave.

“Nonsense,” Pan said. “They’re happy to be here, aren’t you, Porky?” He jabbed a plump boy, who looked as if he wanted to be anywhere in the world apart from Neverland, in the ribs, and the boy made no reply. “See,” Pan continued. “He loves it.”

“You’re mad,” Wendy said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Far from it,” Pan replied. “I just help people to see the truth, that there’s far more sense in staying here with me than in being at home with their families.”

“What have you done with Baelfire?” Wendy pleaded. Her own fate was up in the air, but she had to find out what had happened to Bae, if he was safe and more importantly, if he was alive.

“Well, it’s quite interesting that you should mention him.” Pan’s face took on a ponderous aspect. “He left. Quite some time ago, actually. Yes, apparently he didn’t want to accept my generous offer of a place in my little family of Lost Boys here. He’s gone. Vanished. Vamoosed.”

“Where is he?” Wendy screamed. Pan shrugged and spread his hands.

“I don’t know where he is. Have you considered the possibility that maybe he didn’t want to be part of your family either?”

Wendy shook her head. “Bae would never abandon us like that. He would do anything to protect us. He did do anything to protect us.”

“Well, as you can see,” Pan continued blithely, “he’s not here. He left. Such a shame that your paths didn’t cross, really. And such a shame that you won’t be able to pass the message on to your brothers. I wonder if they’ll come looking for you? It would be very amusing to collect the whole set, so to speak.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Wendy asked. She could feel her bravery waning, but she was determined to keep showing a courageous face to Pan.

“No, what a thing to suggest! I’m not going to kill you. Not yet, anyway. But you could prove useful in the future, I suppose. Bait for traps, target practice. We’ve all got to survive here, after all.”

Wendy saw movement out of the corner of her eye. One of the Lost Boys was inching closer and closer towards the mysterious lantern in the centre of the cave. Although he was out of his sight-line, Pan sighed and snapped his fingers, and a shadow flew across the cave, grabbing the boy and lifting him high into the air. Wendy could hear his choked screams getting fainter and fainter; the shadow had a hold on his neck and was slowly squeezing the life out of him. Wendy had to look away, nauseated, as his desperate noises became gurgles, and his body hit the ground with a dull thud.

“If anyone else tries anything stupid,” Pan said, indicating the light behind him without averting his gaze from Wendy, “then you know the consequences. Now…” He clapped his hands twice and the Lost Boys and other shadows began to move from their positions around the cave. “I think we need to take our new guest to her accommodation. Be careful now, we wouldn’t want to hurt her too badly. Yet.”
Neverland – Present

“I can’t do it.”

“Yes you can. Try again.”

“I’ve already tried about twenty times, Gold, and I can’t do it! Stop pushing me!”

“How else do you plan on learning, dearie?” During the course of the exchange, Rumpelstiltskin had remained so calm and annoyingly serene, and Emma took a surprised step back to hear the anger in his raised voice now. His dark eyes flashed with something dangerous, something magical, and she half-raised her hands in defence, although against what she did not yet know.

“How do you plan on learning anything if I don’t push you?” Rumpelstiltskin asked again, no longer shouting, but still incredibly vehement. “What will you learn if every time you can’t do something, every time you find something difficult, you run away? Your magic could be the difference between life and death and I won’t always be there to take over when you throw in the towel because something’s too hard for you!”

“Don’t you lecture me about running away!” Emma screamed. “You know nothing about the things I’ve had to run away from! And you’re one to talk, you ran away from your own son!”

“And I spent three hundred years regretting that decision and trying to find him again, only to lose him for good! Your son is out there, my grandson, the only part of Bae I have left, and you can’t give up on finding him because it’s too damn difficult!”

“Shut up!” Emma yelled, clenching her fists, and the shrub beside her burst into flames. She jumped sideways in alarm. “Gold! What the hell?”

“That was you, dearie, not me.” He was calm again, or at least as calm as the glittering imp ever was. “Put it out now, we don’t want anyone knowing where we are.”

“There’s no water!” Emma said frantically.

“It’s a magic fire, dearie, use your imagination,” Rumpelstiltskin said sweetly.

“I don’t know how!” Emma let out a long howl of frustration, but when she opened her eyes and unclenched her fists, the shrub was still burning.

“Yes, you do,” Rumpelstiltskin retorted. He was standing with his arms folded, watching the scene with something akin to amusement. “Think about what you want to do and put all your will into doing it.”

Think about what you want to protect. Again the words floated back to her, and Emma held out her hands towards the fire, focussing all her energy into the image of the flames dying back until there was nothing left but smoking leaves. To her amazement, the blaze lessened and lessened until only a flickering embers could be seen, the faintest wisps of white smoke twirling and eddying around her fingertips.

“I did it,” she said, her voice equal parts proud and disbelieving.

“Yes, you did.” Rumpelstiltskin’s voice was neutral but when she turned to look at him, he was grinning broadly and bobbing up and down on his toes. “And that’s the purest magic I’ve seen for a long time, Miss Swan.”
Emma looked at the smoking bush and then down at her hands. “What the hell just happened?” she murmured. “And how do you know that it was me?”


“What, like a mood ring?” Emma asked.

Rumpelstiltskin considered this comparison for a moment before shrugging. “In a manner, I suppose. Anger, fear, hatred, conversely happiness, courage, love… All these things allow you to cast. Control your emotions and you can control your magic.”

“So the bush was my anger?”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded. “And putting it out, that was a positive emotion. You can tell by the colour. So pure and white. So shiny.”

Emma paused and looked at Rumpelstiltskin through narrowed eyes. “Whenever I’ve seen you use magic, it’s always been dark-coloured.”

He gave her a mossy-toothed leer in return. “There’s a lot of darkness in me, dearie. I’m not called the Dark One for nothing.”

Emma nodded slowly. “Regina’s magic is also dark-coloured.”

“Hmm.” Rumpelstiltskin looked away for a moment, pointedly avoiding her eyes. “Yes, Regina’s magic is dark-coloured. Dark magic. So was Cora’s. So was another of my apprentice’s. That’s the way I taught them. You teach what you know.”

“So why aren’t you teaching me dark magic?” Emma asked. “How come mine is so light when everyone else’s is so dark?”

“Because you have so much light magic from your heritage, dearie. So much magical potential waiting to be tapped, and that magic, once you have it under control, once you can bend it to your will and work alongside it… Oh, you’ll give me a run for my money as the most powerful sorcerer in all the realms. Now, try that spell again.”

Mutely, Emma obeyed, holding out her right hand with the palm up and then curling her fingers into a fist.

“What’s the difference between light and dark magic anyway?” she asked.

“What’s the difference between happiness and anger?” Rumpelstiltskin replied, his voice clipped. “Negative emotions are powerful. Explosive. Forceful. But they, like the magic they inform, will fade. Positive emotions endure, make for stronger bonds. It’s harder to learn light magic. Harder to teach. It doesn’t come as easily, but it’s stronger in the end.”

“What about true love?” Emma asked. “Everyone says that’s the most powerful magic of all.”

“And rightly so.” Rumpelstiltskin smiled, a genuine smile rather than a toothy sneer, and Emma could see the traces of Gold in his face now. “Love makes for golden magic. Bright and beautiful….”

He shook himself like a cat that had just sneezed and was attempting to deny the fact. “Enough of
that. Has it worked this time?”

Emma opened her hand. Above her palm, a silvery compass needle was spinning, finally coming to rest.

“Perfect, we can continue on with the compass and follow your shadow.” Rumpelstiltskin set off through the trees without any further ceremony and Emma rushed to catch up with him.

“Hang on, hang on.” She came up beside him and fell into time with his brisk strides. “Earlier, you said that you wouldn’t always be there to do magic for me. That’s not the first time that you’ve made it sound like you’re not coming back from Neverland. Why do you think that this is a one-way trip for you? What do you know that the rest of us don’t?”

Rumpelstiltskin stopped in his tracks and sighed.

“You know,” he said suddenly with a suitably flamboyant gesture that Emma was just about getting used to, although she didn’t think that she’d ever be completely comfortable with it. “I don’t think you want to know.”

Emma just raised an eyebrow, speaking through her teeth as she tried to keep a lid on her worn down patience. “Try me.”

He gave another sigh; she wasn’t going to let him off so easily. Well, he had told her to be persistent with her magic, and she had never been one to let things go even without the magic.

“Many centuries ago, there was a prophecy. A seer told me that I’d reunite with Bae, that a boy would bring us together again. She also told me that the boy would be my undoing.”

Emma let out a long breath. “Henry. Henry is your undoing.”

She folded her arms, stance set, blocking the trail that they were following east to find Emma’s shadow and, by proxy, her son.

“How do I know that you aren’t finding Henry to do away with him?” she asked coldly. “How do I know that this eagerness, this willingness to sacrifice yourself isn’t just you wanting to get to him first to put him out of the picture to secure your own future?”

“Oh, the thought crossed my mind back in Storybrooke, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled, and Emma felt heat prickle at the tips of her fingers. Looking down, she was not surprised to see tiny tongues of flame licking there.

“You’re a bastard,” she growled.

“I told you, there’s a lot of darkness in me. But really, Emma, think about it logically. Henry reunited me with my Bae. But Bae is now gone, lost to me forever, and the only way I can atone for everything I’ve done is to make sure my grandson, my last surviving relative, is safe. Bae’s gone. Why would I destroy Henry? It won’t bring my son back.”

Emma looked at him hard, the flames still warming her fingertips.

“I still don’t trust you,” she said after a long silence.

“Well, what’s new?” Rumpelstiltskin giggled.

“But you’re not lying,” Emma continued. “I know my self-confessed superpower can be off at times,
“I consider myself duly forewarned.” Rumpelstiltskin bowed. “Shall we?” he added, indicating the trail. Emma nodded and continued the trek through the forest. She was thinking about Neal, about his antagonism towards magic and special powers; his understandable antagonism given everything that he had gone through. Thinking about his relationship with his father. If he was here now, how would he react to the knowledge that she had so much magical potential just waiting to be unleashed? Bright magic. Good magic. Not like Rumpelstiltskin’s. She glanced sideways at her companion, but she knew better than to ask his opinion on the subject.

Neverland – Past

Wendy was put back into a coracle and paddled away from Skull Rock with a small contingent of Lost Boys as a guard. Away from Pan’s chilling influence, she found it easier to think and plan. She had no idea how she was going to get off the island, but before she could do that, she had to get free of the Lost Boys. It couldn’t be impossible; Bae must have done it before, after all. She refused to believe Pan’s assertion that Bae had abandoned her, John and Michael. He was on his way back to them, she knew it.

They were going in the opposite direction to the one that they had taken to arrive on the rock, moving further and further away from the jungle at the water’s edge and rowing instead towards the waterfall that crashed down from the mountain. The mermaids were still swimming around the boats, hoping for a spill, and as they neared the cascade, Wendy saw a couple of them sitting on the rocks there. Although at first glance, they seemed to be humanesque, it was obvious once the boats came closer that Pan was right and they were truly a species of their own. Their fingers were webbed, and instead of clothing, the scales on their shimmering fish tails continued up over female torsos to the neck, and back down to scatter over their arms. They viewed Wendy with suspicion as the fleet of boats neared the waterfall and the Lost Boys began to fix covers over the little round vessels to keep them dry; as they passed under the falls the mermaids hissed at them. Wendy shivered and avoided their sharp gaze, not looking back until the boats hit the stark rock face behind the waterfall and the Lost Boys jumped out.

Although it looked like a sheer cliff face, once she was out of the boat, Wendy could see that there was an uneven path cut into the wet rock, and it was this that they were travelling up. Wendy didn’t want to look down as they continued to climb up behind the waterfall, but she couldn’t help herself and risked a small glance over the edge. They were very high up, and there were no handholds of any kind. Wendy felt dizzy all of a sudden and stumbled on the path before being hauled to her feet again by the Lost Boys around her. None of them spoke as they kept climbing higher, and Wendy knew better than to ask where they were taking her. She wouldn’t receive an answer. She glanced over at the skull rock in the centre of the lagoon, and although it was impossible to see it clearly through the rushing water, Wendy could still feel its chilling and oppressive influence. She wondered at the significance of the lantern; she could just about make out the points of bright light coming from the holes in the rock, and her stomach turned when she thought again of the unfortunate Lost Boy.

“We’re here.”

The leader of the group stopped up ahead and indicated for the others to follow him into a crevice in the rock face; Wendy would never have guessed it was there otherwise and would have assumed that it was just another cosmetic feature of the cliff. There was no light inside the narrow passageway and she followed her captors blindly along the wet, uneven floor, listening to the water trickling down the
walls. Ahead of her, one of the Lost Boys lit a torch, although by what means she did not know; Wendy was simply grateful for the light and chose not to ask questions whose reply she might not like. Soon, the tunnel opened out into a larger chamber, filled with small cages. There were no other people inside, but Wendy could see something that looked suspiciously like a pile of clean white bones in one corner. The place smelt of death; she remembered it from Great Aunt Ida’s funeral.

For an awful moment she thought of Bae, and forced her mind away from that terrible fate that might have befallen him. She was going to get out, she was going to get home, and the family was going to be reunited. One of the Lost Boys went over to open the nearest cage. It was only made of wood and rope but it seemed to be a sturdy enough structure. Another boy pushed her forward and Wendy knew that she was expected to get into the cage. Meekly she complied, shuffling into the little box to spare herself the indignity of being manhandled inside, and the Lost Boys shut it up behind her. There was barely enough room for her; she had to curl up as small as she could. None of the boys said anything as the oldest fastened the cage tight again, but she could see one or two of them giving her awkward, sympathetic looks before hastily turning away in case any of their brothers in arms caught them at it. Once they had checked that the cage was fastened securely, they turned and left the cavern, filing back into the narrow passageway.

It was only once she was sure that the sound of footsteps had died away that Wendy chanced to look around properly at her surroundings. The boys had taken the torch with them and it took a while for her eyes to adjust to the outlines of shapes in the vaulted room, but it quickly became clear that she was completely alone. Wendy gave a small smile and looked down at her hands, clasped tightly together, and she opened her cold, stiff fingers to drop into her lap the wet flint that she had picked up when she had stumbled on the path up to the cavern. Wendy was good at concealment. She’d managed to hide Bae from her parents, after all, and what was a simple stone after that? It took her several attempts to get a good hold on it and get it into the correct position to saw through her bonds, and on more than one occasion she was tempted simply to give up. The rope that they had tied her with was strong and the flint was not particularly sharp, but maybe if she could just use it to loosen the knot enough, she’d be able to slide her wrists free. It was a slow and painful process, the rope was rough and it grazed her hands, drawing blood as she eased it over the soft skin, and it brought tears to her eyes. Finally, after what might have been an hour or might have been a day, her hands were free. Wendy flexed her wrists and assessed the damage; it would heal soon enough. She was not an overly tough child, she had never needed to be until now, and now that one layer of her awful situation had been solved and crisis was no longer quite so imminent, the pain made her cry. She wiped her face and the salt burned her wounds, but it also gave her the fire she needed to continue, picking up the flint once more and setting to work weakening the ropes that attached the door to the cage. She heaved her slight weight against the bars; with so little space it was hard to get much leverage, but she persisted. Desperation to be free was winning out over every other thought or feeling in her mind, and with a quiet exclamation of triumph, she managed to loosen one of the hinges. Maybe if she could just squeeze out…

It was easier said than done, especially as she could not really stretch out her limbs within the cage, but eventually she succeeded in getting one arm out, and once one was out, the rest of her body followed, if slowly and painfully. Free from the cage, Wendy looked around the pitch black cavern. She would have given anything for a light, but she could only walk through the darkness with arms outstretched until her fingertips brushed the cool, damp wall. From there it was just a question of feeling her way around until she reached the opening, which she slipped into. A small part of her worried if she had found the correct way out or if there were more tunnels and she was just going further and further into the mountain and towards unknown dangers, but she soon began to make out a faint sliver of something that looked lighter, and the odd twinkling of what could have been a star in the night sky, and the further she crept along the tight corridor, the more distinct the sound of rushing water from the cascade became. Once or twice, she slipped on the damp, slimy rock
underfoot and scraped her already injured hands even further. Wendy blinked back tears; she could not and would not cry now, not when she was so close to freedom. She had no idea how she was going to get home, but she was formulating a plan, if she could just capture one of the shadows…

She reached the entrance to the tunnel and breathed in the fresh air, very welcome after the mouldy smell of decay that had permeated the cave, and she stepped out onto the narrow, slippery ledge that they had walked up. She was still concealed behind the waterfall, but she was cautious in her movements in case any of the lost boys should see her. Wendy glanced down at the trail in front of her, closing her eyes when the dizziness of the height became too much. There were still a couple of coracles moored at the bottom of the path. Excellent, she wouldn’t have to negotiate the water and the mermaids.

It was in that moment that Wendy’s heart began to beat painfully in her chest. There was no reason for the little boats still to be there after the Lost Boys had deposited her in the cavern. Not unless they had also remained behind the waterfall.

Wendy realised a split second too late that there were far more hidden entrances in the seemingly sheer rock face than she had been led to believe, as the Lost Boys, armed with spears and bows and arrows, came rushing out of the cliff onto the ledge in front of and behind her, blocking her route no matter where she decided to go.

“You didn’t think that you were going to get away that easily, did you?” one of them asked. Wendy thought of her aching arms and legs and bleeding hands; her escape had not been easy so far but it had been a piece of cake compared to the dilemma she now faced. She could not go up and down. The only way out was to go down the quick way.

Wendy took a deep breath and jumped off the ledge into the churning water below.

Enchanted Forest – Present

“Where are we going, Mulan?” Neal asked as he followed the soldier through the Dark Castle’s corridors towards their unknown destination.

“Here.” Mulan stopped outside a door at the very end of the landing on the second floor of the castle. It was in one of the parts of the place that was obviously not as well-used as the rest.

“I found it yesterday whilst I was looking around,” Mulan explained, “but I didn’t realise the significance or usefulness until our conversation just now.”

Considering that their conversation had been on true love, Neal was rather intrigued and slightly nervous about what Mulan might have found. His concern must evidently have shown on his face as she caught his expression and laughed.

“There’s no need to look quite so worried, I assure you.”

They entered the room; it was pretty empty apart from a few stuffed bookshelves and a very large wire cage in the corner by the window. The cage looked to be unoccupied, but on closer inspection, Neal saw a small white shape inside, perched on a branch. It was a dove, asleep, head nestled under one wing and feathers puffed up.

“Has it been in here all this time?” Neal asked.

Mulan nodded. “I think so. I think the castle must have made sure that she had enough food and
water whilst she was in here during the curse. She seemed happy enough when I got her out yesterday.”

As relieved as Neal was that the dove was unharmed from her extended stay in confinement, he still didn’t see quite how it related to his current predicament.

“This is great, Mulan, but I think I’m missing the point slightly. Unless you’re suggesting that we use the dove as a carrier pigeon.”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting,” Mulan said excitedly. Neal just raised an incredulous eyebrow, hoping that he could convey his doubts in his friend’s plan without the need for words. Mulan sighed at his reserved judgment and continued her explanation.

“Birds carry messages,” she said. “Most birds can carry a simple message to within a few miles. Bluebirds are the best as they can repeat verbal messages. Other birds can carry written messages. But doves and pigeons, they’re different. When doves fly home, they aren’t flying to a place, they’re flying to their mate. They mate for life with such strong bonds, what they have is true love, just like we humans do.”

“Ok, I’m listening.”

“What are the chances that her mate is in the Land Without Magic?” Mulan asked. “This cage looks big enough to ordinarily house two birds. What if Rumpelstiltskin arranged things so that he had one half of the pair here and one with him, so that he could always send a message back here if he needed to?”

“Because true love transcends all boundaries and doves always fly to their true loves. If anything could take a message between worlds, it’s a dove separated from their mate. Oh Mulan, you’re a genius!”

“Thank you.”

Neal wondered where the other half of the pair could be; he hadn’t seen any sign of a caged dove in the pawn shop, which was where most of his father’s important possessions from the Enchanted Forest seemed to be, but he presumed that he had a home somewhere as well, perhaps the bird was there. It wouldn’t be free, because surely it could have already flown back to the Enchanted Forest to reunite with its mate. He wondered… For the first time, he couldn’t feel the creeping sensation of being watched, and he began to take heart from that. Neal did not trust his father with a lot of things. He didn’t trust him not to receive the message and immediately start trying to rip yet another world apart in order to find him again. He didn’t trust him not to do something completely ridiculous. But if Neal knew his father, which he was somewhat confident that he did, then Rumpelstiltskin would know that Neal would be fighting as hard and as ferociously to reunite with his own son as he had done to reunite with Neal. And his father had been all for Neal and Emma’s reconciliation, much to Neal’s chagrin at the time. Yes, if he sent a message and his father received it, Neal was confident that he’d pass it on. As for anything else he might choose to do, well, Neal wouldn’t be held responsible for that. Mulan opened the cage – it was fastened securely but not locked – and entered carefully, going over to the dove.

“Hello, my dear,” she said, stroking its soft plumage. “Are you ready to stretch your wings a little? You’re going to be going on a very long journey, but you’ll find your true love at the end of it.”

The dove cooed quietly and hopped onto Mulan’s hand, and she bore it out of the cage. The bird seemed docile enough, and together Mulan and Neal made their way back through the castle in search of pen and paper so that Neal could write his missive to Emma and Henry.
“It has to be quite short and to the point,” Mulan said as they sat down in the main hall. The dove had since left her hand and had flown over to perch on a suit of armour. “They can’t carry much weight.”

Neal tore off a tiny strip from the parchment he had found and wrote out a short message.

*Emma & Henry. I am ok. In EF looking for way home. With friends. See you soon love Neal.*

Emma would be able to recognise his handwriting at least, even if the message was slightly garbled.

It took a little while to coax the dove down from her comfortable perch on top of the suit of armour; it took all four of them, and in the end Philip had to resort to tempting her with tidbits from the kitchen. Even once she was happily nibbling on dried fruit on the table, the logistical difficulty of attaching the message to her in some way became apparent. They sourced some twine from somewhere and Neal held the dove securely whilst Mulan tied the little roll of paper to its leg.

“Do you know the way?” he asked the dove. He wasn’t quite sure why he was asking because he didn’t expect a reply, but given the important task that the bird was about to undertake for him, he felt it prudent to check.

Philip had already opened the window and Neal let go of the dove, throwing her out into the warm mid-morning sun. She wouldn’t be back; what reason would she have to return if she had reunited with her true love in Storybrooke? Neal leaned heavily on the windowsill, watching the white shape vanish over the horizon.

“It’ll be all right,” Mulan said beside him. Neal nodded. Even if his message never made it to its intended recipients, he was no worse off than he had been before. Now assured that he had given Henry and Emma hope of seeing him again, Neal returned his attention to his other pressing task. He had to find and entrap that errant shadow and use it to get home.

**Neverland – Past**

As she fell, her limbs flailing hopelessly, Wendy heard the commotion break out above her and saw a couple of loosed arrows fly past her. Then she landed with a splash and thrashed to the surface. Wendy could not swim, not much more than a gently bobbing in the sea, and she swallowed several mouthfuls of the freezing water before she managed to open her eyes and take another gasping breath. She risked a glance upwards; the Lost Boys were no longer aiming their weapons at her and were rushing down to the water’s edge. Wendy began to dog paddle awkwardly towards the boats, but she could not have gone more than a couple of feet when she felt something deceptively strong snake around her ankle. She had a split second to catch a final gasp of air before it yanked her under the surface.

Below the water, the mermaid who had hold of her gave Wendy a sweet smile which quickly became a terrifying leer, and she pulled Wendy further down towards the bottom of the lagoon. Just then, a flash of scales swam past and the mermaid was smacked in the face by a fast-moving tail, leaving an angry red mark on the pale skin. The mermaid hissed and looked around for the culprit, but she still did not relinquish her hold on Wendy’s ankle. The attacker returned; her tail was that of a stingray and she smacked Wendy’s captor around the face again before grabbing one of the drowning girl’s injured wrists and pulling hard. Wendy felt as if she was being torn in two, and she was becoming increasingly light-headed. She felt another set of arms come around her waist and tug her away from the other two warring mermaids, and she was on the verge of giving herself up for lost when she broke the surface again and choked on her instinctive intake of breath. The mermaid
who had hold of her waist looked concerned, head on one side.

“Are you all right?” she asked, before levering her tail out of the water to slap an advancing mermaid with the fin. “Take a deep breath, you’ve got to trust me.”

What other choice did Wendy have? She filled her lungs as much as she could, gagging on a mouthful of water, and the mermaid dived under the surface, taking Wendy with her. She was swimming furiously down to the bottom of the lagoon, and for a moment Wendy thought that she had indeed been lulled into a false sense of security. Then she levelled off and swam onwards with powerful thrusts of her tail, fins flapping so fast and the water rushing past them so ferociously that Wendy was almost convinced that they were flying. She couldn’t hold her breath much longer; her chest felt like it was about to burst, and she let out a stream of bubbles, inadvertently gulping in a lungful of water. She spluttered, but the mermaid’s hold on her was tight and unrelenting.

Wendy could feel herself losing consciousness. Even if the mermaid was going to get her to safety, she didn’t know if she would live to see it. Surely they had reached the edge of the lagoon by now, especially with the speed that they were travelling at. Vaguely, something in the back of her air-starved mind told her that the water in her mouth tasted salty, unlike the fresh water of the lagoon…

When she came to, Wendy realised that she was lying on a sandy beach somewhere, and she opened her eyes to see a weak morning sun beating down on her. She couldn’t be dead, she reasoned. She ached too much for that, and her chest felt like it was on fire. Gingerly she looked around. The mermaid was lying next to her, eyes closed but obviously breathing, and Wendy got a closer look at her saviour. She was a lot younger than anticipated, she could not have been much older than Wendy herself, and her tail and body were covered with scales of a rich, jewel green colour. Her hair was bright red. Wendy touched the mermaid’s arm gently.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

The mermaid groaned. “Never doing that again.”

Wendy looked around. “Where are we?” she ventured. The mermaid shook her head without opening her eyes.

“Don’t know. Somewhere that’s not Neverland.”

Somewhere that was not home, either. Although there was not much to see, Wendy knew instinctively that she was nowhere near London. Was she even in the same world as England was? She turned her attention to more immediate concerns.

“Thank you,” she said to the mermaid. “You saved my life.”

“I could save you. I can’t save the others,” the mermaid replied despondently. “The shadows, you see…. And the one who got away, he wouldn’t come near the water.”

The one that got away…. Bae. Bae was all right, and he was trying to get home. Now all Wendy had to do was get home herself.

“I’m Wendy, by the way,” she said.

The mermaid at last opened her eyes and smiled. “Ariel.”

Neverland – Present
Tamara had not spoken since Henry’s revelation that Baelfire and Neal were one and the same. Henry couldn’t say that he was particularly sorry about that, but it would have been interesting to know what she was thinking. He didn’t ask, though. He wasn’t that concerned, and he knew that he didn’t have much hope of trying to sway her from her mission of destruction. He added a couple more sticks to the fire and stirred it with a slightly too-bendy twig.

“How long are we stopping for?” he asked eventually. Although his mind was still wide awake and churning over everything that he had learned in the past couple of hours, he knew that his body was tiring.

“Until we’re summoned,” Tamara said. Her voice was neutral, as was her face. She was completely unreadable, unlike Regina who had always worn her heart on her sleeve. Did Tamara feel remorse for what she had done, or in the end did she not care; was the mission for the greater good so important to her that she felt that shooting the very cause of that mission was worth it, as long as she achieved her goal?

“How do you mean?” Henry asked.

“Pan’s sending an escort to guide us the rest of the way,” Tamara explained. Henry looked around at the shadows that were hovering between the trees around them.

“And the shadows aren’t escorting us?”

“Too slow,” Tamara snapped. “Too slow, too stupid, too full of magic. We’re going to need human help for the rest of the journey.”

“How do you know he’s sending someone?” Henry persisted.

“Because that’s the plan! Listen, they’re coming now.”

Sure enough, Henry could hear the sound of several sets of footsteps marching through the forest and converging on them from several different directions at once. He listened to the noise getting closer, and he wondered what kind of people he was about to meet given his intensely magical surroundings. He was quite surprised to find that they were just ordinary boys when they appeared, dressed in clothes suitable for hunters living in the depths of the forest. They were all quite young, with some no older than Henry, then going on to late teenage years. These must be the Lost Boys. None of them spoke for a long time; they simply stared at the other two humans in the clearing, until finally one, the oldest and obviously the nominate leader, stepped forward.

“Pan’s expecting you,” he said gruffly.

“I know,” Tamara replied, her voice calm. “He sent you to guide us to him.”

The Lost Boy nodded and Tamara got awkwardly to her feet, leaning heavily on Henry as she did so. Even after she was vertical, she still kept a tight grip on his shoulder. As she had said to the shadows before, she was not letting the boy go without a fight. Now that he knew the whole story about her, Henry was not too shocked at this. He was her lynchpin.

As they continued to walk through the woods along faint trails that no-one other than a Lost Boy would be able to find, Henry briefly considered making another run for it. The boys probably wouldn’t be as fast as the shadows were, but unlike the shadows, the boys were overtly armed with all kinds of nasty-looking weapons. For now, Henry decided that it was probably safer to go along with it. Perhaps once they reached Pan, Tamara would make good on her desire to kill the boy who never grew up.
Suddenly, the Lost Boy who was leading the procession stopped. From his position near the middle of the group with Tamara, Henry could see that he was examining the bark of the nearest tree carefully. He strained to see; the boy was using a broken arrow to scrape something off the bark. Henry’s brow furrowed. It looked like make-up, lipstick, and it was obviously not meant to be there. Who would have lipstick in Neverland? Unless someone had brought lipstick to Neverland…. A new spark of hope ignited in Henry’s heart. Only one person of his acquaintance would bring lipstick to Neverland, and his heart skipped again when he focussed his attention on the arrow that the Lost Boy was now studying intently. It was one of Snow’s arrows, he recognised the fletching. Snow and Regina were in Neverland. Henry didn’t care how one of Snow’s broken arrows had ended up in a Lost Boy’s possession, nor why Regina’s lipstick was smeared on a tree. All that mattered was that they were there. They had somehow found out where he had gone and they had come after him to rescue him.

“What’s got into you, kid?” Tamara asked, one eyebrow raised. Henry’s face had broken into a grin with his new realisation, and he quickly dropped the expression, trying to appear more scared and sombre. It wasn’t hard; even with the revelation that he was not alone here and help was somewhere on the island, however far away from him, he was all too aware of his very immediate predicament. Still, he knew that all was not lost. He just had to keep believing in his family, and they would come to rescue him.
No-one in the town noticed the small purple glow speeding over their heads as they went about their business, hurrying through the snow to their destinations before the markets closed for the yuletide celebrations. Night had fallen and the town was already so festooned with light and colour in honour of the season that one more glimmer did not make an awful lot of difference.

The glimmer in question, however, was flying as fast and hard as her delicate fairy wings could take her towards her goal. She’d been somewhat delayed at headquarters, with the yuletide being such a busy time for fairy godmothers all over the realm, and now she hoped she wouldn’t be too late to witness the magical spectacle of gift-giving that had kept her enthralled for many years, ever since she had been assigned to Clara to protect her.

Sugar Plum avoided a low-flying firework being set off at the palace and took a moment out of her flight to give the person who had launched it a piece of her mind.

“You watch out! Some of us are trying to fly here!” she yelled in a manner that would have given Blue fifty fits if she had seen it, but the firework maker below did not hear her small voice amid the roar of the other rockets and sparklers. Sugar Plum gave a huff of annoyance and flew onwards to arrive at the Stahlbaum house, alighting on the window sill of the middle window at the front, above the heavy mahogany door. This was the best guest bedroom, and the chamber that Clara’s human godfather Herr Drosselmeyer occupied whenever he visited the family for the festive season. Sugar Plum peered inside; sure enough, Drosselmeyer was there, sitting at the writing desk with his paint pots spread out in front of him and his glasses perched on his nose. The fairy knocked on the window expectantly, but it took several attempts to actually gain the man’s attention before he came over to let her in.

“Am I late?” she asked, shaking off the light dusting of snow from the top of her wings before flying over to join Drosselmeyer at the desk. He chuckled.

“Good gracious Sugar Plum, you are eager today. No, no, you’re right on time. I’m just about to put the finishing touches on.”

Sugar Plum landed on the desk and admired Drosselmeyer’s handiwork. He always made Clara’s gifts by hand, and he usually always waited until his fairy counterpart had arrived before adding the finishing touches to whatever wood or metal toy he had made that yuletide. This year’s gift was a tin nutcracker, dressed as a soldier and smartly painted.

“Oh, he looks wonderful!” Sugar Plum exclaimed. “And he’s just my height, too. We could go dancing together.” She curtseyed to the Nutcracker and performed a pirouette beside him before sitting down on the desk and watching with rapt attention as Drosselmeyer added the final paint details to the toy’s face.

“And now for the magic touch.” The old man rubbed his hands together and blew on them a few times before flexing his fingers and picking up the nutcracker doll. He closed his eyes and Sugar Plum stayed mesmerised as a small glow of golden magic began to surround the toy, gradually covering it completely.

“That should do it.” Drosselmeyer set the nutcracker back on the desk and immediately he sprang into life, standing to attention and saluting before offering his hand to Sugar Plum to waltz her round
the desk. Dizzy, she sat down on a paint pot.

“Oh, he dances so well, Herr Drosselmeyer, I think you’ve outdone yourself this time.” When she received no response she looked over at the older man, alarmed by his expression. He was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed and a small grimace on his face, rubbing his chest.

“Herr Drosselmeyer, are you all right?” She flew over to perch on the wingback of the chair, trying to see what was wrong. “Herr Drosselmeyer?”

“I’ll be all right, Sugar,” he said eventually, opening his eyes and giving her a wan smile. “It just takes it out of me a little more these days. I can feel it draining me dry sometimes.”

Sugar Plum looked over to where the nutcracker was standing at ease on the desk, waiting to be put into a box and gifted to Clara.

“You put your own life into the dolls,” she said faintly. “Every time you make one, you lose more of your own time.”

Drosselmeyer nodded placidly.

“Herr Drosselmeyer!” Sugar Plum exclaimed in horror. “That’s terrible!”

“Is it really? How else am I going to protect Clara from the dangers of the world after I’m gone? This way, I know that a part of me is always going to be here to fight off the ratmen nesting in the walls and any other horrible things that might have designs on my goddaughter.”

“But she has me, Herr Drosselmeyer! I’m her fairy godmother! Looking after her is my job!”

“And I am her human godfather and looking after her is also my job!”

Sugar Plum didn’t think that she had ever seen the man so vehement; his eyes were flashing with anger and his moustache was positive bristling. “You fairies,” he continued, “you don’t understand the concept of families, of the bonds between parent and child, of love! You’re born in flowers, for goodness’ sake! You don’t understand what Clara means to me!”

Stung by the accusation, Sugar Plum flew away from the chair and alighted on the desk, looking hurt and confused.

Drosselmeyer sighed.

“I’m sorry, Sugar Plum,” he said. “I know you feel very deeply for Clara. It’s just… I’ve never married and I have no children of my own. Clara is the only family I have, and she is the most important thing in my world. And when you love someone like I love Clara then you’ll do anything to make sure that they’re safe and happy.”

“Even die?” Sugar Plum asked.

Drosselmeyer nodded. “If that’s what it takes.”

There was silence for a moment whilst Sugar Plum let this revelation sink in, and then Drosselmeyer moved again.

“Right, let’s get this handsome fellow packaged up and ready for Clara,” he said briskly, moving away from their earlier morbid conversation.

“There’s got to be another way,” Sugar Plum mused. “A way to breathe life into the toys that doesn’t
hurt you.”

“I’m telling you, Sugar, it’s quite all right. One more next year to complete the set and that will be me done, and I’ll be quite happy with that.”

Sugar Plum watched him pack the nutcracker away.

“We could use my fairy dust,” she suggested. “I don’t have any with me at the moment but I’m sure I could get some for next year.”

“Sugar Plum!” Drosselmeyer looked shocked by the very idea. “You know that’s only for emergencies!”

“I’d say that saving your life qualifies as an emergency,” Sugar Plum countered. “Besides, you know I’ve never been one for sticking to the rules.” She handed Drosselmeyer the ribbon and he cut a loop to tie around the brightly packaged parcel with a snort of laughter.

“Don’t I know it,” he said. Sugar Plum was not supposed to have extended contact with any human other than her fairy child, but she had been seen by Drosselmeyer accidentally on her first trip to the Stahlbaum house six years ago, and the two had been firm friends ever since, sharing stories and watching fondly as their goddaughter grew up.

“We all have to die sooner or later, Sugar Plum, we humans. That’s just the way of things.”

“I’d really rather you died later rather than sooner though,” Sugar Plum said earnestly.

“I don’t know how it is for fairies my dear, but it’s often not quite as simple as that for us. We don’t get much choice in the matter.”

Sugar Plum sighed. “I’ll miss you terribly. So will Clara.”

“I’ll miss you both too,” Drosselmeyer assured her. There was a long paused before Sugar Plum spoke again.

“Please let me use the dust, Herr Drosselmeyer. It won’t do any harm, and there are so many more yuletides to come.”

Silence reigned again.

“All right then,” Drosselmeyer said eventually. “If you’re sure, we can try it next year. I have an extra-special toy in mind now.”

Sugar Plum beamed. “I’m looking forward to it. Now, is it time to present him?”

The clock struck nine and the sounds of rushing feet could be heard as the children all ran from wherever they were to reach the parlour where the yuletide tree was to be lit and presents exchanged. Drosselmeyer left his room and made his way after them, whilst the fairy secreted herself away in the branches of the tree to watch the children open their presents, and she smiled at Clara’s reaction to her doll.

“Oh, he’s wonderful Uncle, thank you! Does he dance like the others?”

“Why don’t you take him out of the box and see?”

“He does!”
“He does. He dances, he fences, he fights. There’ll be no trouble with the ratmen under the bed now that he’s around.”

“Really, Drosselmeyer,” Clara’s mother scolded. “You know there’s no such thing as ratmen, you keep putting these ideas in Clara’s head.”

Drosselmeyer exchanged a glance with Sugar Plum, who knew of the existence of ratmen all too well, and raised an eyebrow before Clara came over and threw her arms around him in a hug. Sugar Plum grinned to herself. She would do everything to make sure that godfather and goddaughter were not separated before their time.

**Storybrooke - Present**

Although the town had fallen into an uneasy limbo for a couple of days after the departure to Neverland, now that a week had passed, things were returning to some semblance of normality. Emergency interim elections were being held to find a stand-in mayor and sheriff whilst Regina and Emma were away, and Belle sighed, standing outside the pawn shop and watching people coming in and out of the town hall to cast their votes. It seemed odd to her for ordinary things like this to be going on whilst her life had been turned upside down so completely and her future was still so up in the air. Until now, her life had always been centred around Rumpel. Now he had gone and she didn’t know what to do with herself. She ducked back into the shop and turned the sign back to open. It was time to face the afternoon.

Outside the town hall, no-one noticed a small white bird soaring through the sky above them, causing a slight shimmer of gold to flash in the clouds as it came through the protection spell that was keeping the town hidden. Just one man, a huge man known to all as simply Dove, looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun, and he smiled as he saw the bird flying down towards him with powerful strokes of her wings. He held up a hand and she alighted in his palm, cooing cheerfully.

“Well, hello my dear,” he said fondly, stroking her head with one large finger. “It’s been a very long time. I trust you’ve been keeping well whilst I’ve been over here? It’s been very lonely without you.”

The dove chirruped and rubbed her beak against his thumb before holding up her right foot and looking at him expectantly. Dove frowned on seeing the message there and untied the small strip of parchment from the bird’s leg, quickly reading it. His frown deepened.

“Oh my. This is a turn up for the books, darling. I think we’d better go and see Miss Belle about all this. Here, you stay here. You’ve had a very long journey, after all, and you need to rest.” He handed the bird onto his shoulder where she perched quite happily, giving his ear the occasional affectionate nuzzle, happy to be reunited with her true love even if he was looking rather different to normal. Together, they set off in the direction of the pawn shop to deliver the message from the Enchanted Forest, ignoring any strange looks that came their way.

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Belle ran her hands over the antique cash register and settled herself behind the counter to wait for customers to arrive. Leroy had suggested that she put her name forward for the position of mayor, but she had declined. She had enough to do with the library and the shop, which she wanted to keep open in Rumpel’s absence due to the amount of magical items in there that people might want to reclaim; she did not want to risk a break in and people dealing with calamitous magic by accident.

Leroy was the first one to open the door that afternoon; he had taken to popping in and checking that
she was alright in between visits to the mines and hanging around outside the convent waiting for Astrid. The two had tentatively begun sort of dating since the incident with Rumpel’s protection spell the previous week, and so far, things seemed to be going rather well.

“Hey Belle, how’s things? Have you voted?”

Belle nodded. “It’s a very new idea to me, getting to choose who’s in charge. It makes me wonder why no-one tried to introduce it in the old world.”

“Well, they might have tried, but I doubt they’d have been very successful,” Leroy pointed out. “We’ve just got used to the different ways I suppose. We all have our curse memories of something vaguely like democracy here in Storybrooke and our real memories of an absolute monarchy in the Enchanted Forest.”

Belle nodded her agreement and looked up again as the door opened once more and Dove strode in. Leroy took a step back, regarding the larger man with suspicion. Belle too had been nervous the first time that she had met him, when he had come into the shop the day after Rumpel had left, but he had merely introduced himself and offered his services should she ever require them in Mr Gold’s absence. All in all he was a gentle giant of a man, however frightening his appearance might be.

“Good morning Miss Belle, Mr Leroy. We’ve received a message,” Dove began. He held out the strip of battered paper and Belle took it.

“From Rumpel?” she asked eagerly.

“Ah, no.” Dove looked apologetic.

Belle read the message aloud.

“Emma & Henry. I am ok. In EF looking for way home. With friends. See you soon love Neal. Oh Dove, Leroy, he’s alive, he’s all right!”

It was the best news that Belle had received for a very long time and she broke into a grin, rushing out from behind the counter to throw her arms around first Leroy then Dove.

“Oh, thank you, Mr Dove, thank you so much.”

“It’s not me you need to thank, Miss.” He stroked the snow white bird that was resting on his shoulder and it chirped proudly.

“Thank you.” Belle curtseyed to the bird and it narrowed its eyes in contentment, snuggling up against Dove’s neck. Belle watched the interplay between the two, one so small and one so large, and she smiled. “Thank you, Mr Dove, you can go now. I’ll be sure to let you know if I need you. You can take your little friend home.”

“Thank you, Miss.”

Dove nodded to Leroy and left the shop again, and Belle looked down at the wonderful message once more, bouncing on her heels with a laugh.

“Oh Leroy, there’s so much to do,” she said. “We have to help him get back.”

“That’s a great idea, Belle, but how are we going to manage it? Portals don’t exactly create themselves,” Leroy said drily.
“I know that.” Belle sighed. “Still, there has to be something we can do. And really, this message wasn’t intended for us. It needs to go to its proper recipients. Emma and Henry and Rumpel need to know that Neal’s still alive.”

“I wouldn’t know how to go about getting a message to Neverland,” Leroy said. “And I don’t think that bird’s going anywhere any time soon.”

Belle smiled. The image of the two doves gave her hope, in a strange way. It was proof that true love really could conquer so many boundaries. It could survive a separation of realms and miles and decades, and even a change of species for half of the couple, and yet it was still strong. They had still found their way back to each other. And Neal too, he was still alive, still fighting to get back to his family against all the odds. Belle had never given up hope that she would see Rumpel again, despite his prediction that he would not return from this trip, but now her faith was fully restored.

“There’s got to be something in here that we can use,” Belle said, looking around at the shelves with their myriad magical items. “I only wish I knew what was what. Rumpel didn’t really have time to show me around too much. He just told me what to avoid because it would try to kill me.”

Leroy gave a snort of laughter at that.

“We need someone with magical knowhow,” Belle continued. “Do you think Astrid would be willing to help? All the other magic users I know in the town are currently in Neverland.”

Leroy nodded. “When true love is at stake, I think Astrid would be willing to help with anything. She could probably get us some fairy dust from the Blue Fairy as well.”

Belle privately thought that this was unlikely; ever since that first day when Blue had stopped her from enacting Rumpel’s spell and they had argued in the clock tower, the senior fairy was giving Belle a distinctly cold shoulder, and she doubted that the Mother Superior would be willing to part with her precious fairy dust to help a relative of Rumpelstiltskin’s, much less Belle herself. Still, she did not voice her suspicions to Leroy and simply nodded.

“It makes sense to keep our options open. Anything that we can get our hands on might prove useful,” she agreed.

“I’ll go and see her,” Leroy said. As he moved over the door, something caught his eye through the window. It was Astrid and Theresa, walking along in the direction of the town hall. “Speak of the Devil.” He rushed out of the shop and down the street at a run to catch up to the two fairies, almost bowling over Archie and Pongo on his way past. Belle came across and watched through the window with a fond smile. Love would always find a way.

“What’s got into Leroy?” Archie asked from the shop doorway. “Can I bring Pongo in or should I leave him outside?”

“Oh, bring him in, I want to say hello and Rumpel won’t mind, he loves dogs.” She came over and bent to stroke Pongo’s silky ears. “We’ve received a message from Neal,” she continued. “He’s in the Enchanted Forest looking for a way home, and Leroy’s gone to ask the fairies for help. There’s so much stuff in here; if Rumpel were here then he would know exactly what to do. Still, hopefully the fairies can provide the magical part of the solution.”

Pongo gave her hand a final lick and she stood up.

“Well, it’s good to see you smiling again, at any rate,” Archie said. “And if you need any non-magical help, then you know where to find me.”
Belle nodded and took another glance out of the window. Theresa had left the group, presumably to go back to the convent, but Astrid and Leroy were still talking in the street, and for a moment Belle’s face fell. As happy as she was that Leroy and Astrid had found each other again after their long separation, the image of them made her feel Rumpel’s absence all the more acutely.

“You miss him a lot,” Archie remarked. Belle nodded with a sigh and turned back to the psychiatrist.

“I know it’s silly…”

“It’s not silly at all,” Archie said, unusually hotly for his normal quiet demeanour. “You love Rumpelstiltskin, and he’s not here at the moment, and missing him is the most natural thing in the world. Whatever you’re feeling, as long as you’re feeling it, is valid. No-one can tell you what you can and can’t feel.”

Belle gave a wan smile. “Thank you, Archie,” she said. “I just wish that the rest of the town could see that.”

“True love isn’t something that I’ve ever experienced myself, but I know it when I see it,” Archie said. “And that’s what’s important. So it’s perfectly ok to miss him, and to be worried about him.”

“I know.” Belle went back over to the desk. “I just need to keep myself busy, that’s all, keep my mind off things. And now that we’ve got this message, I’ve got something else to focus on.”

Archie nodded, sensing that the topic was closed, and he didn’t push it. As important as it was for him to get people to open up and talk about their feelings, it was equally important to know when to take a step back and avoid a raw nerve.

“It would be good if we could source some fairy dust,” Belle said presently. “It might make our task a little easier.” In the glass cabinet below the cash register, a display of magic wands - dusty and fossilised from lack of use - stood tucked away, and she bent to take a closer look at them. “The fairies could probably use these if they charged them up with fairy dust.” She leaned into the cabinet and took hold of one of the wands, yelping when a spark shot out and touched her skin, and she scrambled back, sucking her fingers.

“Are you all right?” Archie asked, leaning over the desk.

Belle nodded. “Did you see that?”

Archie shook his head. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Must have been a static shock.” Gingerly she reached for the wand again; this time nothing happened and it remained as inert as ever, but it felt strangely warm to the touch. Belle put the spark to the back of her mind and stood up again, gesturing for Archie to follow her into the back room.

“There are so many potions in here but I don’t know what any of them do and it will take me an age to go through them all. Rumpel’s ordering system was always somewhat unique.”

Archie laughed. “I can see that causing some difficulties.”

“Oh, I never dared to go up into his tower when he was brewing, I was afraid of ending up on fire. The amount of times that I saw luridly coloured smoke billowing out of the windows was quite alarming.”

“Belle?” The bell above the front door tinkled and Leroy’s voice came through.
“In the back.”

Leroy and Astrid came through the curtain.

“Hey Archie, Pongo,” Leroy said before going over to Belle. “We’re on. Theresa’s gone to the convent to get wands and fairy dust, we’ll meet her in a few minutes.”

“Great!”

“I’ll leave you to it; it looks like you’ve got a lot to get through.” Archie departed with a smile, tugging on Pongo’s lead. It took a couple of attempts to get him to move; he was looking intently at the wand that Belle had set on the workbench when she had come through from the main shop. Astrid went over and picked it up, turning it over between her fingers. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it. It was just an old fairy wand with no magic left in it. She shrugged and put it down again. There was no reason for Pongo to have been so enthralled by it.

“So, are we ready?” Leroy asked.

Belle nodded and grabbed her handbag from under the work bench.

“Oh yes. Let’s get some fairy dust and get Neal back to Storybrooke.”

Together, the trio left the shop, and once Belle had locked up, they began to make their way towards the convent.

**Neverland – Present**

There was a certain advantage to sticking with the pirate, Regina thought, and that was his ability to navigate. She could perform compass spells to tell her which direction she was travelling in, but besides that, she was still lost. At least Hook knew the island and could direct them to possible places where Henry might be being held, instead of wandering aimlessly searching for him. They could be more specific in their hunt. Still, Regina wasn’t altogether sure that she trusted him too much just yet. They said little as they passed on through the forest and the silence between them hung heavy and foreboding in the air. She got the distinct feeling that something wasn’t right.

“Where are you taking us, Hook?” she asked plainly.

“I told you, one of the Lost Boy camps. If my memory serves me correctly, which is usually does, then it should be just around the corner. Just take my word for it.”

“I don’t trust your word,” Regina snapped. Hook stopped and turned to her.

“You don’t have much choice, Your Majesty. If you want to run off elsewhere, be my guest, I’m sure that you can find your way around the island perfectly now that I’ve mapped it for you. I’m moving on.”

Regina remained where she was for a moment before catching up to the pirate, working on the principle that two heads were better than one, especially considering the psychological effects of the island that they had both succumbed to so easily before. Having a clear head was far more important than the trustworthiness of her current companion.

“Why did you come back?” she asked Hook presently. He didn’t respond for a long time.
“It was the honourable thing to do,” he said eventually.

“Since when have you had a code of honour?” Regina gave a snort of incredulity.

“All pirates have a code,” Hook muttered.

“You just haven’t always stuck to it,” Regina suggested. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“When keeping to a code is going to get you killed then no, you don’t stick to it!” Hook had stopped and turned to Regina angrily. “There’s a difference between having honour and having a death wish.”

“So you’re honourable when it suits you, and not when it doesn’t.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when you commissioned me to murder your mother,” Hook snapped back.

“That was before you turned coat and brought my very much alive mother back into my life.” Regina’s retort was sharp and icy. They had come to a stop in a clearing, standing at the grab-ready.

“When you’ve been around for as long as I have and seen as much as I have, you always look after yourself first,” Hook snarled.

“Yes, I’d gathered that.” Regina was staring him down. “Which is why I asked you why you came back. Because I can’t possibly see what there is in this expedition to benefit you. You left us all to our fate and then you came back into the fray. Why?”

“Some gratitude for getting you all here and getting my ship destroyed in the process would be appreciated!” Hook yelled.

“It’s Emma, isn’t it?”

The question came out of the left field and knocked Hook for six.

“What?”

“You didn’t come back because it was the honourable thing to do. You came back for Emma.”

“And what if I did? I’m still here, I’m still helping you find Henry. What does difference does it make why I’m doing it?”

“It makes all the difference!” Regina threw her hands up in frustration and turned away, looking around the clearing. “Oh, enough of this, it isn’t getting us any closer to Henry. Where are we?”

There was an uncomfortable silence for a long while before Hook spoke.

“I have the horrible feeling that this is the camp.”

Looking around, the place had all the hallmarks of being a camp, but it had evidently long since been abandoned. Regina whirled round to face the pirate.

“Did you know that this place would be as dead as a doornail before you brought me here?” she asked.

“Of course I didn’t! It’s been over thirty years since I was last here, things have changed!”
“I don’t believe you,” Regina said flatly, but before any more words could be exchanged, her ears picked up the sound of rustling through the forest, and she turned and blasted the source of the noise with a fireball. Hook drew his sword and together they made their way towards the smoking hole in the trees that Regina’s spell had left.

“Hey, hey, it’s us!”

Snow and David peered out nervously from behind the tree that they had thrown themselves behind when the flame had come hurtling towards them.

“How do we know it’s you and not a hallucination?” Regina asked, her eyes narrowed in suspicion and little tongues of fire licking her fingertips, ready to go on the offensive again. “Wait. Don’t move or you’ll be set alight faster than you can say Maleficent.”

“You’ve been hallucinating?” Snow asked. “We’ve just been chased by shadows.”

“And met Pan,” David added grimly.

“What did he do?” Regina asked.

Hook snorted. “Is he still as awful as ever?”

David nodded. “He’s got Henry and we’re running out of time.”

“Did he give any indication as to where they were, any kind of location?” Hook pressed.

“No, nothing.”

“You really think he’d give something like that away?” Regina snapped. Hook shrugged.

“He knows you don’t know the island, any places he may have mentioned wouldn’t mean anything to you like they would to me.”

Regina was still eyeing Snow warily, unsure whether the newcomers were real or merely apparitions. True, she had not had any trouble with her eyes or ears playing tricks on her since she had joined up with Hook, but since she did not trust Hook quite as much as she might be inclined to trust blindly David and Snow’s intentions, she was less worried about whether or not he was a figment of her imagination.

“I think you’re just going to have to trust us,” Snow said. Regina raised one eyebrow then noticed something that made her stop and narrow her eyes. “

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to the dark thread wrapped around David’s wrist.

“It’s from Henry’s coat, we found it caught on a branch.”

Regina went over and examined the thread.

“If I have a lost and found potion, we could use this to guide us to Henry,” she said. “Since we don’t appear to be getting anywhere by ourselves.” She looked over at Hook who threw his hands up in defence.

“I did not know that this place was abandoned!” he exclaimed.

“Let’s not get into who did and did not know what,” Snow said sternly. “If we get the ingredients, could you make a lost and found potion?”
Regina nodded. “Yes, it’s a simple enough piece of magic, all I need are the ingredients, a receptacle and a fire to blend everything over. The question is getting the ingredients here in Neverland.”

“What do you need?” David asked.

“Arrowroot, crushed pine, squid ink, some kind of neutral liquid to blend it all together and keep it stable, ideally double-distilled water.”

Snow shook her head. “We’ll never find all that here.”

“Is there something else you could use, any other kind of magic?” David pondered.

“Well, as we’re in Neverland, if someone’s got some pixie dust then that would be incredibly useful, but I don’t see any lying around,” Regina said sourly.

“Hook knows Neverland,” Snow suggested. “Maybe he knows where there’s some pixie dust to be found.”

Hook had moved a little away from the group at the mention of pixie dust.

“Hook?”

The pirate turned back to the group with a sigh.

“I know where there’s some pixie dust,” he said. “There’s a fairy on the island, I know her from back in the day. She always used to keep a stash of pixie dust for emergencies.”

“Can we trust her?” Regina asked. “Would she help us or is she working with Pan?”

“She’s on her own side,” Hook replied. “She’s got no particular loyalty to Pan.”

“You could find her?” Snow said eagerly.

“Yes… The only problem is that I don’t think she’ll be particularly pleased to see me,” Hook admitted. “We parted on bad terms.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Regina said drily. “Still if you can get us there, we can do the talking.”

“And once we get the pixie dust, we can find Henry,” David added. “It’s a plan, which is better than what we had before.” He gestured to Hook. “Lead on, captain.”

With obvious reluctance, Hook pointed his sword through the trees. “It’s this way. Stay close. She’s an excellent trapper.”

The four began to move through the forest, and Snow fell into step beside Regina.

“Have you seen any trace of Emma or Gold?” she whispered. Regina shook her head and Snow gave a worried sigh. Regina patted her arm awkwardly, unsure of what to say in the circumstances.

“They’ll be fine. They’re both magicians.” She wished that she could be more optimistic, but Emma’s abilities were hopelessly untested and Rumpelstiltskin had always been a law unto himself.

Snow gave a small nod and they continued their trek through the jungle in search of Hook’s old acquaintance and her pixie dust.
“Am I late?”

Herr Drosselmeyer laughed as he opened the window and Sugar Plum flew inside, stamping the snow off her feet and flitting over to the desk.

“You can hardly be late when you’re the guest of honour, my dear,” he said. “Did you procure your fairy dust?”

“Indeed.” Sugar Plum held up a large bag full of shimmering lilac powder. “Freshly milled by the dwarfs this morning.”

“Perfect.” Drosselmeyer made his way over to the desk and sat down in the wingback chair, his old bones taking a while to get comfortable. “So, let’s get started. You’d better tell me what you think before we commit ourselves though.” He took Clara’s latest toy out of his waistcoat pocket and set it down on the desk in front of him. Sugar Plum gasped.

“Is that me?”

Drosselmeyer nodded as Sugar Plum walked all around the doll, examining the replica in detail from every angle.

“Oh, Herr Drosselmeyer, it’s wonderful, thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. I thought that since you were going to be the one to bring her to life, she should be in your likeness.”

Sugar Plum blushed. “Shall we begin?” she asked, fluttering her wings to hover a few inches above the desk.

“I’m ready whenever you are.” Drosselmeyer picked up the tiny metal dancer and cradled her carefully, feeling life beginning to absorb into the soft painted tin.

Sugar Plum opened her sack of fairy dust and sprinkled a handful over the doll. Nothing seemed to be happening, so she added another, and another…

There was a loud bang and a puff of acrid purple smoke, and the doll flew through the air to land against the doll, the delicate shape breaking into pieces and bending itself beyond repair. Sugar Plum choked on the smoke and waved it away with her wand.

“Herr Drosselmeyer? Herr Drosselmeyer, are you all right? Are you hurt?”

She did not receive a response. As the smoke dissipated, she could see that the man was sitting very still, his head lolled back against the chair and his eyes closed, glasses perched skewed on his face.

“Herr Drosselmeyer!” Sugar Plum felt sick as she flew over to the arm of the chair and tried desperately to find the old man’s pulse, bending to listen at his wrist. She had tried to use her fairy dust to spare his life, but she had done the opposite, her fairy magic unprepared and unwilling to join forces with his natural gift.

She found a weak pulse and gave a shaking breath of relief; he was still alive, thank the stars. But for how much longer, she could not tell. His face was deathly pale but for the stark parallel lines of blood dripping from his nose, and his breathing was shallow, his chest barely moving.
With a shake of her wings, Sugar Plum got big, something she’d only ever done in Clara’s presence before. She didn’t like getting big, she felt clumsy and unsure of her spatial awareness, but sometimes needs must, and this was one of those times.

“Herr Drosselmeyer?” she said, touching his cheek. “Herr Drosselmeyer, please wake up. Please, what am I going to tell Clara?” She looked around frantically for a sign, anything that might assist her. “Help?” she said weakly. Hopefully one of her fairy sisters would hear her plea and come to her aid. She had used most of the fairy dust to try and bring the doll to life and what was left was on the floor as a result of the explosion, now unusable. “Someone please help me.”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a bright blue light enter the room through the gap in the window that she had come through herself, and she closed her eyes. Of all the fairies whose help she could have had in that moment, it had been Blue herself who had answered her summons.

“Oh Sugar Plum, what did you do?”

Blue’s voice was concerned yet full of admonishment, her worry not for Sugar Plum’s grief and the dying man in the chair, but for the secrecy and reputation of the fairy godmothers.

“I was trying to save his life,” Sugar Plum sobbed. “Is that so wrong?”

“You know it is, Sugar Plum,” the Blue Fairy said sternly. “You know we do not meddle in humans’ lives like this.”

“But when people wish…”

“When people wish, then they are asking for our help directly. Now, I did not hear this man wish, Sugar Plum.”

“He does not deserve to die!” Sugar Plum exclaimed. “Please, Blue, you have the power, you can save him before it’s too late.”

The Blue Fairy shook her head. “Mortal lives are fleeting, Sugar Plum. They can be snuffed out like a candle flame. You cannot save everyone.”

“I don’t want to save everyone,” Sugar Plum pleaded. “Just him. He is a good man, Sugar Plum, I’ve known him so long. There’s not an unkind bone in his body and he loves my fairy child so much, he would die for her.”

“And so he will,” the Blue Fairy snapped. “This is not a matter for us to decide, Sugar Plum. He knew the consequences when he began to create his works, he knew what would happen.”

“No-one’s fate is ever set in stone. The slightest thing can change the course of the future. Please save him, please, he deserves so much more.”

Blue shook her head. “No more than any other human, Sugar Plum.”

“But all this is my fault, if we hadn’t used the fairy dust…”

“Then let this be an important lesson to you on the misuse of fairy dust,” the Blue Fairy said coldly. “There’s nothing to be done.”

“Please, it will break my fairy child’s heart.”

“And won’t it break her heart one, two, five years down the line when his fragile human body breaks
under the weight of its life?” Blue asked. Sugar Plum wondered how she could remain so calm and placid in the face of such sorrow, she who heard and answered people’s most desperate pleas for assistance.

“She’s too young to bear this grief now,” Sugar Plum said. “Please Blue, I’m begging you, let them have more time together.”

“Fate has taken its course, and there is nothing to be done. You are Clara’s fairy godmother and it is up to you to guide her through this time. This is our role in our fairy child’s life, to be with them through both the good and the bad.”

Sugar Plum did not reply. Even begging her superior for help had not yielded any kind of mercy. What was she going to do now? How could she console Clara in her grief knowing that she may very well be the reason that her beloved godfather was dying in the first place?

“We do not meddle in other humans’ lives, Sugar Plum,” Blue said firmly. “We keep our fairy children safe and we assist those who desperately ask, but we do not intervene in the human matters of life and death. That is not our place. And you would do well to keep that in mind before you strike up any more friendships with humans other than your fairy child. You remember, I’m sure, what happened to Tinker Bell.”

Sugar Plum nodded, shuddering at the memory of her vivacious friend’s fate.

“Will you at least help me move him?” she asked. “He should be comfortable in his final moments.”

The Blue Fairy nodded and waved her wand, levitating Drosselmeyer out of his chair and over to the bed before shrinking back to her regular size and flying out of the window without another word. Sugar Plum crossed the room and knelt down beside the bed. Somewhere else in the house, the clock struck nine and she heard the children’s pattering footsteps running past the door. Clara would be entering the parlour at any moment now with the expectation of seeing her grandfather and receiving his gift, and Sugar Plum could imagine all too well the look on her face when she realised that he wasn’t coming.

He was still breathing, Sugar Plum could tell that much as she poured some water from the jug by the bed and carefully cleaned his face. There had to be another way. She couldn’t let it end like this. Or perhaps this was his face, destined to pass on with the making of this final gift for Clara, no matter what anyone tried to do to prevent it. Sugar Plum went over to the door and collected up the pieces of the broken fairy toy, feeling her guilt gnawing at her like a knife. Now Clara wouldn’t even have this final thing to remember him by.

There had to be another way to save him. He was still alive, and whilst there was life, there was hope, wasn’t there? Sugar Plum returned to her vigil beside the bed and buried her face in her arms, the broken pieces of the doll scattered on the covers beside her.

“Please,” she murmured to no-one in particular. “Please save him. I’m desperate. Please let him live.”

For a long time, nothing happened. Then Sugar Plum almost jumped out of her skin as a voice spoke.

“Well, you are in a bit of a pickle, aren’t you dearie?”

Storybrooke - Present
There was a certain spring in Belle’s step as she, Astrid and Leroy made their way through the town to the convent. It had given her a sense of purpose, this new mission, a new lease of life, and it made her happy to have something to do instead of sitting in the shop waiting for Rumpel’s possible return. She was doing something good.

“You’re bouncy,” Leroy remarked.

“Well, we’ve had some good news,” Belle said. “No matter how small, every little victory should be celebrated.”

“We haven’t got him back yet; I think that might be more cause for celebration,” Leroy replied.

“I know it’s not going to be easy,” Belle continued. “These things never are. But there’s no point in being put off before you start. As you said to me once: get on that wagon.”

“Every cloud has a silver lining, Leroy,” Astrid added. “And that’s something to be thankful for.”

“After everything that this town’s been through, I’m more inclined to think that every silver lining has a cloud,” Leroy muttered. “I mean, we’ve had this great news, and I am happy about that, don’t get me wrong. But I can’t help feeling a kind of foreboding. It seems to me that every time something good happens, something bad isn’t far behind. We don’t exactly have a great track record when you look at it: Emma breaks the curse, then she and Snow get sucked down a portal. We get them back and then Captain Hook comes to town and Belle loses her memory and discovers hairspray.”

“Yes, let’s not go into that,” Belle said hastily.

“Oh Leroy.” Astrid laughed. “Don’t tempt fate! Come on, everything’s going to be fine.”

They turned the corner towards the convent and immediately saw Theresa and the Mother Superior standing in the driveway talking. Theresa was gesticulating animatedly whilst the older fairy looked on in disapproval.

“Although I will say that this doesn’t exactly look promising,” Astrid admitted as they continued to walk up the drive.

“But this is for a good, unselfish cause,” Theresa was saying to the Mother Superior. “This is what we’re meant to be doing, surely, Blue. We’re not nuns anymore, we’re fairies.”

“Yes, we are,” the Mother Superior said levelly. “And fairy dust is not an infinite resource. We can’t use it as a catch-all solution for everything, cases for its use must be considered carefully. You of all people, Sugar Plum, must remember the consequences of using fairy dust incorrectly and inappropriately. Given your previous experience in this matter I’m surprised at your eagerness to use it again.”

Theresa’s eyes flashed with anger. “I have learned from past mistakes,” she said, her voice cold. “We’re talking about the reunion of a family, Blue.”

“We’re talking about crossing realms,” the Mother Superior countered. “Even we fairies cannot do this without help. It will take something far darker than fairy dust to bring Neal home. There’s no use in wasting one of our most precious commodities.”

Theresa opened her mouth to say something else and then visibly thought better of it, exchanging a glance with Astrid. Belle stepped forward; if she could try to defuse the situation with diplomacy then she would.
“Mother Superior, you and your fairies are the only regular users of powerful magic left in the town,” she began. “It’s clear that this problem will not be solved without magic, so we need your help.”

The Mother Superior turned to Belle.

“Only one week ago you vehemently rejected my assistance,” she said benignly. Belle took a deep breath and refused steadfastly to rise to the barb.

“This isn’t a question of protecting the town,” she said through gritted teeth. “This is something much larger. This is reuniting three generations of a family.” The diplomatic approach wasn’t working, so Belle decided to change tack. “You know what happened the last time that Rumpelstiltskin was separated from his son. He spent three hundred years planning to rip apart a world to find him again. What do you think will happen when he returns from Neverland…”

“If he returns,” the Mother Superior interjected.

“When he returns from Neverland, what do you think will happen when he learns that his son is alive, but once again trapped in another land, and you refused to help get him back? Do you think he’ll accept that? Or do you think he’ll rip apart another world? And don’t you think that Neal will be just as desperate to reunite with his own son?” Belle shook her head. “That family, my family, has been separated too many times and for too long, and we have to help get them back.”

The Mother Superior pursed her lips. “Your master taught you well,” she said, her voice clipped. “I wonder if your alternate persona would have been as ruthless as she was had he not got his poisonous claws into you before she appeared.”

“Rumpelstiltskin is not my master,” Belle said. “He is my true love and I am my own person, and my claws are as sharp as anyone’s.”

The Mother Superior simply raised one eyebrow in response.

“Even if we don’t use any fairy dust, I really think we ought to have our wands, Blue,” Astrid said. “What if something terrible happens unrelated to anything else? We’re the last line of magical defence in the town now and we need to be prepared.”

For a long time, the Mother Superior did not say anything, then she gave a curt nod.

“Very well then. As you say, it would be unwise to leave the town without any kind of protection, especially if some people plan to start trying to punch holes through to other realms with no regard for the consequences.” She directed this last comment to Belle, who simply continued to stare her down in retaliation, and the senior fairy turned to the two younger ones. “Come with me and collect your wands.”

It was clear that Belle and Leroy were not welcome within the convent’s walls, but unwilling to be perturbed, they remained in the driveway as the fairies retreated into their domain.

“I really don’t see what the harm in using a little fairy dust could be,” Astrid said as they made their way through the convent’s corridors towards the Mother Superior’s room where the wands were kept under lock and key. “We aren’t using it for anything else at the moment,” she continued.

“Our dust is for use in emergencies and dire situations only,” the older fairy said coldly. “It is not to be squandered on ridiculous experiments.”

“But our magic is good magic,” Astrid continued. “It’s not like trying to reach a new world through a dark curse.”
“Even good magic, light magic, can have devastating effects,” the Mother Superior snapped. “Theresa knows this all too well. There are all sorts of magical items in that shop, none of them good or pure, and if Belle starts mixing magics, even with the best of intentions, then the fallout from a dark curse will be the least of our worries. I am consenting to let both of you have your wands back, you should be thankful for that, and there will be no more talk of using fairy dust to try and assist Rumpelstiltskin’s son. If anything, he’s far better off remaining where he is, since his arrival here in the first place has only caused more turmoil. I am trying to think of the greater good, which must always come before our own needs and desires.”

They had reached their destination by this point and Theresa and Astrid remained silent as the Mother Superior unlocked the door and they entered the room, going over to the wooden cabinet on the wall where the fairies’ magical items were kept. The wands were in a rack much like the one in the pawnshop, and the Blue Fairy took it out and placed it on the desk, indicating for each of the other ladies to take her wand. Whilst there was a certain degree of uniformity to them, and any fairy could theoretically use any wand, each had her own favoured wand made from a stem of their own flower in which they had been born, and their spells were always much more effective when channelled through this particular wand. Astrid smiled as she immediately recognised her old wand and picked it up, feeling it warm and ready to use in her hand. She waved it and a soft shower of pink sparks shot out of the end of it; Theresa did the same and produced lilac-coloured sparks.

“Stop that,” the Blue Fairy said sternly. “We don’t use our magic for frivolities.”

“Of course not, Blue,” Astrid said. She could see that the older fairy had been reluctant to part with the wands, however much it made sense for her sisters to have some degree of self-defence, and she watched her senior put the other wands back into their place. Something caught her eye and her brow furrowed.

“Blue, where’s the fairy dust?” she asked.

“We have already established that I will not let you waste our precious resources,” the Mother Superior said without turning.

“No, Blue, where has the fairy dust gone? We had three full jars of it at the start of the week, the dwarfs had just milled it for us. I saw them come with it. Now the pots are empty. What has the dust been used for?”

Ordinarily Astrid would never question her superior like this, but ever since the incident with Rumpelstiltskin’s protection spell, and her gradual reunion with Leroy, she was becoming ever more sceptical of her previous course of trusting and following the senior fairy so blindly.

There was no response from the other fairy for a long time.

“Blue?” Theresa pressed. “Have you used it for something?”

“Of course not!” the Mother Superior exclaimed, affronted. “How dare you suggest such a thing? I would care to remind you that this is not the first time in recent days that things have gone missing from my room, and that these things are of great interest to Belle.”

Astrid knew better than to say anything; she was already suspected in the reclamation (she refused to call it theft) of the protection spell, and what could she say without incriminating herself, Leroy and Belle? She just exchanged a pointed glance with Theresa behind the Blue Fairy’s back and they both remained silent.

“I shall report the loss to the interim sheriff as soon as they have been elected,” the Mother Superior
said. “In the meantime, I suggest that you use your wands and your influence wisely. We are the guardians of our way of life and we must act in a manner that befits our office. When did you last see your fairy child, Sugar Plum? I would advise that you check in on her. Our duties still remain even though we have been displaced.”

“Of course, Blue,” Theresa said. “I’ll go straight away.”

The two younger fairies left the room and made their way back towards the driveway where they could see that Belle and Leroy were still waiting patiently for them.

“Something’s not right,” Theresa said once they were out of the Mother Superior’s earshot.

“She’s hiding something,” Astrid agreed. “But what on earth could she be doing with that fairy dust?”

**Neverland - Present**

“Aha!”

Emma startled out of the despondent daydream that she had fallen into on seeing nothing but miles upon miles of dark tree branches all around her, and turned to Rumpelstiltskin only to find that he was nowhere to be seen despite his sudden declaration. Closer inspection revealed that he was crouched on the ground next to her, peering very intently at a moss-covered rock.

“You have got to start giving me warning before you do that,” she muttered. She had thought that she was just about getting used to Rumpelstiltskin’s eclectic whims, but every time she got him sussed, he did something even more strange or ridiculous and she was set off kilter again.

“Before I do what?” he asked, not looking up from the rock that had captivated his attention.

“Anything,” Emma grumbled. “What have you found?”

He twisted to reveal a gleeful grin on his face and he waggled his fingertips at her. They were coated in a shimmering, silvery green powder. Emma raise one eyebrow,

“Pixie dust,” Rumpelstiltskin explained, springing to his feet and turning his hand this way and that so that the crystals caught the dim moonlight.

“The stuff that makes the Jolly Roger fly.”

“Indeed. Some of the most potent magic there is, pixie dust, and you won’t find it anywhere else. A Neverland exclusivity.” He plucked a handkerchief from his sleeve, where Emma was sure that it had not been secreted before, and carefully wiped the dust off his fingers. “Don’t want to waste it,” he said, his voice matter of fact. “We might need it to get home. Mind you, considering the state that the ship was in when we left it, perhaps it’s even beyond the help of pixie dust. Careful, dearie,” he said, snatching the fabric away as Emma tried to get a closer look. “This is the hard stuff, not like any cheap fairy dust you might have used in the past. This is grade a, pure pixie dust straight from the source. Very powerful. Very addictive. The most addictive of them all.”

Emma was going to make some kind of comment about highly addictive powders but she refrained, unable to tell what Rumpelstiltskin’s reaction would be. Probably an explosive giggle that still almost gave her a heart attack every time she heard it, but she couldn’t be sure. If Gold had been hard to read, then Rumpelstiltskin was impossible. She thought of his assertion of magic as addictive. She
could quite see why it might be. Personally she found magic to be unnervingly unpredictable, and she still did not feel entirely in control of her own haphazard abilities. But she could not deny that there was a small rush, a thrill that came with a successful spell, the feeling of having conquered nature’s order, and a frisson of power, and she could understand how it might be addictive to a certain calibre of person. To be able to feel like they held dominion over everything and could control the world in the palm of their hand. She looked at Rumpelstiltskin, who had gone back to studying the rock for more traces of dust. She had dealt with addicts in her time and she watched him carefully, trying to match up his behaviour with that of the people that she had known in the past. Mood swings, slightly anarchic personality, and his unorthodox appearance. She didn’t know. Perhaps magic was not quite as destructive as its narcotic counterparts. After all, Rumpelstiltskin had lived with it for centuries.

Still, she found herself wondering what the withdrawal would be like if he was suddenly made to go cold turkey. Magic came so easily to him, it was second nature for him to use magic as a solution to everything. Emma narrowed her eyes. He’d survived under the curse, obviously, but as soon as he was able, he had brought magic back to him.

“How do you prevent it?” she asked presently. “If magic is so addictive, how do you keep in control?”

Down by the rock, Rumpelstiltskin went very still. You don’t, he wanted to say, but he couldn’t say it to Emma, not when the fate of the excursion would probably be resting on her magical shoulders. He quickly changed the subject.

“There’s no more here, just that smear,” he said, standing up and looking around at his immediate environs. “It must have been dropped by someone on their way to somewhere else. There’s none growing here.”

Emma could tell that he was avoiding her question and his silence on the matter spoke reams more than any number of pretty lies might have done. She left it be. For the moment there were more important things to be worried about, namely finding Henry. She glanced across at Rumpelstiltskin, whose dark eyes were still darting around the forest.

“Come on, let’s go,” she said firmly. He nodded.

“Yes. An excellent idea.”

They continued to walk on, following Emma’s compass spell, and Emma kept looking at Rumpelstiltskin. He seemed subdued, his normal gleeful madness was suppressed since their brief stop. It was strange to see him like this. She’d evidently touched a nerve. She thought of Neal, of the angry words exchanged in the apartment in New York, and of Belle back home in Storybrooke whom he might never see again, and at the crux of it all, magic, his overwhelming need and desire for it. She desperately wanted to know if this would be her fate as well, but she knew that she wouldn’t get a response.

“What’s the difference between fairy dust and pixie dust then?” she asked, more to break the uncomfortable silence out of any real desire to know.

“Well,” Rumpelstiltskin began, brandishing one finger in the air. The imp was back, and Emma wasn’t sure whether to be happy or worried about this. “Interesting that you should ask. Fairy dust is neither dust, nor, unfortunately, is it made from fairies. It is diamond powder, and it is mined and milled by the dwarfs for use by the fairies. The fairies really have very little to do with the process aside from naming it after themselves, as fairies are wont to do. It should really be called dwarf dust, or diamond dust.”
Emma had to give a snort of laughter at that.

"The point is, my opinions of fairies aside, the dust is a construct. Artificial. Manufactured."

Emma nodded. “Ok, I’m following so far. And pixie dust? Aside from being the stuff that makes ships fly?”

“Now pixie dust, that’s the real deal,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “Natural and powerful. It’s like fairy dust, but better. Or rather, fairy dust is pixie dust, but worse. The fairies’ attempts to recreate pixie dust.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Why would anyone do that?” Rumpelstiltskin countered. “Power, dearie. More power. It doesn’t matter what you intend to use it for, in the end, everyone’s quest is the same. More power. Magicians can do a lot of things, Emma, as you are quickly learning. But even magicians as powerful as you and I, there will always be gaps in our abilities, gaps that we seek to fill via other means.”

Addiction, Emma thought to herself. That was what it all came down to in the end.

“But surely, if you’re using it for good, then it can’t do any harm?” she asked Rumpelstiltskin. He gave a snort of hollow laughter.

“And what, dearie, do you call good? That’s the crux of it, isn’t it? We all have the best of intentions and yet, they never get us anywhere. What do you call good? Stopping wars, helping the needy, protecting the vulnerable? These are all such lovely things in the abstract, but when you get down to the fine print... intent is meaningless. You can accumulate power wishing to do good or you can accumulate power wishing to do evil. Whatever your intentions are, the action is the same – the steady accumulation of magic. Say you have... a piece of rope.” He snapped his fingers and a fine woven cord appeared, dangling from his hand. “Now, you can use it to save a drowning man by pulling him to shore, or you can use it to dispose of your enemies through carefully placed strangulation, but it doesn’t change the fact that you have a piece of rope. Or, in a different context, you can use it to strangle a kidnapper in order to free his abductee, or you can use it to get rid of someone you find particularly irksome but it doesn’t change the fact that you have killed someone with a piece of rope. Magic and the accumulation of it are no different. What you intend to use it for is of little consequence. The fact remains that you have it and you are getting more of it.”

“I already have way more magic than I ever expected to have, magic that I’m not quite sure I want,” Emma said. Rumpelstiltskin sopped in his tracks and regarded her shrewdly.

“But if pixie dust is the only way to get Henry back, then you’ll use it, won’t you?”

Emma sighed and nodded. She was never going to get a straight answer so she decided to stop trying.

“So what else can pixie dust do, apart from make objects fly?”

“No-one’s really sure,” Rumpelstiltskin said vaguely, and he continued to walk on through the forest. Emma rolled her eyes and caught up to him. “The general consensus is that it will do almost anything that you want it to do. As I said, it plugs gaps in magical knowledge. It comes from Neverland, a place fuelled by belief. As long as you believe, pixie dust can do anything. Why do you think it’s so rare, so highly sought after, so incredibly potent? It’s almost magic incarnate, and this is where it grows.”

He gestured around the Neverland trees, and they went on in silence for a while.
“Is that why you came here before?” Emma asked presently. Rumpelstiltskin stopped short. “I know you’ve been here before. Did you come in search of pixie dust?”

“That was a very long time ago,” he snapped. “Long before I knew what magic and pixie dust could do. All I gained from that trip was one very important lesson.”

“What was that?”

“Never trust a fairy.”

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

Sugar Plum whirled around on hearing the unknown voice in the room and she startled to her feet on seeing the Dark One sprawled leisurely in Drosselmeyer’s wingback chair. He too shot up on seeing Sugar Plum and looked her up and down with a sneer.

“Ugh. If I’d have known I was answering a fairy’s call for help I’d have stayed at home in front of a warm fire.”

“What are you doing here?” Sugar Plum asked warily.

“I heard a desperate soul crying out for assistance, and being the honourable sorcerer that I am, I came to offer my aid. But fear not, I can see it was a false alarm and I’ll be off now.” He raised one hand in a fanciful gesture, meaning to vanish himself from the room, but Sugar Plum stopped him.

“Please, don’t go, I need your help.”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “I don’t deal with fairy folk,” he snapped.

“Please,” Sugar Plum pleaded. “Not for me, but for him and his goddaughter.” She gestured to Drosselmeyer. “He’s a good man and this isn’t his time to go.”

“You don’t get to decide that, dearie,” the Dark One said, moving closer and pointing an accusatory finger at her. “You fairies don’t get to pick and choose who lives and who dies.”

“And you do?” Sugar Plum asked.

“No-one does.”

“But this is all my fault in the first place,” Sugar Plum continued. “I only want to put things right.”

“Noble, but ultimately pointless.”

“I never intended for any of this to happen!”

“Intent is meaningless.”

They stayed in a stalemate for a while, neither moving nor speaking, until Rumpelstiltskin finally came over to the bed and picked up the little metal doll.

“You didn’t leave much life in him,” he observed, looking down at Drosselmeyer. “You know that magic can’t bring back the dead.”

“I know, and I’ll give you anything if you save him from that fate.” Sugar Plum paused. “Can you
save him from that fate?”

“Of course I can, dearie, what kind of a one-trick show magician do you take me for?” He turned the
doll pieces over, studying them carefully. “How old is the child?” he asked out of the blue.

“She’s eight years old.”

“Interesting.” He folded his arms and looked down at Drosselmeyer. “You’d have been better off
calling for a doctor than a sorcerer. But still. Anything, you say?”

“Anything,” Sugar Plum repeated.

“How about the Blue Fairy’s wings?” Rumpelstiltskin asked. He gave an explosive giggle at the
prospect and Sugar Plum took a step backwards, somewhat stunned by the request and not at all sure
how to react. Was he being serious?

“I…”

“I jest, dearie,” he said quickly. “As much as I would dearly love to see them framed and mounted
on my wall, there is something else that I’d like you to procure for me.”

“What is it?” Sugar Plum asked, breathing a sigh of relief that she would not have to bring him her
superior’s wings.

Rumpelstiltskin was now pacing the room and he turned on his heel, waggling one clawed finger at
her.

“Pixie dust,” he said. “Bring me pixie dust and his life will be restored.”

(Of course, as much as I can carry, I’ll go now…’’

Sugar Plum made to shrink down and fly off out of the window back to headquarters to beg, borrow
or steal as much dust as she could, but Rumpelstiltskin held up a hand to stop her.

“No, no, I think we’re talking at cross purposes here. I don’t want your fairy dust. I want pixie dust. I
want the real thing, not your mass-produced, dilute fairy substitute.”

Sugar Plum shook her head. “Pixie dust doesn’t exist,” she said, on the verge of crying with
frustration once more. “You of all people should know that.”

“Yes it does exist,” Rumpelstiltskin replied. His voice was hard, challenging. “You of all people
should know that. How is your dear friend Tinker Bell, by the way?”

Sugar Plum narrowed her eyes but did not ask him how he knew about what had happened to Tinker
Bell.

“Do we have a deal?” Rumpelstiltskin pressed. Sugar Plum sighed. She had no choice in the matter,
when all things were said and done. This was her only chance of saving Herr Drosselmeyer, and she
had to accept it. She nodded slowly.

“But save him first, please,” she said. “He doesn’t have much time left.”

“You really aren’t in a position to be dictating terms, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin pointed out. “But yes,
I’ll be generous. He will remain alive until you bring me the pixie dust, this I guarantee.”

He snapped his fingers and a contract appeared from thin air. Sugar Plum grabbed it and skimmed
the main paragraphs that detailed the exchange and took it over to the desk to scrawl her name at the bottom. Rumpelstiltskin snatched the roll of parchment back up and scrutinised the signature before making a face.

“You fairies. Even your scribblings are ridiculous. Still, let’s get down to business. Time is, after all, running rather short.”

He pranced back to Drosselmeyer’s side and waved a hand over the prone form, engulfing it in dark purple smoke.

When the smoke vanished, so Drosselmeyer’s body was also gone, and Sugar Plum gasped.

“What have you done with him?” she demanded.

“I saved his life!” Rumpelstiltskin exclaimed. “I must admit that I was expecting a little more gratitude.”

“What have you done?” Sugar Plum cried. Where Drosselmeyer’s body had been lying, a small tin toy was now in its stead.

“Should have read the small print dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin said benignly. “I said that I would keep him alive. I never said I would keep him human. And you can’t say he’s not dead.”

“He’s a nutcracker!”

“Indeed he is, and so he will remain until you bring me some pixie dust, whereupon he will return to being a perfectly healthy human being with a somewhat long and happy life ahead of him.”

He picked up the doll and turned it this way and that. “I think it’s a good likeness, myself. I always appreciate a fellow artist.”

Rumpelstiltskin tucked Drosselmeyer away into an inside pocket and Sugar Plum yelped.

“Where are you taking him?”

“Somewhere safe, of course. We don’t want him to be added to Clara’s magical toy collection by accident now, do we?”

With this parting remark, Rumpelstiltskin disappeared, and Sugar Plum slumped back onto the floor beside the now empty bed. There were rare commodities in the magical world. Unicorn horns, ice dragon eyes, salamander tails. But pixie dust was the rarest of them all, believed by many to be a myth. It was only found in one place – Neverland. And there was only one way for a fairy to get to Neverland…

Sugar Plum was on the verge of flying away and leaving the scene of so much pain and grief and returning to headquarters to plan her next move when there was a soft tap on the door.

“Uncle?” It was Clara’s voice, evidently come to investigate why her godfather had not made an appearance in the parlour downstairs. The door knob slowly turned and Clara’s face appeared around it, the furrow between her brows deepening into a full frown on finding the room empty apart from her fairy godmother, who was big for some reason. It was rare for Sugar Plum to remain human-sized for any length of time, and Clara knew immediately that something was wrong.

“Where’s Uncle, Sugar?” she asked. Sugar Plum pressed her hands over her face and let out a long, shaky breath before looking Clara in the eye and responding.
“He’s not very well, dear. He’s had to go away for a while until he gets better.”

“Oh.” Clara came into the room fully and wandered over to the desk, almost as if to check he wasn’t hiding under it. “Will he be back soon?”

“I hope so, Clara. I hope so.” How soon it would be would depend entirely on how quickly Sugar Plum could source some pixie dust for Rumpelstiltskin, and once she had it, how long it would take her to get it to him.

“He made a doll of you, Sugar,” Clara said suddenly, pointing to the desk.

“Yes, I, he…” Sugar Plum scrambled to her feet to hide the broken tin but stopped in her tracks. The little doll was standing on the desk, performing pirouettes and arabesques. “She even twirls like you do.”

Sugar Plum could only nod mutely in response. How had the doll come to be fixed? Had something happened when Drosselmeyer had been put into stasis in his nutcracker form, or had Rumpelstiltskin fixed it himself?

Either way, Sugar Plum was grateful that Clara had something else to remember her godfather by. It was going to take a long time to get the man himself back, but Sugar Plum was determined to succeed.

**Storybrooke - Present**

“Are we sure it’s the Blue Fairy?” Leroy asked. He, Astrid and Belle were sitting in the back room of the pawn shop drinking tea.

“I mean, I know I don’t agree with her and we don’t see eye to eye,” Belle said, “but I’ve always thought that she was pretty trustworthy. Just incredibly single-minded and tenacious. Although it must be said that Rumpel never did trust fairies, and especially not the Blue Fairy. No offence,” she added to Astrid, who shook her head.

“None taken. I’m not sure I trust her entirely myself after this. I can’t see who else it would be. I don’t see why anyone would want fairy dust and I don’t see who would risk breaking into the convent to get it.”

“We broke in,” Leroy reminded her.

“That’s different. I helped you. We knew about that theft. Unless we’ve got more inside fairies that I don’t know about - and it is possible, I’m not hugely observant - then this is an outside influence. It’s not the act that the fairy dust was missing that worries me so much as the fact that Blue didn’t notice, she didn’t say anything until we pointed it out, and it’s the kind of thing that Blue would notice immediately. No, she definitely knew that it was already gone. She wasn’t surprised by its absence.”

“Ok, so if we work on the principle that the Blue Fairy did take the dust herself, as she’s seeming to be the most likely candidate, why did she take it?” Belle asked. “Did she use it herself, or is she working with or for someone?”

“I don’t know.” Astrid poured herself a cup of tea from the pot on the workbench, narrowly avoiding spilling the amber liquid all over the worn wooden surface. “Blue knows a lot of people. She knows everyone in the town in some shape or form. If she’s not working alone, then it could be anyone. But I don’t know who she would part with fairy dust for. She’s always been protective of it, even back in
the Enchanted Forest when we had an almost unlimited supply. And she’s always been the type to work alone. She was always the strongest of our sisterhood. I just can’t see what she would be doing.”

“We’ll just have to keep a closer eye on her,” Belle said.

“Yeah, see if she does anything out of the ordinary,” Leroy agreed.

“But don’t give her too much cause to suspect that you suspect her,” Belle continued. She went over to the nearest set of shelves and grabbed a stack of paper, making notes on the strange situation that they had encountered. “I love a good mystery novel,” she said and as she scribbled down evidence and theories and started trying to piece them all together, she smiled, back in her element truly and completely after her week of limbo and being unsure of what to do, unable to carry on as if nothing had happened like the rest of the town. “I always liked to try and work out who committed the crime before the investigators did.”

“You should talk to the new sheriff later,” Leroy said to Astrid. “See if Blue really did report the stolen dust.”

“Do you think they’ll take our suspicions seriously?” Astrid asked.

“Well, we’ll let them do their investigation and we’ll continue our own,” Belle said brightly. “We’re coming at things from a different angle to the sheriff. We might find something more pertinent.”

“You know, I hate to say ‘I told you so’, but…” Leroy began, but Astrid cut him off with a playful swat to his arm.

“It’s all your fault. If you hadn’t said that every bit of good news is inevitably followed by something bad, then this wouldn’t have happened. I did warn you not to tempt fate.”

It was at that point that there was a knock on the side door of the shop and Belle went to open it. Theresa stepped inside.

“Got anywhere with the mystery?” she asked as she came over to the workbench and looked down at Belle’s web of intrigue.

“It’s early days yet,” Belle said, pouring a cup of tea for the newly-arrived fairy.

“How’s Clara?” Leroy asked.

Theresa smiled. “She’s fine.” She looked around the back room of the shop as she sipped her tea. “I’ve never been here before. Never had reason to. So this is Rumpelstiltskin’s treasure trove. However do you find anything?”

“I don’t, Rumpel does,” Belle replied. “That’s why I need help. I don’t know what most of these things do. Can you shed any light on them?”

Theresa wandered over to the shelves and perused the things on them, shaking her head. Suddenly she stopped and went very still.

“Oh,” was all that she said.

“What is it?” Belle asked. “What have you found?”

Theresa picked up the small tin doll from the shelf. It was Herr Drosselmeyer, still in his nutcracker
form, just as he had been when she had last seen him on that fateful yuletide, two years before the curse arrived. He had come through with them. He was still here, still all right. Still in his magical stasis until she could find some pixie dust for him.

“He was a good friend of mine,” she said, showing the nutcracker to Belle. “I need to find a way to restore him to his true form.”

“Why isn’t he a man?” Belle asked.

“Rumpelstiltskin transformed him,” Theresa explained. When Belle looked shocked, she shrugged and went on. “It was the only way to save his life. I should be grateful really. I wouldn’t have been able to bear it if he had died. But sometimes, afterwards, I wondered if this was worse than death, because either way, I wasn’t likely to see him alive again.”

“We’ll find a way,” Belle reassured the fairy. “Once Rumpel comes back from Neverland, I’ll talk to him.”

Theresa shook her head sadly. “I need to uphold my end of the deal first. Pixie dust will save him. But pixie dust doesn’t just grow on trees. At least, not in this realm.” She sighed. “It’s all my own fault, really, both why he needed saving and why he ended up in this form. Sometimes I wonder how many more heartaches could have been prevented if people had read the small print.”

Belle gave a wan smile and patted Theresa’s arm.

“I’ll talk to Rumpel.”

Theresa placed Drosselmeyer back on his shelf and came over to join the others sat round the work bench.

“So, the first step is to see what we can find in here that might be able to help us out,” Belle said. “It’s a shame that Jefferson’s hat was destroyed.”

“I don’t know, it caused a lot of trouble,” Leroy muttered.

“Hmm.” Belle pondered for a moment. “We don’t want to travel ourselves, just open a gap between two worlds so that we can let Neal through and send a message to Neverland.”

In spite of the daunting tasks ahead of her, Belle smiled. It was a challenge, an adventure of sorts, with the added mystery of the vanishing fairy dust as well.

“You know, the Blue Fairy was so adamant to stop us using fairy dust to try and reach Neal, but maybe the only reason was because she’d already used all of it herself,” she said.

“It looks like the best explanation,” Leroy conceded. “What I still don’t get is why she would do it.”

No-one seemed to have an answer for that.

“I wonder…” Belle mused. “She’s been very vehement about defending the town in her own way, about doing things for the greater good rather than individuals.”

Astrid and Theresa nodded their agreement.

“Yes,” Astrid said. “She reminded us of that today.”

Belle looked down at her meagre investigative notes and sighed. “She’s got to be planning something. Something for the greater good.”
“We’ll see what we can dig up,” Astrid said. “Won’t we, Theresa?”

The other fairy nodded abstractedly, her mind obviously miles away with Drosselmeyer or pondering the Blue Fairy’s actions.

“Well, it’s getting on. I should go and lock up,” Belle announced to the room at large. “I don’t think I’m likely to get any more custom today.”

She got up and picked up the wand that had been left on the workbench from earlier, intending to put it back where it had come from, and Theresa was suddenly roused from her reverie.

“Wait, can I see that?”

“Sure.” Belle handed over the wand and Theresa ran her fingertips over it reverently.

“It’s warm,” she murmured.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. It looked familiar, that’s all.” She handed it back and Belle took it back into the front of the shop with a shrug and a quirked eyebrow.


Theresa shook her head. “No, it’s more than that. I recognise that wand. I know who it once belonged to.”

Astrid brought one hand to her mouth.

“Oh my, Theresa, do you think it could be?”

Both of the fairies looked through into the main shop, where Belle was locking up and turning the sign to closed.

“Yes,” Theresa said. “That’s Tinker Bell’s old wand…”

Neverland – Present

“We’re here.”

Snow, Hook, Regina and David were standing in the shadow of a very tall tree, peering into the clearing that they had stopped just outside. Unlike the various other less densely forested parts of the island that they had come across, this one was comparatively light, the eternal moonlight shining down clearly. Around the edge of the clearing was a fairy ring of mushrooms, and a small dwelling could be seen built into one of the trees on the far side.

“That’s where she lives?”

Hook nodded. “She’s extended a bit since I was last here.” He looked up into the tree house. “It doesn’t look like she’s in.”

“Should we wait?” Snow asked.

“Are you joking?” Regina hissed. “We don’t have much time, Pan told you that much himself.”
“We can’t just break in and steal a fairy’s dust!” Snow exclaimed.

“Now I know you’re not an apparition,” Regina muttered. “We’ll leave an IOU if you’re that worried.”

“Sometimes needs must,” David agreed. “Come on, we ought to go. The sooner we can get some pixie dust and locate Henry, the better.”

They entered the fairy ring and made their way across the circle of moonlight towards the house.

“I guess there’s nothing for it but to climb up,” David said.

“I’ll keep watch,” Hook added.

“Oh no, you’re coming with us.” Regina shoved the pirate towards the tree. “I still don’t trust you not to run off and leave us.”

“Look, I need that pixie dust just as much as you do if we’re ever going to stand a chance in hell of getting off this godforsaken island,” Hook said. “Unless one of you has a better idea, I presumed you’d be wanting to use the Jolly for the return journey, which is going to need a miracle to sail again, let alone fly.”

“All the more reason for you to come with us then,” Regina said sweetly.

“Oh for crying out loud.” David sheathed his sword and began to climb up the tree. “Hello?” he called up into the branches. “Hello? Is there anyone there?”

It was quiet in the clearing, but more of a peaceful quiet than the eerie silence that enveloped the rest of the island. Perhaps it was the fairy ring, keeping darkness at bay. There was no response to David’s summons from the little house, and they continued up the tree, Regina bringing up the rear. It was obviously well-climbed, there were several easy hand and footholds.

“Do we know what we’re looking for?” David asked once they were at the top of the tree. “Everyone talks about pixie dust, but has anyone actually seen it?”

Hook nodded. “Believe me, you’ll know it when you see it. Shimmering with a green tint.”

David and Snow entered the little dwelling and looked around through the dim light, looking for anything that might have held pixie dust. The home was small and cosy, just the right size for one person, with a hammock and various nets and traps set up on hooks around the woven twig structure, everything portable and ready to move on at a moment’s notice if needs be. It was a lonely house, Snow thought, and she wondered at the melancholy existence of the fairy who lived here without any kind of companionship. Together she and David started looking through the pots and other containers that looked promising, but always coming up empty-handed.

“There’s nothing here,” David called back to the others who had remained outside.

“What?” Regina ducked inside, followed by Hook, who stood off to one side just inside the entryway that was covered with a large woven cloth.

“There’s no pixie dust in here. Unless we’ve missed something very obvious.” Snow sat down on the hammock and looked around despondently.

“There’s got to be some somewhere,” Hook said, but he had to concede that there was no pixie dust to be seen. The treehouse was obviously still lived-in, unlike the camp that they had passed through
before, but it was not playing host to any pixie dust. “I know she had some before!”

“Maybe she used it,” David suggested. “Maybe if we just talk to her, she’ll be able to help us.”

Just then, a knife flew through the air, missing David’s nose by about an inch and lodging in a thick piece of rope that was hanging down from the ceiling. Everyone inside the treehouse froze, unnerved by the suddenness of the attack and fearful of another.

“Help you do what?” asked a cold voice from the entrance. Hook closed his eyes and let out a long breath on hearing the words.

“I told you we needed a lookout,” he murmured.

“What the hell is going on?”

Snow looked over at the young woman in the doorway and immediately became conscious that she was sitting on her bed, and stood up quickly. She had a fairy’s elfin build and appearance, but she did not look like a typical fairy from the Enchanted Forest. Her dress had once been green and sparkling, but it seemed to have faded with more than just time into a darker, drabber colour. Her face was fierce and wild, expression tight-lipped and dangerous. She held a small dagger in a combat grip in one hand, and another knife poised ready to throw in the other.

“We were just…” Regina began, making her way towards the fairy, who loosed the knife to send it flying past the former queen’s left ear.

“Next time, I won’t miss,” the fairy snarled, “so don’t move and tell me why you’re in my home.”

“We were just looking for pixie dust,” Regina finished, half-raising her hands in a gesture of surrender but still ready to use magic if needs be.

“Right. Well, as you can see, I’m all out of pixie dust at the moment, and after what happened the last time I loaned some out, I’m disinclined to help anyone in search of the stuff. Ah!” she warned, raising the dagger as Snow took a step forward, her other hand going to the final throwing blade that was tucked into her belt. “So, in a moment, you can go on your own sweet way and leave me alone. But I am intrigued through. How did you come to be in Neverland and why did you decide to come looking for pixie dust in here in the first place?”

Regina’s eyes darted over to Hook, hovering in the corner of the little treehouse and looking for all the world like he would rather be anywhere else but there. The fairy followed her gaze and turned.

“Well, well, well,” she said on seeing Hook, and she let go of the throwing knife. “Look what the cat dragged in. If it isn’t Killian Jones.”

“Hello, Tinker Bell,” Hook said, subdued, and he braced himself for what would come next.

There was a loud smack as Tinker Bell’s fist made contact very squarely with the side of Hook’s jaw.
Neverland – Present

“You’ve got some nerve, showing your face around here again after the stunt you pulled the last time that you were here, Jones!”

Since being discovered in their quest for pixie dust by the fairy Tinker Bell, the four searchers had decamped from her increasingly cramped treehouse and were standing around inside the protection of the fairy ring. Well, Snow, David and Regina were standing around inside the protection of the fairy ring at a respectful distance from Hook and Tinker Bell, who had not stopped her tirade against the pirate since they had arrived back on the ground.

“And guess what?” Tinker Bell continued. “When you do skulk back like the lowlife you are, I find you, once again, stealing from me!”

“We didn’t actually take anything,” Hook pointed out.

“Only because you already looted the lot the last time that you were here!” the fairy yelled. “Well, it’s good to know that some things never change!”

“I’m a pirate!” Hook exclaimed.

“You’re a scumbag!” Tinker Bell countered. “There was no reason for you to go back on our deal! None! You… You…” She ran out of insults and just gave an exclamation of frustration instead. “To think, all the pretty little lies you span me. I’m sure your father would be so proud of you. Unless, of course, he was a lie too and he was just as much of a dirty cheating scoundrel as you are!”

“Don’t you dare bring my father into this!”

“You were the one who brought him into this, thirty years ago! Thirty years!”

There was silence for a moment as Hook tried to think of a suitable response, opening and closing his mouth a couple of times but never actually giving voice to any words.

Off to one side, Snow and David continued to watch the altercation with a mixture of worry and morbid amusement.

“Well, something spectacular must have happened between them thirty years ago,” David said dryly.

“When he said that she wouldn’t be happy to see him, I hadn’t realised quite how violent the meeting was going to be,” Snow agreed, leaning into David’s side to watch the two wildly gesticulating arguers. “What happened, do you think?”

Regina sighed. “This is ridiculous,” she said, shaking her head and beginning to pace within the confines of the fairy ring. “The time we spend here listening to Captain Scruffy’s lovers’ tiff is time that we’re not using to get to Henry.”

“But we need the pixie dust,” Snow said.

“She doesn’t have any!” Regina hissed, pointing to Tinker Bell. “She doesn’t have any pixie dust, so we can’t make the potion, so we’re back to square one and there’s no point in hanging around here wasting time with these two idiots!”
“Tinker Bell might be able to help us,” Snow said levelly. “She’s been here a long time, she’ll know Pan better than any of us, and maybe she’ll have a better idea of where Henry might be.”

Regina thought back to the long abandoned Lost Boy camp that Hook had led her to and gave a reluctant nod of agreement.

“And let’s face it,” David added, “we haven’t exactly been making much headway on our own, have we?”

“She could be a very valuable ally,” Snow continued, glancing over at Tinker Bell.

“We have no idea if we can trust her!” Regina exclaimed. “We can’t just go around asking people for help willy-nilly, especially not in a place like this!” She gestured around at the trees. “This is a waste of time. I’m going to find Henry. If you two want to stay here and continue eavesdropping on the marital dispute of the century then be my guest.”

She got to the edge of the fairy ring and set one foot outside it before Snow called her back.

“Remember what happened the last time that you tried to find Henry on your own with no guide?” she asked.

Regina remembered, the confusion and the strange auditory hallucinations, and the cold, metallic taste of fear coating the back of her throat.

“There’s no shame in asking for help,” David said firmly.

Regina would have begged to differ; she’d had enough experiences of weakness in her past that she wanted nothing more to do with it, but she conceded that there was not much that she could do on her own.

“Fine,” she muttered, “We’ll ask for the fairy’s help. But at the first sign of anything untoward, I will not hesitate to turn her into a bright green firework!”

Snow took a step back under the force of Regina’s vehemence and nodded. “Fair enough.”

They turned their attention back to the fairy and the pirate who were still battling it out over by the treehouse.

“I don’t suppose it occurred to you that I might need any pixie dust myself, did it? I don’t suppose it crossed your tiny mind that thirty years later I’m still here and nothing’s changed?”

“It’s for a good cause,” Hook said, a pleading tone in his voice.

“Really?” Tinker Bell snarled. “Look me in the eye and tell me that you weren’t going to use it to fix your precious ship.”

Hook did not meet her eyes.

“I thought so,” Tinker Bell said mildly.

“I was going to use the leftover to fix the ship!” Hook exclaimed.

“So what were you going to use the rest of it for?” Tinker Bell asked.

David decided that it was time to step in.
“We’re looking for our grandson,” he said. “Two of Pan’s… associates… kidnapped him and brought him here. Hook – Killian – brought us here on the Jolly Roger to look for him. We need the pixie dust for a lost and found potion, and to fix the ship if we stand any chance of getting home after we find him.”

“See!” Hook said indignantly, indicating David. “I told you that it was for a good cause!”

“Given your reputation and my past experience, I think I can be forgiven for my disbelief,” Tinker Bell snapped. “Your grandson,” she said, turning to David. “When was he taken?”

“A few days ago. Probably about a week, it’s hard to keep track of time here.”

“What’s his name?” Tinker Bell asked.

“Henry.”

“Henry,” Tinker Bell repeated, and her brow furrowed before she nodded slowly. “Yes, that name is familiar.”

“Do you know where he is?” Snow asked.

“I’m not sure. You say ‘associates’, was he taken by shadows?”

“No,” Snow replied, “a man and a woman. We found the man dead in the forest a few miles west of here but there was no sign of Henry or Tamara.”

Tinker Bell nodded.

“In that case, I think I know where he’s going to be. But why can’t you just follow your shadow?”

“Pardon?” Snow asked, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Your shadow,” Tinker Bell said, pointing to Regina. “If you cut it, it will have flown to Henry, or it should have done if you’re that desperate to find him.”

Regina looked down at the ground at where her shadow should have been, and gasped when she saw that it was not there. Ice flooded her veins.

“Oh no,” she murmured. “Oh no, this can’t be happening.”

“Regina, where’s your shadow?” David asked.

“Please tell me that you cut it away yourself,” Tinker Bell added, her voice stern.

Regina shook her head. “I don’t know where it is,” she said, unable to hide the panic in her voice. “Oh God, I didn’t even feel it go.”

“Oh no…” Tinker Bell murmured.

“What’s going on?” David asked. “What does it mean?” Is this bad?”

“Of course it’s bad, you imbecile!” Regina shouted. “My shadow’s been stolen!”

“It means that Pan has her shadow,” Tinker Bell explained. “If someone other than yourself severs your shadow, then they can control it. They can control you. You know all those shadows that hang around in the forest? You’ve seen the Lost Boys hiding in the trees? They aren’t there because they
want to be, they’re there because Pan’s ordered them to be. If someone holds your shadow then they hold dominion over you, just as if they held your heart.”

“And now Pan has Regina’s shadow,” Hook said.

Snow cast a quick glance around at the rest of their party but all of their shadows were still intact.

“Is there any way that we can get it back?” she asked.

Tinker Bell shook her head. “Not straight away, no.”

Regina’s heart was beating hard in her chest as she looked around at the shocked rest of the group. She felt like a traitor without having done anything, just standing there, liable to become Pan’s lackey at any moment. He must have grabbed her shadow in that brief moment when she had been at the edge of the scant protection that Tinker Bell’s fairy ring had offered. Well, there was no point in staying within it now. The damage had already been done.

She turned on her heel and ran off into the dense, dark forest.

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

Regina sighed as she looked out of her bedroom window at the rapidly darkeniding sky. She was, in a word, bored, and she couldn’t settle to any of her studies. The magical text books and almanacs that Rumpelstiltskin had provided her with were proving less than thrilling at the moment. She had not quite anticipated how much theory went into magic. It was almost as bad as some of the deportment and etiquette guides that her mother had made her read, grooming her for a life at court. For all that Rumpelstiltskin’s instructions on the performing of feats of magic were annoyingly vague – think about what you want to do and put all of your will into doing it – he was worryingly persistent when it came to studying. She looked down at her mother’s spell book and traced her fingers over the handwritten notes in the margins. He’d taught her mother too, and she wondered if he’d been just as hard a taskmaster with Cora as he was with Regina herself.

Mother had drawn her magic straight from the source, straight from the book itself. She’d breathed it in and it had flowed through her veins like liquid power. Maybe Regina could do that too. It would make her magic far more powerful than it currently was, without all the hard work that Rumpelstiltskin was so keen on her doing. She held the book up close to her face and watched the magic shimmering on the pages before closing her eyes and making to take a deep breath.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, dearie.” The annoyingly familiar voice came out of nowhere and startled her, making her drop the book into her lap with a painful thud. She opened her eyes to see Rumpelstiltskin lounging in her armchair, legs swinging carelessly over one of the arms, as if he’d been there for hours. Who knew, maybe he had. She could never tell with him.

“Those are pure spells,” he said. “Are you sure you’re ready for them?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for the side effects?” Rumpelstiltskin asked. “Don’t answer lightly now. One of my ex-pupils thought that she was ready for the hard stuff, but oh dearie me, that really was a particularly virulent shade of green. It clashed horribly with her hair.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “I think I’m ready.”
“I don’t think you are.” Rumpelstiltskin came over and plucked the book from her hands, tossing it over his shoulder where it vanished in a puff of inky smoke. “Besides, green really isn’t your colour.”

“Give that back!” Regina exclaimed indignantly.

“All in good time, my dear, all in good time. Stick with the lighter stuff first and move on later. You can’t become an all-powerful sorceress overnight, you know.” He replaced Cora’s spell book with one of the smaller, simpler volumes that had been stacked on the nightstand. Regina snatched it from him and opened it at the book mark.

“You know, a gentleman should knock before he enters a lady’s chamber,” she snapped.

“I am well aware of that social nicety,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “Luckily, I am not a gentleman, therefore I can come and go as I please.”

Regina narrowed her eyes at him.

“Of course, if you think you can teach yourself the arcane arts of which you are so fond, please do go ahead,” Rumpelstiltskin said, gesturing around the room expansively. “Just don’t come running to me if you end up a rather attractive shade of chartreuse.”

Regina just scowled at him, but she did admit that ending up green was not high on her list of priorities at that moment in time.

“I thought so,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “So, are you ready for today’s lesson? I trust you’ve been doing your research.”

Regina looked out of the window again, because she had not been as attentive a student this week as she should have been. With the king away on a diplomatic mission to a neighbouring kingdom, she had even more leisure in which to study without fear of someone wondering at her interest in the dark arts, but she hadn’t had any inclination to pore over the dusty books lately. She had thought that learning magic would give her freedom, adventure, but it was not doing so as much as she hoped. She didn’t want to study from books, she wanted hands-on, practical experience. She did enjoy the times when Rumpelstiltskin took her out and about to practise her skills, even if it was nerve-wracking at times to be thrown in front of something with little to no idea of what she was facing and being told simply ‘go’.

Besides, there were certain burning questions that she was eager to have answered, and it would be far easier to get them straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak.

“Is there any other way of controlling someone other than by using their heart?” she asked presently. Rumpelstiltskin paused in his leisurely pacing of the room and spun on his heel to face her.

“An excellent question!” he exclaimed, one finger held high in the air. “But allow me to answer your excellent question with another excellent question.” He wagged the finger at her accusingly. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’m curious,” Regina said, batting his hand away from her face before he could poke her in the eye. “And I thought that there must be another way. One that isn’t quite so… intrusive and ostentatious.”

Rumpelstiltskin raised one eyebrow and moved away from her again, dismissing her words with an airy wave of his hand.
“If there’s one thing that magic is most definitely not, dearie, it’s subtle. I would have thought that in the last few months of our acquaintance, you would have learned that.”

“Yes, well, no-one could ever accuse you of subtlety,” Regina muttered. “I don’t think you’d know what it was if it bit you on the backside.”

He turned sharply at that remark, but said nothing.

“I was just thinking,” Regina continued. “It’s somewhat hard to take someone’s heart without them noticing, unless you wait until they’re asleep to do it. But what if you wanted to take someone’s heart without them noticing whilst they were awake, how would one go about such a feat?”

Rumpelstiltskin grinned.

“Oooh, sneaky, I like it. Now you’re thinking like a magician.”

Regina smiled. “So there is another way.”

“Well, if you had read this particular tome here,” Rumpelstiltskin said, pointing to a very old and very heavy book entitled *Dominion Over Living Things*, “then you would know the answer to that.”

Regina gave a huff of annoyance.

“Just answer the question, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“What’s the magic word, dearie?”

*Please* answer the question, Rumpelstiltskin.”

Rumpelstiltskin pondered for a while.

“The answer is that you should really stick to hearts like the rest of us. There are reasons why we stay in favour of tried and tested methods.”

“Well, sometimes tried and tested methods need to be changed,” Regina said, “Sometimes there are occasions when innovation is called for.”

“And what kind of occasion did you have in mind?” Rumpelstiltskin asked snidely. “A little light entertainment for the forthcoming yuletide, perhaps? I’m sure that would be a very festive celebration.”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Regina said. “I just think that it would be a useful thing to know.”

“To know, perhaps. To put into fruition, definitely not. You’ve got access to a veritable menagerie of nice, shiny red hearts in your mother’s vaults, why not stick to those if you want to practise these things?”

“There obviously is another way, you just don’t want to tell me,” Regina said. “I’m your pupil. You should be sharing your knowledge with me.”

“I’ve got to keep some secrets. My mystique would be entirely ruined if you knew everything that I do,” Rumpelstiltskin paused. “Yes, there is another way.”

“What is it?” Regina asked eagerly.

“Patience, patience. You can just look it up yourself, you know. I’m tempted to make you, but I’ll be
kind this time, since you’re so fascinated with the subject.” He came back to her at the window and pointed outside, down at the ground. “There.”

“I don’t follow,” Regina said plainly.

“That’s because you’re not looking hard enough,” Rumpelstiltskin snapped. “Look. What do you see?”

“Nothing,” Regina replied. “It’s all in the shadow of the palace.”

“Precisely. The shadow,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “A most useful little appendage, and one that everyone has.”

“You can control someone via their shadow? How?”

“Now that is beyond you at the moment,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “I think it’s best that you stick to hearts. Less messy. Less potential for terrible disasters. Shadows are tricky things.”

“How come?” Regina asked. “Why are shadows any trickier than hearts? I presume that the basic magic works in the same way, that whoever holds the shadow holds dominion over it.”

“That is precisely how it works. You’re a quick learner. But tell me this, Your Majesty. When was the last time that you tried to hold a shadow, hmm?”

“It’s got to be possible,” Regina countered.

“Not everything’s possible, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin said. There was a steely, warning edge to his words, and Regina was certain that she had never heard it there before. “You of all people know this.”

Regina gave a long exhalation at the memory of Daniel.

“Catching a shadow isn’t the same thing as bringing back the dead,” she said.

“No, it’s not, but there are still some things that should not be attempted and those are two of them. Stick to hearts.”

Regina gave a slow nod, although she had no intention of doing anything of the sort. This had piqued her interest now, drawn her out of the stagnant quagmire of boredom that she had been drowning in before. Rumpelstiltskin’s guardedness about the whole affair and unwillingness to let her have anything to do with it made her all the more determined to learn about this strange and mysterious phenomenon. Who knew, perhaps if she could prove her prowess to him in this way then he would finally deem her ready for the tougher stuff and stop predicting her verdigrification every time she mentioned it. She hastily masked the small smile that crept over her face at the thought of getting one over on her mentor.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll do it your way. I’ll stick to hearts.”

Rumpelstiltskin narrowed his eyes.

“You’re messing about with magic you don’t understand,” he said sharply. “And that never ends well. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, and don’t expect me to pick up the pieces.”

Regina opened her mouth to defend herself in response, but he had already vanished.

“Fine then,” she said to the empty air. “I’ll just try without you.”
She went over and picked up the dusty old book that he had told her contained all she wanted to know. It took a few minutes of leafing through and cross-referencing glossaries and indexes before she found what she was looking for, and she read aloud.

“It is perfectly possible, therefore, for a magician to detach a subject’s shadow without their knowledge, but such a feat should only be attempted by the most skilled of sorcerers, ideally using a shadow puppet of their own In the absence of a shadow puppet, any method of severance may be used but the subject may be conscious of some change.”

She snapped the book shut.

“Any method of severance.”

There were several different simple spells for cutting, slicing, and indeed severing things. One of those would do.

It was time to go and practise.

**Enchanted Forest – Present**

Neal had long since accepted that if he was going to make any headway with his mysterious shadow then he was going to have to trick it. He lacked the means to control it in any way, and even if he had been in possession of the necessary magic, he could not shake off the feeling that the shadow was his father’s.

Stealth came naturally to Neal; so many years living on the edge of society had ensured that, and he was confident that his plan would work. Shadows, by their very nature, shied away from light and were most comfortable in darkness, where they had places to hide. If they were forced into the light, however, then they had nowhere to go. That was how he had eventually trapped Pan’s shadow for his journey from Neverland back home. It was merely a question of employing the same tactics again and hopefully appealing to this shadow’s better nature. If it really was his father, then surely he would understand. He of all people could empathise with a desperate desire to reunite with family.

Their stay in the castle had given the quartet a good idea of its layout and of which corridors led to where, and between them, Neal and Mulan had laid a makeshift snare. It was the middle of the night and Philip and Aurora were asleep as Neal made his way blindly along the pitch black gallery in the west wing of the castle. They had cleared the way of obstacles earlier in the day, but Neal wasn’t sure if the building itself would see fit to put something in his path. Often during the days he had spent here, Neal had been convinced of the castle’s sentience, and although the gates had welcomed him as Rumpelstiltskin’s son, he was not quite sure how inviting the place was on a more long term basis.

He could feel the shadow a couple of steps behind him, closer in the dark where it could not be seen accidentally; it was not as concerned about keeping its distance and Neal could still feel it with him as he entered the small chamber at the end of the corridor. It was barely more than a closet, really, but it had no windows, and nowhere in which to hide, and only one way in and out.

There was a sudden slam as Mulan shut and bolted the door behind him, effectively locking him in
with the shadow, and Neal lit a candle, placing it into the bracket beside the door.

“I know you’re in here,” he said to the shadow. “So show yourself. Come into the light.”

The shadow moved into his sight line fully, its eyes blinking into life. It was not Pan’s shadow, although Neal had never really had any feeling that it was. The silhouette was unfamiliar for the most part, but Neal’s instinct was growing ever stronger.

“Is that you, Papa?” he asked.

The shadow remained motionless for a long time and then gave a small nod.

Neal nodded in response, his suspicions confirmed, but the slightest hint of unease remained.

“How can I trust you?” he asked. The shadow had not shown any malevolent intent so far during its stay in the Dark Castle, but Neal knew only too well from experience that shadows could be beguiling when they wanted to be.

The shadow did something rather unexpected then, and reached inside its coat, fumbling around in the expanse of blackness that made up its body.

“What are you doing?” Neal asked. He didn’t quite know why he was asking for he knew that he wasn’t going to get any kind of verbal response. Finally, the shadow found what it was looking for and Neal saw the candlelight glint off metal before he saw what the shadow was holding properly. A chill ran through him when he recognised his father’s dagger.

“Well, now I definitely know it’s you,” he said. He touched the smooth blade and for a brief moment he felt the raw power coursing through his veins. “You’d never trust anyone else with that.” He pushed the knife back towards the shadow. “I don’t want it though,” Neal said firmly. “I don’t want it even yours…” He shook his head. “I can’t. I don’t want it, Papa.”

The shadow held out the blade again, insistent, pressing it into Neal’s hands and closing his fingers over the cold metal.

“I don’t want it!” Neal said vehemently. “I don’t want anything to do with it! You know that, Papa! You’ve always known that! It’s the entire reason that we’re in this situation in the first place.”

It was hard for a face with no features other than points of unblinking light for eyes and no means of expressing itself at all to look pleading, but somehow Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow managed it.

“Oh, just until we get back to Storybrooke and I see you again. Then you can damn well take it back and deal with things like an adult.”

The shadow nodded its acquiescence, subdued, and Neal made to slide the blade into the back pocket of his jeans before realising that it was too big and shoving it through his belt at the hip instead.

“You’d think something this lethal would come with a scabbard,” he muttered, and he crossed his arms, facing down the shadow once more. “So why all the skulking around?” he asked the spectre. “Why just come straight over as soon as you arrived? Why are you here, anyway? Did you follow me through wanting to keep an eye on me? Did you come just to bring me the dagger? Why?”

The shadow looked away, its yellow eyes downcast, and if Neal didn’t know better then he’d say
that it was looking embarrassed. It was going to be a slow process, getting information out of his father’s shadow, but Neal was nothing if not determined and he was going to get to the bottom of it all.

“Where you scared?” he asked the shadow.

It nodded slowly and Neal gave a sigh of mingled despair and disappointment.

“Well, good to know that some things never change,” he muttered. Although, given the circumstances of their last interaction, Neal couldn’t say that he blamed the shadow entirely. Quite a few men would have had somewhat chilly feet in Rumpelstiltskin’s position. He ran his fingers over the dagger’s handle.

“This doesn’t constitute me accepting an apology,” he warned the spectre. “This is because agreeing with you is the easiest way to get home.” He might as well take the path of least resistance whilst he could and leave the confrontations for when he was in the same realm as an incarnation of his father that could actually communicate with words.

“I need you to take me home,” Neal said. “I’m not going to ask ‘can you do that?’ because I know you can. You got here, after all, so you can get back. I need you to get me to Storybrooke. You’re my only hope.”

Neal had been let down by his father spectacularly before, and he was not overly quick to trust this spectral part of him, but, he thought grimly as he touched the dagger’s handle again, this time he did have a strategic advantage. Neal would never use the dagger against his own father. Who knew, perhaps more tragedies could have been avoided if he had abandoned his principles and forcibly stopped his father from hurting people. He shook his head; it was a double-edged sword. No matter what his intentions were, as pure as they might have been at the time, it did not change the fact that he would have been using magic to get his own way. He only had to look at his father to see that dark path that would lead down. Rumpelstiltskin’s intentions had been noble enough when he had taken on this immense power, but look at what had happened since. With a power this strong and this dark in his hands, who was to say that Neal himself would not go the same way? Besides, there was something altogether disturbing about the idea of his father’s soul bending to Neal’s whim. He had seen his father bend to others’ whims so often in the past during his childhood, and he still remembered the burning feeling of second-hand embarrassment on Rumpelstiltskin’s behalf, and no matter what had passed between them, he never wanted to be in that situation again.

The shadow nodded its agreement and held out a hand, hovering a few inches off the ground, ready to set off there and then, but Neal shook his head.

“Not yet, there are some things that have to be finished before we set off. But if I let you out, you can’t vanish like you did before, you hear me?”

He didn’t threaten with the dagger, he never would, but the shadow’s eyes flickered to the blade nonetheless and it nodded warily.

Neal banged on the door and listened to the scraping of the bolts and locks as Mulan opened the door again. The torches along the gallery had since been lit and Neal blinked several times, squinting against the sudden light after the comparative darkness of the closet. Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow remained by his side, true and visible, and Mulan’s eyes widened as she looked at it.

“Success?” she asked. Neal nodded.

“Yes. Storybrooke awaits. Are Philip and Aurora still asleep? I want to speak to them before I go.
And you too, obviously.”

“I’ll go and get them,” Mulan said.

“No, it’s ok, it can wait a little while,” Neal replied. “We should probably get some rest ourselves.”

Mulan gave a smile. “The sun’s coming up now,” she said, looking over to the east where a pale red glow was beginning to creep over the horizon. “They won’t be too long.”

Together, the three made their way down towards the main hall to wait for the others.

**Neverland – Present**

Regina ran through the forest blindly until she could no longer hear the shouts of the others coming after her. Whilst before she had been perfectly ready to strike out on her own and continue her quest to find Henry as a solo mission if needs be, now she felt horribly alone and unprepared. She could not shake the cold feeling of being watched, and she wondered if even now Pan was tracking her every move, ready to strike at the most opportune moment.

In all her years of practising dark magic, and for all the times that she had plunged her hand into someone’s chest and pulled out their heart to use as a weapon against them, she had never known what it was like to be on the receiving end. It wasn’t something she had ever thought about. She’d just done it. In her eyes, the ends had always justified the means, no matter how many hearts she’d had to crush to get what she wanted. It was only now she realised what a truly horrible feeling it was, not to have complete control over her mind and body. Usually shadows that had been detached moved separately from their owners but the link between soul and body could never be truly severed. If Pan wanted to use her physical form to do his bidding, then there was nothing stopping him. Regina looked down at her hands, her palms slick with sweat and her fingers shaking, and she clenched them into fists, willing for some strength.

It was the element of the unknown that was killing her, making her hyper-aware and vigilant. Would she even know if she was being controlled? Would there be some kind of warning sign or would she simply snap into a trance-like state of obedience, forgetting everything she’d done upon waking? What if she’d already done something irretrievable but she just couldn’t remember it?

Regina leaned back against the nearest tree and slid down it until she was sitting on the ground, clutching her head in both hands, eyes screwed tight shut. She didn’t want to see or hear any awful hallucinations that would only throw her into further turmoil. She just wanted everything to be over. She wanted to be back in Storybrooke with the knowledge that Henry was safe and sound, and above all, she wanted her shadow back. She buried her face in her knees, trying to remain calm and think up a logical battle plan. Her normal plan was to go in with fire and magic on the offensive, but how could she make that work when her magic might turn against her at any point? And even if her body remained uninfluenced, her shadow was still out there in Pan’s clutches, and who knew what he might make it do without her knowledge? Even though it was unattached, it was still an important part of her. She shivered at the thought. It made her feel contaminated in a way, like she wasn’t quite whole, wasn’t quite right. What if she made it out of Neverland but her shadow didn’t? She didn’t even want to think about it.

Presently she became aware of loud footsteps crunching along through the undergrowth towards her. They sounded real, not illusion or phantasm, and she wondered if it was one of the others come after her or some other foe come with nefarious intent. Shadowless or not, she could still fight as long as she had her conscious mind, and she felt the flames begin to lick her fingertips in readiness for the
possible showdown. When she looked up, however, the newcomer was neither friend nor enemy. Regina felt all the blood drain from her face, an icy trickle of fear running down her spine and rooting her to the spot.

Graham was standing in front of her. His aspect was calm and casual, and he looked exactly the same as the day he had died all those months ago.

“You’re not really here,” Regina said, wishing that her voice didn’t sound quite so shaky. “You’re in my head. You’re not real. You’re just the island playing tricks on me.”

Graham nodded. “Yes, you just keep telling yourself that, Regina,” he said quietly.

“You’re not real,” Regina repeated vehemently. “You’re dead, for crying out loud!”

“Of course I’m dead.” Graham’s voice was neutral, matter-of-fact. “You murdered me.”

“You make it sound so crude,” Regina muttered.

“It’s murder. It is crude. It’s one of the basest things you can do to another being.” The huntsman’s voice was colder now, sharper. It brokered no arguments.

“It’s not like that,” Regina said. “It wasn’t like that, it wasn’t really murder…”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Graham said. “I’m sure you didn’t mean to go down into your vault in the middle of the night. I’m sure it was pure chance that you took my heart from whatever grotesque trophy cabinet you kept it in. I’m sure that you squeezing it and crushing it into dust was a complete accident.”

There was no getting around the fact, she had murdered Graham, she had done so in cold blood and she had not regretted it. Well, not until now, when she was staring in horror at his deathly pale face that was betraying nothing but pure and unadulterated hatred.

“The thing about crushing hearts,” Graham continued, “is that the victims never live to tell you just what it feels like. You’ll never be able to imagine the excruciating pain, like your chest is destroying itself from the inside out, like all the air in your lungs is being squeezed out into one last desperate, choked gasp or scream. You’ve seen people die in front of you. You’ve seen them and heard them as they writhe in their final moments, but you’ll never know how it actually feels.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” Regina said nervously. “And I don’t want to know.”

“Right now, I don’t think that you’ll have much choice in the matter.” Graham came over and sat down beside Regina, staring off into the middle distance. Regina wanted to move away, but she knew that there was no point. If this was the island playing on long-suppressed feelings and insecurities or the product of her own fraught mind, she would not be able to get away from the dead man.

“It’s a horrible feeling, isn’t it?” Graham said conversationally after they had sat in a heavy silence for a few minutes.

“Yes,” Regina replied, and she pressed one hand over her chest where she felt her own heart beating fast, pounding almost painfully in her fear.

“Not being in control,” Graham continued.

“I thought we were still on hearts,” Regina murmured. “Yes. It’s horrible.”
“Never knowing where you might be taken, what you might be made to do, what someone might be doing to you without your knowledge or consent. It’s an awful feeling.”

“Yes,” Regina mumbled, pressing her face into her knees again so that she didn’t have to look at him.

“I imagine having that feeling for days, weeks, months, years on end. Imagine knowing that any moment you might feel that pull in your empty chest compelling you forwards when all you want to do is cling to the nearest immovable object and scream no. But you can’t. You have to keep going on, borne on someone else’s will because your own is powerless, and there’s absolutely nothing you can do.” He paused. “I wonder sometimes, which was worse. Awareness or blissful ignorance, knowing what was happening or being convinced that everything was well in the world. Which would you prefer, do you think?”

Regina shook her head. She didn’t want to think about it at all, but she couldn’t stop the insidious images from creeping through her mind.

“I woke up before I died, you know.” Graham’s tone was light and non-committal again. Regina knew. She’d suspected that he was beginning to remember. That was why she’d killed him. That, and Emma, because at that time she was going to destroy Emma by any means necessary and if that meant killing anyone who got close to her then so be it.

“I remembered everything. I woke up and I realised how it was all a lie, how for twenty-eight years you’d made me believe that I was happy with you. That I wanted you. That maybe, even, I loved you. I remembered all the years I’d spent before Storybrooke and I felt sick to think of all the things that I’d done so willingly and eagerly because you were in control, not just of me but of everyone. It was as if you had an entire realm’s worth of shadows in the palm of your hand and you controlled us all. How the tables have turned. Did it make you feel powerful, knowing that you had the man you’d ordered to bed you on pain of death practically begging you for sex? Or was there always some sour taste knowing that it wasn’t real and that, in a real world, it would never have happened?”

Regina screwed her eyes up tight. “Go away,” she murmured, fighting back the tears of horror. “I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t get to decide what you do and don’t want any more, Regina,” Graham said. “You’re someone else’s plaything now. This is what it feels like. Get used to it. And as for me, well, you’ll never control me again. You made sure of that when you crushed my heart.”

“I’m sorry,” Regina sobbed. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Graham did not reply.

Enchanted Forest – Past

Regina watched her chosen subject from the shadows. She liked that word, subject. It made it sound less crude than the word ‘victim’; it was more like she was conducting an experiment and the guard in front of her, wandering up and down on his watch, was simply an unknowing participant. She just had to wait until he stood still long enough for her to sever his shadow from him.

Finally he stopped his pacing, leaning on his pike and staring out towards the palace gates. His shadow was stretched out behind him in the moonlight, clear and sharply outlined, and Regina smiled, almost ready to strike. She reached out with one hand and made a quick slicing motion, and
she watched the small blue spark run around the outline of his feet. The shadow moved away an inch or so, and Regina’s grin broadened. So far, so good.

The guard suddenly looked down at his feet, aware of something being different but not sure what, and having looked all around and found nothing very amiss, he shrugged and returned his attention to the lifeless palace gates. It was then that his shadow began to move, pulling further away from its owner and rising about a foot off the ground, hovering like a grim spectre behind him. Regina had never appreciated just how unnerving the sight of someone without a shadow was. It wasn’t something that she had ever thought about; shadows were such a common part of everyday life that they just went unnoticed, until they were gone.

The guard’s shadow was coming to life, a life of its own, and the sight of it moving around so independently of its owner made Regina very nervous. She was beginning to understand why hearts were the method of choice for Rumpelstiltskin and her mother. A heart fitted in one hand and could not move around of its own accord. This shadow had four very moveable limbs and was carrying a shadowy pike. Regina was beginning to think that she may have chosen her first subject poorly. Two bright points of light blinked into life where the eyes should have been, and Regina shuddered. The book had warned her that this would happen, but it still looked incredibly creepy and malevolent.

The shadow looked around, blinking slowly, and it began to float upwards a little, towards the night sky and away from Regina.

“No! Come back!” she hissed. This really wasn’t how she’d expected things to go. Rumpelstiltskin had been right, shadows were tricky things. “Come back!” she said again, but the shadow ignored her. She cast a spell to try and lasso it back to her, but since the spectre had no real physical form, it failed, and the magic hit the guard instead. He rubbed his head, looking around to see what had dropped from the sky, and Regina knew that she only had a few moments before he realised both that he was mysteriously lacking a shadow and that said shadow was now floating several feet above his head, so she threw a sleeping spell at him. He’d probably be out for a good few hours at least; Regina still wasn’t altogether skilled at performing magic in moderation.

Hmm. So much for trying to gain control of someone without their knowledge whilst they were still conscious. Still, it wasn’t going too badly for a first attempt, all things considered, and if Rumpelstiltskin were to say anything then she could easily counter that if he had agreed to teach her the magic in the first place then she not have made such a mess of her own self-taught attempts.

The shadow was moving away from her more rapidly now, and she ran through the courtyard after it, trying to catch up like a child who had let go of a streamer and was running along after it where it danced on the breeze, always just out of reach.

“Oh for crying out loud.” Regina stopped, rolled up her sleeves and made ready to throw a fireball at the shadow. Destructive magic came to her far more easily than anything that required complex thought. Rumpelstiltskin had said that was natural. All things in the world tended towards chaos, so sending something towards chaos with a little magical assistance was the easiest thing that a magician could do. A spell to throw a cup against a wall was easy, but a spell to bring all the pieces of the cup together again was far more difficult for it went against the natural order of things.

Regina launched the fire at the shadow, which immediately dodged it, flying away across the courtyard towards the darkest point: the entrance to the palace that was still open from where Regina had come out earlier in the night. She cursed inwardly and ran after it. Of course the shadow would flee from fire. Fire was light and shadows were darkness; it was part of their very nature. A different method was going to be required. As she came through the dim palace entrance once more, she
fancied that she could see the shadow’s eyes twinkling at her at the end of the hallway before it turned a corner and vanished from view up a staircase. Regina chased after it, but it was nowhere to be seen.

For a moment, she considered giving it up as a bad job. The guard could probably survive without his shadow for a while – he hadn’t seemed to suffer any ill effects when it had been detached, after all – and there probably wasn’t a lot of damage that a shadow loose in the palace could cause, was there? The place was already said to be haunted after so many kings and queens had expired there, and the shadow could easily take up a position as the new resident ghost.

Regina put the thoughts of failure to the back of her mind. She was going to succeed. She had to. If she didn’t, then Rumpelstiltskin would never let her live it down. He’d find out about her attempts even if she never mentioned them to him; he had an uncanny ability just to know things without any indication as to how he knew them. It was downright disturbing sometimes. She wondered if he was spying on her or if he just had excellent intuition. Whatever happened, she had to find the shadow and tame it, so Regina steeled herself for the task ahead and made her way down the corridor, checking in every nook and cranny. Shadows were fluid and formless, they had no bodies to fit into obscure corners and could squeeze into the tiniest of open spaces with ease.

She saw movement behind a suit of armour at the end of the corridor and stopped, looking over into the darkness at the silhouettes of the stationary statues. Sure enough, one of them was moving, if only slightly, and she caught the briefest flicker of its eyes. Regina smiled and began to move towards it on careful, silent feet.

“I’ve got you now,” she breathed.

The shadow didn’t move as she approached its hiding place, although it was looking right at her. It had its head on one side, looking puzzled almost, wary, as if it was wondering what she was about to do.

Regina raised one hand, putting Rumpelstiltskin’s advice into practice. She wanted to freeze the shadow, keep it still so that she could tell it what she wanted it to do. She put all of her will into the magic, but nothing happened. The shadow kept looking at her warily and began to move further away from her, down towards the open window at the other end of the corridor. It was making ready to escape.

“Oh no you don’t.” Regina shot a handful of red sparks after the shadow; hopefully they were not bright enough to cause it to flee like the fire had done, but they would still be able to slow it down. They had the desired effect and the shadow stopped in its tracks. Had it felt the sting of the sparks like a human would have done, or did its lack of flesh render it immune to such things?

Regina followed it along the corridor, but before she could get too close, the shadow turned and lowered its pike in a defensive gesture towards her.

“Stand down,” Regina ordered the shadow. “I am your queen,” she continued. “I command you to stand down.”

The shadow did not heed her demand and took a couple of paces forward, jabbing at her with the ghostly pike. It did not make contact, but Regina definitely felt the displacement of air beside her, as if something solid was moving past her, and she wondered if an injury from a shadow pike would be just as gruesome as an injury from a real one.

“Stop that,” she said sternly. Why wasn’t it working? She had severed the shadow, just as the book
had said, so she should be able to control it, shouldn’t she? “Stop that and listen to me, and do as I say.”

Her words once more fell on deaf ears, and, frustrated, Regina shot another couple of sparks at the shadow. It jerked back, shocked by the small blast, and then rose into the air and swooped down towards her, over her head to her own shadow, stretched out on the flagstones behind her in the moonlight that shone through the open window.

“What are you doing?” Regina exclaimed as it grabbed her own shadow, pulling at it and tugging at its hair. “Stop it! Stop it!”

She threw a fireball at the detached shadow but it had little effect; the spectre simply dodged it and returned with determination to its self-appointed task, the smouldering mark on the flagstones doing nothing to deter it.

Then there was a swirl of purple smoke and a blast of bright white light.

Enchanted Forest – Present

“Your father obviously loves you very much,” Mulan said unexpectedly. Neal’s head jerked up from where he had fallen into a light doze in his chair at the long table, and he looked from Mulan, to Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow lurking in a corner – out of the light but not out of sight completely – and back again.

“What makes you say that?”

Mulan nodded towards the shadow.

“His shadow came to you. Shadows fly to their soul’s deepest desire.” She paused and took a sip of her tea. “It’s how Aurora and I found Philip in the Well of Lost Souls.”

Neal took a look around at his environs, the castle that Rumpelstiltskin had occupied for so many years, and he raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“No,” Mulan said, interpreting his gesture correctly. “The shadow was always more interested in you than in anything else. Why else did it keep so close? Especially in the dark? They’re like guardian angels in a way.”

Neal looked over at his shoulder at the shadow, which was watching him with unmoving eyes, and he gained a whole new level of appreciation for it. His father’s shadow had crossed realms to find him, just to make sure that he was safe. The thought pulled him into a ponderous silence for a while, until the castle’s other occupants arrived.

Aurora’s first motion on arriving in the Dark Castle’s main hall early in the morning was to stop and double take at the sight that met her, namely the shadow hanging around unobtrusively in the shade behind a display cabinet whilst Neal and Mulan sat calmly at the table with their morning tea. Her second motion was to grin broadly and run across the room to throw her arms around Neal.

“You did it!” she exclaimed. “Congratulations! You can get home!”

Neal nodded. “Yes, it worked.”

“Why are you still here though?” Aurora asked. “Not that I’m not pleased to see you, of course, but
I’d have thought that you would have wanted to set off as soon as possible.”

“Well, I couldn’t leave without saying goodbye,” Neal said with a shrug. “And thank you, for all that you’ve done for me.”

“Really we should be thanking you, for giving us free reign in this place,” Philip said. He had followed his fiancée across the room at a slightly more sedate pace and he presently pulled out a chair at the table for her before sitting down himself.

“Well, I’m not sure how welcome you’ll be once I’ve left,” Neal pointed out. “The castle’s definitely got some mind of its own and I’m not sure it wouldn’t be above throwing you all out as soon as its legitimate heir has left the premises.” He paused. “That’s the other reason why I wanted to speak to you all together,” he continued eventually. “I’ve got a proposition for you. Shadows can carry vast weights, I’ve seen them do it before. Because they have no physical form, they have no physical limitations like strength and mass. So, if you wanted to, you could all come with me. The shadow could take all of us.”

Mulan glanced over at the shadow in the corner, although she was not quite sure why she was so anxious to get its second opinion, and it inclined its head towards her in a gesture of agreement. Satisfied, Mulan returned her attention to the others who were sitting around the table. Neal was waiting patiently and calmly for a response to his suggestion, but Philip and Aurora were looking at each other pensively. Mulan could understand their reticence. Although she herself had no qualms about beginning a new life in the Land Without Magic, it was perfectly natural to have some reservations about it all.

“Could you give us a minute to talk about it?” Aurora asked.

“Of course.” Neal got up from the table and left the room, Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow tagging along close behind.

“It could be good for us,” Mulan said tentatively. “A new start in a new place; we can perhaps define our relationship better. But then again, perhaps not.” She thought back to the conversation that she’d had with Neal a few days before when they had found the dove, about the Land Without Magic placing so much less stock in love than they did in their society in the Enchanted Forest. Even though none of them were magic users themselves, the thought of life in a place where magic did not exist in any form was a sobering one. “And I know you wanted to go home,” she added to Aurora.

The princess nodded.

“Yes,” she said, although there was something slightly wary in her voice that made Mulan think it was not the full story. “Yes, I want to go home. I haven’t seen my home for such a long time and I want to see it again, even if there’s nothing left. It will still be a new start for us. But… that’s not the only reason.”

She looked down at her hands, suddenly unable to meet her friend’s eyes. Philip reached across and covered her fidgeting fingers with his own larger ones, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. Aurora took a deep breath, but then her courage failed her and she let it out in a long sigh before taking another and eventually speaking.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, and she finally looked up to find Mulan’s gaze once more.

For a long time, Mulan was speechless, and then it dawned on her that she should probably say something, and that something should probably be positive.
“Oh,” she said at last, and immediately cursed how idiotic she sounded. “Congratulations.”

Aurora gave a small smile. “So,” she said. “I’m really not sure where that leaves us.”

Mulan wasn’t sure either. Whilst before, for the past couple of months since they got Philip back, their relationship had been comparatively easy, fluid almost, growing in and of itself as they themselves grew as people and its definition changed accordingly, a baby represented something definitive and concrete. It was an obvious manifestation of Philip and Aurora’s love and it was something that Mulan essentially had no part in.

“We’ll understand if you want to go,” Philip said. “If this makes things too difficult or too uncomfortable.”

Mulan gave the matter serious thought. It was an opportunity to make a clean break, and perhaps she would not be so broken-hearted if she was in another realm entirely. But all things aside, she would miss them too much, and however much it might pain her, she wanted to see Aurora and Philip’s children grow up. She wanted to be part of their lives.

Suddenly a smile spread across her face. There was no reason why it had to be difficult. Philip and Aurora were having a baby together, something that Mulan and Aurora would never achieve together. It did not mean that the relationship between the two women was changed in any way, that they loved each other any less.

“I want to stay with you, and the baby,” Mulan said. “If you want me to, of course,” she added hastily, because it could be that the other two wanted to encourage her to take this opportunity to spare their own awkward feelings.

“Of course we want you to stay,” Aurora said, and the relief in her voice was genuine and heartfelt. “You’re such a big part of our lives and we want you to be part of our baby’s life too.”

“After all,” Philip nodded. “He or she will need a godmother.”

Mulan laughed. “And their godmother will spoil them rotten.”

Aurora gave a snort of laughter. “I find that hard to believe, Mulan.”

“Just wait and see.”

There was a minute of companionable silence, and then Aurora spoke again.

“I know it seems paradoxical, wanting to stay here in a land that’s full of so many dangers, especially with the baby. But…”

“But this is home,” Philip finished. “This is where we belong, all of us.”

Mulan placed her hand on top of Philip’s.

“All of us,” she repeated.

They were still like that when Neal poked his head around the door a few minutes later.

“We’re going to stay here, in the Enchanted Forest,” Philip said in answer to the unasked question on Neal’s lips. “But thank you for the generous offer.”

“You’re welcome,” Neal said. “Believe me, I can understand the attraction of home, however bleak things might be.”
There was a pause.

“Well, there’s not much left to say, really,” Neal said. “Thank you for everything, and the best of luck on the rest of your journey.”

“Thank you, and the same to you.”

Neal wondered what was the correct way of saying goodbye to royalty that one had been sharing one’s father’s abandoned home with for a week, but Aurora saved him the trouble by coming over and giving him another hug, and Mulan and Philip followed suit. Sensing that its time was approaching, the shadow came over and held out one hand, which Neal took. It felt warm to the touch, not quite solid but not quite intangible either.

Mulan opened the window wide, and with a final wave goodbye, Neal and the shadow set off in the direction of home.

**Neverland – Present**

Regina felt sick, and she didn’t know if it was because she’d cried herself nauseous or if it was the crushing realisation, or a mixture of the two. Graham’s words were true. She had been puppet-master for so many for so long. Even excluding the Storybrooke years, there were so many hearts in her vault below her father’s mausoleum... All those people were feeling the way that she did now. So scared and unsure and unknowing, their freedom entirely dependent on someone else. And it was a horrible feeling.

She wondered what would have happened if Graham had not appeared to her. Would she have made the connection and comparison on her own given time? Or would she have been so caught up in her own miseries that she would not have given a thought to the countless others who shared her position? Probably the latter. Part of her wished that she’d remained ignorant. It was so much easier, only thinking of herself and her own problems, but the insidious thought had crept into her mind and it wouldn’t leave; she was forcibly aware.

“Hey. Are you all right?”

Regina looked up sharply on hearing the voice, a familiar and very real voice, and she hastily wiped her face on the sleeve of her jacket before turning to find the source of the words. Hook was standing a little way off, leaning against a tree with his arms folded, watching her. Graham was nowhere to be seen.

“How did you find me?” she asked.

“Well, without a map or a compass you’re an absolutely useless navigator,” Hook said, his voice matter-of-fact. “You’ve been running around in circles. It wasn’t that hard to track you down.”

Regina gave a grunt and looked away. She didn’t respond to his previous query over her wellbeing and instead simply stared off into the middle distance, lost in her own tumultuous thoughts. Presently, she heard Hook move closer.

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“Have you ever done anything that you regret?” she asked him presently.

Hook raised one eyebrow. “You saw Tink’s reaction to my presence. Yes, I’ve done an awful lot of things that I regret.”
“But do you regret them because the consequences were bad for you, or for other people?” Regina pressed. “You regret whatever it was you did to Tinker Bell because it resulted in you getting a punch in the face, one that was no doubt well-deserved.” She paused. “What did you do?”

“Let’s just say that I’m the reason she’s still here and not where she should be,” Hook said grimly. Regina gave a snort of melancholy laughter.

“Why am I not surprised?”

The two fell into silence again before Regina finally asked the question that was bothering her the most.

“Have you ever done something truly terrible that you never regretted until it hit you like a ton of bricks, just like that?” She snapped her fingers. “Perhaps you didn’t regret it at the time, and you thought it was perfectly fine. It wasn’t even a case of knowing it was wrong or feeling uneasy about it but doing it anyway because the ends justify the means. It was a case of genuinely not caring, or being so driven towards something that the consequences don’t even enter your head.”

Hook came over and sat down beside her, in the same position that Graham had taken.

“No,” he said eventually. “No, I don’t think so. I’ve done plenty of things that I regretted at the time or shortly after, but nothing like you describe. Not yet, at least. I haven’t had any incredibly revelatory moments. Who knows, though, maybe tomorrow something will happen that will make me really regret something I did decades ago.”

“You never think about these things until they happen to you. And even then, you keep trying so desperately to justify them and reason that what you’ve done can’t possibly be as bad as what was done to you, because you can’t be victim and perpetrator.”

Regina sighed and looked across at Hook’s shadow, stretched out in front of them in the low-hanging moonlight, and her own conspicuous lack of one.

“Regret is horrible,” she muttered.

“I know.”

“And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“I know.”

“Because you can’t change the past, and you know that saying sorry won’t help because it’s far too late now, and a part of you thinks, why do you even bother feeling this way because it can’t be changed and you know, if you had the opportunity to go back and do it all again, you wouldn’t change anything. You’d still make all the same decisions because at that time, they were good decisions. In your head, at least. What’s the point of regret? It just is. It sits there and reminds you of things you just want to forget, because you never comprehended how awful everything was until you were forced to open your eyes.”

Hook didn’t respond for a long time.

“I think it’s a way of making sure that you don’t do it again,” he replied eventually. “But not necessarily a very effective one.”

“Hmm.”
Uncomfortable silence reigned supreme.

“You’ll be all right,” Hook said. “We’ll find Henry and you’ll get your shadow back, and it will all be all right again.”

Regina shook her head.

“You have no way of knowing that.”

Hook shrugged. “Just trying to put a positive spin on things. God knows we haven’t had any good news lately.”

“We’re not dead,” Regina said dryly. “That’s good news.”

“You’ll get through it,” Hook repeated. “Just tell yourself the same thing that you tell yourself whenever you do something that you regret. It was worth it in the end.”

Regina shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. That’s the problem. It was all for nothing.”

Hook didn’t have a response for that.

“Tink thinks she might have a plan,” he said finally. “It’s somewhat circuitous, but it should work.” He didn’t share any of the details with her, there was no telling how much she might reveal to Pan unknowingly, but he felt that she ought to know that all was not lost and they were still continuing their mission.

“Can we trust her,” Regina asked.

“As much as we can trust anyone,” Hook replied.

The deceptively simple statement hung heavy in the air between them.

Enchanted Forest – Past

There was a swirl of dark purple smoke and a blast of bright white light, and Regina shielded her eyes. Once she’d recovered from the glare, she saw that Rumpelstiltskin was standing between her and the shadow, which was trapped in the light that emanated from the small lantern that he was holding. It was a magical light, of that Regina had no doubt, as there was no way that a single candle flame could produce a beam that strong. The shadow was wriggling, struggling to get free, and Regina wondered if it was in pain.

“That’s it,” Rumpelstiltskin said to it. “You just stay there like a good little lamb.” He glanced over his shoulder at Regina. “Most gratifying to know that you’ve got everything under control,” he quipped, before returning his attention to the shadow. He adjusted the panels of the lantern and the light lessened in intensity.

“Scurry off back to your owner now,” he said to the shadow, which was still trying to get free of the light. “You’ve had more than enough excitement and adventure for one night.”

The shadow finally succeeded in breaking free from the light that was trapping it, or perhaps Rumpelstiltskin let it go; Regina couldn’t tell. Either way, it took off down the corridor, clattering and knocking over suits of armour as it went, desperate to get to the window at the other end. Rumpelstiltskin closed the lantern’s glass so that only a little soft light was emitted, and he set off at a
run, following after the shadow to watch as it swept through the open window and dived down into the courtyard below, seeking out the guard that Regina had knocked out earlier. It hovered above him for a while and Rumpelstiltskin gave an impatient huff of breath.

“They’re so incredibly dense, sometimes,” he muttered, more to himself than to Regina, who had picked herself up and dusted herself off, and had followed him down the corridor to look out of the window.

Rumpelstiltskin stuck an arm out of the window and waved to the shadow before pointing forcefully at the guard. The shadow nodded its eager understanding and, without any kind of sudden change of form, melted onto the stone flags, becoming a flat shadow once more. The eyes were the last things to go, the points of yellow light still staring up at them for a long time, until there was a spark of blue light around the guard’s slumped form and his shadow was attached once more.

“Finally,” Rumpelstiltskin snapped. He opened the lantern again, squinting against the light, and he peered inside it before giving a nod of satisfaction and blowing out the candle therein with a sharp puff of breath. The lantern vanished from his hands in a cloud of smoke shortly after.

Regina blinked rapidly as her eyes got used to the pitch black again.

“What was that?” she asked.

“That was an unattached shadow, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin said irritably. “And prime example of why it is an exceedingly bad idea for a magician as inexperienced as yourself to try dealing with them. I warned you, did I not? I told you to stick to hearts.”

Regina nodded her acquiescence; she was not going to be doing that again in a hurry.

“Yes,” she said, “yes, we’ll definitely stick to hearts in the future.”

“Good.”

“What was that lantern?” Regina asked after a short pause.

Rumpelstiltskin turned and looked at her pointedly.

“That is an incredibly powerful and dangerous piece of magic that is currently the only reason you are still on this earthly plane. It comes at a steep price, even for me, and I would not have had to use it if you had not been so foolish as to ignore my advice,” he said icily. He learned out of the window and looked up at the stars that still twinkled innocently in the sky above them. “I think we got away with it this time,” he murmured before looking back at Regina. “No-one can control a shadow without outside help,” he said. “Not even me. They’re not entirely sentient, but they can make their own decisions, they can think in their own simple way. They defend themselves when they can, and since they have a little independence, they strive to keep that. They have their own agenda and they can only communicate with their own kind. They’re dangerous. We don’t deal with them.”

Regina nodded in agreement.

“Well,” the sorcerer began presently. His usual anarchic, gleeful manner had returned, a far cry from the angry magician that he had been just a few moments before, and he clapped his hands together with a giggle. “I trust I can leave you to take care of this devastation? I’m sure you can think up some kind of plausible explanation for the carnage to give to the guards who are no doubt coming running to the rescue after hearing the… interesting noises coming from this part of the palace.”

Sure enough, Regina could hear the clanking of armour coming along the corridors towards her.
“Excellent. I shall bid you adieu then, until our next meeting.”

He bowed low and raised one hand, making to vanish with a flourish, but Regina stopped him.

“Wait,” she said. “I have to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Why did you save me?” she asked. “Such powerful and dangerous magic that comes at such a high cost… why not leave me to my fate?”

For a moment, Rumpelstiltskin looked taken aback by the question, but then a toothy grin spread over his face, and he responded in his usual cryptic manner.

“Let’s just say, dearie, that I’m heavily invested in your future, and I’d quite like you to live to fulfil your potential.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Regina demanded, but it was at that moment that the troop of guards rounded the corner and distracted her attention, and when she turned back to Rumpelstiltskin, she found that he had vanished, slipping away without warning like he was wont to do.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?” the leader of the guards asked, looking around at the fallen suits of armour and the scorched floor with a worried expression. “We heard a commotion, and raised voices.”

“That was me,” Regina said, lying hastily and not at all smoothly, but she knew that the guards would not dare to question her word. “I was… sleep-walking. And sleep-talking.”

The guards knew better than to say anything disbelieving in response, but she could tell from their expressions as they set about putting the suits of armour to rights that they were entirely unconvinced.

Regina left the corridor and made her way back to her chamber. She wondered at the strange lantern that Rumpelstiltskin had used to control the shadow, and made the firm decision that she didn’t want to know any more about it.

**Enchanted Forest – Present**

In Neal’s past experience, travel by shadow was never normally a pleasant pastime. On his journey to Neverland, he had been trying desperately to get free from his captor. On his voyage back to the Land Without Magic, he’d been tossed and turned and thrown about, barely managing to keep his grip on his transport as it tried in vain to dislodge its unwanted passenger.

Flying with Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow was far more comfortable. They were still going at a fairly swift pace, but the flight was much smoother than his previous travels; the shadow was far more concerned for its human companion’s wellbeing. Every time Neal felt his hand cramping up, the shadow would seamlessly move around him in the air to change his position and alleviate his aching muscles somewhat. It kept looking back at him, its yellow eyes flickering in its emotionless face, and in spite of his rather precarious position above a dark, inky and forbidding sea that stretched for miles around with no shore in sight, Neal couldn’t help but smile. It was all going to be all right in the end. He was on his way back to Storybrooke, he would reunite with Emma and Henry, and they could start rebuilding their lives after the tragedy that had forced them apart again.
Presently, the shadow stopped in mid-air, looking around, as if it was puzzled by something. Although they were able to move independently of their owners and could make their own decisions, the fact remained that shadows were not possessed of great brains and still needed some human guidance for them to function efficiently.

“Problem?” Neal asked. “Are you lost?”

The shadow nodded briefly, then shook its head and started off again, veering to the left. They could only have been flying for about a minute when it came to a sudden stop again, turned on its heel and set off back in the direction that it had come from.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Neal asked, yelling above the roar of the wind rushing past them. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the shadow to take him to the right place, but its current behaviour wasn’t exactly inspiring much confidence. “We’re going to Storybrooke. The Land Without Magic.”

The shadow gave a determined nod and they continued on their previous way. At length, land finally came into view below them. It was odd, as Neal could not recall passing over a coastline during their flight. It was as if one moment, they were over sea, and the next they were over land without any kind of transition. Neal supposed that it must have been the transition between realms. On his previous flights he had been too preoccupied to really take in or even notice his surroundings too much, and he had never before had the opportunity to view the world from above and appreciate its beauty. Despite the many years he had lived in America, he had never actually taken a plane; his travels had always been made by car or Greyhound bus, or on his own two feet with his thumb stuck out, hoping for a ride. It was strange to see the world laid out like a patchwork beneath him and he enjoyed having the leisure to watch the landscapes change.

The shadow was slowing, faltering slightly, coming to an almost complete stop before lurching off forwards again. The sudden change in motion made Neal feel queasy and he tore his eyes away from the ground that was swimming below him. Something was definitely wrong, but he could not tell what. He looked over at the shadow; its blank face betrayed no hint of unease but it was clear from its manner that something was troubling it.

They had since come to a stop and the shadow was showing no signs of moving on.

“What’s wrong?” Neal asked. He knew that he wouldn’t receive any kind of pertinent answer to the question but he wanted the shadow to know that he was aware that all was not well. The shadow remained motionless and turned its head on one side, looking down at the vast expanse of forest beneath them. Neal risked a glance down. There was nothing to see, no signs of civilisation in sight at all.

“You know, I really don’t think we’re there yet,” he told the shadow, which proceeded to ignore him. Surely he’d be able to see the town if they had arrived above Storybrooke.

The shadow slowly shook its head and reached out in front of it. For a split second, the air around its fingers glowed golden, but then the mirage was gone and the dark fingers were snatched back. Before Neal had time to wonder what was going on, he was pulled into a sharp dive, straight down towards the ground.

“What are you doing?” Neal screamed. For the briefest of moments, he thought that he’d got it completely wrong and the shadow’s intentions were entirely malevolent, but then they levelled off about fifteen feet from the ground, dangling above a road that seemed to lead to nowhere. The shadow reached out again, and again the golden sheen could be seen, swirling like mist in the air. Neal was wary, unsure if this strange magic – because magic it most definitely was – was friend or
foe.

The shadow charged forward into an explosion of gold, and it dragged Neal with it.

It was like hitting a brick wall, slamming against some invisible barrier in the air that prevented him from following the shadow any further. A shower of golden sparks cascaded down where Neal was pressed against the force field, but nothing could be seen of the shadow itself except the dark hand that was clasped tightly around Neal’s wrist, still trying to pull him through.

“Ouch! Knock it off!” Neal yelled as he was slammed against the invisible wall once more. “I think we’ve established that I can’t get through!”

The shadow desisted from any further attempts and Neal felt himself being gently lowered until his feet his touched the tarmac. He put his free hand out in front of him, watching the way that the sparks danced at his fingertips, and he looked around at the forest that surrounded him. He hadn’t had chance to see all that much of Storybrooke during his short stay there, but it looked like it could be familiar.

He was here, he was home, but how on earth was he going to get into the town?

**Neverland – Present**

Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, surveyed his new prize with a certain degree of satisfaction, walking all around it and viewing it from all angles. It really had been criminally easy to take the witch’s shadow. She hadn’t even noticed, and even if she had, it would have been too late. He turned to his own shadow, hovering ready for action in the corner. He had a lot of people and spirits to do his bidding, but his shadow had always been his most loyal servant, ever since he had first come to Neverland.

“Excellent work,” he told the shadow, and it bowed its head in silent acceptance of the praise. “Now, I think you know where you need to go now. I would so hate for anyone to disturb the pieces now that the chessboard is almost set up to our advantage. Off with you. Use any means necessary.”

The shadow needed no further encouragement and shot out of the entrance to the vast cavern that was Skull Rock before climbing up and up until it was nothing but a speck against the full moon that never went down and constantly bathed the island in its eerie silver light. Pan screwed his eyes up to see where it had gone and watched it level off then fly away from the island, off towards the other realms where his intervention was required. He smiled cruelly and came back inside the rock. It was empty apart from the queen’s shadow; he had already sent the Lost Boys out to make camp and preparations elsewhere. It made sense to have a double-pronged attack. Pan was confident that his plan could not fail, but he was not one to celebrate a victory too prematurely. As soon as Henry was here though, he was on the final stretch. Once he had Henry, nothing could stop him.

Pan returned his attention to his captive shadow. It was very amusing to watch it trying to fight against its bonds, trapped in the beam of the lantern as it was, its arms thrashing wildly as it tried to pull itself free, phantasmic fingers scrabbling ineffectually at the smooth cavern walls.

“There’s no escape, you know,” he said conversationally. “The sooner you accept this, the easier it will be. Struggling only makes it worse. You should have taken a leaf out of Emma and Rumpelstiltskin’s book.” Pan would admit to being irritated that he had not managed to capture their shadows as well. A trifecta would have been most pleasing, but Rumpelstiltskin had pre-empted him.
“It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other but he still remembers. Not that Neverland is really a place that you can ever forget,” Pan continued. “Still,” he added brightly. “Since you’re going to die here it doesn’t really make much difference. You won’t remember it for very long. Oh, but the memories will be very… vivid.”

Regina’s shadow looked around frantically, still desperately trying to get free.

“Oh, please stop that,” Pan snapped. “I had hoped that you’d see sense on your own but apparently a little persuasion will be required.” He went over to the single lantern that illuminated the entirety of the skull and adjusted the way that the glass was angled, forcing a sharp beam directly onto Regina’s shadow, which cringed away from the intense light.

“Like an ant under a magnifying glass,” Pan mused. “How interesting it would be if a shadow’s owner feels the pain of their shadow.”

Regina’s shadow, holding its no doubt aching head in its hands, shook its head violently.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Pan said benevolently. “I’m not that cruel. Not yet. But it’s an option to be explored at a later date. Right now, I’ve got far too many things to organise. So, you understand what’s expected of you?” he asked the shadow, which nodded sadly. “Excellent.”

Pan returned the lantern to its previous aspect and the intense beam of light faded.

“This is my island,” he said icily. “And I control everything here. Even you. So, you will do as I ask, and maybe I’ll kill your body quickly. Won’t that be nice?”

Presently, another shadow entered the cavern, its owner following close behind it.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Oh yes, Felix, I have a very important job for you.”

“I’m honoured to be entrusted with such a task.”

Pan raised one eyebrow. “Don’t lay it on quite so thick, Felix, I haven’t told you what it is yet.”

Felix took a step back, abashed, and Pan picked up the lantern from its position in the centre of the cave, and he checked that the light inside was still burning undisturbed. It cast strange shapes and odd shadows against the inside of the glass plates, and Pan counted them with a smile before handing the lantern to Felix.

For a split second, the darkness outside lifted and the never-ending night became a bright, sunny day, but the moment was over so quickly that one could be forgiven for thinking that it had never happened at all.

“I need you to take the Eternal Light to the camp. It can’t be here for what happens next. Keep it safe. Don’t let me down, Felix.”

Felix smiled. “Have I ever?”

Pan did not have the time nor the inclination to enumerate Felix’s blunders from over the years and just waved him away carelessly, paying his second-in-command little attention as he and his shadow left the cave. Felix was not the perfect lieutenant, but he held one very clear distinction above all the other lost boys, and that was the simple fact that unlike all the rest of them whom the shadow had taken at opportune moments, Felix actually wanted to be here. Pan glanced across at Regina’s
shadow; all that could be seen of it were the yellow eyes.

“You understand your task, so go and do it,” he said. The shadow, which had been floating subdued in the corner all through Pan and Felix’s conversation, nodded and flew out of the cavern in the opposite direction to his subordinate. Pan surveyed the vast expanse of darkness that now lay within the rock, and he lit some candles with a wave of his hand. Soon, it would all fall into place. He pulled a scrap of paper out of his trouser pocket and smoothed it out, grinning down at Henry’s face, a face he had spent so many centuries, ever since he had first received this sketch, waiting to find.

“Soon,” he said to the all-encompassing night. “Very soon.”
Neverland – Present

All during the remainder of their journey through the forest, ever since he had seen Regina’s lipstick mark and Snow’s swan fletches, Henry had been trying to think of some way of getting a message to his rescuers to let them know that he was, as of yet, safe, and give them some idea of his location. Sadly, all his efforts to lay a metaphorical trail of breadcrumbs had come to naught. Suspicious of his muttered conversation with Tamara after she had caught his hopeful expression earlier, the Lost Boys had bound his hands again and were leading him along by a rope like a dog on a leash, and there were shadows flanking him all around.

Henry glanced across at Tamara, wondering if she had a plan, or if this was all part of a bigger plan. Despite knowing her story now and the reasons behind what she was doing, Henry still did not trust her. She had no qualms about using him as bait in her quest, and he doubted that she would give a second thought to his safety when push came to shove. Although, they were almost family in a way, separated by realms and generations. For a moment Henry had to give a snort of ironic laughter at what would have happened had Tamara and Neal’s engagement worked out and they later discovered his identity. How would she feel about being married to her adopted great-great uncle? Maybe it was for the best that the relationship hadn’t been genuine.

Henry felt a stab of fierce anger towards Tamara again. He’d grown up without a dad, and he’d got on fine without one because you can’t miss what you’ve never had. But then he’d got a dad, and his dad was really excited about being a dad, and even if Neal and Emma hadn’t ended up getting back together again, Neal would still have been there and would still have been his dad. Now, all of that opportunity was lost. Neal had been a father for all of a few days before everything had been ripped away by someone whom he had thought had loved him.

Henry had to get away from the Lost Boys and Tamara, but there was no chance of that now. He needed to be patient and wait for an opportunity, and stay on his guard so that he wouldn’t miss one when it presented itself. Then again… Henry looked around through the trees, dimly lit by the silvery moon that hung low in the sky above them, the moon that he hadn’t seen move or change, or show any sign of time moving forward. The forest around him looked and felt dangerous as he moved through it, and he had no idea what other perils might be around within the dense, low-hanging branches. It was all very well running away, but in running away through unknown territory with no idea of where he was going, he might just be running into further dangers. It was a thought to give braver twelve-year-olds than he cold feet at the prospect.

Henry’s ears pricked up. He could hear rushing water and for some reason it gave him hope. Maybe his rescue party was close by; it would make sense to set up camp near a source of fresh water. As they moved through the trees, the shadows closed ranks around him so that they were so close Henry could almost touch them. He hunched his shoulders up, trying to avoid contact with them. They didn’t feel quite right, like they were solid and liquid at the same time, and the sensation sent a shiver down his spine.

The Lost Boys in front of them were slowing down, and Henry’s brow furrowed. Surely they couldn’t possibly be there yet. Beside him, Tamara also looked puzzled, and for some reason that unnerved Henry more than the Lost Boys stopping did. It meant that this wasn’t part of her plan and he couldn’t rely on her anticipation.

“What’s happening?” she asked the nominate leader of the Lost Boys, the one who still had Snow’s
arrow tucked into his belt. “Why are we stopping? Is something wrong?”

The leader ignored her and pushed on through the trees, indicating for the rest of the boys to stay behind. A couple of them began to whisper to each other, but they were too far away and too quiet for Henry to be able to hear what they were saying. Trying to avoid the shadows as much as he could, Henry made his way towards the Lost Boy who was holding the other end of his rope. He couldn’t have been much older than Henry himself, and Henry received the distinct impression that he would rather be anywhere else than Neverland at that point in time.

“What’s happening?” he asked the other boy, who shook his head with a non-committal shrug.

“I don’t know. Something’s changed from the original plan.”

Henry wondered what the original plan was, other than taking him to Pan. Were they still going to take him to Pan?

“What’s going to happen when we get there?” he asked. The boy shrugged again.

“I don’t know. Stop asking questions.”

Henry moved away from the boy, back towards Tamara, and as he did, he caught a glimpse of something between the trees. It was a rushing waterfall, cascading down the side of the mountain to land in a deep pool below. There was a huge rock in the centre of the pool, and from this angle, it looked a lot like a skull. Henry shuddered, and the shadows around him shifted with his movement. He wondered where they had come from, and then he realised, with another sudden shiver.

None of the Lost Boys cast shadows in the pale moonlight. He and Tamara were the only people present whose shadows were attached to their bodies. The more he stared, the stranger the sight was, and as he concentrated on the shadows themselves, the more he started to see the differences between them, the subtle variations in their size, shape and outline. These were the Lost Boys’ shadows that had been keeping watch on him all this time whilst their owners were absent. It made him very aware of his own shadow, and for several minutes after the revelation, he kept checking to make sure that it was still there. He wondered how the shadows had come to be detached from their bodies and whether it had something to do with why all the Lost Boys looked so pensive and melancholy. None of them seemed particularly happy to be doing their task, all of the expressions around him were grim.

Tamara, who had begun pacing up and down in the short space between the trees that they had stopped in, presently ceased her frantic movement and grabbed the nearest Lost Boy by the shoulder.

“What’s taking so long?” she asked him, but the boy simply shrugged apathetically.

“Pan must have had a change of plan,” he said levelly. “We don’t get told about these things.”

“Just as long as he hasn’t had a change of heart,” Tamara snapped. “It took a lot of time and resources to get him here,” she continued, pointing to Henry. “I don’t want to see that go to waste.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it won’t.”

A new voice came through the trees, and a boy whom Henry had not seen before appeared, the nominate leader of the Lost Boy group following close behind him. The newcomer, Henry noticed, also did not have a shadow, but unlike the others, his remained close by, hovering behind his shoulder. Henry wondered if this was the infamous Peter Pan.

“There’s been a change of plan,” he announced to the Lost Boys. It was clear that he was the oldest
and a figure of authority among the boys, and he held up a small lantern. The glass plates were angled so that only a little light escaped, but Henry could tell that there was a powerful beam inside, more powerful than an ordinary candle.

The effect that this innocuous item had on the shadows was palpable; although the humans remained unconcerned by its appearance, the shadows drew back from it, in fear almost.

“We’re going to the new camp,” the newcomer explained. “Pan will meet us there. Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, Felix,” the other boys chorused gloomily.

“Excellent. Move out.”

The procession of Lost Boys, shadows, Henry and Tamara began to move on through the trees again, with Felix at the front of the group. They were moving away from the waterfall now, and Henry racked his brains to try and find something that he could leave as a clue for his rescuers, but he came up with nothing. He looked up at Felix, leading them through the trees, and he got the impression that of all the Lost Boys, Felix would be the most dangerous. Not only did he have the lantern that the shadows seemed so afraid of, he also looked like the only member of the group who was in any way happy with their current situation, a small smile on his face as he looked back at Henry, who shivered under his gaze.

He looked across at Tamara, but her face had returned to its usual unreadable, neutral aspect and she kept her eyes on the trail ahead. Henry looked around him, still searching for a way out, however futile it might be. Something caught his eye and he had to double take. The number of shadows had increased. There were two more than there had been before. Henry did a quick mental headcount but no, there were two more shadows than there were bodies in the group. Had extra been drafted in, or…

He looked again but the spare shadows had gone. Henry’s optimism, however, remained.

**Storybrooke – Present**

The shop doorbell almost had a conniption fit as Leroy rushed in, nearly pulling the door off its hinges in his haste. Belle ran out from the back room in alarm to find out what could possibly have caused so much commotion.

“Leroy? What’s going on?”

“There’s a problem at the town line!” Leroy exclaimed, gesturing out of the doorway in the general direction of the town’s boundaries. “Archie saw it when he was out walking Pongo in the woods, we think something’s trying to come through the protection spell.”

Belle grabbed her coat and handbag from underneath the counter and raced into the back room again, Leroy hot on her heels, as she scrambled around for the empty vial of potion and the paper spell that went with it. She wasn’t sure what she was going to have to do to keep the protection intact, or how she could lift it if their intruder turned out to be friend rather than foe, but she thought that it would be useful to have it just in case it turned out to be important.

“Lead on, Leroy.”

The drive to the town line in Leroy’s truck was not a long one, but it was filled with trepidation for
Belle. She couldn’t help but remember the last time that she had been so close to the town line, and what had happened then, and she was glad when Leroy pulled over several metres short to allow them to appraise the situation.

A shadow without an owner was hovering over the orange line that marked the edge of the town, a faint golden glow pulsing behind it, obviously caused by the proximity of the protection spell. The shadow had come through, but why had it gone no further? As Belle got out of the truck and ventured to take a couple of steps closer, she saw the reason. Neal was standing on the other side of the barrier, looking around, obviously unable to see them. Belle’s heart pounded hard in her chest. She was so happy to see him alive and well, but she knew that she was going to have to be the one to break the news about Emma, Henry and Rumpel’s departure from Storybrooke to Neverland. She had no idea how Neal had got back, she was just exceedingly glad that he had.

“Do you think he can hear us?” Leroy asked.

“Neal!” Belle cupped her hands around her mouth. “Neal!”

The young man remained oblivious and Belle shook her head.

“How are we going to get him inside?” she wondered aloud. “The shadow came through.”

“It’s not his shadow, though,” Leroy pointed out grimly. Sure enough, Neal’s own shadow was still flat on the ground, firmly attached to his feet. “So whose is that one, and do we need to be worried?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Belle said. “Let’s focus on getting Neal in first. He’ll probably be able to tell us more.”

She walked a little closer to the line but still stopped a good deal short, afraid to go too near in case for some reason, some malevolent force pushed her over it again. She looked at the shadow and its creepy yellow eyes suspiciously. Its outline seemed familiar somehow, although she couldn’t quite place where she had seen it before in that moment.

“If only there was some way of getting a message across,” Leroy said. “Paper aeroplane, perhaps?”

Belle looked over at the shadow again; it was definitely watching her. It must have been able to come through because it was only semi-corporeal.

“Maybe the spell works on a watchtower basis,” she mused. “It will keep people out until you say that they’re allowed to come in.”

Leroy raised an eyebrow.

“So what do we do? Yell ‘magical cloud of protection, Neal can come in’?” he asked drily.

“No, nothing like that. We can’t cross the town line, but we could pull him in, perhaps. He can’t see us, but maybe if one of us stuck a hand out, we could pull him in. After all, the protection is meant to keep other people out, not keep us in.”

Leroy considered her words for a moment then nodded with a shrug.

“It’s as reasonable a suggestion as any,” he said, and without having to be asked, he went up to the town line where Neal was standing and unceremoniously thrust his hand out. The golden barrier shimmered, but let him through, and Belle saw Neal jump backwards a couple of feet on seeing what was, to him, a disembodied hand appearing in front of him suddenly.
“Come on,” Leroy said, waving frantically and gesturing for Neal to come closer. “And if you pull me over this line, we’re both screwed.”

Tentatively, Neal took Leroy’s hand, and immediately the shorter man yanked on his arm, pulling him across the line in a barrage of sparks, the two of them ending up sprawled on the tarmac.

“Well,” said a rather squashed sounding Leroy from underneath Neal. “That was deceptively easy.”

Neal just gave him an incredulous look as they got to their feet and brushed themselves down.

“Are you both all right?” Belle asked, running over to them.

Neal nodded slowly, taking her in from head to toe with a funny look.

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you.” His voice was clipped, guarded, and Belle remembered that their first and only meeting had taken place under rather unfavourable circumstances.

“I’m Belle,” she said, holding out her hand. “I apologise for the extremely bad first impression that you got a week ago.”

Neal looked Belle up and down again, gingerly taking her hand and shaking it, trying to equate this warm and concerned young woman with the one who had been so amused by his father’s cruelty.

“She’s a sweet lady when she’s not cursed,” Leroy said. “Lacey was… an accident.”

“I see.” Neal nodded, willing to put Lacey behind them and move on. Even from this brief experience, Belle was far more like the woman that his father had described her on the phone in the pawn shop.

“Speaking of accidents and Lacey, I would feel a lot more comfortable away from the line,” Belle said pointedly, and they moved away back towards the truck. “Oh Neal,” she began again once they were at a safe distance, and she threw her arms around him in an unexpected hug. “I’m so glad you’re alive. We had no idea what had happened to you, and then we got your message and it felt like hope had been restored at last.”

“I’m glad it got through,” Neal said.

“I’m curious though, how did you get back from the Enchanted Forest? Does it have something to do with that?” Leroy gestured towards the shadow, which was still hovering by the town line.

Neal nodded.

“It’s my father’s shadow. It came to check up on me, and I got it to bring me home. Shadows can cross realms.”

“I’m not even going to ask why Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow isn’t attached to Rumpelstiltskin’s body,” Leroy muttered.

Belle turned to look at the shadow, and its shape became familiar to her now. It was Rumpelstiltskin as he had been in the Enchanted Forest: wavy hair, high collar, stiff coat and tight breeches.

“Rumpel?” she breathed.

The shadow came over to her, still hovering above the ground a little, and Belle reached out to touch it on instinct. She was surprised when she encountered something warm and slightly, but not fully, solid.
“What have you been doing, Rumpel?” she asked the shadow. It shook its head, verbal replies somewhat beyond it, and reached out with long spectral fingertips to cup her cheek, thumb brushing along the side of her nose.

“Oh Rumpel.” Belle sighed, leaning into a touch that felt familiar and yet just not quite right, but despite it all she did not want it to end, because it was the nearest that she had been to Rumpel for a week, and she did not know when she might be this close to him again. She closed her eyes, and they stayed like that for a few seconds until suddenly the shadow drew back. Belle’s eyes shot open and she took a step back. The shadow was looking around, eyes darting here and there as if it was a bloodhound sniffing the air. Finally it settled its gaze on the sky above them, and all three of the people gathered by the truck followed its line of sight, but there was nothing to be seen.

The shadow took off, streaking straight upwards towards the sun, and it passed through the barrier in another pulse of sparks before veering off over the treetops and eventually vanishing from view.

“Where has it gone?” Leroy asked, of no-one in particular.

“Back to Rumpel, I suppose,” Belle replied despondently.

“Why would it have to leave town to do that?” Neal asked. He was beginning to receive the distinct impression that something was really rather wrong in the town; of all the people to be anticipating his return and coming to his aid, Belle and Leroy were not the first he would have thought of.

Belle looked grave.

“It’s a long story,” she began, indicating Leroy’s truck. “We’ll tell you on the way back into town.”

“Belle, where is my father?” Neal asked pointedly.

“He’s in Neverland,” Belle said with a sigh. “Rumpel’s in Neverland. Emma, Regina, David, Snow, Hook… They all went. They took the last bean.”

“Why are they in Neverland?” Neal felt his blood run cold. His memories of Neverland, although a long time ago now, were suddenly very fresh in his mind, and he shivered inwardly at the thought of Emma spending any time there.

“Henry,” Belle said quietly. Neal’s heart beat painfully in his chest, feeling like he’d just run a marathon without any physical exertion on his part. Henry was in Neverland. “He was kidnapped and taken there.”

Neverland – Present

“You’re quiet.”

Emma jerked out of her reverie on hearing Rumpelstiltskin’s voice beside her ear. They had been walking along in silence for a long time and Emma had almost forgotten that he was there.

“So are you,” she countered.

Rumpelstiltskin thought about this for a few moments, and gave a concessionary nod.

“I suppose,” he said. “How’s our progress?”

Emma held up her hand, closed her eyes and focussed on the magic before opening her palm and
showing him the glimmering compass needle finding true north above her hand.

“Right on track,” Rumpelstiltskin said, clapping his hands together eagerly. “Always good to know
that you’re going in the right direction.”

Emma nodded and continued on through the forest in an easterly direction, Rumpelstiltskin a few
paces behind her. Nothing more was said for a while, until the imp broke the heavy silence.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, voice full of curiosity. “You look unusually pensive.”

“My son’s somewhere on this creepy island, I’ve no idea where, and I’ve no idea when I might find
him or what state he’s going to be in when I do find him. I’m a bit more than ‘pensive’, Gold.”

“Oh, I know you’re worried,” Rumpelstiltskin replied. “We’re all worried. But there’s something
else that I can’t quite put my finger on.”

Emma shook her head. “I’d rather not talk about it, and you definitely don’t want to talk about it,”
she responded.

“Try me.”

Emma turned to look at him sharply, but his face was in earnest, unreadable dark eyes searching
hers, his brow furrowed. She sighed; it would be good to talk about her muddled feelings with
someone, but her ex-boyfriend’s father, who was currently green and almost sparkling, was not
exactly her first choice.

“Neal,” she said eventually. “I was thinking about Neal. I saw him fall down that portal and I had no
idea – I still have no idea – whether he was dead or alive at the other end, and I’ve got no idea where
he is, and I just watched him fall, and there was nothing that I could do about it.”

Rumpelstiltskin sighed and looked away, thinking of a cool autumn night centuries ago, able to
picture Emma’s plight all too well.

“And I know it’s terrible of me to think it, but a part of me just hopes he’s dead, because it would all
be over then, and there’d be no more of all this thinking about what might be, or what could have
been, or thinking about him and wondering if he’s thinking about me. Because it took me so long,
last time, and I can’t do it again. Not so soon after finding him again. And then I think that this isn’t
just about me. It’s not just my feelings that I have to think about, because there’s Henry, and I can’t
just want Henry’s father dead, what kind of a horrible thought is that? And you, it’s your loss too.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded thoughtfully.

“And I don’t know what’s worse,” Emma said, raising her arms but letting them drop back to her
sides in a gesture of defeat. “The thought that he’s dead and I’ll never see him again because of that,
or the hope that he’s alive out there somewhere and I still might never see him again because he’s
worlds away.” She gave a snort of laughter. “I told you that you wouldn’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, you’d be right about that. But we don’t always get what we want, as much as it pains us.” He
paused. “I’ve tried not to think about it,” he said eventually. “If I do…” he shrugged. “Henry’s the
most important thing at the moment, for both of us. However much my son might not forgive me for
everything that’s happened, I know he’d never forgive me if I let his own son fall victim to the
monster that is Peter Pan. So even if I never see him again, which is an increasingly likely scenario, I
need to know that I’ve done right by him at least once before I go. For me, there’s simply no point in
speculation.”
“It’s all right for you,” Emma said, somewhat irritably. “For you, this is a suicide mission, but I’m intending to get out of this place alive and well and with Henry in tow. And for us, life will go on.”

“I know it will, which is why I am the person least qualified to give you advice on these matters. So I’m not going to try. You can think or feel whatever you want.”

“Even if it doesn’t make sense?”

“Especially if it doesn’t make sense.”

Emma gave a long sigh. “I was thinking about him earlier, and about what we’d said the other day, about magic and intent being meaningless. When I put the fire out with magic, I was just thinking about how Neal would react. He was never the world’s greatest fan of magic.”

“Well, his experiences of it so far haven’t exactly been encouraging,” Rumpelstiltskin pointed out drily. “But you’re forgetting a very large and very important fact.”

“What’s that?”

“Your magic is light, Emma. It’s pure and good, and it comes from the most powerful magic of all – True Love. It’s not just that you have magic – you are magic. Magic incarnate. Your power is a gift, a blessing. Mine is a curse.” He paused. “It doesn’t change the fact that you have magic, and you use magic, and you’ll continue to accumulate power. It doesn’t stop it from being your choice as to when and how you use that power. But it’s not insidious, it’s not influential. It won’t creep around in the back of your head and eat away at you.”

Emma looked sideways at Rumpelstiltskin, and for the first time she wondered. His reputation was nigh on pitch black, and from her experience of the man it was a well-deserved one. But how much of that was due to the curse that he was under?

“That’s the difference,” he concluded simply.

Emma still wasn’t sure. She and Neal had not really had the time to speak on the subject of her burgeoning magical abilities. He knew she had them, but with everything that had happened, it had not been a topic of extended discussion. She could understand him being somewhat wary given his previous experience, but she thought that she knew him well enough to know that he wouldn’t think any less of her as a person because of this new-found gift that was beyond her control, a side-effect of her very birth right. Although hopefully not beyond her control for too much longer. She was getting much better at her spell work now.

Experimentally she tried for an offensive spell; they came to her worryingly easily but considering the kind of things that she might be going up against, she was grateful for the ease with which she could defend herself and others. Emma concentrated until she felt flames tingle over her fingertips, then raised her hand and launched the fireball that was created. It puffed out in a cloud of purple smoke before it could hit anything and Rumpelstiltskin gave her a polite round of applause.

“Very good,” he said. “Very impressive indeed. I must say, Miss Swan, I’ve never taught anyone with such innate ability before.”

Emma smiled at the compliment.

Suddenly there was a flash in the sky above them and they both looked up.

“Lightning?” Emma suggested, although for some reason the thought unnerved her, possibly because there had been no other signs of changing weather patterns during the few days that they had spent
“No.” Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. His voice was grim and icy, and it sounded the closest to the scheming Scottish pawnbroker from Storybrooke that Emma had heard him since his transformation back into the spindle imp of the story book. “No, that wasn’t lightning, it was lightening.”

“What does that even mean?” Emma protested.

Rumpelstiltskin didn’t reply, just looking up at the sky, dark and lifeless once more.

“Pan’s on the move,” he muttered at last. “Damn him, I thought we’d have more time.”

Finally, he looked back at Emma.

“It means that this is where I leave you,” he said. “There are things I have to do, and do alone. I think that this is where fate finally catches up with me.”

Emma wished that she could think of something meaningful to say in the circumstances, but nothing seemed appropriate.

“Thank you,” she said eventually. “For everything that you’ve taught me.”

“My pleasure.” Rumpelstiltskin bowed low. “I can honestly say that you have been one of my best pupils.”

He cast another glance upwards towards the inky sky, and Emma thought that she could see the outline of his shadow circling high above them, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Good luck,” she said, although it didn’t exactly seem right to say that to a man who was, quite possibly, going to his death.

“Thank you, and the same to you. Keep following east,” he continued. “You’ll meet Henry and your shadow soon enough.”

He turned on his heel with a typical flourish and began to walk away in the direction that they had just come from, back towards the centre of the island. Emma watched him go until he was no longer visible through the murky leaves, before accepting that she had no choice but to press on her own mission and find Henry. She looked up at the sky again. The shadow had vanished.

**Neverland – Present**

They had been walking through the woods away from the waterfall for about an hour and Henry was hopelessly lost. He had been trying to memorise the route in case he had to make a quick getaway later, but there was no use in it. All of the trees looked the same and he could have sworn that they were walking around in circles. They probably were, purposefully, to disorientate him.

Eventually, Felix stopped the group.

“We’re here,” he said, pushing back some overhanging fronds, and the Lost Boys marched into the clearing that was revealed, the shadows still flanking their captives.

The camp was well-constructed, with twig houses built seamlessly into the trees around a campfire in the centre. It was clear that everything had been built in a way that meant it could be pulled down and moved on with the minimum of effort, and Henry wondered how often they changed their
location, and why. In a place where time didn’t move and nothing changed from day to day, what possible reason could there be to move on? Was it simply a way to alleviate the tedium of every day being the same?

Or was it way of confusing any visitors to the island, knowing that the layout would never be the same twice in a row? Mind you, Henry thought with a snort, he wasn’t sure who in their right mind would ever come to this place voluntarily.

As soon as Henry had entered the clearing, all the activity within the camp had ceased, and he had assumed that it was due to the presence of Felix and the lantern, but he soon realised that the thing that the boys and the shadows were so focussed on was himself. As he passed through the camp to the centre circle, the Lost Boys stared at him, their eyes tracking him across the ground. Once he’d gone past them, they leaned in to whisper to their neighbours, although Henry could not make out what they were saying.

“Be quiet,” Felix snapped to them once they had reached the middle of the camp and he had put the lantern down in the mouth of a shallow cave that had been hewn out of a large boulder. Henry got the impression that it had been created specifically for this purpose. “Slightly, put that fire out. Nibs, sound the summons. Everything’s ready.”

“Where’s Pan?” asked the boy named Slightly as he rushed to smother the campfire.

“Oh, he’s on his way.” Felix said benignly. “He’s been a little delayed. Urgent matters to…” Here he was interrupted by a loud bellow of a horn from Nibs, and he fixed the younger boy with an intense glare before continuing to speak. “Urgent matters to take care of elsewhere,” he finally finished.

Henry thought of Snow and Regina, and possibly the other members of his family, all elsewhere on the island, and his stomach began to turn itself in knots, wondering what was happening to them right now.

“As you can see, we have an honoured guest with us,” Felix said, and immediately all eyes turned to Henry. “Do sit down, Henry.” He indicated the ground in the soft glow from the shaded lantern.

“I’d rather stand, thanks.”

Felix shrugged. “As you wish. But I warn you that you might be with us for quite some time.”

Not if Henry had anything to do with it. He looked across at Tamara, who was being kept apart at the back of the troupe of Lost Boys. Her brow was furrowed, but when she caught Henry’s eye, she gave a minute nod. Henry wished that he knew what it meant. Did she have a plan, or was this what she had always intended to happen?

“Henry!” The shout came from the boulder and Henry looked over at it, almost jumping out of his skin when he saw the boy standing on top of it, the boy who had definitely not been standing on top of it before. This was, without any shadow of a doubt, Peter Pan. He jumped down off the rock and came over to the group of Lost Boys. Henry could see other boys and shadows slipping through the trees, obviously responding to the summons of the horn.

“I’m so glad that you could finally join us,” Pan continued. “We’ve been waiting a very long time for you, and my, my, it took a lot to get you here. But now you are here, and we can finally get started. We were going to prepare a feast in your honour, but I forgot. Some other things came up. Still, at least you’re where you belong now. Welcome home! Don’t you just love it?”

Henry shook his head.
“I want to go home,” he said. “Storybrooke. That’s my home. Noe this creepy, crazy place.”

“Creepy and crazy? Pshaw, you just haven’t spent enough time here with us,” Pan said. “And honestly, Henry, you’re the truest believe of them all. This is Neverland, and belief is at the core of everything that we do here. It’s part of the fabric of reality. Where else do you belong other than here?”

Henry shook his head again.

“Why do you need me?” he asked. “What do you want with me?”

“Now, now, Henry.” Pan came over and slung his arm around Henry’s shoulders, the younger boy tried to flinch away but Pan’s grip was too strong. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. We’ve got so much to talk about before we get to the part that you’ll play in this end-game, and a very important part it is too, but you’ll learn all about that in good time. You should be honoured, no-one else can play your role quite like you, and we’ve all had to wait so long for you to come and take up your position.”

“My family’s coming to get me,” Henry said bravely. “You’ll see.”

“Are they really?” Pan asked mildly. “I haven’t seen any trace of them, have you? Are you sure that they’re coming? I mean, it is a long way to Neverland. They might not bother with the journey.”

Henry didn’t say anything. He knew that Snow and Regina were here, and if Pan didn’t know that, then they were at an advantage and he couldn’t spoil that. But all the same, he didn’t know how long it might take them to find him. Would it be too late? Once again, Henry looked over at Tamara. They were sort of family, weren’t they?

He met her eyes, and then he saw her take a deep breath.

Then, she reached into the depths of her bag and pulled out her gun, sending the Lost Boys scattering away from the weapon. She grabbed the nearest one, putting the gun against his temple. It was Nibs, the boy who’d blown the horn.

“Nobody move,” she said. “Let Henry go and no-one gets hurt.”

There was silence and stillness in the camp for all of a second, and then Pan started laughing. It was a harsh, cruel sound, and it made Henry shiver. All of the other Lost Boys, even Felix, looked at him with fear.

“You really think that I care that much about them to worry if I lose a few along the way?” he asked incredulously. “Go ahead. Shoot him. The only difference it will make is the amount of blood on your hands. I can always get more Lost Boys. The shadow finds them every day.”

Nibs whimpered in Tamara’s clutches; he could only have been a year or so older than Henry.

“But Pan, it’s Nibs,” Slightly said, trying to plead with his leader.

“Oh, be quiet.” Pan clicked his fingers and one of the shadows swooped down over Slightly. Henry closed his eyes, but couldn’t do anything about his ears, and he had to listen to the gasping, choking sounds of Slightly’s final moments. When he finally dared to open his eyes again, he saw the shocked expressions of Tamara and the other Lost Boys.

“Still think that will work?” Pan asked Tamara. She shook her head, releasing Nibs and shoving him away. The other younger Lost Boys crowded around him to make sure that he was all right, and it
was in that moment that Tamara took advantage of the distraction to point the gun at Pan and fire. Henry closed his eyes again, ready for the bullet to hit him instead, but nothing happened. He felt Pan’s grip on his shoulders vanish, but that was it. He opened his eyes once more to find Pan examining the bullet carefully.

“You’re going to have to do a lot better than that,” he said, his tone almost conversational. “Except, sadly, you won’t have the opportunity.” He waved one hand lazily, and several shadows rose up. “Get her.”

As the shadows descended, Tamara caught Henry’s eye.

“Run,” she mouthed.

Henry didn’t need telling twice and took off through the trees without looking back.

Tamara watched Henry leave the camp, confident that none of the shadows would be pursuing him yet, occupied as they were with herself. As they began to tear into her, spectral hands plunging into her body and then becoming suddenly solid, she hoped that she’d bought him enough of a head start. She had done the wrong thing, without knowing who Henry was in relation to the family, and she had done more harm than good in the name of the cause, but hopefully this action could redeem her somewhat.

As Tamara breathed her last, she didn’t notice a shadow slip away from the edge of the group where it had been hovering and follow Henry into the jungle.

**Storybrooke – Present**

“I’ve got to get there. I’ve got to help them.”

Neal had been pacing up and down the length of the pawn shop ever since Leroy had dropped him and Belle off there, and Belle was beginning to fear that he might wear a hole in the floor.

“Neal,” she began. He turned on his heel and looked at her directly.

“I’ve been to Neverland,” he said sternly. “I know what it’s like there, I know what an awful place it is, and it’s somewhere I wouldn’t wish anyone to go to, not even my father. I can’t just sit here and do nothing whilst they’re out there on that godforsaken island. My son is out there, and I can’t bear to think about what might happen to him if Pan gets his claws into him. Why would Pan even want Henry in the first place? None of this makes any sense! I’ve got to get to Neverland.”

He finally stopped his pacing in the middle of the shop and groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face before finally staring at the ceiling.

“If only the shadow hadn’t left so quickly. I could have grabbed it and hitched another lift,” he said.

“Maybe he was just trying to protect you,” Belle said from her position behind the counter, pouring through one of Rumpelstiltskin’s stacks of ancient books, trying to find some more information about Neverland, and more importantly how to get there. “He knew that you would want to go after them as soon as you found out, so he made sure that you couldn’t follow. Keeping you out of danger.”

Neal nodded and leaned back against the nearest display cabinet, giving the gruesome puppets propped up on top of it a sidelong glance.
“Probably. After all, someone wise did say that shadows act as guardian angels.”

“Is there any way of contacting it and getting it to come back?” Belle asked.

“I don’t know. Papa’s shadow came to me of its own accord; I had to trick it to get hold of it, but it came with free will. When Pan’s shadow came for Michael and John, it came because it was sent.”

“There’s got to be a way of summoning a shadow,” Belle said. “How else would Pan choose his victims? There must be something that attracts the shadow to them.”

“Belief.” Neal shrugged. “If you believe hard enough you’ll see the shadow. But I don’t think that it works in quite the same way for adults.”

“We’ll find a way,” Belle said. “We’ll get them all back, you’ll see.”

“How did they get there?” Neal asked.

“Magic bean,” Belle replied. “Hook took them all on the Jolly Roger.”

“They trusted Hook to get them there in one piece? To a place where Pan’s hanging around?” He gave a long exhalation of breath. “Well, times are desperate.” He paused. “You said earlier that it was the last bean. How did they plan on getting back?”

Belle shook her head.

“I don’t know. They were so focussed on getting there that they didn’t give it a lot of thought. Everything happened so quickly. And of course Rumpel…” She tailed off and glanced away, and Neal looked at her with his head on one side.

“Of course Rumpel what?” he asked.

Belle sighed. “Rumpel doesn’t think he’s coming back,” she said. “It’s another long story, but he thinks this is a suicide mission for him.”

Belle looked so despondent and desolate, and Neal could see tears in her eyes before she hastily wiped them away.

“Don’t think that he doesn’t love you,” Neal said. “I was here when he made that call to you in the hospital, when he was dying. I know he loves you.”

Belle nodded. “I know. And I know he loves you too, although you might not see it. Everything he did was to get back to you, and everything he’s doing now is for you too. In your name. He doesn’t know that you’re all right. He thinks Henry is the only family he has left, his only link to you, and he’ll do anything to save him.” She sighed, and the heartfelt sound somehow filled the pawnshop. “When we first received your message, I have to admit, the first thing that I wanted to do was find some way, any way, of getting it to Rumpel so that he knew you were ok and it would give him extra incentive to come home. But that was a selfish thought, and we decided that it would be best to try and get you home safely first. And now you’re here.”

“And as soon as I get here, I want to leave again.”

Belle laughed weakly. “Well, it’s for a good reason,” she said. “All we have to do is get you there, and more importantly, get everyone home again.”

Neal was silent for a few moments.
“There’s pixie dust in Neverland,” he said. “And plenty of shadows to catch. If I can get there, then I know how to get us back. I’ve done it before, after all. It will be difficult with so many of us and not just me, but it’s not impossible by any manner or means. I just don’t know if anyone else would think to use the same method. I mean, Hook obviously managed to get out before, although I don’t know how. Yes, getting home shouldn’t be a problem as long as I can get there.”

Belle was looking a little more positive now.

“All we have to do is find a shadow,” she said.

It was at that point that the bell above the door jangled and a young woman entered the shop. She wasn’t particularly familiar to Belle, although she knew that she’d seen the blonde in passing around the town. Her manner was nervous, slightly hesitant, and her eyes darted from Neal to Belle and back again. Belle glanced across at Neal, but the minute quirk of his eyebrow told her that he too was in the dark as to the newcomer’s identity.

“Erm, hi,” she began, waving awkwardly.

“Hello,” Belle said brightly. “Can we help you?”

“I’m not sure, I hope you can.” The woman was addressing Neal. They stayed looking at each other for a while before she spoke again. “You don’t recognise me, do you?”

Neal shook his head with an apologetic grimace, but the young blonde just gave a self-deprecating smile.

“It’s ok, I wouldn’t have known you either if I hadn’t heard people talking. After all, you’re not Bae any more, not really.”

Realisation struck and Neal’s jaw dropped open.

“How…” he began again.

“I tried to rescue you,” Wendy said, shrugging her shoulders. “The sacrifice you made for us, for a family you’d only been a part of for a few months… I couldn’t just stand by and let that happen. I just wanted to get you home.” She gave a snort of laughter. “It’s not often that the damsel in distress gets to go out and rescue the knight in shining armour, and it didn’t work out so great for me in the
end. But I had to try. We summoned the shadow back and I got it to take me to Neverland. That was where I came unstuck. And then, eventually, I got to the Enchanted Forest, which was where I stayed until the curse hit.”

Well, a stint spent in Neverland would explain why she was only twenty or so years older than when Neal had last seen her in the London nursery.

“What about Michael and John?” Neal asked. “Did they come with you?”

Wendy shook her head sadly.

“They’re long since dead,” she said with a sigh. “When the curse broke and we got our memories back, I tried to find out what had happened to them, track down my family, but being unable to leave the town made it difficult.” She paused. “Besides, what could I say to them? I could hardly say that I was their great-great-great etcetera aunt. I’m glad in a way, I suppose. They didn’t have to go through what we did. They lived ordinary lives.”

There was a long silence between them for a while, before they moved closer by mutual consent and Wendy went to hug Neal, who accepted the embrace readily.

“It’s good to see you well,” Wendy said at last once they broke apart.

“You too.”

“It’s strange, really.” Wendy gazed around the shop at all the weird and wonderful artefacts that were housed there. “I’ve had so much time to think about what I would say when I found you again. I never gave up hope that some twist of fate had taken you back to London, even if I was still in another realm. I always had faith that we’d see each other again, and as I got older I kept thinking about what I would say when we finally met again. But now that it comes down to it, I’ve realised that I really only need two words.” She paused. “Thank you. Thank you for everything, for the sacrifices you made for us – even if I did throw it back in your face by getting myself caught. Thank you.”

Neal shrugged. “That’s what family does,” he said. “We look out for each other.”

Wendy nodded. “Speaking of family, I’m sorry about what happened to your son. If there’s anything that I can do to help, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Wendy.”

“Any time.” Wendy turned and made to leave the shop, topping with her hand on the door handle. “It was good to see you, Baelfire.”

“You too, Wendy.” Neal paused. “Wait. I think I might know how you might be able to help us.”

“Yes?”

“Come through,” Neal said, indicating the back room of the shop. “But first, tell me, how did you escape from Neverland?”

**Neverland - Present**

“The first thing we have to do is get the Lost Boys on side,” Tinker Bell said.
They were all sitting in the centre of the fairy ring with a pile of twigs and twine in front of a rough map of the island carved out of the grass with Hook’s appendage. Regina had returned to the group with the captain after she’d fled on seeing her lack of shadow, but it had been mutually decided that she would absent herself during their planning sessions in order to prevent accidentally revealing something to Pan through the shadow, and she had gone to collect some more firewood.

“The Lost Boys?” Hook exclaimed incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You spend your days living in a tree house in a protection ring avoiding them!”

“Yes, and whose fault is that, Hook?” Tinker Bell snapped.

He held his hands up in submission. “That aside,” he continued, “I still don’t think that the words ‘Lost Boys’ and ‘on side’ belong in the same sentence.”

“I have to agree with Hook,” David conceded, “as strange as it feels to be doing so. From our, admittedly limited, experience, they’re not what I would call allies.”

Tinker Bell sighed.

“I know they haven’t made a favourable impression, but they’re a good bunch of kids when you get to know them. Honestly. And I’ve had a while to get to know them,” she added, her tone hard and directed at Hook, who shuffled backwards a little. “They know me and trust me; it wouldn’t be too hard to get a couple of them to let me into their camp, and then it’s just a question of getting this.”

She made a cross with twigs on the map, a little offset from the centre. “Pan calls it the Eternal Light,” she explained. “It’s the source of most of his power on the island, and if we can get it, then we can take control. The Eternal Light is what enables him to control the shadows. If we can get the Light, we can release the shadows, freeing the Lost Boys and Regina. Once the Lost Boys aren’t under Pan’s control anymore, I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to inveigle them into an uprising. Even if not a full uprising, I don’t know any of the boys who would actively stand with Pan when given a choice, if they had possession of their full free will.”

“Ok,” Snow said warily. “I can see the potential. But what about the Light? Surely something so powerful… He would want to keep it with him all the time, to keep it safe.”

“Normally, you’d be right,” Tinker Bell said. “But now, he’s focussed on Henry and getting ready for his arrival. I don’t know all the details of the plan - Pan never talks to me and I can only glean a little from the Lost Boys, he never shares his ideas fully with anyone.”

She made another cross in the dead centre of the map.

“This is Skull Rock,” she said. “It’s the centre point of the island and the heart of Neverland, literally. It’s the source of all the magic here. Normally, the Eternal Light is kept in Skull Rock under constant guard. But recently it’s been changing hands, and the Lost Boys have been building a new camp.” She gestured to the first cross. “The Eternal Light is being moved from Skull Rock to the new camp; he’s entrusted it to his second-in-command.”

“Felix,” Hook muttered. “Almost as brutal as Pan himself.”

“Whatever Pan is planning, it’s taking place, ultimately, on Skull Rock,” Tinker Bell said, ignoring Hook’s words. “So, we should be able to get the light, free the Lost Boys and then go after Pan and Henry with our newly acquired back-up.”

“Shouldn’t we really be going after Pan and Henry first?” Snow asked pensively. “I mean, if Pan already has Henry then we don’t have all that much time.”
Tinker Bell shook her head.

"It would be suicide," she declared plainly. "We can’t plan any kind of offence whilst Pan still has the shadows, and by proxy the Lost Boys, at his beck and call. We’d be charging to our doom. Besides, we don’t know where Henry and Pan are at this moment in time and we’ll only end up on a wild goose chase looking for them. We know, though, that Pan is intending for them to end up at Skull Rock to complete his plan. That’s a certainty."

Snow nodded, not happy with the idea of putting their search for Henry on hold but understanding the need to take down Pan a piece at a time by first destroying his support network.

"Skull Rock is also where Pan keeps all the pixie dust," Tinker Bell continued. "If we want to get out of here once you’ve got Henry, that’s what we’ll need." She looked at Hook. "But you’re not going to be let out of my sight once we get it, do you hear me?" she growled.

"Loud and clear," Hook sighed. Snow and Charming looked from the fairy to the captain and back again, still not entirely sure what had happened between them, although now building up a much clearer picture, and not entirely sure whether they could be trusted to put aside their differences in order to work together for the greater good.

"So where are we in relation to Skull Rock and the new camp?" David asked.

"Here." Hook dug the point of his hook into the map. "It’s only a couple of hours’ walk. Nowhere in Neverland is really all that far away from anywhere else; the trouble comes from not knowing where you’re going and ending up going in circles."

"Speaking of going in circles, is Regina going to be ok, do you think?" Snow asked.

Hook nodded. "She won’t have gone too far, we should be able to find her again if needs be. Besides, she took her lipstick with her."

Snow gave a weak laugh, and then there was silence for a while.

"So what’s the plan for the infiltration?" David asked eventually.

"I…” Tinker Bell began, but before she could reply, a sudden sound rang through the trees, shocking those gathered inside the fairy ring back into silence. It sounded like a gunshot, and it seemed so utterly out of place on the island that no-one could speak for several moments afterwards.

Snow glanced over at David.

"Did Emma bring her gun with her?" she murmured.

David shook his head.

"No, I don’t think she did."

"Oh no…” Snow clasped her hands over her mouth. "Tamara… Henry…”

David reached over and pulled his wife into his arms. "He’ll be ok, I promise."

"You can’t possibly know that, David," Snow said, shaking her head sadly.

Tinker Bell looked over at them, twisting a piece of twine between her fingers.

"I know it’s not exactly any kind of consolation," she began, “but Pan wants Henry alive at all costs.
He’s going to be in one piece when we find him, I’m sure of it.”

Snow nodded then shook her head again.

“But there’s Emma, Emma’s out there too, and we haven’t even factored her in to any of this; she could be anywhere out there. And Gold, we can’t leave him behind either.”

“Are you sure?” Hook asked mildly.

David shot him a look.

“We all came here for the same purpose,” he said. “And once we have fulfilled that purpose, we are all going home again. No-one is being left behind.” He looked at Tinker Bell. “No-one,” he repeated.

The fairy gave a small smile and returned her attention to making little structures out of the twigs and twine and setting up a new map beside the map of the island. David returned his attention to Snow.

“We will find Emma, I promise you, Snow. But right now we have to focus on getting Henry first. You know that he’s going to be Emma’s top priority, so he has to be ours too. You know she’d never forgive us if we found her but didn’t find Henry.”

Snow nodded. “I know, but I just keep worrying.”

“The camp looks like this,” Tinker Bell said, drawing their attention back to the map.

“We’ll need some kind of distraction,” Hook said. “Once the Lost Boys realise that you’re trying to steal the Light, it won’t be pretty.”

“True. Thank you for volunteering, Hook.”

The pirate opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it and shut it again, shaking his head in disbelief.

“You’ll want someone in the trees to cover a wide area of escape routes,” Snow said, pointing out the line of twigs around the camp that represented the trees. “I can do that, it’ll be more effective with the bow, and arrows work on shadows.”

“Just like taking back Green Canyon back home,” David said. “It’ll be like a walk in the park compared to some of the campaigns we fought.”

Snow looked at him with a fond smile. Suddenly, their hard-won battle to take back the kingdom from George and Regina seemed very far back in the past, and they seemed to be such different people now. Eventually, she nodded slowly.

“It’ll be fine,” she said. David gave an encouraging nod.

“Yes. It’ll be fine.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle locked the pawn shop door before turning the sign to closed and retreating into the back room with Neal and Wendy, drawing the blinds. She didn’t know why she felt the need to be so furtive, but for some reason it was especially important to her that no-one could eavesdrop on their
impending conversation, which she had already surmised would probably lead them into the territory of dark and dangerous magic. Belle had already made an enemy of the Mother Superior, and she didn’t want to give the town’s primary remaining magic user any more ammunition against her.

“I swam to the Enchanted Forest from Neverland,” Wendy explained once they were all sitting at the workbench around the teapot. “Or rather, I was swum. One of the mermaids from the lagoon, she brought me there.”

“A Neverland mermaid saved your life?” Neal interjected, his tone incredulous.

“Are mermaids not in the habit of saving lives?” Belle asked politely. “I know some of the merfolk are malicious, but that’s usually sirens and kelpies. Then again, I’ve always worked on the principle that if we leave them alone, they leave us alone.”

“Neverland mermaids are a class apart,” Wendy muttered. “They’re a species unto themselves. They’re vicious. Apart from one, as far as I know. The one who swam me to the Enchanted Forest.”

Neal’s brow furrowed. “Even back when I was in the Enchanted Forest, I’d never heard of a mermaid who could cross realms before.”

Wendy shrugged. “Well, Ariel did it. She never tried again, though, after that swim from Neverland. It nearly killed the both of us. Sometimes, a part of me wanted to see if she could swim me home, but I couldn’t make a friend do that.” She shook her head. “It’s a moot point anyway. Ariel won’t be swimming across realm boundaries any time soon.”

“Yeah, I don’t suppose the curse gave her back her tail when it broke,” Neal said drily.

“Oh, Ariel has had legs since long before the curse hit,” Wendy said. “The course of True Love can sometimes trip you up along the way.”

There was silence for a moment as they weighed up the implications of that remark.

“Let’s look at what we know,” Belle said eventually. “We know that the shadows can cross realms. We know that shadows can be captured. We know that shadows can be summoned. Now all we need to work out is how to summon a shadow over here so that we can capture it and Neal can use it to get to Neverland.”

“Aren’t you going too?” Wendy asked her. Belle shook her head.

“No, my place is here. Rumpel has entrusted me to keep the town safe, and I have to honour that, it’s my responsibility.”

Wendy smiled, but then her face fell.

“I don’t know how we’re going to get the shadow over here,” she admitted. “We managed to summon it all those years ago, but we were children then. Pan’s shadow always comes to little boys who believe in it; it’s looking for fresh meat. But we’re adults, we know only too well what a monster Pan is. I don’t think that our belief will summon it, and I don’t think anyone in their right mind would lend us a child as bait.”

“That’s very true,” Neal said. “There’s got to be another way.” He groaned. “It’s so long ago and I’ve tried to block it from memory as much as possible, but back on Neverland, Pan must have had a way of controlling the shadows. I mean, they’re vaguely sentient; they’ve got some kind of minds of their own, especially if my father’s is anything to go by. I don’t think that they’d just follow his orders meekly. He’d need some way to keep control of them. When I was hiding out on the island, I
knew that he used to summon them all at once, I’d see them moving all over towards Skull Rock. I never got near enough to know exactly what he was doing though. I was more focussed on catching a shadow and not getting caught myself.”

Wendy, who had been deep in thought whilst Neal had been speaking, her brow furrowed, spoke again.

“There is a way,” she said. “I remember when I was on Skull Rock… He killed one of the Lost Boys who was getting too close to a lantern in the centre. It was strange, obviously magical.”

“The Skull Rock light,” Neal mused. “I never went onto the rock itself but I could always see the light from it, and I could tell that it wasn’t a fire.” He paused. “You think that’s the key?”

Wendy shrugged. “Shadows hate light. That’s how you captured the shadow for your journey home – with light. It would make sense to use a magical light to control magical shadows.”

There was a long pause.

“The fact remains, of course, that the lantern’s on Neverland and we’re here,” Wendy said with a sigh. “The fundamental point is getting a shadow here.”

“Any ideas, Belle?” Neal asked. “Belle?”

Belle was staring into the middle distance, a look of intense concentration on her face.

“The lantern,” she said eventually, addressing Wendy. “What did it look like?”

“Just a standard dark lantern with shaded glass,” Wendy said. “I remember that it had a metal frame though, and I remember thinking that was strange because there’s hardly any metal on Neverland apart from in the Lost Boys’ weapons. They make everything from wood and stone. There was a single candle inside, but it was giving out far too much strong light to be an ordinary taper.”

Belle got up from the table and went over to one of the shelving units, balancing precariously on a storage crate to attain the height she needed and feeling about on the shelf.

“Did it look like this?” she asked. She hopped off the crate and came back to the others, setting a small metal lantern on the table and blowing the dust off it. To all intents and purposes, it looked like a standard dark lantern, just as Wendy had described.

“Yes,” Wendy said. “Yes, that’s it exactly. But how is it here?”

“There must be more than one,” Neal observed.

“It was part of Rumpel’s collection of potentially useful things,” Belle recalled. “He called it an Eternal Light. He said that it contained powerful magic, and under no circumstances was I ever to light it unless I wanted to cause catastrophe. At the time I thought he was just being melodramatic, like he so often is, but I never questioned it, not with the amount of dangerous magic in the castle. I remember when I nearly dropped it when I was dusting once, he nearly had a heart attack. The only other thing that he’s ever moved so quickly to catch is me.”

“Under no circumstances ever to light it,” Neal repeated. “I suppose that he never quite intended for these circumstances to occur.”

Belle laughed. “You know what they say. Desperate times call for desperate measures.”
“We don’t even know how it works,” Wendy said doubtfully. “What if we light it and everything goes to hell? And I don’t think that it’s going to attract shadows. They all seemed to be scared of it on Skull Rock.”

“We’ve got to try,” Neal said. He was trying not to let on just how desperate he was to get over to Neverland to find and help Emma and Henry, but he was willing to do just about anything, and he realised that this must have been how his father felt when he was creating the dark curse – blinkered to all consequences. Neal gave an internal sigh. Wendy was right, they couldn’t continue completely ignorant to the possible repercussions.

“If we just light it and see what happens,” Belle suggested. “If necessary we can get the fairies’ help if magic is needed to control it. But it’s just a flame at heart, theoretically. Even magic has to adhere to the basic laws of nature most of the time, or the price of the magic is too great. Water should douse it. The candle wick is burned,” she added, indicating the lantern, “so it’s able to be extinguished.”

Wendy nodded her agreement and Neal went to fill a bucket to have on standby. Belle retrieved a box of matches, and there was a long pause before she struck one, touching it to the wick. It flickered for a few moments before it caught, and a blast of powerful light, stark white and stronger than a candle beam, shot out, blinding the three around the table and forcing Belle to hastily turn the glass panels to dim it before their eyeballs burned.

The change was immediate. Even through the drawn Venetian blinds, it was obvious that the bright and sunny afternoon had turned pitch black straight away, and outside, people could be heard exclaiming at the sudden change in the weather. Neal went over and peered through the blind slats out at the sky, inky dark and full of twinkling stars, a perfect midnight.

“Well, that explains so much,” he murmured, thinking of Neverland’s everlasting night.

“We can’t leave it like this,” Wendy said.

“I agree.” Belle leaned forward to put the lamp out with a huff of breath. It took her a couple of attempts, but then the flame died and the sky outside gradually returned to normal.

“Well,” Wendy said eventually. “At least we know what it does now.”

“All we need is a shadow to use it on,” Neal agreed. “That’s going to be the tricky part.”

“Back to the drawing board.” Belle sighed and reached across the table, taking one of Neal’s hands and squeezing it. “We’ll get you there, Neal, I promise.”

Neal nodded. He wouldn’t give up hope just yet.

Elsewhere in Storybrooke, a shadow hid out of sight under the landing stage. The sudden igniting of the Eternal Light had startled it a little, but now everything had returned to normal. Good. It had a job to do, and it just needed to lie in wait here to do it, without any pesky distractions.

Neverland - Present

Emma was becoming increasingly certain that she was being incredibly paranoid, but in a place like this, perhaps the constant feeling of being watched was a good thing, keeping her alert and on edge. She couldn’t shake the sensation of being watched, no matter how many times she looked around her to find absolutely nothing of any interest, not even a whisper of an independent shadow, and that made her even more nervous. She was certain that the feeling hadn’t been this bad when she’d still
had Rumpelstiltskin as a companion, and although she never thought that she’d be in the position of wishing for him to be back, it was looking like a very attractive option. Emma shook herself. No. She had to keep going onwards and moving forwards. She checked the compass spell; the magic was second nature to her now and she barely had to think to summon the glowing needle above her palm. It worried her a little, to think just how quickly she’d become used to it.

She was still on the right track, although the needle wobbled slightly, as if its conviction was wavering somewhat. Magic was heavily influenced by thoughts and feelings, that much she had learned from Rumpelstiltskin during their time together, and now that she was doubting herself and her confidence was decreasing a little since being left alone, her magic was reacting to that. She couldn’t afford to keep thinking like this. Without the spell to guide her, she would be lost, wandering aimlessly through this dense jungle for eternity but getting no closer to her goal.

“Lost, are we?”

Emma spun around on hearing the voice behind her and found herself face to face with a boy; he could not have been more than five years older than Henry.

“Who are you?” she asked, raising her hands and making ready to throw a haphazard fireball if necessary. Whoever the newcomer was, and she had a very good idea as to his identity, she was certain that he was foe, not friend.

“I think you know who I am,” the boy said. “The question is, who do you think you are? If you’re already this lost when you strike out on your own, really, how successful do you think you’re going to be in your efforts to save Henry? How likely is it that you’ll see any of your family again?” He leaned back against the nearest tree, picking at his fingernails with a thoroughly uninterested air. “You know, Emma…”

“How do you know my name?” Emma demanded. Peter Pan - for Emma was certain it was he - shrugged.

“I know everything,” he said. “There are a lot of perks to immortality, you should try it some time. But I know all about you, Emma Swan. Abandoned by your parents, abandoned by so many sets of foster parents, abandoned by the man you loved, and now look at you, alone and abandoned once more.”

“I am not abandoned,” Emma retorted.

“Really? And where did your previous companion say he was going, exactly, when he left you in a hurry? What great quest was he going on that was too dangerous for your assistance?”

Emma took a deep breath, she couldn’t and wouldn’t be affected by these mind games.

“You know,” Pan began again, “it’s really a shame that I didn’t catch you sooner. You would have been an excellent addition to the Lost Boys, you little girl lost. Do you think you would have enjoyed it here? We would have given you a family. A proper family.”

“I have a family,” Emma retorted. “They are on this island and wherever you may be hiding them from me, I am going to find them if it’s the last thing that I do.”

“Hmm.” Peter Pan just raised one eyebrow. “Are you absolutely sure that they want to be found, though?” I mean, there’s been no sign of them looking for you, has there?”

“They’re looking for Henry,” Emma said. “We’re all looking for Henry, because it may have escaped your notice, but you kidnapped him.”
“I think that liberated is the correct word to use,” Pan said archly. “He’s going to love it here. No rules, no responsibility… It’s paradise. Well, at least, it will be for a while. Ah yes, Henry. He is a very good reason why I didn’t sweep in and rescue you from your miserable childhood when you were younger. I am going to need Henry, and for that, I had to ensure that I got him in the right place at the right time. Still, it’s all fallen nicely into place now. We’re all ready for the final game.”

“What are you going to do with him?” Emma asked. “Why do you need him?”

“Well, that’s a very interesting question with a very long and complicated answer that I don’t believe your tiny little mind has the capacity to comprehend,” Pan said. “Besides, I’m not some moustache-twirling villain out of a play. Do you really think I’m going to just stand here and tell you what my plan is?”

“Well, you seem to like the sound of your own voice enough,” Emma muttered. Pan just laughed. “Well, Lost Girl, I hope you’ll remember what I said. Best to give up now and accept your fate. Unloved, unwanted, abandoned…”

Emma couldn’t keep her rage down any longer and she felt the flames of the fireball spell licking at her fingertips, and she launched the handful at the boy without even thinking. Whether he actually did anything to evade the attack, Emma didn’t know, but the flames sailed straight past him, missing by several metres. Pan raised his eyebrows again. “Is that the best you can do?” he asked. “You need some serious practice.” He cocked his head on one side, listening. “Luckily, I think I hear someone coming now. Friend or foe? No time to decide, just fire and pray. Still, I must be going. I believe Rumpelstiltskin is looking for me. It’ll be most interesting to see him again. We haven’t met for a very long time, is he still the coward I always knew?” Pan paused again. “They’re coming from behind you. Good luck finding Henry. You’ll need it.”

Emma glanced over her shoulder in the direction he had indicated, but there was nothing to see, and when she turned to face him again, he was gone. “No, I won’t need it,” she muttered, and she opened her palm to look at the compass needle, now shining more strongly than ever in her ire. “I’ve already found him.”

Her moment of triumph was cut short by the sound of leaves crunching underfoot and she realised that Pan had not been lying about them not being alone. But who was it, just beyond the trees? She didn’t want to launch any attack blindly in case she hit Henry, or another from their party, but at the same time the jungle was making her nervous and praying on her mind all the time. “Who’s there?” she called.

The noise stopped, but she had obviously got the attention of whoever it was, although they were making no move to come out into the dim moonlight. “Show yourself!” she called. “Or I’ll….” She tailed off, having no idea what to call the offensive magic that she had learned. “Or I’ll fireball you!”

“Well, I don’t think that you’re a hallucination,” came a dry voice from behind the trees, and Regina peered out. Her appearance threw Emma for six slightly. “Regina?”

The other woman nodded. “Yes, that’s me.”
Still completely wrong-footed, Emma looked around.

“Do you know where everyone else is?” she asked, before adding, because it seemed wrong not to, “I’m glad you’re ok.”

Regina nodded slowly. “It’s good to see you too.” She gestured through the trees behind her. “The others are through there. Snow, David, Hook. There’s a fairy ring, it’s pretty safe from shadows and Lost Boys. I’ve been relegated to errand girl. Gathering firewood.”

Emma had to give a snort of laughter at that.

“It’s not funny,” Regina snapped.

“It is a bit,” Emma pointed out. “Henry would think it was.” She cautiously took a couple of steps towards Regina, who seemed to realise at that point that one of her hands was still on the verge of bursting into flame, and she shook it to extinguish the tiny tongues of fire dancing on her fingernails.

“You’re right,” she conceded at last. “Henry would think that it was funny.”

“Speaking of Henry,” Emma began. Regina shook her head.

“We haven’t found him. Sorry, Emma.”

“It’s ok, I know where he is. I just haven’t got there yet.”

“Where is he?” Regina asked eagerly.

“Well, I don’t know for certain where he is…”

“You just said that you knew!”

“It’s more that I know how to find him rather than where he is,” Emma finished. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Regina sighed. “Well, it’s further than we’ve got.”

The two women began walking back in the direction that Regina had come in when the brunette stopped in her tracks.

“Emma, where’s your shadow?” she asked.

“That’s part of the long story,” Emma said. “It’s with Henry.”

“Are you sure?”

“That’s where Mr G-Rumpelstiltskin said that it had gone when I cut it away. So, as long as I can follow my shadow, I can find Henry.” She held up her palm and showed the compass. “It’s headed east.”

Regina nodded and began walking again.

“Makes sense,” she said. “I don’t suppose the shadow could bring him back to you?”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t think so. They don’t have much in the way of brains, apparently. Wait…” Emma paused. “Where’s your own shadow, Regina?”
Regina stopped, and she looked away, unable to meet Emma’s eyes.

“Stolen,” she said eventually. “Pan took my shadow.”

“Ah.” Emma remembered what Rumpelstiltskin had told her about shadows that their owners could not control. “That’s, erm…”

“It’s bad, let’s not beat about the bush here. He’s got my shadow, he can control it, he might even be able to control me, which is why I’m out here collecting twigs whilst everyone else comes up with a battleplan that I can’t know about in case it gets back to Pan.”

“Oh, I think you can work on the principle that he knows everything already,” Emma said. The conversation from a few moments ago was fresh in her mind and it made her shiver to think of it.

Regina looked at her and raised a cynical eyebrow.

“How incredibly reassuring that is;” she said sarcastically. "I feel so much more confident in our ability to rescue Henry now.”

“Have you ever met Pan?” Emma snapped. “That boy rivals the kid from The Omen in levels of creepiness. Maybe once you’ve had a conversation with him, you can tell me how confident you feel.”

“I’d probably just flambé the brat,” Regina muttered.

“You think I didn’t try that?” Emma replied.

“Hmm. Well, you did always have an affinity for pyrotechnics,” Regina said, remembering the fire at City Hall.

“Hey, that was Gold, not me,” Emma exclaimed.

“I didn’t say a word,” Regina retorted. “We’re here.”

Emma peered through the trees to see the fairy ring in the clear moonlight, and immediately she felt more at ease after the dark and oppressive jungle. Snow, David, Hook and a young woman whom she assumed to be the fairy were sat around in the centre of the circle, poring over what looked to be a three-dimensional map that had been built up on the soft green grass.

“Hey,” Regina called. “I found something interesting in among the firewood.”

The others looked up on hearing Regina’s voice, and for a moment, as the two ladies stepped into the fairy ring, there was complete and utter stunned silence as they stared at Emma in disbelief.

“Hi,” she said, waving awkwardly.

Snow scrambled to her feet, practically dragging David with her, and she ran over to Emma, throwing her arms around her daughter in the most possessively crushing hug that Emma had ever received.

“Oh Emma,” she breathed. “Oh God, we thought we’d lost you again. Are you all right? Are you hurt? How did you find us? Where’s Gold? Are you all right? I’m so happy to see you…”

Snow was sobbing; Emma could feel her tears soaking into the shoulder of her shirt.

“Give her room to breathe, Snow,” David said, bringing both of them into his arms and pressing a
kiss to the top of Emma’s head. “You have no idea how glad we are to see that you’re all right.”

Emma smiled. “It’s good to see you all too.” She thought again of Pan’s words. No, she had definitely not been abandoned on the island. Finally, she broke away from her parents, looking at Regina and Hook and the fairy, who were standing off to one side. “All of you,” she admitted.

“Are you all right?” Snow pressed.

Emma nodded.

“I’m fine, I’m not hurt,” she assured her mother. “I’ve been following my shadow to find Henry, and, well, I found you on the way. I kind of thought that I would.”

“Yes,” David agreed. “We thought that the best way to find you would be to look for Henry.”

“Where’s Rumpelstiltskin?” Regina asked. “You said he was with you before.”

“Yeah.” Emma sighed. “He’s gone after Pan.”

The fairy gave a low whistle.

“Well, he’s either brave or stupid or both,” she muttered. “But he might just be the distraction we need. My name’s Tinker Bell, by the way,” she said, holding out her hand, which Emma shook. “I’m very glad you’re here too. We’ve got a plan, and now everything’s falling into place.”

**Neverland - Present**

Henry ran as fast as his legs could take him, completely uncaring for his direction or destination, or even if he was going around in circles. All he cared about was keeping as much distance as possible between himself and Pan and the shadows and the Lost Boys. His lungs felt like they were about to explode, his head was pounding in his skull and his legs felt like jelly, threatening to collapse under him with every step that he took, but he pushed through the pain, determined to keep going for as long as he possibly could.

Finally, he had to accept that he really could go no further, and he stopped behind a thick-trunked tree, sinking down onto his knees and choking for breath, gasping air into his aching chest. He didn’t care how much noise he was making - he was under no illusions that the shadows would be able to find him anywhere on the island if they chose to. He felt sick and light-headed, and he closed his eyes, willing the feeling to pass so that he could focus more on his surroundings and not his own terribly tired body.

When he was finally able to concentrate on something other than his painful muscles, he listened carefully. Everything was eerily quiet apart from the steady rush of water nearby, and he realised that he must be back by the waterfall and the skull-shaped rock where they had stopped before. Carefully, he looked around, peering through the trees back in the direction that he had come to check for pursuers. There was nothing to see, not even the glowing yellow eyes of the shadows, but he didn’t kid himself into thinking that he was alone and safe for the time being. It would make sense to try and find the water source, though; he was still panting from his exertions.

Following his ears and keeping a cautious eye out for possible ambushes, it did not take Henry long to reach the pool that the waterfall cascaded into, and he looked down into its murky depths. He could just about make out shimmering shapes moving beneath the surface and as he peered in further, he thought he could see faces. Mermaids, evidently, but were they friend or foe? Given that
everything else on the island seemed to be working against him, Henry was more inclined toward the latter option, and despite his thirst, he was hesitant to dip his hand into the water in case it was snatched.

Presently, he saw something shift out of the corner of his eye and he glanced across to the source of the movement. It was a shadow, hovering motionless on the shore several metres away from him. Henry scrambled backwards, afraid, but the spectre did not make any move to come towards him, and Henry looked at it, head on one side. It didn’t look like a Lost Boy’s shadow. It seemed taller, and its silhouette looked to be female. Henry remembered the extra shadows that had joined them during the hike to the camp, and he took a couple of steps towards the one on the shore. It looked like… Could it possibly be Regina’s shadow?

“Mom?” he asked tentatively. “Regina? Is that you?”

The shadow nodded slowly, and Henry couldn’t help but grin.

“I knew you’d come after me!” he said. “I knew it! You and Snow are here, is anyone else?”

The shadow made no kind of response, but Henry hadn’t exactly been expecting one and he didn’t care. He was going to be rescued and that was all he could think about.

“Where’s your body?” he pressed. “And, erm, why are you separated from your body in the first place?”

Regina’s shadow did not reply to his questioning, but it did drift towards him, coming to rest next to him and folding itself down into a kneeling position in the wet grass. It dipped its ghostly hands into the water and although it did not appear to disturb the surface or the creatures swimming in the deep, when it brought its hands out again, they were cupping a small amount of water, which it offered to Henry. He drank it gratefully, and for a moment he watched the mermaids thrashing about in the pool, angered at having their water stolen but unable to do anything about it. He turned back to Regina’s shadow.

“So where do we go from here?” he asked. “Will you take me back?” He paused. “How are we even going to get back?” He didn’t want to dwell too much on that thought. It hadn’t really crossed his mind until now. He’d been solely occupied with getting away from Tamara and Pan and finding a safe haven, and now that he’d found one, other worrying things were starting to cross his mind, like the logistics of his return to Storybrooke. Regina had managed to get here, obviously, and he hoped fervently that she had a plan for getting back.

The shadow didn’t respond for a while and then pointed over at the dark rock in the centre of the pool. Henry gulped.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “It doesn’t exactly look safe.”

Regina nodded and Henry glanced over at the skull again. Well, if Pan had just vacated it then it would probably be the last place that he would look, but Henry still wasn’t convinced.

Presently, a battle cry rang out through the forest, and Henry shot to his feet. The Lost Boys were on their way, and they were getting closer. Beside him, Regina’s shadow had also risen from the ground.

“Come on, we’ve got to go!” Henry said as the shadow curled a not quite solid hand around his wrist, but showed no signs of actually moving away. “Come on!” Henry pleaded, but Regina’s shadow still did not move. It looked across at him, its eyes sad and downcast. Henry could feel fear
beginning to coat the back of his mouth.

“Mom, what’s going on?” he asked warily, trying to free himself from the shadow’s strong grip and failing. He could hear a rustling through the leaves, something was moving between the trees without taking any footsteps, moving at speed, and Henry braced himself for an influx of shadows coming careening towards him.

When the noise finally broke free from the trees and its source was revealed, Henry was somewhat wrong-footed to see that it was in fact only one shadow, and it stopped short on finding them.

Regina’s shadow raised its free hand in a warning, and the newcomer studied them for a moment. Henry recognised it now, and he couldn’t believe that he hadn’t done so before.

It was Emma’s shadow, there was no doubt about it, and it only paused for a split second longer before it charged at them, flying at Regina’s shadow and bowling it over, causing the grip on Henry’s hand to release. He ran away from the warring pair as they continued to grapple on the ground, completely unsure of what was happening and which one, if either of them, he ought to trust. He was already wary of Regina’s shadow’s intentions, and he didn’t know what Emma’s were, although she appeared to be against Regina for the time being. The Lost Boys were still approaching through the trees.

Presently, Emma’s shadow, which had the upper hand in the bout, looked up and straight at Henry, freeing one hand from Regina’s clutches to wave at him frantically, indicating for him to run. Beneath her, Regina’s shadow gave a small nod of agreement before returning to the task at hand. Henry needed no further encouragement and took off through the forest again in the direction that Emma had pointed out. He could hear Lost Boys pursuing him, and he resisted the urge to look back over his shoulder to see how much distance there was between him and his hunters. He continued to run on blindly, praying for a miracle…
Enchanted Forest – Past

There was a party going on at the palace, and anyone who was out on a boat in the harbour was able to see it, for the courtyard where the celebration was being held was as close to the shore as it was possible to be, and brilliantly decorated with lights and bunting and delicately carved ice sculptures which served the dual purpose of being aesthetically pleasing and keeping the punch bowls cold. It was well into the evening and the ball was already in full swing, and none of the guests noticed a latecomer.

A small face, with bright red wet hair slicked back and plastered down her back, could be seen – if anyone had cared to look – resting on lightly scaled arms that were leaning on one of the smooth rocks at the edge of the courtyard that bordered the sea. The mermaid sighed happily, her tail flapping in time with the waltz music as she watched the dancers whirl around the space. Presently, a seagull alighted on the rock next to her with a squawk.

“Be quiet, Scuttle,” Ariel hissed. “You’ll draw attention to me!”

The seagull did not appear to take any heed of what she had said but did dutifully remain silent, and ignored both the mermaid and the party in favour of picking at the seaweed around his feet. As the music came to a stop and the dancers bowed and curtseyed to each other before moving to find their next partner, Scuttle the seagull gave another impeccably timed squawk.

“You!” Ariel reached over to try and clamp his beak shut, to no avail, as the bird simply took off from its rock and landed on another one out of her reach. Ariel glared at the gull. “Yes, I know it’s a risk,” she muttered, more to herself than to Scuttle. “But it’s the prince’s birthday, I had to come!”

The prince in question was standing at the far end of the outdoor ballroom looking rather less than interested in the proceedings. Well, less than interested in the parade of eligible young women that his valet was introducing to him. It was expected that he would choose a bride soon, and Ariel sighed. It wasn’t fair. Humans got to have all the fun. She couldn’t even dance, let alone meet the prince. Merfolk and landfolk did not mingle; it was one of the first rules of sea etiquette that she had learned on her arrival in the Enchanted Forest from Neverland all those years ago. But Ariel found the landfolk fascinating, with all their rituals and the things they could do. What she wouldn’t give to be a part of their world just for one night, to be able to jump and dance and run, and walk down a road instead of always having to swim everywhere, and find out what it would be like to wear those wonderful gowns instead of just her scaly skin. It would be amazing, but it was nigh on impossible, so for now, Ariel had to content herself with watching from the side lines. Of course, the prince wasn’t exactly a bad view, but it would be nice to see him up close.

Scuttle chirruped softly.

“Yes,” Ariel agreed dreamily, resting her chin on her hands again. “He is very good-looking for a human.”

“Ariel? Is that you?”

Ariel’s immediate instinct on hearing the words directed at her was to duck down behind the rock that she was leaning on, but on recognising the voice and the fact that she had been addressed by name, she popped up again.
Wendy was crouched by the rocks in a black and white uniform, a tray of champagne flutes balanced on one hand.

“Hello Wendy!” Ariel said overly brightly. Even though Wendy was a friend who would never reveal the mermaid’s presence, she had really not intended for anyone to see her at all. “What are you doing here?”

Wendy looked pointedly at the champagne glasses. “I work here, Ariel. The question is, what are you doing here?”


“It’s champagne,” Wendy said, giving her friend a disapproving look but making no move to stop her from reaching out and taking a glass. “It’ll make you giggly,” she warned as Ariel took a gulp, and then another.

“It’s nice,” Ariel mused, finishing the glass. “So, what’s the gossip? Has Eric picked his intended yet?”

Wendy gave a snort of laughter. “I fully believe that Eric will remain a bachelor until the end of his days. He’s much too interested in sailing and dancing to get down to the altogether more sedate life of marriage and siring heirs to the kingdom.” She sighed. “Ariel, you shouldn’t be here. Triton will have you gutted and served up to us on a platter if he finds out that you’ve been fraternising again.”

“I know, I know, but it’s worth the risk. Can I have another glass please?”

Wendy rolled her eyes but handed her another champagne flute nonetheless.

“I just had to see what was going on up here,” Ariel continued, between sips of the effervescent liquid. “Your world is so much more interesting than mine.” Scuttle squawked his agreement.

“Exactly. Scuttle knows what I’m talking about. I just want to be a part of this world, Wendy. There’s so much to do up here. And you have champagne! You try drinking sea water all the time.”


“Thanks for pointing that out, I had no idea,” Ariel said sourly.

“I don’t mean it like that. I just mean, why torture yourself with something that you can never have?”

Ariel chinked the empty champagne glasses together in a toast to herself and stowed them away in the purse she always had with her for keepsakes, and rested her chin on her arms once again.

“What if there was a way?” she asked. “A way for me to have legs? This is a land full of magic, just like Neverland was, and this realm actually has magicians who can use that magic. Maybe I could meet one of them and get them to give me legs?”

Wendy sighed and glanced away from Ariel, and the mermaid immediately knew that there was something that her friend was not telling her.

“Wendy, what is it? What do you know? You’ve got to tell me, Wendy, I’m your oldest friend.”

“There’s a legend,” Wendy began. “The older sailors tell it all the time. They talk about a sea witch
in the Northern Waters who will grant mermaids’ wishes.”

“The Northern Waters are off limits,” Ariel murmured. “Triton never lets us go there. I wonder. Maybe that’s why. He doesn’t want us to meet the sea witch.”

“Wendy!”

Ariel ducked down behind the rocks as someone called to her friend.

“What are you doing?” It was the prince’s valet, the nominate head of the household for the evening.

“I was, erm, feeding the seagull, sir?” Wendy suggested feebly as an excuse. Scuttle cawed in protest and the valet raised one incredulous eyebrow.

“Return to your post, please, Wendy, the guests are thirsty.”

“Yes, Mr Grimsby, sir.”

Grimsby moved away and Ariel popped back up.

“Phew, that was a close one,” she said.

“Yes, too close,” Wendy muttered. “I’ve got to go. But here.” She fished around in the pocket of her apron and pulled out a fork, presenting it to Ariel. “I know you wanted one the last time you came up.”

“A dinglehopper!” Ariel exclaimed. “Thank you, Wendy!” She stowed it in her bag as Wendy got up and moved away, and the mermaid returned to her previous occupation of watching the ball. The dancing had begun again, but the prince had no partner and was looking around the courtyard. Presently, something caught his eye and he came closer. Ariel took a second to realise that he was looking at her, and she panicked for a moment before deciding to take a chance and smile at him. He smiled back, and moved more quickly through the dancers towards her, just as Ariel realised what she had done and ducked out of sight behind her rock. Scuttle looked down at her, head on one side, and she pressed a finger over her lips. Thankfully the seagull understood and took off into the night, squawking wildly. Above her, Ariel heard Eric’s footsteps stop.

Eric looked around for the young woman whom he had seen only a few moments ago, puzzled. She must have been a mermaid, but there was no sign of her now. Mermaids did not usually come to shore when there were landfolk about, and they certainly did not smile at humans. In some landlocked areas, Eric knew that merfolk had fallen into myth and legend, they had been seen so rarely.

“I wonder what it is about this rock that attracts so many people to it?” Grimsby muttered, coming over to Eric. “Don’t tell me, you were feeding the seagull as well?”

“I was looking for a young lady,” Eric said. “She was here a moment ago. She had red hair and a beautiful smile.”

Grimsby peered over the rock and Ariel pressed herself flat against it, trying to become as invisible as possible.

“Eric, the only things beyond these rocks are merfolk and fish, neither of which make suitable brides. Let’s focus on more attainable pursuits, shall we?”

As she heard them move away, Ariel gave out a long breath of relief and dived back into the sea,
heading in the direction of the Northern Waters.

X

Rumpelstiltskin was spinning in the main hall of the Dark Castle when he heard Regina’s entrance. The place was so used to her frequent visits that it knew to let her in, and usually to make room for her rage if she was in a particularly indignant mood. He listened to the tapping of her heels against the floor as she made her way through the castle towards him, and concluded that today she was not in such a mood. There was a sense of purpose in her stride, but no hint of anger. She wanted something from him.

He returned his attention to the spinning wheel in front of him, whirring away at the fastest that he could possibly make it go. Regina’s sudden presence irked him. He had a good rhythm going; his head was clear and focussed only on the motion of the wooden wheel, all other thoughts and memories blessedly silent, and now she had thrown him off kilter, broken his concentration and brought all those regrets that he had been trying so hard to press down flying back into his consciousness.

Just as Rumpelstiltskin was standing from the wheel to anticipate the queen’s entrance, the doors opened and Regina strolled in.

“One of these days, Regina, you will walk into this room as if you own the place, and oh, how you will wish that you had knocked,” he said drily.

Regina arched one eyebrow.

“All things considered, Rumpel, I think that’s hardly likely.” She went over to the table where the tea set was stationed in its usual place, with two cups waiting for a return that would never happen, however much Rumpelstiltskin’s unconscious mind might want it to when he kept setting out a second cup.

“It really is good of you to have tea waiting for me when I arrive, Rumpel,” Regina said mildly.

“Oh, it’s not for you, Your Majesty,” Rumpelstiltskin said, trying to keep the growl from his voice.

“Really? Who is it for, then?” She ran a finger down the long table and studied the dust residue that she picked up. “Good help is so hard to find these days, isn’t it?

“On what errand are you here today, dearie?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, forcing himself to ignore her words. “Poisons? Peasant disguises?”

“It’s about a certain mermaid,” Regina began. “I tried to ask for your assistance on the matter a month ago, but you weren’t dealing that day. I trust you’ve had ample time to put you back in good spirits since then?”

“Indeed, although if you keep on in that vein, dearie, you may well put me into a far less charitable mood,” Rumpelstiltskin warned. “So tell me about your problem.”

“I require a mermaid’s voice, Rumpel,” Regina said.

“Hmm. You are making a lure, for some reason? Are you sure that you can’t just use your natural…” He looked her up and down and quirked an eyebrow before finishing: “charms to secure the object of your desire?”

“The lure is for Snow White,” Regina snapped. “I assure you that I am perfectly capable of
managing without magical intervention in other areas.”

“That was something I am not entirely sure I needed to know,” Rumpelstiltskin retorted dryly. “I must ask though, why you find yourself in need of my help to acquire such a voice. The magic is not so potent as to be beyond you.”

“I know it’s not,” Regina replied. There was a hardness to her voice now, a seething anger at being made to admit that she needed her former mentor’s help. “I have indeed caught a mermaid.”

“So… What’s the problem?” Rumpelstiltskin asked.

Regina looked embarrassed for a moment, unable to meet Rumpelstiltskin’s eyes, before she fixed him with a steely glare.

“The certain mermaid I have caught has turned out not, in fact, to be a mermaid. At least, not with a voice I can use.”

“Mermaids are rather distinctive creatures,” Rumpelstiltskin mused. “I wonder that you managed to mistake another vaguely sentient sea-dweller for a mermaid.”

“She’s a Krakenkind,” Regina ground out. “A sea witch.”

Rumpelstiltskin took a step back with a gesture of disgust. “Ugh, so many tentacles.” He shuddered. “Still, my point remains. Since one is part fish and one is part squid, I am amazed at the confusion between the two.”

“They both have the same top half,” Regina snapped. “Now are you able to give me a mermaid’s voice or not?”

“What are you doing with the sea witch, out of curiosity?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, ignoring the queen’s question.

“Oh, I’m going to keep her for a while,” Regina said airily. “I have a large enough pond. Who knows, some other part of her might come in handy even if her voice leaves a lot to be desired. Let us not forget the properties of squid ink, my dear Rumpel.”

Rumpelstiltskin just looked at her for a few moments, eyes narrowed, before turning away with his usual flamboyance.

“Well, I’m afraid that I can’t help you today, dearie. Fresh out of mermaid voices.”

“Would you be able to… procure one?” Regina asked. Rumpelstiltskin stopped in his leisurely stride away from her and turned on his heel once more. “After all, as you said yourself, the magic is not so potent as to be beyond you.”

“Ah yes, but a voice is so much more powerful when given freely, don’t you think? Fear not, I have my methods. To answer your question, yes, of course I would be able to procure a voice.”

“Excellent.” Regina smiled, her hungry smile that came out whenever she was on the verge of getting something that she wanted. “I trust you’ll let me know when you’ve got it.”

Rumpelstiltskin merely inclined his head towards her.

“You can see yourself out,” he said eventually. “After all, you see yourself in often enough, and the entrance and the exit are through the same door.”
Regina turned and left him without another word, and Rumpelstiltskin made his way back over to the wheel, giving it a strong pull to get it spinning again.

“A deal requires two interested parties, dearie,” he muttered to himself. “Remember that.”

**Neverland - Present**

Henry ran through the forest, aware of the shadows dogging his every move. He could not hear any footsteps other than his own, but he could hear the displacement of the undergrowth as the semi-corporeal spectres crashed through it in search of their quarry. Further off in the distance, he could hear the whoops and battle cries of the Lost Boys, but they were the lesser of the two evils at that point in time.

Presently he came to an opening in the trees and went for it, but then he stopped short, heart beating painfully in his chest. He was on the edge of a cliff face, looking down into the lagoon that he had stopped beside earlier. He was on the side of the mountain where the waterfall cascaded down, and he was trapped. He hadn’t realised that he’d come so far up. He could hear the shadows approaching either side; there’d be no escape in any direction except down, and that would lead to the mermaids. Henry quickly re-evaluated his options. Jumping down into the lagoon would almost certainly end in sudden death, but Pan, he was pretty sure, wanted him alive. At least, for the time being. So theoretically, it would be easier to surrender to the shadows and let himself be taken to Pan, rather than fight for his life in the water - Henry was not the best of swimmers even if he had not had to contend with mermaids. There was always the chance that he could try to engineer another escape attempt later. Henry took a deep breath. He could do this.

The shadows appeared through the trees and Henry held up his hands in a gesture of defeat.

"I'll come quietly," he said. "But don't come any closer or I'll jump."

The shadows dutifully remained where they were, but it all happened very quickly after that. There was a sudden noise in the trees, one that the shadows had evidently not been expecting, and as they turned to investigate, Emma and Regina's shadows crashed into view, still at war. Henry took an instinctive step out of the way as they barrelled towards him, and he lost his balance on the edge of the cliff. Before he could stop himself, he was tumbling down towards the water. He saw the shadows race after him, but then suddenly pull back, and he wondered for a moment if they were as scared of the mermaids below as he was. Then, he hit the lagoon, closing his eyes as the freezing water came over his head.

It was like a piranha attack, although this time he was inside it, not watching it on the Discovery Channel. The water bubbled around him violently with the movement of the swarming mermaids and he could feel them grabbing at his clothes as he tried to struggle to the surface. Opening his eyes briefly, he could make out their snarling faces surrounding him, and he closed them again as a hand closed around his throat. Then, suddenly, the grasping fingers vanished, as if repelled by a pulse of some sort, and Henry was so shocked by the sensation that he opened his eyes again to try and see what was going on. The mermaids had all gone, all swimming towards the surface, and Henry began to paddle his way to fresh air when an unseen hand grabbed the back of his shirt. For a brief moment, Henry wondered if the other mermaids had gone because a far worse threat had come along and claimed him as its prize, but then he felt himself lifted bodily out of the water and set down on dry land. He choked and spluttered, coughing out the water in his lungs with the aid of the same unseen hand giving him a hefty thwack between the shoulder blades.
"Thanks," he managed to choke out to his rescuer once he was recovered from his impromptu dip. When he turned to find the owner of the hand, however, he was not quite as relieved at being rescued and scrambled to his feet.

"Hey, don’t fall in again," Pan said, shooting an arm out to stop him from toppling back into the water. "I might not be able to stop them a second time."

Henry looked down into the lagoon, at the mermaids who were thrashing about angrily at the surface, their expressions absolutely murderous. A few of them seemed to be growling.

"Don't interfere, Pan," one of them, her tail that of a stingray, hissed. "The water is ours, along with everything in it."

"Everything except him," Pan replied blithely, before turning back to Henry again. "Are you all right?" he asked, and he seemed to be genuinely concerned for the response, which unnerved Henry all the more. "You really should be more careful about not getting yourself killed, you know. It would be a great tragedy to all of us here, not least of all me." He sighed and put his arm around Henry’s shoulders. The younger boy shook it off, but Pan was unperturbed and resumed his grip again, uncomfortably tightly, and Henry knew that it could slip into a chokehold on his neck in a matter of seconds, so he decided upon self-preservation as the best course of action and let himself be guided away from the water’s edge. He could see now that they were on the skull-shaped rock in the centre of the lagoon, and they were heading inside it through the mouth. The idea of the rock swallowing them whole was an unwelcome one, and it made Henry shiver to think about it. Pan caught his unease and laughed, that same cruel, high laugh that he had given just before he had killed Slightly back at the camp.

“There’s really no need to look quite so fearfual, Henry,” he said. “We aren’t doing anything bad. In fact, what we’re doing is very good. It won’t cause any harm to anyone on the island. Or off the island, for that matter. Well, I say no harm. Not much harm, at any rate. And it’ll be relatively painless.” They had entered the rock by this point and were standing in the centre of a large cavern, with several ledges cut into the rock leading up to the high ceiling above them. Henry could see the moon and stars shining in through the eye and nose holes of the skull and he felt very claustrophobic all of a sudden.

“You know, you really are incredibly important to our little operation here,” Pan continued. “Do you know where we are, Henry?” he asked.

“Neverland,” Henry replied flatly. He was in no mood to be patronised by the older boy, nor did he want to play his games. He just wanted to know what he was up against as soon as possible.

“No. Well. Yes. We are in Neverland. But this is Skull Rock, and standing where we are now, we are in the exact centre of the island, the very heart of Neverland. This is where all the magic happens. I’m going to let you into a secret, Henry, because I like you and because given the important role you’re about to play, you need to know what’s what. Not even all the Lost Boys know this. But Neverland is more than a realm. It’s a machine.”

Henry’s brow furrowed as Pan went over to one of the walls and, digging his fingers into one of the ledges at eye level, began to move the façade. It creaked and groaned as it scraped along the floor to reveal more stone behind it, stone that was moving in a complex yet completely silent system of gears, levers and pulleys. Despite his fear, Henry was absolutely fascinated by this new development.

“In order to keep the realm’s placement in time fixed, it must constantly be in motion,” Pan explained, indicating the engine behind him. “But like all machines, Neverland requires fuel. And the
fuel we use here is belief. Now the shadow can collect believers forever, but none of them really have a potent enough belief. But you, Henry… You are the truest believer, and your belief will keep Neverland going into eternity.”

“How do you know all this?” Henry asked. Pan pointed to a rough etching on the cavern wall above the stone engine.

“Neverland is timeless. It exists in the past, present and future simultaneously. Someone, many years ago – or perhaps yesterday, since time is irrelevant here – saw that in the future, the future according to other realms, of course, you would be the key to our salvation.”

Henry shuddered when he saw that the carving was a picture of his own face.

“So, are you ready?” Pan asked eagerly. “Ready to play your part and keep Neverland from the brink of destruction?” He gazed at the vast, silent machinery once more. It appeared to be slowing down, and Pan sighed. “You know, we really don’t have a lot of time. You left it till the very last minute to get here. There’s not a lot of life left in the old girl, and if we don’t do something soon, well, Neverland will cease to exist – and so will everyone on it. This is your chance to be a hero, Henry, like in the fairy tales that you’re so fond of. Your chance to be a saviour, like your mother.”

As tempting as it might have been to someone who had come to Neverland of their own free will, Henry was unconvinced. There was something fundamentally wrong; something that Pan wasn’t telling him.

“What do I need to do?” he asked. He doubted it was as simple as just the abstract act of believing.

“Well, we’ll need your heart,” Pan said, his voice as matter-of-fact as if he was stating the weather, as if asking people to surrender their organs was an everyday occurrence. He moved back over to where Henry was standing and opened a hidden trap door in the floor, revealing a box just the right size for a human heart.

“I can’t just give you my heart!” Henry exclaimed, backing away from Pan but knowing that he had no way out unless he wanted to take his chances with the mermaids again.

“Oh Henry,” Pan scoffed. “You of all people know it’s not lethal. Look at your mother! Your other mother,” he added hastily for clarification. “So many hearts in her vault and their owners are all walking around perfectly alive and well. Of course, we can’t have you walking around in case you throw a spanner in the works, but you’ll still be alive, and you’ll be alive forever more.”

“No!” Henry yelled, rushing away towards the gap in the rock that they had come in through, uncaring of anything except getting as far away from Pan as possible. Something grabbed his shoulder and forced him to turn, and he found himself once more in Pan’s grip. The older boy blew a puff of shimmering powder into Henry’s face, and immediately he felt himself falling asleep.

“I’m afraid, Henry,” Pan’s voice said, sounding ever more distant, “that you really don’t get a choice in the matter.”

Enchanted Forest – Past
The Northern Waters were cold and murky, and Ariel shivered as she swam through them. She could quite see why Triton had forbidden the Southern merfolk from coming here, the presence of the sea witch notwithstanding. Although, speaking of sea witches, Ariel had not seen any sign of her lair, and she paused. Perhaps she had come to the wrong place after all. Perhaps the sea witch really was just a myth among the sailors.

She stopped, drifting in the depths for a while. There was no sea life at all to be found around her for miles, just fronds of seaweed in the misty water, but the air of magic remained. The sea witch had obviously been here, not too long ago, and the fish still cowered in fear of her. Ariel glanced around; where could she be? It was night time on land, and the mermaid could just about see the stars and moon twinkling above her. There was a shape on top of the water, and as she swam up towards it, she quickly saw that it was a small rowing boat, the oars at ease. Who would be rowing in the middle of the night, in the Northern Waters, in the heart of the sea witch’s domain?

Cautiously, Ariel broke the surface without making a sound and looked at the boat and its occupant, who was quite possibly the strangest looking man that she had ever seen. His skin had a scaled appearance, almost like a crocodile’s, but he was a human man, lazing in the bottom of the boat with his feet up on one of the seats, one hand trailing in the water and the other holding a hip flask from which he was sipping, staring up at the sky and paying no attention to Ariel or his surroundings whatsoever. Ariel looked around. There was no sign of dry land for miles around. Where on earth had this man come from?

She swam a little closer and he presently looked over at her, betraying no alarm at her presence, as if he had known that she was there all along.

“Can I help you, dearie?” he asked languidly.

“What are you doing out here?” Ariel asked.

“Fishing,” the man replied.

Ariel observed his lack of nets and rods and raised her eyebrows, but made no comment.

“There aren’t any fish here,” she said instead.

“I never said that I wanted to catch a fish.” The man sat up in the boat and put the hip flask down, leaning on the side and watching Ariel closely. “So, may I ask you the same question? What are you doing out here? It’s a long swim from Triton’s seas and his influence does not protect you from the… unscrupulous entities in these Northern Waters.”

“I’ve come to see the sea witch,” Ariel replied levelly, refusing to let his words make her uneasy. “If you know these waters so well, perhaps you can tell me where she is.”

“Hmm.” The man looked thoughtful for a second. “The sea witch is currently indisposed and unable to take visitors. Can I perhaps help instead?”

“Aren’t you a magician?” Ariel asked.

“Are you a magician?” The man asked.

The man raised an eyebrow and looked down at his general appearance.

“You’re not from round here, are you, dearie?”

“No… I was born in Neverland. I’ve been here just ten years.”

“Neverland…” The man steepled his fingers and smiled. “How very interesting. But still, in answer
to your question, do I look like an ordinary man to you?”

Ariel shook her head, and the man bowed as low as his precarious position sitting in the bottom of the boat would allow.

“Rumpelstiltskin, at your service. So tell me, dearie, what was it that you required the sea witch’s powers for?”

Ariel swam a little closer, venturing to hold onto the side of the boat to speak to him.

“I want to become human,” she said. “I want to have legs.”

“So I see.” Rumpelstiltskin gave a sharp intake of breath and made a face. “Tricky magic, changing species. Takes a lot of work, and the cost to you will be substantial.”

“The cost?”

“Do you think magic spells grow on trees?” Rumpelstiltskin snapped. “Oh no. All magic comes with a price. But that aside, why this desire for human limbs? Legs can be far more trouble than they’re worth.”

“Humans can do so much more than us,” Ariel said. “I want the freedom that you have to do anything and go anywhere. All I can do is swim and explore the seas, but I know there that there is so much more to do.” She thought of Eric and looked away, her face colouring. Rumpelstiltskin leaned in closer.

“Are you sure that’s it?” he asked. “There are no reasons that are somewhat closer to your heart?”

“I’m sure.”

Rumpelstiltskin quirked an eyebrow and sat back in the boat again, resuming his previous aspect.

“Well, if you are certain that you’re prepared for the consequences, then I believe I can help you.”

“Thank you.” Ariel looked expectant and Rumpelstiltskin waved a hand airily.

“Follow me,” he said, and the mermaid jumped back with a splash as the oars began to row of their own accord.

“Where are we going?” she asked, swimming along beside the boat.

“Land, of course,” Rumpelstiltskin replied. “There’s not much point in me giving you legs in the middle of the sea, unless drowning slowly is your idea of exploring the world of the landfolk.”

Ariel had to concede that point, and she continued to follow the boat until a small landing stage became visible through the misty night. Rumpelstiltskin alighted from the boat and looked down at Ariel, still paddling in the shallows.

“Well, you can’t follow me any further than that,” he mused. “Still, come up onto land, dearie. You’ll be spending a lot of time here from now on.”

With some effort, Ariel heaved herself and her tail fully out of the water, sitting down heavily on the end of the jetty and looking up at Rumpelstiltskin.

He produced a contract and a quill from thin air and handed them to her.
“These are the terms and conditions of your transformation,” he explained. “If you agree, sign on the dotted line. If you disagree, well, you can swim off home to the Southern Waters and Triton will be none the wiser of your dabbling in human affairs.”

Ariel skimmed over the contract.

“My voice?” she exclaimed. “What possible use could you have for my voice?”

“All magic comes at a price,” Rumpelstiltskin repeated. “You can either walk or talk, you can’t do both.”

“But how am I supposed to do anything if I can’t speak?” Ariel asked.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Rumpelstiltskin said airily. “Flutter your eyelashes; body language is very important you know. Always carry a pencil with you. Interpretive dance. The possibilities are endless once you start thinking about them.”

Ariel looked down at the contract and the quill in her hand. It was a heavy price to pay, but would it be worth it if she got to spend time with Eric, and explore the landfolk’s world, and see Wendy far more often than she did now?

The mermaid took a deep breath and signed her name at the bottom of the parchment, whereupon it promptly rolled itself up and vanished, and Rumpelstiltskin clapped his hands together with glee.

“Perfect. First things first.” He snapped his fingers and a pink dress appeared on Ariel’s body, her fin peeking out from under it. “We don’t want you scaring the locals now.” He held out a vial in front of her. “Your voice, please.”

“How…” Ariel began, but then he touched one clawed fingertip to her throat and the words choked and died, and she clutched her neck as she began to cough uncontrollably, as if something was lodged in her throat; she couldn’t breathe. Finally, she coughed up the obstruction and spat it into the vial on instinct. It was a shimmering ball, floating and pulsing in the tiny glass bottle.

It was in that moment that the transformation began, her tail feeling like it was ripping in two. It was ripping in two; legs forming from the flesh. The pain was excruciating, but Ariel grit her teeth through it, and finally it died down. When she opened her eyes, dainty little pink feet were showing under the dress where her green-scaled fin had been before. Taking a peep down the neck of the dress, she realising that all her scales had vanished and she was thankful for Rumpelstiltskin’s foresight in providing her with clothing.

The magician offered her is hand to help her up and she took it, getting shakily to her feet, stumbling several times before finally gaining her balance.

“So how does it feel?” he asked. Ariel opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out, and Rumpelstiltskin smiled, holding up the vial containing her voice and peering at it closely in the moonlight.

“Oh yes. This is just what I need. This will do very nicely indeed.”

He began to walk away down the landing stage into the mist. Ariel tried to call him back, ask him how she was meant to proceed, but it was a silent and fruitless endeavour.
In spite of the invasions of outsiders bearing ill will and evil queen mothers attempting to become all powerful, and in spite of the sudden and unexpected departure of several of the town’s most prominent citizens, for the rest of Storybrooke’s inhabitants, life continued in the same way that it had always done. These people who had been princes or peasants back home in the Enchanted Forest had new lives, new careers in the Land Without Magic, and these lives did not change to accommodate the town’s strange circumstances.

So, despite the turmoil facing those who had gone to Neverland, every morning like clockwork, Ariel and Eric set out on their boat to secure the day’s catch. It was somewhat ironic in Ariel’s eyes that the curse had turned a former mermaid into a fishmonger, but she had not made mention of the fact to anyone on regaining her memories. She just kept on in the way she’d always done during her previous twenty-eight years in Storybrooke.

It was a cold, grey morning, overcast and just past dawn, when the pair reached their usual fishing spot and lowered the nets. Ariel huddled up in her life-jacket and overalls, wishing that she’d worn a thicker jumper. It was not the most ideal of existences and certainly not the one that she would have chosen for herself, but it was what she was used to.

Presently she gave a shiver unrelated to the low temperature. She had the sudden feeling of someone walking over her grave; a sensation of being watched by someone not particularly friendly.

“Are you all right?” Eric asked. Ariel nodded, giving him a thumbs up. The curse had given her a comprehensive understanding of American Sign Language, and her husband a partial knowledge of it, and that was probably the only thing for which she was grateful to Regina. Even so, they still sometimes slipped back into the old shorthand sign language that they’d developed between them back in the Enchanted Forest.

The sudden shiver came again, stronger this time, and Ariel could see that Eric had felt it too. He looked up sharply from the ropes and glanced around at the slightly choppy sea, the only thing that could be seen for miles around.

“Did you feel that?” he asked her. Ariel nodded. Something definitely wasn’t right in the atmosphere, and Ariel began to feel the distinct and unpleasant sensation of dread. Now what could be causing such a disturbance, and how could they hope to defeat it with the town’s primary magic users and first line of defence against strange goings on out of the country – out of the realm, even?

Ariel gestured back towards the docks and signed to Eric: We should go back. I don’t feel safe out here.

Eric nodded, his expression worried.

“I completely agree. There’s certainly no fish to be had out here today,” he said, lamenting the emptiness of their nets. “Whatever it is out there, it’s obviously scared off the sea life as well as us.”

Ariel went to help him haul the nets in, and it was then that it happened. Had she been able to scream, she would have screamed herself hoarse. As they pulled the nets in, a great dark shape rose up from the murky Atlantic waters and hovered above the boat for a moment. It was a shadow, Ariel realised, human in shape but with terrifying yellow eyes burning brightly in the dim morning light. There had been mutterings in the town about shadows at the boundary yesterday, was this something to do with those spectral visitors, and was it friend or foe? Instinct told Ariel that it was a foe, from the way it loomed in such an intimidating fashion and the way its eyes were boring into her. A split second later, she was proved correct when it swooped down, heading straight towards her. Ariel
threw herself down on the deck to avoid it, and she heard Eric rush towards her to cover her.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed, trying to keep himself between the shadow, which was coming back for a second round, and Ariel, the obvious object of its quest. Ariel scrambled out of sight behind the piled up nets, but it was not enough to perturb the shadow, despite Eric’s best efforts. Ariel gave a silent scream as the ghostly shape grabbed her husband by his life-jacket, picked him bodily off the deck and threw him at the cabin. He landed against it with a sickening smack and stayed there, unmoving. Her own safety be damned; Ariel couldn’t leave him like that, and she raced over to him as fast as she was able. The boat had begun to pitch wildly thanks to the shadow’s violent antics, and it rolled in the increasingly rough waters as Ariel pressed a hand to Eric’s clammy neck. He was still breathing and she could feel a pulse, but there was blood oozing rapidly from a deep cut on the back of his head where he had hit the cabin.

She didn’t have time to do anything to help him before the shadow was back, clutching and grasping at her life-jacket. Ariel tried to swat it away but it was to no avail – what use could it be against something that wasn’t really there? The shadow succeeded in lifting her, and Ariel thought that she was going to meet the same fate as Eric until she felt one of its semi-solid hands close around her neck, and she scrabbled for a few moments before deciding that there was only one thing to do that might possibly help her. Fishing around in her pocket, Ariel took out the sturdy knife that she always carried on the boat, unsheathed it and slashed at the shadow’s hands and face. Amazingly, it worked, to annoy it and throw it off balance even if it did not cause it any pain. The shadow released its grip on her, letting her drop back down onto the deck, landing sprawled and winded on her stomach. She couldn’t grab anything in time before the violent motion of the boat sent her flying overboard and she landed in the sea, bobbing about awkwardly, saved by her life-jacket. The shadow was coming towards her again, its determination to catch her unfailing, and Ariel knew that she was a sitting duck. Her knife was still on the deck of the boat where she had dropped it when she landed, so she wrestled herself free of her life-jacket and dived under the surface of the water just as the shadow came upon her. The sudden disappearance of its prey didn’t stop it, however, and it simply followed her down beneath the waves.

A throwback to her mermaid days was that Ariel’s breath control, even underwater, was extraordinary, but it did not remove her need to breathe entirely. If it came down to a test of endurance then the shadow, which had no lungs, would inevitably win. Ariel clung to the bottom of the fishing boat. All she could do was stay down here and play dead, and hope that it worked. She had no idea how intelligent the spectre might be. Would it be fooled by a faked drowning?

She had no other choice. She couldn’t stay down here under the boat forever. Ariel let out the breath she was holding in a burst of bubbles in the shadow’s face, and closed her eyes, staying as still as she possibly could and hoping against all hope that her deception had worked. She couldn’t open her eyes to check without betraying herself; she could only guess.

It felt like the shadow had gone. All during its presence she had felt a certain unease, and now that felt lifted, although it could be that she was simply getting light-headed from lack of oxygen. She would need to come up for air soon no matter what, so she opened her eyes and glanced around. The spectre was gone, and with her chest burning, Ariel let go of the keel and swam upwards, gasping for breath as she broke the surface. There was still no sign of the shadow, and Ariel wasted no thought on where it had gone to, instead concentrating on getting back on board the boat and getting back to Eric. Finally she managed to heave herself up and onto the deck; the boat was still pitching and rolling but the waters appeared to be calming now that the shadow was gone.

Eric was still in the same position as before – still unconscious, still bleeding – when Ariel managed to make her way over to him. She didn’t want to think about how badly he had been hurt, but as much as she wanted to stay with him, she simply couldn’t. She had to get them back to safety so that
he could receive the medical attention that he so desperately needed.

Ariel dragged herself away from Eric and into the cabin, starting the boat’s rickety old engine and picking up the radio that served as the connection between the boat and the mainland. She’d never had to use it before; what point was there? But now, she had to make herself understood.

She pressed the button to transmit and pondered for a moment before letting go. Immediately, she heard Grimsby’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Ariel?” he crackled. “Ariel, is that you?”

Ariel had never fully seen eye to eye with Grimsby, but she’d never been as happy to hear from him as in that second. Morse code. Grimsby would understand Morse code.

She made an experimental clicking noise with her tongue before laboriously making the letters Y-E-S.


S-O-S S-E-N-D H-E-L-P E-R-I-C H-U-R-T

“Oh good lord. Help is on the way, Ariel!”

Ariel breathed a long sigh of relief as she continued to pilot the boat back towards the town, but she did not feel completely at ease until she saw the ambulance waiting at the docks, Grimsby looking anxious beside it, and the small motorboat coming out to meet her and guide her in. It was only once Eric was safely on his way to hospital that she had any real opportunity to think about the traumatic events that she had just experienced. What the hell had just happened?

It was with a fresh wave of terror that Ariel realised she had seen that shadow before, a very long time ago.

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

Ariel leaned on the balcony of her and Eric’s bedroom in the palace, looking out to the sea she had once called home. She was happy, but she couldn’t help feeling at that there was something missing. She knew what it was, of course. She brought a hand up to her throat, feeling the absence of her voice acutely.

“Ariel?”

She turned to look over her shoulder as Eric entered the room and came over to the balcony to take her in his arms, and she twisted fully in his embrace to kiss him.

“Are you all right, my love?” he asked. “You’ve seemed despondent ever since we returned from our last visit to the Northern Kingdoms.”

Ariel glanced back at the sea one final time then smiled and nodded. She was all right. Physically there was nothing wrong with her. It was just her voice, the voice that Eric had never heard. He’d recognised her the moment she had ventured back into his kingdom and their paths had crossed; he knew her as the girl from the ball with the red hair and the beautiful smile. She had never said a word
to him, but they communicated well enough in their own way, and Eric had learned to listen to her smiles, her frowns, and the way she moved her head as well as looking to her silent lips for confirmation of her train of thought.

“I was wondering if you’d like to take a boat trip out to the cove tonight,” Eric said conversationally. “Just the two of us, no courtiers or servants constantly fussing around. I could ask the cook to make us a picnic.”

Ariel smiled and nodded her consent.

“Excellent, I shall go and made the arrangements straight away. To be perfectly honest, I need to get away from my mother if nothing else. She’s been bending my ear about her lack of grandchildren again. Apparently six months is plenty of time to begin the production of heirs.” He gave Ariel a sly smile and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Who knows, maybe by the time we return she’ll have her wish.”

Ariel looked away as he left her, back out to sea. She wasn’t sure if their difficulty conceiving was down to some kind of physical incompatibility, the fact she was not human by birth. It certainly had nothing to do with a lack of enthusiasm on either her or Eric’s part. She supposed that the truth would have to come out sooner or later, but how could she tell him without a voice; how could she explain it?

“I love you,” Eric called back to her at the doorway. Ariel turned and mouthed the sentiment back to him. She had never heard herself say the words out loud, no matter how many times her tongue had formed the necessary shapes. That was the only reason that she wanted her voice, really, aside from making life easier. She wanted to be able to say those three magical words: I love you.

Eric had happily accepted her silence without batting an eyelid, and she knew that several of his less forward-thinking and refined aides had congratulated him on his choice of a bride who could not answer back or protest in any way. Not that Eric himself would ever take advantage of her inability to communicate verbally, but sometimes, Ariel’s skin crawled whenever she saw the older men of his acquaintance, and what they thought that the status of her and Eric’s marriage was.

“Ariel?”

Ariel jumped, she had not heard Wendy’s knock nor her entry into the room and onto the balcony.

“Are you all right?” Wendy asked. It had been one of Ariel’s first acts after she had come to live at the palace – to make Wendy her lady-in-waiting. It had caused much consternation and many ruffled feathers in the household that Wendy, a foundling washed up on the beaches as a young woman with no family, no connections and no money, should be elevated from obscurity to the personal favourite of the new princess, but since the princess herself was without family, connections and money, perhaps it made sense.

If Ariel had been able to groan, she would have done so. As it was, she merely rested her head on her arms on the balcony railing.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Wendy pressed again, coming over and putting her arms around her friend. “Is everything well with Eric?”

Ariel nodded. Eric wasn’t the problem. She was herself. She sighed before straightening and touching her throat.

“You miss your voice,” Wendy surmised, and Ariel nodded again before turning her attention back
to the water where the sunset was just beginning to paint a streak of pale pink over the calm surface. Wendy assumed the same aspect, leaning on the balcony. “Do you want to go back to the sea?” she continued.

Ariel shook her head vigorously. She just wished that her voice and her legs could co-exist in the same space.

“Have you ever thought…” Wendy began, but then she tailed off. Ariel looked across at her inquisitively. “True Love’s Kiss can break any curse,” Wendy finished, her voice somewhat flat.

Ariel pondered for a while. Maybe that was the key after all. True Love was the most powerful magic of all, more powerful than Rumpelstiltskin was, and Ariel was certain that what she and Eric had was True Love. But then, they had kissed many times and Ariel remained silent. Again, her thoughts returned to those three simple words that she had never actually given voice to. I love you. Could it be that the magic wasn’t working because she had not expressed her love? But how could she do that if she had no voice in the first place? It was a vicious cycle, but perhaps some kind of compromise could be reached.

Suddenly, she had a brainwave, and she threw her arms around Wendy, who took it all in her stride and patted her friend’s back before the redhead started rushing around the room, gathering up an outdoor cloak and boots.

“Wait, Ariel, where are you going?” Wendy ran inside after her. Ariel looked around before mouthing to her friend one word: Rumpelstiltskin.

Wendy shook her head. “Oh no, Ariel, don’t make a deal with him…”

Ariel looked down at her legs then back up at Wendy. Wendy had always assumed ever since Ariel had arrived on land that her friend had been successful in her quest to see the sea witch, and Ariel had never corrected her. Until now.

I already did.

Wendy just looked on in horror as Ariel ran from the room, and she was still standing there when Eric re-entered, looking rather taken aback to see her.

“Oh, Wendy, I wasn’t expecting to find you here. Where’s Ariel?”

“I…” Wendy began. Should she tell Eric that his wife had gone to see the dread magician in a bid to get her voice back? “I don’t know. She was gone when I came in.”

“Oh.” He made to leave the room. “I’ll go and find her. If you see her, tell her that everything’s ready and I’ll meet her by the landing stage.”

Wendy nodded her acquiescence, and sighed as Eric left the room.

“Oh Ariel,” she murmured. “What have you done?”

X

Ariel’s confidence was waning somewhat now that she had reached the Dark Castle. It was not too far away from the palace, only a couple of hours’ ride to the North, but nestled in the foothills of the mountains it was an imposing, forbidding place, especially at night when one came upon its main façade. The gates opened without any kind of influence as she approached and Ariel shivered, but kept her head held high, and she continued up the driveway. Again, the heavy doors opened for her
unbidden, and Ariel cautiously stepped inside the entrance hall, looking around for signs of life. She had not seen the interior of the castle the last time that she had been here, and only the jetty and the grounds to the rear.

“Well well well, what have we here?”

Ariel jumped and gave a silent scream as she heard the voice behind her, and she turned to see Rumpelstiltskin standing calmly in the entry way.

“Ah, the mermaid who wanted legs. Tell me, how is life on land treating you?” He came a little closer, strolling around the large table in the centre of the entryway. “Not exceedingly well, I presume, or you would not be here. It’s rare for people to return for a second deal with me,” he added. “Are you sure that you can afford the cost?”

Ariel brought her hand up to her throat again.

“Aha, you come in search of a voice. You want it back, I presume?”

Ariel nodded.

“I thought as much. The question is, do you want your tail back?”

Ariel shook her head and Rumpelstiltskin smiled, an unnerving smile that showed too many of his mossy teeth.

“I thought as much of that as well. But as I said before, dearie, you have to make a choice. You can’t have the best of both worlds.”

Ariel looked down at her wedding ring and twisted it around her finger, and unconsciously she brought her hand up to her mouth, remembering the last time that Eric had kissed her.

“True Love’s Kiss?” Rumpelstiltskin suggested. “Ah yes, True Love’s Kiss, the breaker of all curses, that wonderful magical failsafe to everything you could possibly imagine. And since your voice has remained… absent, are you doubting the veracity of your love, perhaps?”

Ariel did not respond, although the fear was playing heavily on the back of her mind now, the more she thought about it, the more insidious it became. Could it be that Eric had only wed her to continue his family line? And what would happen if she could not bear him children due to her species?

Rumpelstiltskin gave a low snort.

“Fear not, Princess, your love is true. The problem lies in the fact that there is no curse to break.”

Ariel looked at him sharply, and he spread his hands with a shrug.

“Your voice is a legitimate price, agreed by you in writing.” He snapped his fingers and the contract that Ariel had signed all those months before appeared in his hand, her name clearly inked at the bottom. “Your silence is no curse, although it might feel like one to you. There’s no dark magic at work here. So run along, dearie, back to your loving husband, and be grateful that unlike some other princesses who want more than they can have, your dealings with me are complete.”

Ariel nodded. There was a dangerous tone in Rumpelstiltskin’s voice now, and she knew that she was fast outstaying her already limited welcome. She turned to leave the castle, at least now assured in her and Eric’s love, even if she would never say the words aloud to him. At the gates she turned back to glance over her shoulder. Rumpelstiltskin was still standing in the entrance hall, watching her.
leave, and Ariel shuddered. She pitied the poor soul whose dealings with him were not yet done.

**Storybrooke – Present**

As soon as Neal and Belle had heard the whisperings and gossip in the town of a fishing boat being attacked by a mysterious shadow, they had exchanged a worried look and immediately started to try and find out more.

“It wouldn’t be Rumpel’s shadow, would it?” Belle asked. “I can’t believe that it would do something like that.”

Neal shook his head.

“No, it wouldn’t. It has no reason to. But Rumpelstiltskin’s is not the only shadow out there, and it might be the one we’d rather not meet.”

Belle knew that for the purposes of getting Neal to Neverland, any shadow would do, be it friend or foe, but from all the things that she had heard Wendy and Neal say about Pan’s shadow, she certainly did not want to meet it if at all possible.

“You think it’s Pan’s,” she said to Neal. It was a statement, not a question. He nodded grimly.

“It’s certainly malicious enough to do something like this. Shadows aren’t normally malicious. They protect, they don’t attack.” Neal was remembering Mulan’s words to him, back in the Enchanted Forest, when he had realised his father’s shadow’s true intentions. “Except Pan’s.”

“But why a fishing boat of all things? Surely that posed no threat to it, unless it was a random act of violence.”

Neal shrugged, and they continued to make their way towards the hospital where the victim was recuperating in silence.

“A display of wanton violence does appear to be the only explanation,” Neal said eventually. “But aside from that, why is Pan’s shadow here in the first place? Not that I’m not glad to have the chance of catching it, but it doesn’t make sense by all accounts.”

“You would think that it would be in Neverland, on hand to help Pan,” Belle agreed. “Unless… Yes, that might be plausible.”

“What? You look like you’ve had a brainwave.”

“Pan can’t cross realms but his shadow can. For as long as anyone can remember, Pan has used his shadow to do his bidding in other realms – selecting his victims and taking them back to Neverland. Who’s to say it’s not doing exactly the same thing here? Protecting Pan’s interests in other realms.”

“It makes sense, but why would he want to attack a fishing boat of all things?”

“I don’t know, we’ll just have to wait to find out more.”

They had reached the hospital by this time and they entered reception cautiously, Neal bundling them down a corridor before anyone could notice they were there and ask them what they were doing. Furtively they continued to creep along the corridors, listening in to what conversations they could
until they surmised both that they were getting closer to where they needed to be and that the victim of the shadow’s attack was in a serious but stable condition.

“Ok,” Neal murmured as they rounded the corner and came upon the victim’s family. “I think I might know why the shadow chose that particular boat.”

Belle looked across at the family group. Wendy was consoling a young redheaded woman, and an older man looked on, worried.

“That’s Ariel, isn’t it?” she hissed. “The mermaid from Neverland?”

“I would think it highly likely,” Neal muttered. “This puts a whole different spin on things now.”

“Everything links back to Neverland.” Belle sighed. They were at something of an impasse. On the one hand, time was of the essence. On the other, they were about to interrupt a family in the midst of tragedy and emotional upheaval. Presently Wendy looked up and saw them, then murmured something to Ariel, who nodded. Wendy beckoned to Neal.

“Go on,” Belle said, encouraging him forward. “You’ve had far more experience with shadows than I have. You know what you’re talking about. I’ll head back to the shop.”

Neal nodded his agreement and went over to Wendy and Ariel as Belle turned to leave.

“Ariel, Neal Cassidy. Neal, Ariel,” Wendy said as he approached, her introductions short and to the point.

_Baelfire_, Ariel mouthed clearly.

Neal nodded. “Yes, that is me.” He glanced at Wendy, who shrugged.

“You’re family,” she said. “You came up in conversation a lot.”

Ariel looked over at the room where Eric was being looked after in Intensive Care, and Neal could tell that she was itching to get back to her husband.

“I won’t keep you long, I just want to get to the bottom of things,” he said. “I’m so sorry for what’s happened.”

Ariel gave a wan smile and she indicated the small family waiting room at the end of the corridor. Wendy and Neal followed her along to it and they sat down by mutual consent, all rather awkward and nervous in their manners.

“The shadow…” Neal began.

_Pan_. Even without any voice behind the words, Neal could tell that it had been spoken with an intense bitterness and vitriol.

“Are you absolutely sure?” he asked.

Ariel nodded grimly. Neal believed her; Pan’s shadow was not one that was easily forgotten after it had been witnessed, and it backed up his theory. What he really wanted to know was whether the shadow was still in Storybrooke or whether it had gone the way of Rumpelstiltskin’s and returned to its owner in Neverland. If it was still here, they stood a chance in hell of catching it instead of having to start from scratch again, but he didn’t know how to broach the subject without seeming callous.

“Where did it go?” he asked. Ariel spread her hands and shook her head; she didn’t know. She only
knew that it was there one minute and gone the next.

“Have you got any idea why it would attack Eric?” Wendy asked.

Ariel shook her head, an exasperated huff of breath escaping her, and she indicating herself.

“It attacked you?”

The former mermaid nodded.

“How did you escape it?” Wendy asked. Ariel looked around for a moment, still frustrated, and finally mimed writing. Wendy sourced a pen from her handbag and glanced around the room for paper, but her friend was already scribbling on her hand.

_Played possum_, she wrote. Her hands were shaking so much that the writing was barely legible. _It wanted me dead. Tried to kill me. Saved it the trouble._

“You don’t think it would have paid any attention to the boat if you hadn’t been on it?” Neal asked.

“And Eric was only hurt because he was protecting you?”

Ariel nodded again, and in that moment, Neal realised what was going on.

“Oh jeez…” He scrubbed his hands over his face as Wendy quirked an eyebrow at his sudden exclamation. “Belle was right.” He turned back to Ariel. “Thank you. And my thoughts are with you, and your husband. I hope everything turns out ok.”

_Thanks_, Ariel mouthed.

“What’s going on, Neal?” Wendy asked, her voice alarmed as he jumped from his chair and made to leave the waiting room.

“I’ll tell you later,” Neal called to her as he sprinted away from them down the corridor. “Wendy, keep Ariel safe! I have a feeling we’re not out of the woods just yet!”

Wendy and Ariel looked at each other, and Ariel raised her eyebrows to question her new acquaintance’s erratic behaviour.

“Well, that’s encouraging,” Wendy muttered. She sighed. “Neal knows what he’s doing. He’ll get to the bottom of it, and Grimsby and I will take care of you.”

Ariel bit her lip.

_Thanks._

Neal raced down the passageways and back into reception, startling several doctors and nurses on his way past before he caught up to Belle, halfway down the street.

“Neal? What’s up?”

“Pan’s shadow,” Neal began, panting as he came to a stop beside her. “I know what it’s doing. It’s cutting off all the links to Neverland. It’s stranding them there. Well. Making sure they can’t get outside help. Think about it. Ariel’s the only mermaid to have swum across realms to our knowledge. Even if she’s not, she’s likely the only mermaid in Storybrooke right now. And it was going for her, not the boat. Eric was collateral damage. It meant to kill her, stop her from crossing realms again. Luckily it’s pretty literal. It doesn’t have a brain so it’s quite easy to fool.”
“Oh no…” Belle shook her head, worried. “If it wants to cut us off then it’ll be going after all things that can be used to cross realms. The bean fields are barren, and the Hatter’s hat is destroyed. That only leaves one method, as far as I can see.”

Neal nodded. “The shadow itself. It’ll be going after the Eternal Light so that we can’t capture it.”

They took off in the direction of the pawn shop, and as soon as they reached it, Neal and Belle could tell at once that something was wrong. The side door that led into the workroom had been forced open; the wood around the lock was splintered.

“Shadows are semi-corporeal, they can come and go through magical barriers but not physical ones,” Belle said. “All the same, this looks like it was done with more brute strength than I’d expect from a shadow.”

It was dark inside the shop despite it being mid-morning; they had left the blinds shut since their exploits with the Eternal Light the previous day, and barely any of the room could be seen through the small sliver that the broken lock presented. Belle pressed her ear up against the glass panel and listened for a moment. She heard a small tinkle, like fine china or delicate crystal breaking.

“Someone’s still in there,” she hissed to Neal. “Do we sneak or do we go in on the offensive?” She gave a snort of bitter laughter. “Ordinary I’d say ‘call the sheriff’, but she and the deputy are in Neverland.”

“Offensive,” Neal said. “We need to startle it, shock it. Maybe that way we can capture it.”

He flung the door open and the shadow stopped in its tracks, hovering over by the shelf where the Eternal Light sat. Or rather, where it had sat until Neal and Belle had left the shop earlier that morning. There was no sign of it now.

“Something’s wrong,” Belle said immediately.

The shadow made no move to attack them, as Neal had said, the suddenness of their entry had startled it. But there was no sign of the Eternal Light anywhere on its person, or anywhere in the shop at all.

“What’s wrong?” Neal asked.

“The light has gone. The shadow doesn’t have it. Why would it still be searching if it did?” She took in the empty shelves and the piles of broken junk on the floor, evidently swept from the shelves by an impatient spectral arm.

“Christ, you’re right,” Neal muttered. “Where the hell has it gone?”

“And how are you going to capture that thing without it?” Belle added.

“I’ve done it before,” Neal said. There was a tone of conviction in his voice, an air of ‘do it or die trying’. “I can do it again.”

The shadow made to come towards them, floating a little further forward, its arms outstretched. Neal flicked on his lighter, holding it out towards the shadow. It was only a small flame, but it was enough to keep the already stunned phantom at bay, and he looked around the untidy workroom, frantically searching for something that he could use as a container before finally deciding to cut his losses.

“There’s nothing else for it,” he said. “Here goes.”
“Oh no, Neal, you’re not really going to…”

“It’s now or never, Belle. The flame won’t hold it back much longer, and we might not have another chance.”

“Be careful!”

Neal nodded, and he took a running leap towards the shadow, making to grab hold of one of its limbs. The shadow, although still a little dazed, caught on to what was happening immediately and tried to shake him off, but Neal had a firm hold on its legs.

“You know where to go,” he said, wrestling against its attempts to dislodge him. “Now take me there!”

The shadow stopped struggling and Belle pressed a hand over her mouth, recognising the move for what it was – the calm before the storm. Before she could make any further warnings, the shadow shot off at top speed, Neal still clinging to it, and it burst through the nearest window, sending shards of glass flying. Apparently, the semi-corporeal shadows could be extremely corporeal when they wanted to be. Belle rushed outside and watched as Neal climbed further and further into the air, still showering bits of glass but otherwise unharmed from his ordeal. All around her, people were coming out into the street having heard the commotion from the pawn shop, and the air became an all-out pandemonium of panicked screams and exclamations.

There was a flash of golden light as the shadow passed through the protection spell, and soon no more could be seen of either it or its passenger. The town remained in stunned stillness for a while before all eyes turned to Belle and the shop.

“Belle, what’s going on?”

“What happened?”

“What was that thing? Was it the same shadow that attacked Ariel and Eric earlier?”

“Where’ve they gone?”

“He’s gone to help the others in Neverland,” Belle said, trying to make herself heard above the cacophony of questions that were being directed at her before giving it up as a bad job and raising her hands in a gesture of surrender.

“All right, all right, give her some room.”

The voice was a familiar and very welcome one, and it had the desired effect. Dove came through the crowds towards the shop, his little avian companion still perched on his shoulder, tucked in against his neck. The bustle of people parted for him; although he had been a nondescript messenger bird in his previous life, his identity in Storybrooke as Mr Gold’s infamous enforcer left a long shadow in people’s memories, and all knew better than to cross him.

“Thank you, Mr Dove,” Belle said gratefully as he reached her and stood in the pawn shop doorway looking menacing.

“No trouble at all, Miss. Let me know what you need.”

“A locksmith and a glazier,” Belle replied with a sigh, looking at the ruined door and shattered window. She turned back to the gathered crowd. “Neal has gone to help the others in Neverland,” she repeated. “Hopefully, the shadow shouldn’t be bothering us again.”
Not completely satisfied with this, the crowd nonetheless began to dissipate and Belle began to survey the extent of the damage again.

“And if it does come back, then we have a method against it,” she murmured to herself. “If we can find it again. I was right, though. That door was forced by something stronger than a shadow.” To Dove, she said: “I’d better get this cleaned up. Could you try to find something to cover the window with?”

“Righto, Miss.”

Dove left the shop doorway and Belle entered the cool workroom once more to fetch a dustpan and brush to clean up the broken glass on the street outside. Who could have taken the Eternal Light, and why on earth would they want it? Did they even know what it was and how it worked?

Belle cast a cursory glance around the shop, both front and back, but nothing else seemed to be missing, and in reality, she and Neal had not left the place unattended for all that long. This couldn’t be the work of an opportunistic sneak thief. Why would they take an old lantern but leave the cash register untouched? No, someone had been watching out for them, waiting for them to leave the shop for their window of opportunity.

As she turned, something caught Belle’s eye on the floor beside the shelf where the Eternal Light had stood. It glittered slightly in the sunlight that now streamed into the back room in an intense beam through the missing window’s ruined blinds, and Belle went over to investigate.

She bent down, reaching out to touch it tentatively, and the sparkling substance transferred to her fingers. It was fairy dust; she remembered it from the Enchanted Forest when she had saved Philip. It looked the same and smelled the same, a sweet, almost sickly smell of pure, distilled fae magic, and it was unusually warm to the touch.

Their thief had fairy dust. Fairy dust that, in no great coincidence, was missing from the fairies’ stocks at the convent. Astrid and Theresa had only one possible suspect in mind when it came to the theft, and Belle had no doubts that the same person was responsible for the break-in at the pawn shop.

“Mother Superior,” Belle muttered drily. “What have you been doing?”

It seemed farfetched for the Blue Fairy to want the Eternal Light and more so for her to resort to petty crime in order to get it, but after her previous altercations with the fairies’ leader, Belle knew that she would not put anything past the older woman. The only problem would be pinning any evidence on her. Unperturbed, Belle carefully brushed up the fairy dust and scooped it into a spare potion vial before continuing to clean up. She was going to get to the bottom of this once and for all.

Enchanted Forest – Past

“Rumpelstiltskin?” Regina was feeling in a particularly charitable mood as she made her way through the Dark Castle’s corridors to wherever the Dark One himself was hiding. She had already checked the main hall, but his spinning wheel was abandoned there, so now she was making her way through the west wing towards his tower, a place she remembered from her days as his apprentice, but had not set foot in for a very long time.

“Rumpelstiltskin?” she called again.
“Yes, yes, you’ve made your presence felt, what is it, dearie?”

Regina turned on her heel and entered the room that Rumpelstiltskin’s voice had emanated from, and she had to do a double take at the sight that met her.

“Going somewhere, Rumpel?” she asked, looking around at the array of trunks and packing crates that were piled around the room.

“Aren’t we all going somewhere?” Rumpelstiltskin asked benignly without looking up from his packing. “We’re all going on a little trip very soon, if you have your way.”

Regina huffed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she snapped.

“Oh, you will, dearie, in time. Tell me, have you still got that curse that you almost paid an arm and a leg for, or did you give it away? A little birdy told me that you’d gone and done swapsies with another sorcerer and procured yourself a sleeping curse. Tut tut tut.” He finally looked up at her and shook his head in disapproval. “It’s bad taste to go around swapping spells that aren’t yours to swap in the first place. What will Maleficent do with the Dark Curse, do you think?”

“I don’t see what the Dark Curse has to do with any of this,” Regina said irritably, her earlier good mood rapidly slipping in the presence of Rumpelstiltskin’s annoying habits. “Now, stop speaking in riddles, because we have a deal to fulfil.”

“Do we?” Rumpelstiltskin looked ponderous for a moment. “Interestingly enough, I don’t remember anything overdue on either side, and I remember every deal that I make.”

Regina rolled her eyes.

“Several months ago, I asked you if you could procure a mermaid’s voice for me. Several months ago, a very mysterious young lady with no voice in her throat arrived in the Peninsula and promptly married the heir to the throne there having come from nowhere, almost as if she’d been borne in on a sea wave. Now, you know as well as I do that Princess Ariel is a former mermaid, and since the sea witch is currently still taking pride of place in the pond in the summer palace grounds, I’m assuming that her legs came from another magician in the immediate vicinity.”

Rumpelstiltskin leaned back against one of the half-emptied bookshelves and regarded Regina with an amused expression.

“You are referring, of course, to this?” He opened his palm to show her the bottle that contained Ariel’s swirling voice, and it disappeared with a snap of his fingers.

“That’s exactly what I’m referring to.”

“Hmm.” Rumpelstiltskin held up the bottle in his other hand, closed his fist around it and showed her his empty palm again. Regina sighed with frustration.

“We had a deal, Rumpelstiltskin,” she said.

“Except, we didn’t, actually.” Rumpelstiltskin leaped over one of the crates as Regina came towards him, bounding out of her reach.

“I asked you to procure a mermaid’s voice for me,” Regina growled.

“No, you asked me to procure a mermaid’s voice, which I have done. However, you never mentioned what you would give me in return for that mermaid’s voice. Ergo, no deal was made, and
I am under no obligation to pass on this lovely little bauble to you.”

“What do you want for it?” Regina asked.

“Hmm…” Rumpelstiltskin held the bottle up to the light and studied it carefully for a few moments before it vanished out of his fingers once more. “No, this one isn’t for dealing.”

“Rumpel, what possible use do you have of it?”

“Always handy to have one in stock,” Rumpelstiltskin said blithely. “What possible use do you have of it?”

“Snow White…” Regina began.

Yes, yes, Snow White and Prince Charming, threatened with death, destruction, dismemberment, extreme hair loss and erectile dysfunction, blah blah blah.” He held up a hand to prevent Regina retorting. “Well, it looks like you’ll have to go back to your old pal Maleficent and organise another trade if you want to make good on those threats. Meanwhile, I have an appointment with a certain princess who wishes to renegotiate a deal, and I already know that it is one from which I will not be returning. So scurry along, Your Majesty, I have lots to do to make everything ready for my prolonged absence.” He flapped his hands, shooing her towards the door again. Once the queen was gone, Rumpelstiltskin smiled to himself. Everything was falling into place.

**Neverland – Present**

Rumpelstiltskin, hidden in the shadows of the forest by the lagoon, stared out at Skull Rock. In the darkness, the shape was only barely discernible, but Rumpelstiltskin remembered it well enough, and he shivered at the memory of that time, so far back in his past, when he had first come to Neverland. Convinced that there was nothing around that would pose an impasse, he left his hiding place and made his way down to the water’s edge. The lagoon was absolutely teeming with mermaids, their fins flapping angrily and their expressions fierce and snarling when they came closer to the surface. Something had angered them; they’d been cheated of a victim and now they were champing at the bit for fresh meat, their agitated movement turning the water foaming and choppy.

Rumpelstiltskin looked over to the other side of the lagoon where several small coracles were moored, and with a snap of his fingers, one of the boats floated over to him, borne on a wind of magic. He had no intention of giving the mermaids their prize today. He stepped into the little boat and began to paddle it slowly towards Skull Rock; he was aware of the presence of his shadow beside him, hovering obediently and awaiting further instruction but obviously aware of further perils out there in the darkness – it had returned to him, but not reattached itself. As they neared the rock, he turned to his spectral companion.

“Are they safe?” he asked. “Belle, and Bae?”

The shadow gave a curt nod and Rumpelstiltskin let out a long breath of relief. It was all going to be all right. No matter what happened on Skull Rock when he finally reached it and met his destiny, he could meet it knowing that the woman he loved was unharmed and that his son was alive and well. The shadow continued to stay beside him for a few moments until Rumpelstiltskin pointed at the rock they were headed towards and indicated for the shadow to make a circuit, searching out any kind of an ambush that might have been waiting for them.
The shadow returned, shaking its head.

“So, Pan,” Rumpelstiltskin murmured. “It’s just you and me. Just like the way it always was. This is what it all comes down to. I wonder… Is this what you’ve been planning all along?”

He had reached Skull Rock by this point and he moored the coracle at a rocky outcrop towards the back of the creepy formation.

“It’s a long time since we were last here,” Rumpelstiltskin muttered to his shadow. “Not long enough. If I never had to see this place again I’d be more than happy. Still, hopefully this will be the last time.” As he got out of the boat, he turned to his shadow again. “Stay close. I might need your help, especially if he has Henry. But stay out of sight. His shadow is… unpredictable.”

The shadow made a show of acquiescence and continued to hover over the boat as Rumpelstiltskin made his way into the rock, standing like a sentinel on watch duty, its yellow eyes flickering back and forth between various different vantage points, watching for the slightest sign of trouble as its owner vanished from view.

Inside Skull Rock, Rumpelstiltskin glanced around to get his bearings. He’d entered from the back of the head and found himself in a small passageway that would lead, he presumed, to the main cavern with the nose, mouth and eye openings. The stone here was slimy and damp to the touch, with water dripping down the walls in some places. It was these patches of wet rock that unnerved Rumpelstiltskin the most, because where the moonlight fell upon them, the sheets of water became almost like mirrors, but not quite. He caught sight of his outline in one of them and jumped back, startled by his appearance. It was not a true reflection, for although he remained dressed in the Dark One’s clothing, the face that was shown was very much human. He looked down at his hands to find them still scaled and shimmering a little, and out of curiosity, he reached out to touch the image.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?”

Rumpelstiltskin turned sharply on hearing the voice, one he had not heard for a long time but that was still horribly familiar nonetheless. Pan was standing there, leaning calmly on a dry part of the wall, his arms folded and his entire aspect annoyingly casual.

“The water shows us as we truly are,” Pan continued. “In your case, really old.”

Rumpelstiltskin glanced back at his reflection once more, at the lines in his tired face and the new grey in his hair, before turning back to Pan.

“I’m no older than you,” he said, keeping his voice as neutral as he could, refusing to be riled by the boy. “I wonder just what we’d see if you took a good long look at yourself here.”

Pan just laughed. “Oh Rumpel. Whatever happened to you? You could have had it all, just like me. But you decided to get old instead. How very boring of you. I knew you’d turn out boring in the end. You always were.” He paused. “Still spinning away, I presume? Although…” Pan strolled a little closer but did not come within the mirror’s reach. “Your son, Baelfire. Now, he would have been a prime candidate for one of my Lost Boys. In fact, I nearly had him once, but the dratted lad was too much like you for his own good. He had no desire to stay here and I can’t fathom why. He was very boring. Just like you.”

“Do not speak of my son,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled. “You have no right to even say his name.”

“But Rumpel!” Pan feigned shock. “How can you say such things? What with us being family and all? This should make quite the reunion, really. You, me, and Henry.”
Rumpelstiltskin could feel flames licking at his fingertips.

“Where is my grandson?” he growled.

“All in good time, Rumpel, all in good time. You’ll be joining him soon enough. But first things first.” Pan smiled cruelly. “You and I are going to play a little game…”
"Tinker Bell, you have had a lot of stupid, ridiculous, and even downright dangerous ideas in your time, but all of those pale into insignificance beside this one, and as your best friend, I feel duty-bound to bring you to your senses by any means necessary."

To the casual observer passing along the high road between Avalon and the Marchlands that evening, these words would appear to have fallen from the sky with no visible source, but on closer inspection, one would have been able to see two small points of light – one green, the other purple – hovering around in the tree canopy above the road, and the more astute would attribute these strange lights to their being fairies.

Tinker Bell was peering out of the tree, seeming to be looking for an opportune moment for something, whilst Sugar Plum was sitting a little further along the same branch with her head in her hands in a gesture of despair.

"It'll be fine!" Tinker Bell was reassuring her friend. "Have a little faith in me, Sugar, please. When have you ever known any of my schemes to go wrong?"

"Shall I list them alphabetically or chronologically?" Sugar Plum muttered. Tinker Bell rolled her eyes.

"At least for every plan that failed, another one succeeded." She looked down out of the trees again. A carriage was coming along the road, and from the finery that it was bedecked with, there was no possibility that it was not going to where Tinker Bell wanted to go to. She grinned. "Perfect."

"I just don’t understand your obsession with humans, Tink." Sugar Plum was not above pleading to get her friend to see reason. "You’ll meet them when you get your fairy child."

"I don’t want to have to wait until I get my fairy child," Tinker Bell said, her voice frustrated. "At the rate I’m going I might never get a fairy child."

"Yes, and going off on madcap schemes to meet local nobility and schmooze with humans is really going to speed up that process, isn’t it?"

"Come on, Sugar, in for a penny, in for a pound. If I’m on the road to ruin, as Blue keeps telling me with monotonous regularity, then I might as well enjoy the journey. I’ll see you back at headquarters, ta-ra!"

With that unceremonious goodbye, Tinker Bell dropped off the branch, her wings carrying her lightly down to land on the roof of the carriage as it passed beneath them. Sugar Plum sighed heavily and followed her friend down in order to continue the conversation.

"You’re making a big mistake," she said. Tinker Bell shook her head.
“I’m performing valuable research,” she corrected Sugar Plum sagely. “I can’t possibly be expected to nurture and guide a human child if I’ve never had any experience of humans now, can I?”

“All the other fairies seem to manage,” Sugar Plum pointed out. “Tinker Bell, you know that Blue will have your wings for this if she finds you.”

“I know. That’s why I have you. To stall her. Just until I get back. I won’t be too long, I promise. I just want to see what it’s all about.”

Sugar Plum gave her a pointed look. “Midnight,” she said flatly. “After that, you’re on your own.”

“Oh, thank you Sugar, you’re the best.”

“Quite possibly. Either that or I’m just as mad as you are.”

With that, Sugar Plum alighted from the carriage and flew off back in the direction that she had come, back towards the fairy godmothers’ headquarters. Tinker Bell turned her attention to the road ahead of her and smiled. Everything was going to be fine. Sugar Plum had covered for her before when she went on her little adventures often enough, and she trusted her friend. Tonight was going to be wonderful. There was a celebration in the Marchlands for the Summer Solstice, and everyone who was anyone would be attending the festivities in the grounds of the Lord’s estate. Young and old, rich and poor alike, with people travelling from miles around to take part. If there was ever a time when a fairy could mingle in with the crowds and not be noticed, then this was it.

Just as the carriage entered the courtyard, Tinker Bell hopped off it and flew into the shadows of the castle gates before getting big with a shake of her wings. Unlike Sugar Plum, she had never been averse to remaining human size for any length of time. In a world designed for people rather larger than herself, it made sense to minimise the effort needed to be a part of that world. It was all very well hovering above it and keeping out of sight, but what good was that for actually seeing how the humans truly lived?

With her wings tucked away until she needed them again, Tinker Bell stepped out into the spectacle and began to take a look around. It was as good as she’d imagined it would be, better even. There was so much to see and do, and so many people looking joyous and excited. It was the job of the fairies to bring light and happiness to the world, but it certainly did not look as if these people needed it, and it was a beautiful thing to behold. Tinker Bell couldn’t see how Blue and the other senior fairies could be so superior about the humans’ simple enjoyments like these. Perhaps if they spent more time with those that they were meant to protect and serve then their views would be altered.

She was just trying to decide between candy floss and glazed apples and realising that she had no money for either when a young couple caught her eye, walking along around the stalls hand in hand, and it made her smile. Love was a wondrous thing, really, and as fairies they never really understood it. Not in the way that they perhaps should have done. There were no male fairies, no fairy weddings or courtships, and Tinker Bell felt that this was a fundamental flaw in their culture. Certainly, love could be messy and problematic at times, and fairies were supposed to represent that level of perfection unattainable by humans, but that was part of the magic of the whole thing in Tinker Bell’s opinion. There was a lot to be learned from people in love.

Presently a voice beside her pulled her out of her thoughts and back to the smell of sugar caramelising in the air around her.

“I recommend the apples.”

She turned to see who had spoken and found a finely dressed young man standing next to her,
watching her with thinly veiled amusement.

“Is it your first time at the Solstice?” he asked. Tinker Bell nodded. “I thought it might be,” he continued, before adding in an undertone: “We don’t usually get many fairies in these parts.”

Tinker Bell almost jumped out of her skin at that remark.

“How did you know?” she exclaimed. “I mean, I’m not a fairy. I’m just your ordinary, average human being, just like you.”

The man laughed.

“Don’t fear, your secret’s safe with me,” he said. “But I will say that you do stand out rather.”

Tinker Bell looked down at her attire, bright green and shimmering. Whilst it was not the most ostentatious outfit on display amongst the other ladies, it was still obvious that she was definitely different.

“Here.” The man held out a toffee apple on a stick for her.

“Thank you.” Tinker Bell accepted the gift with a little curtsey and took a bite. It was heavenly, the chewy sweet sugar coating a perfect contrast to the crisp, sharp apple inside.

“I’ve just realised that I haven’t introduced myself,” the man said. “My name is Maurice.”

He held out his hand and Tinker Bell shook it.

“Tinker Bell. Although my friends call me just Tink.”

“Do I qualify as a friend?” Maurice asked.

Tinker Bell looked down at her apple. “I would say so, yes. So, Maurice, whereabouts do you come from? You’ve been able to tell a lot about me, but I don’t know anything about you.”

“I, er…” Maurice’s eyes flickered towards the castle in whose grounds they stood, and Tinker Bell gasped.

“You’re the Lord of the Manor?” she asked. Maurice shook his head.

“No, my father is. I will be in time though.”

“Are you looking forward to it?”

“Not at all. Not only does it mean that my father will have died, it means that I have to take care of the Marchlands. I’m petrified of doing it wrong, of making a bad decision somewhere along the line.”

“I’m sure that you’ll be fine,” Tinker Bell said brightly. “Anyway, hopefully there will be many more years before you’ll have to step into the role, and by then you’ll be ready.”

Maurice smiled. “I hope you’re right.”

They had wandered around the courtyard by this point and were standing by some rows of tiered seating that had been erected near the castle walls, and they stopped here to continue their conversation into the night, the other visitors to the festival calmly passing them by.
“I have to say, Tink, that you’re probably the most interesting woman I’ve ever met,” Maurice said after they had fallen into silence for a few minutes.

“Well, we fairies are full of mysteries, you know,” Tinker Bell joked. She couldn’t really say the same of Maurice. She definitely found him interesting, but she was not sure if that was because he was the first human that she had ever encountered or because she was genuinely enamoured with him.

“Will you stay and watch the fireworks?” he asked. Tinker Bell was about to acquiesce, but then she saw the time on the clock on the castle tower. It was almost midnight, and she would be missed soon. She shook her head.

“I can’t, my friends are expecting me. But it was very nice to meet you Maurice.”

“You too, Tinker Bell. Wait,” he called as she made to slip away into the shadows and transform back into her regular size. “Can I see you again?”

Tinker Bell pondered. On the one hand, she would be in enough trouble as it was if her brief dalliance with the human world was found out. The penalties for continuing a friendship with one did not bear thinking about. But as she had said to Sugar Plum earlier, if this was to end badly, then she might as well make the most of the moments that came before the end. Sugar Plum could cover for her. Sugar Plum always covered for her.

And she really did want to see Maurice and speak with him again. Their friendship had been far too brief to leave it there.

She nodded. “I’d like that. I’ll return tomorrow.”

Before they parted, Maurice kissed her hand, and Tinker Bell felt herself blush as bright pink as some of her sisters’ wings at the action. That was something that she would not have experienced had she remained her normal size, and she couldn’t wait to get back and tell Sugar Plum all about it.

Although he watched closely as Tinker Bell moved away and slipped back into the shadows to avoid detection, Maurice could not see the moment when she actually shrank down. One second she was her normal size and the next she was just a speck of green light racing across the sky. She might as well have been a stray spark from the fireworks that had just started going off above them.

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Maurice had not honestly entertained any real hope of seeing Tinker Bell again, although he had been earnest in his wish to do so when he had asked if she would return. Fairies were so seldom seen by humans that he considered himself lucky to have met her at all. It would not do to become too greedy for her company, as fascinating a companion as she had turned out to be. So wise and yet so innocent of the world at the same time. He wanted to know more about her and hear more of what she had to say, her point of view so different from everyone else’s. More than once during the day his father had admonished him for staring out of the window and not paying attention to anything, whilst his mother had laughed and asked him for whom he was waiting so impatiently, muttering under her breath about young love.

Maurice thought love was a bit of a strong word. He had only known her a few short hours after all, but curiosity, yes, there was definitely that.

When he finally did see it, the little green speck of light flying through the dusk towards his window, he could scarcely believe his eyes.
“Tinker Bell! You came!”

“Well, I said that I would.” She flew into the window and sat down on the sill, shimmering into her human size before his eyes. “And fairies always keep their word.”

**Neverland – Present**

Emma did not enjoy strange noises. Especially not in the eternal night of Neverland when she was on her own and she had no idea whether the strange noises had been made by something human or something more sinister. She had no doubt that whatever was making the strange noises was not friendly, and she decided to investigate it before it could investigate her. She was glad of the weapons that Tinker Bell and Hook had provided her, the latter having returned to his ship under the fairy’s close supervision to source them some more supplies. It felt good to be carrying something substantial as opposed to having to rely on her haphazard magic – and who knew what the price would be for that which she’d already used? Emma readjusted her grip on the cutlass as she moved through the trees as quietly as she could, and took Tinker Bell’s combat knife from her belt. The noise appeared to be coming from above her, and she looked up just in time to see a shape tumble down, almost on top of her. It was a human shape, and it landed heavily with a groan. Emma drew back into the shadows, keeping her blades at the ready, and she almost dropped them when she saw who the newcomer, getting to his feet and brushing himself down, was.

“Neal?” she breathed.

He spun around on hearing her voice, and for a moment he had a certain look of a deer in the headlights before he gave a tentative smile.

“Hi, Emma.”

“I…” Emma was at a complete loss. Only a few hours ago, she had given him up for dead and now he was here, in front of her, very much alive. “Wait,” she said, holding up the cutlass to stop him coming any closer. “How do I know that it’s you and not the island playing tricks on me?”

“Yeah, it does like to do that a lot.” Neal spread his hands, trying to think up a way of confirming his identity. “Ask me something only I would know?”

Emma racked her brains, trying to think back to her and Neal’s time together with a clear, logical head, although his unexpected presence had thrown her completely for six.

“Where was our home going to be?” she asked eventually. “And why?”

“Tallahassee,” Neal replied. “I got a map and told you to close your eyes and point, and that was home. And you pointed to Tallahassee.”

Emma nodded slowly. He wasn’t an obstacle that Pan had placed in her way, but she was still having a little trouble convincing herself that he wasn’t just a product of her imagination.

“How did you get here?” she asked.

“Pan’s shadow,” Neal said, his voice matter-of-fact. “The same way I got here last time. It put up a fight though, and eventually I had to let it drop me.”

“Wait, you’ve been here before?”

Neal nodded. “I told you, back in Manhattan, that if America had been my first stop after leaving home I’d be a couple of centuries old.”
“You spent those couple of centuries here, where time doesn’t pass,” Emma murmured.

Neal nodded again.

“Let’s just say that when I was a boy I was really quite lost for a while. But speaking of lost boys, is there any sign of Henry?”

Emma shook her head. “No, but we know where he is.” She sighed. “He’s not lost, Neal. That makes me sound like some absent-minded mother who left her baby in Walmart. He was taken.”

“I know,” Neal said. “Belle told me what happened when I got back to Storybrooke. I’m sorry, that was a poor choice of words.”

“It’s ok. I just can’t believe that this has happened. Just when it looked like everything was starting to go smoothly again, this happens and throws it all off.”

She gestured expansively at the trees around them to indicate their circumstances in general.

“We’ll get him back, Emma,” Neal said. “Pan might be a demon but he’s got weaknesses just like everyone else.” He looked around the clearing but there was no other sign of life. “Where’s everyone else, or are you on your own?”

“We’re all together, except Rumpelstiltskin,” Emma replied. “He’s gone off to find Pan; we’re on another mission. Everyone else is back there.” She pointed back in the direction she’d come from towards Tinker Bell’s fairy ring.

“What’s the plan?” Neal asked. There was no unease or trepidation in his face, despite his being back in a place he obviously had not cared much for on his first visit; he was all seriousness, ready to do what was needed of him to save his son. Even though he had only been a father for a few weeks, he had fallen into the role as if he was born to it. Emma didn’t know if she was surprised or not. They hadn’t really had enough time together for her to have any kind of inkling as to what kind of father he would make and babies had been so far from her mind at that point in her life that the thought had not once crossed her mind. She supposed that she wasn’t all that surprised considering Neal’s relationship with his own father (and Emma still sometimes couldn’t believe that particular revelation); he wanted to be the best possible father he could so that his child would never know the same experiences that he had.

“We’re going to take Pan’s Eternal Light,” Emma explained. “Once we have it, we can free the Lost Boys’ shadows and it will be easier to go after Pan and Henry.”

Neal nodded his agreement.

“What can I do to help?”

“Well, I think any extra pairs of hands are useful,” Emma said. “But we’ll have to ask Tink and Hook, it’s their masterplan.”

Neal looked wary. “Are you sure that we can trust Hook?” he asked, obviously less than willing to go along with something that the pirate thought up.

“Well, Tinker Bell definitely doesn’t,” Emma said. “I’m not sure. He did get us here in one piece. I haven’t had as much time with him as the others have. I think it’s more a case of having a common enemy than anything else.”

“Yes. Well.” Neal remained unconvinced. “I supposed we’ll just have to see what happens when the
going gets tough.”

Emma gave a shrug of acceptance. No matter what the history between Neal and Hook was, it was their business and now wasn’t the time to be getting into the politics of their group of rescuers.

“They’re through here,” Emma said, leading the way through the trees back towards Tinker Bell’s camp. They fell into an awkward silence, and although not the most talkative of people, Emma was desperate to fill the quiet somehow. There was so much hanging unsaid in the air between them that it was practically screaming at her.

“I thought that you were dead,” she blurted out eventually. “When I saw you fall down that portal, I was certain that you were a goner.”

“So was I,” Neal admitted. “But fate intervened and brought me some help. I sent you a message, but I didn’t know you were here so you never received it.”

“I think…” Emma stopped, her footsteps stopping as well, because this was not something that she ought to be saying now, but she felt that it had to be aired before they went any further, because she had to know what Neal’s intentions were and why he had come here.

“Yes?”

“I think a part of me hoped that you were dead. I’m glad that you’re alive, for Henry’s sake if nothing else. But I didn’t think that I’d be able to take it. Going through all the emotions again.”

“Emma…” Neal began, before tailing off. “I came here for Henry. I won’t lie, I came here for you as well, but I know that Henry has to come first, and for you Henry will always come first.”

Emma nodded. “Thank you. Henry’s the priority right now. Everything else, we’ll deal with when we get home.”

“We can wait. Henry can’t,” Neal agreed.

The air cleared between them, they continued to walk on towards the little camp.

“You said you know where Henry is,” Neal began presently.

“Yes. Pan’s taking him to Skull Rock. Do you know what he might be planning?”

Neal shook his head. “No. Fortunately I managed to avoid Skull Rock. But whatever he’s doing, he’s waited a hell of a long time to do it. He was on the look-out for some kind of chosen one back when I first arrived here, and that’s a while ago now.”

“Henry’s special,” Emma said. “He’s very unique, and I’ve only known him a year or so. But the idea of him being some kind of chosen one doesn’t exactly thrill me right now.”

“Nothing about this place is particularly thrilling,” Neal said dryly. “I was so scared when Belle told me you and Henry were here. It’s not a destination I’d wish on anyone.”

“It’s always been like this, then?” Emma asked. Neal nodded.

“Yes. It’s the Eternal Light. I found that out when we were trying to catch Pan’s shadow in Storybrooke. It’s what keeps it night all the time. If we snuff it out then day will return.”

“So, that’s what Rumpelstiltskin meant by lightening,” Emma muttered. To Neal, she added: “What was Pan’s shadow doing in Storybrooke anyway?”
“Causing chaos,” Neal said. “Trying to stop anyone else from coming over here, stopping you getting any reinforcements.”

“And instead, it ended up bringing one itself.” Emma had to snort at the irony, and then paused before speaking again. “Thank you for coming.”

“Nothing could have kept me away. Nothing did.”

“I suppose it’s too much to ask how you got back to Storybrooke?” Emma asked. Neal was silent for a while.

“Dad’s shadow,” he said eventually. “It came to check up on me.”

Emma cast a glance sideways at him. “That makes sense.”

“What does?”

“I was there when he cut it away. I cut mine away too and it went to find Henry. I thought that his would have gone to Belle, but he didn’t seem as sure.” Emma paused. “I’ve spent the last week or so with your father as my only company, and whilst I can’t claim to know him anywhere as well as you do, I know that he loves you, and he really regrets everything that’s happened. That’s why his shadow came to you.”

Neal nodded. “I know. Mulan said the same thing before I left.”

“You met Mulan?” Emma exclaimed.

“Yeah, she’s pretty cool. She and Aurora managed to revive Philip, by the way, and the three of them are very happy together.”

In spite of their rather bleak circumstances, Emma had to smile at this good news from her friends that she’d made in the Enchanted Forest during her brief stay there. It was good to know that at least one family group was safe and sound. She looked at Neal again. There was so much more that needed to be said, and so much more that she desperately did not want to say, but at least they were in agreement that Henry came before anything else.

“We’re here,” she said, as they approached the fairy ring. “Here.” She handed him Tink’s knife. Even though they were not in any immediate danger, she didn’t want to leave him without any kind of self-defence in case Pan sprung something on them when they were least expecting it.

“Do you think I’ll need protection from your parents?” Neal joked. Emma just rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You might need protection from me soon,” she said. “I’m not leaving you without any defence against Pan,” she added, before stepping into the clear moonlight where the others were preparing for their attack.

“Guys,” she called to them. “I found reinforcements.”

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

“Where have you been?”
Tinker Bell didn’t think that she had ever seen Sugar Plum look so anxious, but however highly strung her friend was, it was nothing compared to how Tinker Bell herself was feeling.

“You can’t just vanish like that!” Sugar Plum continued. “You’ve been gone for days! Blue’s been going spare about not being able to find you. I’ve run out of excuses so badly that I’ve been having to hide every time she comes looking for you!”

Tinker Bell took no notice of Sugar Plum’s admonishments and sat down heavily in the centre of her flower. Immediately her friend noticed that something was wrong and came over to sit beside her.

“What’s the matter?” she asked gently. “Is it something with Maurice? Is that where you’ve been?”

Tinker Bell shook her head and looked out through the petals of her flower at the lights of the fireworks over the Marchlands in the distance.

“It was Solstice last year when you met, wasn’t it?” Sugar Plum mused. “My, the time flies.”

“It does.” Tinker Bell sighed. “I wasn’t with Maurice. His father died a few days ago. He’s Lord of the Marchlands now. He has to take care of his people just like I have to watch over the humans. He’ll be expected to marry a nice high-born lady and continue the family line. His father had already had someone in mind for him, he told me. She’s a nice lady actually. Very pretty and intelligent. Loves books. They’re good friends; it’ll be a happy marriage. They just don’t love each other.”

“Ah.” There wasn’t really anything to be done in the situation. Tinker Bell was a fairy. That was common knowledge between her and Maurice. She couldn’t leave her sisterhood indefinitely, no matter how much she might want to.

“He’s destined to be a lord just as I’m destined to be a fairy godmother,” Tinker Bell said. “Although I don’t think I’ve ever been less excited by the prospect of being one.”

Sugar Plum put her arm around her friend.

“You know, I’m beginning to see why we don’t really do love,” she said. “I never thought about it much until now.”

Tinker Bell nodded her agreement. “Love’s the worst.”

She reached down inside her dress and pulled out the chain bearing the ring that Maurice had given her a few months into their friendship.

“I suppose it’s just one of those things that we have to accept,” she said.

“Do you regret it?” Sugar Plum asked. “Maybe this is why we never get too deeply involved in the affairs of the humans.”

“No,” Tinker Bell shook her head vehemently at the suggestion. “No, I don’t regret any of it. Love is layered, and the pain and the heartbreak are all part of that. It hurts, but it was so wonderful at the time that just to have had a taste of it is enough. I think that’s what Blue doesn’t understand. Our mindset is always to end pain and suffering. We hear the desperate wishes of people who are in love and hurting because of it, but that’s what makes them human. It’s not for us to make judgments based on how they fall in love and who with. That’s a mystery all to itself. If I could go back in time and do it all again, I would still make all the same decisions.”

The two fairies remained in silence for a while before Sugar Plum spoke again.
“There’s something else, isn’t there? Something you’re not telling me. I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re hiding something, Tinker Bell. We’re fairies. Deception doesn’t come entirely naturally. I think that’s why Blue acts so suspicious of everything all the time.”

Tinker Bell sighed. “I said I would see him again. It was the morning before his father died. I said that I would see him again that night. But when I arrived and everything was priests and doctors and mourning, I knew that the worst had indeed happened and that everything had changed. So I just left without seeing him. I went back on my word.”

“You can go and see him now,” Sugar Plum suggested. “It’s not too late. I’ll cover for you again, I don’t mind. I think Blue’s so annoyed with me now that she’s stopped coming.”

Tinker Bell shook her head. “I can’t see him again. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“Besides,” Tinker Bell continued, her voice just a mutter. “You’ll have to cover for me soon enough.”

Sugar Plum paused.

“Tink, if you weren’t with Maurice these past few days, then where have you been?”

“I went to the mines,” Tinker Bell said. She was still staring out over the land below them, off towards Maurice’s home, pointedly avoiding Sugar Plum’s expectant gaze. “I needed the dwarfs’ help.”

“Help with what?” Sugar Plum sounded wary, as if she could almost tell what was going to come next and didn’t want to be proved right.

“Confirming something.”

“Confirming what, Tink?”

Finally Tinker Bell met her friend’s eyes.

“I’m pregnant.”

For several seconds, Sugar Plum couldn’t speak. Although she had feared words along those lines coming out of Tinker Bell’s mouth, she couldn’t quite believe it now that she had heard it.

“You can’t be,” she said faintly. “You’re a fairy.”

“We can have children, Sugar Plum,” Tinker Bell said. “We’re physically able to. We’ve just never done it before.” She paused, letting out a long breath. “I won’t be able to stay here. I’ll have to get big, and stay big, very soon. The baby won’t be full fae.”

Sugar Plum shook her head. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell Blue,” she murmured.

“Just tell her the truth,” Tinker Bell said.

“What?” Sugar Plum exclaimed.

“Tell her the truth. That you don’t know where I’ve gone or when I’ll be back.”

“Oh, Tink…” She threw her arms around her friend in a final hug.
“I’ll be back. I promise.”

Sugar Plum could only watch as Tinker Bell set off again into the night, and wait for her to return, whenever that might be.

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**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle had no real idea what she was going to do once she got to the convent and confronted the Mother Superior, but she was on a mission and she was not going to stop until she had got to the bottom of what was going on and precisely what the other woman was hoping to achieve.

The Blue Fairy had always been a major proponent of doing things for the Greater Good. This was no big secret; indeed she took great pains to remind everyone of this on a regular basis, especially her junior fairies. It was this that made Belle wonder; if whatever she was doing with the Eternal Light and all the missing fairy dust was something for that shadowy and mysterious force of nature known as the Greater Good, then surely she would have no reason to hide it. If precedent was anything to go by, then she would want everyone to know what she was doing so righteously.

“Hey, sister.” Belle became aware of Leroy running to catch up with her. “Are you all right?” he asked, once he had fallen into step beside her. “I mean, you weren’t in the shop this morning, and then all that happened with the shadow… I was worried about you.”

Belle managed a wan smile through her ire.

“I’m fine thank you Leroy, your concern means a lot to me.”

The dwarf shrugged.

“Just looking out for a friend. Where are you going anyway?”

“The convent.” She added: “You’re welcome to come too.”

“I’m always willing to go and see the nuns,” Leroy said genially, and Belle had to laugh at the declaration. “But why are you going there? I mean, Neal’s off to Neverland now, so we don’t really need their magical assistance anymore, do we?”

Belle shook her head. “It’s not magic that I’m looking for. Well, it is. I’m looking for missing magic. It’s not just fairy dust now, there’s more.” She held up the small clear vial with its grains of fairy dust in the bottom. “Something’s gone missing from the shop,” she explained. “An Eternal Light, a very powerful piece of magic. It could be catastrophic in the wrong hands. But I think I know whose hands it’s in. She left something behind.”

“It’s pretty damning evidence,” Leroy admitted.

“So I’ve come looking for answers.”

“I’m not sure you’ll get any,” Leroy pointed out. “The Blue Fairy, well, you’re not exactly her favourite person, as lovely as you are.”

“I know, but whatever she’s doing, she needs to be stopped. She could have the best intentions in the
world, but what she’s doing is still wrong.” Belle sighed. “Rumpel always used to say that intent is meaningless. It doesn’t matter why you’ve done something – it doesn’t change the fact that you’ve done it. Why she’s done it I cannot hope to fathom, but the fact remains that Blue is stealing and hoarding magic, and no-one should do that. I think that’s one of the problems in this place, with magic in a world where it’s not meant to be. There are too many secrets here, too much of a power imbalance. In the Enchanted Forest, it worked somehow, because there was so much more space, there were kingdoms, there weren’t as many magicians per square mile. Now all that’s changed, but I don’t think that we have. The Land Without Magic just doesn’t support our way of life.”

They had reached the convent now, and were walking up the driveway. There was no sign of anything untoward in the building, but then again, Belle didn’t think that there would be. The fairies were by nature very obedient and subservient, and they would not question strange goings on, but they were not unobservant, and anything blatantly untoward happening in the convent would be noticed and commented upon. No, the Mother Superior, already shrouded in secrecy as she was, would be discreet in any illicit activities.

They made it to the front door without being waylaid, which Belle thought somewhat unusual. The Blue Fairy had made it clear that she and Leroy were not welcome on the convent grounds, and she was keen to enforce this. Nevertheless, she knocked on the door, preparing herself mentally for the verbal battle that was no doubt going to ensue.

The door opened almost before the knocker had fallen back into place, but to Belle’s surprise, it was not the Mother Superior behind the door, but Astrid. She was beaming from ear to ear and must have seen Leroy arriving and come down to anticipate him.

“Hi Belle, hi Leroy. What can we do for you today?”

“We’re looking for the Blue Fairy,” Belle said. “Is your fairy dust still missing?”

Astrid nodded sadly. “Yes. Theresa went down to see the Sheriff, but he said that nothing had been reported.”

Their interim sheriff – they had voted in the man who had been the captain of Snow and Charming’s Royal Guard back in the Enchanted Forest – had entered Belle’s head briefly before she had decided to take matters into her own hands. He was a perfectly competent man, but he’d only been in the job for two days, and he was busy dealing with the fallout from Pan’s shadow’s arrival and the havoc that it had caused.

Belle showed Astrid the vial. “Something was stolen from the pawn shop. This was left at the scene of the crime.”

Astrid took the vial and shook it with a sigh.

“Yes, this is definitely our missing stock,” she said sadly. “There’s just a slight problem. The Mother Superior’s not in.”

“Do you know where she’s gone?” Leroy asked. The circumstances were looking ever bleaker for the senior fairy.

Astrid shook her head. “No, she left early this morning and hasn’t been back since. But she did take her wand with her, so wherever she’s going, she’s intending to do magic when she gets there.”

“The mines,” Leroy said suddenly.

“Pardon?”
“The mines,” he repeated. “The fairy dust diamond streams run through the rocks in the mines; they’re what helps keep the magic here stable. The Blue Fairy always tells us where the most potent streams are,” he continued. “The mines are full of magic, and she always knows where we are in them at any given time.”

“Well, it’s as good a starting point as any,” Belle said. “It looks like we’re headed to the mines.”

“Can we come?” Astrid asked. “Theresa and I want to find out what’s going on just as much as you do.” Theresa’s face appeared, peering over Astrid’s shoulder. “And as fellow fairies, Blue owes the truth to us. What one of us does reflects in the entire sisterhood.”

“As she is always so quick to remind us,” Theresa muttered darkly.

“We need to know what’s happening, to defend the sanctity of the fairy godmothers if nothing else.”

“Ok.” Belle nodded. It would be useful to have the other fairies with them from a purely practical point of view – the Blue Fairy had magic, and she and Leroy did not. “Bring your wands, although hopefully you won’t have to use them.”

It was mid-afternoon by the time they reached the mines, but there were no signs of any of the other dwarfs.

“Extended lunch and gossip break,” Leroy said. “What? We’re the news-bringers in this town.”

“Well, you definitely are,” Astrid observed. “Come on, this is a big mine system and we’re searching for one small fairy in it. At last we can’t get back to our normal size in this world, or it would be a nightmare.”

“Hang on.” Leroy went into the entrance of the main mineshaft and grabbed his pickaxe, hefting it onto his shoulder. “Can’t be too careful.”

“This way,” Theresa said, pointing down one of the narrower, disused tunnels. “There are traces of fairy dust on the floor. She must have been in a hurry, not checking whether or not the containers were properly sealed.”

They made their way down the small tunnel, each holding a lantern from the main shaft. About a hundred yards along, the shaft opened out into a cavern.

As they entered, Belle immediately became aware of the heavy coating of magic in the little underground room. Sure enough, the Blue Fairy was there, and she froze when she saw them, the Eternal Light clutched in one hand, her wand in the other.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, although the usual haughtiness in her voice was not as strong as it could have been, a very real fear taking its place.

“No, Blue,” Belle said. “The question is, what are you doing here, and what are you doing with that lantern?”

Enchanted Forest – Past
Tinker Bell looked down into her daughter’s bright blue eyes and sighed. She had not even said her goodbyes yet, but still her heart was breaking in anticipation of the event. More than once during her pregnancy and the few wonderful weeks that had followed, Tinker Bell had considered running away entirely, but she knew that it could not be. She really was not equipped to live among humans indefinitely. She had no money for a start, and no real way of procuring any – even less with a baby in her arms. She had no fixed abode, for she couldn’t remain with the religious sisters forever. The nuns had been very kind to her during her stay, but they only dealt with expectant mothers and soon she would have to leave, and leave her child with them. As much as it tore her apart to do so, she had to give her baby her best chance. Although she had remained hidden from the Blue Fairy for so long, she would be found sooner or later, and Tinker Bell had decided that it would be best for her to return to her sisterhood and pre-empt any unpleasantness. She dreaded to think what would happen if the Blue Fairy set eyes on her little one.

“Have you decided on a name yet?” one of the nuns asked. Tinker Bell shook her head.

“No. Her new family can decide that. She can have a clean slate.”

In truth, Tinker Bell knew that if she named her daughter, she would not be able to part with her when the time came. If there was nothing of Tinker Bell’s attached to the child, including a given name, then there was less likelihood of her parentage being traced.

Suddenly there was a commotion by the front door of the nunnery, and Tinker Bell slipped out of her seat where she had been settled in the window, and moved cautiously towards the source of the disturbance.

“You don’t understand, I have to speak to Tinker Bell!”

Tinker Bell’s heart leapt to her mouth. That was Sugar Plum’s voice. It had been almost a year since she had heard it, but she would recognise it anywhere.

“Miss, there’s no Tinker Bell here, and I really don’t think that a fairy such as yourself has any business in a home for unwed mothers.” One of the nuns was trying to push Sugar Plum out of the door.

“It’s all right, Sister, she’s a friend of mine,” Tinker Bell said, rushing out into the hallway. “It’s me that she wants to see.”

“Tina? Well, if you’re sure.”

The nun stepped aside to let Sugar Plum in, and her friend ran over, enveloping both mother and child in a hug.

“Oh Tink, I’m so happy to see you safe and well! Is this the little one? Oh, she’s just precious.” Sugar Plum paused. “Since when have you been Tina?”

“Tinker Bell isn’t exactly a common name,” Tinker Bell replied. “I wanted to avoid detection. Speaking of, Sugar, how did you find me?”

Sugar Plum shook her head. “Never mind how I found you, the fact remains that Blue found you. She’s on her way. You’ve got to get out, both of you, we have to leave now!”

“Where can I go to, Sugar? I was about to come back to the sisterhood. I can’t keep running!”

“I don’t know, we’ll think of something. I’m sure that Maurice would help you out.”
“Yes, he’s certain to help the woman who left him a year ago without a word and his illegitimate daughter,” Tinker Bell said sourly.

“Come on, Tink, please, I came to warn you!”

Tinker Bell nodded.

“All right. We'll leave. But I have to leave her here.” She indicated the babe in her arms. “We’ll just be putting her in even more danger if she comes with us. The nuns will take care of her here and find her a good home.”

Sugar Plum gave a sad smile. “I suppose you’re right. Come on, we don’t have much time. I’ll pack for you, and let you…” She tailed off, not wanting to give voice to the horrible words in the hope that doing so would make the imminent separation of mother and child less painful.

Tinker Bell waved the way into her room and Sugar Plum sped off. She took a deep breath, horribly aware of how much she was shaking, and she went over to the nun who had opened the door to her old friend.

“I would never have guessed that you were a fairy,” the sister said softly, taking Tinker Bell’s child from her. “Most fairies I’ve met have their heads firmly in the clouds, but you’re a practical girl, and sensible, no matter how much it might break your heart. We’ll take care of your little darling, I promise.”

Tinker Bell nodded her thanks, unable to speak around the lump in her throat. She took one last look at her daughter’s face and touched her little finger to the tiny palm just visible through the layers of blankets, watching as she gripped it. There was an entire life ahead of her that Tinker Bell would miss, a happy life in a good home.

“Tinker Bell.”

Tinker Bell did not look up at the all-too-familiar voice from the nunnery doorway.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding all this time. And this is evidently why you’ve been hiding.” The Blue Fairy’s voice was full of barely-disguised disgust. “I knew that your fascination with humans would get you into trouble, but I didn’t think that it would do so literally.”

“Let her alone, Blue, please,” Tinker Bell said. She didn’t have the heart to fight, not now, not in the midst of these sorrowful circumstances. Behind her, she heard the door to her room creak and she quickly kicked it shut, hoping that Sugar Plum would get the message. Whatever might happen to her, she was not getting her friend punished as well.

“Ordinarily I would have your wings for such an indiscretion,” the Blue Fairy said conversationally. “You know our rules about interacting with humans, Tinker Bell. Much less… mating… with them.”

Tinker Bell steeled herself up. If this was it, then this was it.

“However, since kindness and benevolence are the standards by which we fairies live, I am going to give you a second chance.”

Tinker Bell couldn’t quite believe she was hearing the words, and somewhere deep inside she allowed herself the briefest flicker of hope.

“There are of course conditions to your return to the fae sisterhood,” the senior fairy continued.
“There will be no more visits to the human world. I’m sure that we can find plenty to keep you occupied with at headquarters. And of course, the child must be taken care of.”

There was a horrible tone of finality in the Blue Fairy’s voice.

“She can stay here,” the nun said. “That was always the plan, right from when Tina – Tinker Bell – first arrived here.”

“I’m afraid that I cannot permit that,” the Blue Fairy said sweetly. “You see, the baby is half-fairy and indeed the only one of her breed. We would need to keep a close eye on her to ensure that all is as it should be. She will come to the care of the fairies as a foundling. No-one need be any the wiser as to her heritage and we would be sure of her health and safety.”

Unseen by the Blue Fairy, Tinker Bell shook her head. Somehow she didn’t think that her daughter’s health and safety were foremost in the superior fairy’s mind.

“Someone will collect her shortly,” the Blue Fairy continued. “In the meantime, Tinker Bell, it is time that we were leaving.”

Tinker Bell leaned in and kissed her daughter’s forehead.

“I’ll see you again, my darling,” she said. “I promise.”

The Blue Fairy was looking at her with impatience, but Tinker Bell took a moment to look around the room once more. She caught the briefest flash of glittering purple in the keyhole of her door, and hoping against all hope that Sugar Plum could both see and understand her, mouthed her a final message.

*Keep her safe. Please.*

X

Although he had long since given up hoping for a glimpse of glittering green flying towards him across the night sky, it did not stop Maurice from wistfully looking out for it every evening. He glanced back down at his wife’s sleeping form and resettled himself in the chair beside her bed. It did not do to be thinking of another woman when one’s spouse was unwell, although Maurice knew that Colette would understand. They had been good friends before they married and they’d reached the understanding that it would be easier to live with a friend in a loveless marriage than a stranger. Colette was a wonderful friend, but she needed his support right now, not the other way around.

“I don’t think that she’s going to come, Maurice,” Colette said sleepily. He looked over to find her watching him through one half-open eye. “It’s been a year.”

“I know, but she gave me her word, and fairies don’t go back on their word.” Maurice sighed.

“You only have her word of that,” Colette pointed out gently. “I’m sure she had her reasons, Maurice. After your father died, you knew that our arrangement would come into fruition sooner rather than later. Perhaps she did it to spare herself the pain. I know I would, if I had ever been in love like that. It’s not quite such a wrench when one loses a favourite book, I feel.”

Colette’s first and only love would always be her books. Marriage had never interested her really, although she did want to be a mother. That was what made their current situation all the more heart-breaking. Whilst Colette did not wish to marry him for love, she was very happy to bear his children, although that had led to their current melancholy aspect.
“You should get some rest,” Maurice admonished his wife. Colette just raised an eyebrow at him.

“You’re one to talk,” she said. “I’ll be all right, Maurice, honestly. Go to bed. I’ll ring for the maid if I need anything.”

Maurice got up and made to leave Colette’s room, but before he could do so, something caught his eye on the terrace outside. It was a shimmering sort of movement, the kind he associated with Tinker Bell changing her size, and his heart leapt to his mouth. Dare he hope?

“What is it?” Colette asked.

He didn’t answer her, not trusting his voice yet, and he went over to the window, opening it and stepping out into the night air. He jumped when he saw the cloaked figure standing at the end of the terrace, but they were just as surprised as he was.

“Who are you?” he asked. “Reveal yourself, or I’ll call the guards.”

“Please don’t.”

The cloaked figure looked up and Maurice could see a small elfin face with pale blonde hair inside the hood. The stranger was not Tinker Bell, but Maurice would recognise her as a fairy any day.

“My name is Sugar Plum,” the fairy said. “I’m a friend of Tinker Bell’s. I’ve come to you on her behalf.”

“Is she all right?” Maurice asked frantically. “She left with no warning, no message, nothing.”

Sugar Plum shook her head. “You won’t see her again,” she said sadly. “A deal had to be made. I’m so sorry.”

Maurice took a step back, stunned by this terrible news.

“She entrusted me with something for you though,” Sugar Plum continued. “She will fully understand if you do not accept it, and she takes her leave of you with no bitter feelings.”

“What is it?” Maurice asked.

“Do you mind coming down?” Sugar Plum gestured to the terrace on the ground floor below them. “I can’t shrink it to fairy size so I couldn’t fly up here with it. I saw the light in this window and I thought it might be my best chance of finding you.”

Maurice nodded. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

Sugar Plum shrank down to her normal stature and flew down over the railing of the terrace, and Maurice returned inside.

“Whatever is going on?” Colette asked.

“A message from Tinker Bell,” Maurice said, rushing through the room and out into the castle itself, racing along the corridor and down the stairs. It was the dead of night, and the rest of the household was fast asleep, but he still moved furtively, fearing discovery. By the time he got to the terrace below the one that Colette’s room led onto, Sugar Plum was already there. As soon as he saw her, he knew why he had not seen Tinker Bell for so long. There was a basket by Sugar Plum’s feet and in her arms she held a tiny bundle of blankets, cooing to it softly.

“Oh my,” Maurice breathed. “Oh my word.”
“Your daughter,” Sugar Plum said with a nervous smile, moving forward to let him see the child’s healthy pink cheeks. Coming so soon after his and Colette’s tragedy, it was almost a miracle, and Maurice could not believe it.

“Even if you don’t accept her as your own, please keep her safe,” Sugar Plum pleaded. There was tone of desperate urgency in her voice. “She’s the first of her kind, and we fear for her safety if we keep her among the fairies. There are some of our sisterhood who are not inclined to accept her as half-fae. She’ll be safer here with you, hidden in plain sight.”

Maurice nodded.

“Bring her in,” he said. “Come on in, out of the cold.”

Sugar Plum obeyed gratefully and Maurice picked up the blanket. Together they made their way up the stairs, looking around cautiously for any sound of the servants waking.

“Will you take her in?” Sugar Plum asked.

“I need to speak to my wife,” Maurice said. He sighed. “She was recently delivered of a stillborn baby. I don’t know what her reaction to this news will be, but I hope it will be favourable. The news of our tragedy has not been given out yet, only the household knows. We could still say that the child is mine and Colette’s.”

Sugar Plum waited outside the door whilst Maurice spoke to his wife, although she could not hear anything more than the vaguest murmurs of conversation through the wood. Eventually the door opened again and Maurice stepped back to let the fairy inside before taking his daughter gently from her arms.

“So you’re the reason for Tink’s departure,” he murmured to her. Sugar Plum smiled. It seemed that all was going to be well.

“Let me see the poor little mite,” Colette said as the baby girl began to grizzle in her father’s arms. “Oh no, little one, don’t cry. You’ll be safe here with us. Everything’s going to be all right. Here.” Still carrying the milk meant for her own baby, she opened the front of her nightdress and took the child from Maurice; she suckled hungrily, quietening immediately, and Colette felt joy for the first time since her own baby had been taken away. She could still be a mother.

Maurice turned to Sugar Plum. “Did Tink give her a name?”

Sugar Plum shook her head.

“No,” she said. “She knew that she would not be able to keep her and she didn’t want to get too attached. To Tink she was always just Darling.”

Sugar Plum watched the family for a few more minutes before she slipped away quietly. Although it had broken Tinker Bell’s heart to give her daughter up, she would be pleased with the news that she was going to grow up safe and loved with her father.

“Belle,” Colette said eventually once the fairy had left them and the girl was sleeping again. She looked up at Maurice for his approval and he nodded. “We’ll call her Belle, after her mother.”
There was silence in the cavern for a long while as the two sides faced off, the Blue Fairy versus two of her own juniors, a dwarf, and an almost-librarian.

“This is a terribly powerful magical object,” she said eventually, tightening her hold on the lantern. “You saw the chaos that it caused yesterday. It cannot fall into the wrong hands.”

“I’m aware of how powerful it is,” Belle replied calmly, an edge of steel in her voice. “And I get the feeling that it’s already in the wrong hands. It’s stolen property, Blue, along with all of that fairy dust behind you. Give it back. The Eternal Light belongs to Rumpel.”

“I don’t think that the Dark One is to be trusted with such things,” the Blue Fairy said coolly.

“You don’t get to decide that,” Belle snapped. “You don’t have a monopoly on magic. You don’t get to pick and choose who is worthy of what. Now give it back.”

“Blue, what are you doing?” Astrid asked. She sounded so small, so horribly betrayed. She and Theresa had suspected that their leader was not all that she seemed to be for a while now, but having suspicions and seeing concrete proof with one’s own eyes were very different things.

“It’s for the Greater Good,” Blue said, drawing herself up to her full height. She flexed her fingers on her wand and Leroy swung his axe down off his shoulder, holding it in two hands like a soldier would wield a war hammer.

“It isn’t though, is it?” Astrid said. “If it was, you would have told us. You wouldn’t be sneaking around like this. The Greater Good is a noble cause, everyone knows that. We’re open about it. We don’t hide it away in dark corners underground.”

“And who decides what the Greater Good is anyway?” Leroy added. “I think you and me might have very different definitions, sister.”

Blue shook her head.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “The things I’ve had to do to protect our way of life. How can you understand? You haven’t seen a quarter of the things that I’ve seen. You have no idea what the shadows are capable of! You have no idea what Pan is capable of! You have no idea what Neverland is like! We can’t run the risk of Pan returning to this world. It’s too dangerous, you don’t know!”

“So tell us!” Astrid yelled in return. “If this is such a threat, such a terrible threat, then surely we need to know about it!”

“Surely it would be for the Greater Good to let the town know that we are in any kind of danger,” Belle said. “What do you hope to gain from hiding this?”

“I have to protect the integrity of the sisterhood,” Blue replied sanctimoniously.

“We haven’t done anything!” Theresa said. “The only one who’s doing anything less than above board is you. So really, it’s your own integrity that you want to protect, not ours.”

“What did you do, Blue?” Astrid murmured. There was a distinct tone of fear in her small, silvery voice. “What have you done that’s so terrible that you’ll stop everyone knowing about it at all costs?”
The Blue Fairy was beginning to panic; Belle could see it in her eyes.

“Just give back the Eternal Light and the fairy dust, and no-one needs to know,” Leroy said. “We’ll say that it was an attempt to protect the town.”

The senior fairy shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I’m the blue star. I have to make this right.”

She waved her wand and Leroy was plucked bodily off the ground and thrown towards the cavern wall, where he landed with a sickening thud.

“Leroy!” Astrid raced across to him.

“I’m ok,” he groaned. “It’s ok, I’m solidly built.”

With Leroy and Astrid out of the way, the Blue Fairy turned her attention to Belle and Theresa, raising her wand again.

“No!”

Theresa dived in front of Belle, her own wand at the ready, but her magic was not quick enough to deflect the Mother Superior’s in time. It cracked through the air like a whip and Belle closed her eyes, bracing herself for the impact.

But it never came. There was a brilliant flash of golden light, seeming to pulse out of Belle’s petite form, and the Blue Fairy’s spell was forced back, the magic curving over on itself and causing the Eternal Light to shatter into a hundred glittering shards.

The Blue Fairy dropped her wand in astonishment and the other two fairies, getting to their feet, gazed on in wonder at what had just occurred.

“It’s you,” the Blue Fairy breathed. “The half-fae…”

Theresa and Astrid exchanged an excited look.

“What are you talking about?” Belle asked warily.

“She’s Tink’s baby,” Astrid murmured. “Tink’s little girl all grown up.”

“Will someone tell me what’s going on?” Belle pressed. “I’m not a fairy. I’m just me. Just Belle. Nothing special. I have no idea what that was.”

“Your mother, Belle…” Theresa began, coming towards her but stopping short when Belle began backing up rapidly. “She was a fairy, just like us. Tinker Bell. That thing just now, it was her way of protecting you from her own kind.”

Belle shook her head. “No. No. My mother was called Colette and she was definitely human!”

She turned on her heel and ran out of the cavern, back towards the entrance to the mines and hopefully clarity of thought.

The three fairies and Leroy could only stay and watch her leave. Astrid was the first to move, gathering up the pieces of the lantern and the stock of fairy dust.

“We’ll leave these with the Sheriff under lock and key,” she said firmly. “That way no-one can get at
them.”

The Mother Superior did not respond, dumbfounded by what she had just seen.

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**Enchanted Forest – Past**

Tinker Bell flew through the air towards Maurice’s castle as fast as her wings could take her. Sugar Plum could not cover for her this time; her friend’s standing with the Blue Fairy was precarious enough as it was now, and Tinker Bell had no desire to see Sugar Plum punished for indiscretions that were entirely Tinker Bell’s own fault. She looked over her shoulder several times as she flew, looking out for any kind of pursuit, but so far she seemed to be alone.

Finally she reached the castle and slipped in through an open window on the top floor, keeping to the shadows as she made her way through the place in search of her child. She didn’t doubt Sugar Plum’s assertions that the baby would be perfectly all right with Maurice and Colette, but the look in the Blue Fairy’s face when she had first cast eyes on the child had made Tinker Bell extremely wary, and it was worth risking her wings to make doubly sure that the senior fairy would not be able to meddle.

She had almost given up hope of finding her when she entered the last chamber on the left and found herself in what was very obviously a nursery. Tinker Bell wasted no time in going over to the crib and alighting on the side, causing it to rock gently. Inside, her daughter was fast asleep, undisturbed for the dramatic scenes that had played out during the first few weeks of her life. It was going to be hard to wrench herself away, harder still knowing that Maurice was only a few steps down the hall, but the die had been cast. She could not remain.

“I'll keep you safe, sweet one,” Tinker Bell said softly. She took her wand and the small bag of pixie dust that she had stolen from their almost depleted supply at headquarters – pure, unrefined pixie dust from Neverland, the most powerful magical substance in all the realms. “No fairy will be able to harm you now. Blue won’t be able to get her hands on you, I promise.”

She blew the silvery green powder into the baby’s face and she gave a little sneeze, waking herself up.

“Don’t cry, my darling,” Tinker Bell said, rocking the crib with a flutter of her wings. “Your mama’s here.”

Her daughter did not cry and just stared with wonder at the small green glowing light sitting on the edge of her crib. After a while, an infant smile crept over her face and she gurgled. Tinker Bell smiled, trying not to cry.

“That’s it,” she crooned. “Everything’s going to be all right now. You’ll be safe from Blue. I just need to finish the spell.”

She raised her wand and passed it through the air above the crib, muttering the words of the complex enchantment under her breath.

“It’s normally more effective with three,” she explained to her child whilst she worked, a golden cloud of magic forming in the air around them. “But for now my own magic will have to suffice.”

The spell complete, the cloud of magic blanketed the baby and shone for a few moments before
vanishing completely.

“There we are. That’s better. Blue can’t harm you now.”

She stayed gazing at her daughter’s pretty face and bright blue eyes for a lot longer than she should have done, unable to tear herself away, until finally dawn began to break in the east outside, and Tinker Bell accepted that soon the castle would be waking and her presence would be discovered. With a heavy heart, she took off from the crib and made her way towards the window, opening it a crack. As she left the baby’s eyeline, however, her daughter started to grizzle, which in turn brought tears to Tinker Bell’s eyes.

“I’m sorry darling, I’m so sorry, but this is the way it has to be. You’re safe now, that’s all that I can hope for, and your papa will take care of you. Oh sweetheart, I love you so much it’s tearing me apart, but I have to go now.”

Unable to stand the crying any longer, Tinker Bell flew back to the crib and planted a tiny fairy kiss on the child’s hot, tear-stained cheek. She quietened a little but continued to wail, and Tinker Bell had no choice but to move away again. Her crying would attract attention soon and she had to leave, as painful as it was to close the window on the pitiful sobs. Leaning on the glass, Tinker Bell broke down herself. It was the second time that she had had to turn her back on her darling, and it was no easier than the first.

Peering over the edge of the window as she dried her eyes, Tinker Bell saw that Colette had come into the room and taken the infant in her arms, rocking her gently. As painful as it was to see someone else being a mother in the way that she wanted to be herself, it gave Tinker Bell a certain kind of closure to see that her baby was being looked after well.

Presently Maurice joined them in the room, and through the window, his eyes met Tinker Bell’s for a split second.

“Tink?” she saw him mouth, and she took off away from the window, not looking back. It had been a mistake to stay so long, although she did not regret the magic that she had performed.

“Tinker Bell.”

The voice stopped her in her tracks and Tinker Bell just hovered in the air, unwilling to turn around and face what was coming next – especially not with tear-tracked and blotchy cheeks. It was the Blue Fairy’s voice, and Tinker Bell knew that she had to be composed when the confrontation inevitably took place.

“Tinker Bell, you know that under the terms of your return to the fae, you were no longer allowed contact with humans.”

Tinker Bell steeled herself up and twisted in the air to face the Blue Fairy.

“She is my daughter,” she said. “I had to make sure that she was safe from the likes of you.”

“You are already in a precarious position, Tinker Bell, don’t make it any worse for yourself,” the Blue Fairy said coldly. “Such accusations are not helping your cause.”

“I know what you think of her,” Tinker Bell continued. “A half-fairy, an abomination to be wiped out. Something that never should have happened.”

“She never should have happened. Her very existence goes against the natural order of things. Who knows what will happen to her later in life? Will she inherit your longevity or will she have a normal
lifespan? Will she suddenly develop fae wings that can’t hold her human form and fall to her death? It would be better for all parties to put her out of her misery now."

“I can’t believe you’re even considering such a thing, Blue!” Tinker Bell exclaimed. “You who are meant to be the most compassionate and benevolent of fairies towards humans in need. She is not just my daughter, she is Maurice’s and now she is Colette’s as well. Have you no intention of taking their feelings into account?”

“It would be a tragic loss for them, but they can have more children. It would not do to send a message to our fellow fairies that these things will be tolerated. We are above such foolish things as love, Tinker Bell. Surely you know how it all ends by now.”

Tinker Bell shook her head. “You’ll never touch her. You’re too late. I’ve already done it. Not even you can undo that magic. You won’t find her in this world, and you’ll never harm her as long as you both live!”

The Blue Fairy’s face was set in an angry snarl, the likes of which Tinker Bell had never seen.

“When I discovered that both you and some pixie dust were missing from headquarters, I had hoped that you had not done something so foolish as to take it for your own ends, but I can see that I was mistaken. Contravening my direct orders and now stealing from your sisterhood. You know what this means, Tinker Bell. You’ve already had your second chance and you leave me with no choice. As much as I would like to be able to show you clemency, I have to set an example.”

Tinker Bell held her head up high.

“I don’t regret it,” she said. “Not a moment of it. Even if I am damned for eternity, I did it all for love and that is worth every minute of whatever happens next.”

The Blue Fairy looked grave.

“Well, I hope that thought brings you comfort, Tinker Bell,” she said, raising her wand.

Tinker Bell closed her eyes.

No fairy who had ever lost her wings had ever returned from her banishment to tell the tale, so no fairy was ever prepared for the agony of having her wings ripped from her body by magic. Tinker Bell clenched her teeth through the pain, thinking of her daughter’s smiling face, of holding her in her arms. She thought of the satisfaction of knowing that whatever happened, her baby was safe. She thought of Maurice’s lips soft against hers, and the blissful year of happiness that they had shared. It was worth the pain that she felt now. Every second of it.

The pain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and Tinker Bell felt herself falling. Somewhere in the back of her mind, very faintly, she thought she heard Sugar Plum’s voice screaming ‘no!’ , but it was only a vague impression. The roar of the magic around her enveloped her and rang in her ears as she fell through the realms towards her destination.

It was a hard landing, and Tinker Bell groaned, not daring to move for fear of discovering broken bones.

“Well, well, what have we here then?” asked a voice above her. Tinker Bell groaned again. She had arrived. Neverland, home of all fallen fairies. Eternal and deadly, with no wings or magic to aid in survival, only wits. She gingerly got her aching body into a sitting position and opened her eyes, looking around at the group of Lost Boys that surrounded her, led by the devil himself, Peter Pan.
“It looks like another fairy just dropped out of the sky, lads,” Pan continued. “Now, you must have been a very naughty girl to end up here. Tut tut.” He turned to the Lost Boys. “How long did we take to catch the last one, boys? A week?”

Pan returned his attention to the fairy on the ground. “We’ll make it fair on you, since you’ve only just arrived on our shores. You can have a day’s head start.”

Tinker Bell needed no further encouragement to scramble to her feet and set off at a run through the dense undergrowth.

Storybrooke – Present

Belle stood outside Game of Thorns, wishing that she could pluck up the courage to go in and ask her father the myriad of questions that were on her mind. Her mother – well, the woman that she had always thought of as her mother – had died when she was just small, and he had never liked to talk about her much, other than to say wistfully just how much Belle reminded him of her. Now everything had changed. Although there were many uncertainties in the world, Belle had always been sure of her own identity, but even that was up in the air now. A small part of her mind was grousing at her, wondering what Rumpel would say when he found out that she was half-fairy. He had never made any secret of his distaste for the fae folk, what would his reaction be to finding out that she was one?

“How’s working out what to say?”

Belle turned to see Theresa hovering nervously beside her, and she shook her head.

“How’s working out if I want to say anything at all,” she replied. “Our last conversation didn’t go down very well. I told him I never wanted to see him again and we haven’t spoken since.”

Theresa gave a sad smile. “I’m very sorry to hear that. He loves you very much, he always has done.”

“I know he does, in his own way, but that love can be stifling sometimes, when I just want to be free to make my own decisions and my own mistakes.”

“All fathers are protective,” Theresa said. “You’re always protective of a child that you love. I only have to look at Herr Drosselmeyer and Clara to know that. But perhaps your father is more protective than most due to your unusual heritage.” She sighed. “I was the one to take you to Maurice after Tinker Bell had to give you up. You would have been raised under the watch of the fairies as a fae foundling otherwise, but we already knew that Blue’s intentions towards you were suspect, so I snuck you away. You were in so much danger at that time, the need to protect you at all costs was pressing. Perhaps that desire to put your safety above all other concerns has never truly died. He wants to keep you from having your heart broken like his and Tinker Bell’s were.”

“It’s my heart though,” Belle stressed. “I can’t be wrapped up my whole life. I’m so angry and confused, I don’t know what to do. Why did he never tell me who my real mother was?”

“Colette was your real mother just as Tinker Bell was,” Theresa said softly. “From the moment she took you in her arms she loved you as her own. She was every inch your mother, don’t doubt that. And you loved her as a mother as well, the only mother you’d ever known. What was there to be gained from confusing matters? It would not bring either woman back.”
Belle gave a last look through the glass at Moe, who had looked up and caught her gaze. There was a stalemate then, neither wanting to be the one to make the first move. Finally Belle broke the moment, turning away from the shop window and walking along down the road towards the docks. Theresa followed her.

“I know I’m not Maurice or Colette or Tinker Bell,” she began, “but I was Tinker Bell’s best friend and I was there for most of the tale. If there’s anything that you want to know that you perhaps don’t have the strength to ask your father yet, you can ask me if you want.”

“Thank you.”

The two women walked on in silence for a while until Belle spoke again.

“What was she like? Tinker Bell?”

“Bright. Adventurous. Optimistic. She always saw the best in everything and everyone. And she was fearless, especially when it came to things that she cared about. Some might have called her foolishly fearless.” Theresa smiled. “She was a lot like you, honestly. And she was a lot like your father was when he was younger. It’s why they got on so well.”

“How did she die?”

Theresa shook her head. “She didn’t die; she fell. She had her wings taken as a punishment. Fallen fairies are banished to Neverland.”

Belle looked over at the sea front, across the waves and realms to Rumpel and Neal and Henry and now her mother as well.

“Do you think she’s still alive?” she asked the fairy. “From what I’ve heard Neverland isn’t the easiest place in which to survive.”

“I think she’s all right,” Theresa said. “I think that I would have felt it if something had happened to her. We were born from different flowers of the same plant; she’s almost what you would call family to me. No, I’m certain that she’s all right.”

Belle did not stop her perusal of the horizon. It was something that she did every time she looked in this direction, hoping that she could perhaps catch a glimpse of the returning ship, however futile that hope may be.

“If you knew I was Tinker Bell’s daughter, why didn’t you say something sooner?” she asked presently.

“I didn’t know,” Theresa replied levelly. “Not until recently at least. I had not seen you since you were a few weeks old and you didn’t have a name at that time. That was the last occasion that I saw your father as well. People change a lot over the course of three decades. I didn’t recognise either of you. It was only once I saw you handling Tinker Bell’s wand that I suspected. It was warm under your touch: it recognised your blood as hers. That was when things started to become clear. But what could I say? It was better just to let things continue in the way that they had always done.”

“But in the cavern you rushed to protect me, although you knew about the protection that Tinker Bell had placed on me.”

“I didn’t know for sure about that,” Theresa admitted. “I’d only ever had Blue’s word that such a protection existed, and we’ve become painfully aware that her word is not to be trusted. I just knew that Tink had trusted me to protect you, so that was what I was going to do.”
Belle smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Together they looked out across the sea, wondering what could be happening to their friends and family a world away.

**Neverland – Present**

The reaction on Neal entering the clearing was one of stunned disbelief.

“Neal?” Snow began. “We thought…” She didn’t give any voice to the words but it was clear what she was thinking. Regina and Tinker Bell just looked on, the former wary and the latter confused, and Hook stayed at the edge of the group. He exchanged a glance with Neal, and a sort of understanding passed between them, that whilst Neal did not trust the pirate as far as he could throw him, he was prepared to park their past for a little while until Henry was safe. It was David who saved the situation in the end, coming over to Neal and shaking his hand before clapping him on the back.

“We’re very glad to have you on board, Neal,” he said. “The more the merrier, considering what we’re about to undertake.”

“This is turning into quite the family affair,” Regina said dryly.

“Hey, I can always leave if you want me to,” Neal shot back.

“No,” Snow said, her voice firm. “Neal, I have no idea how you managed to survive what you went through, but I’m very glad to see that you’re ok, and we need all the help that we can get from as many quarters as possible. You’ve turned up just in time, hasn’t he, Tinker Bell?”

The fairy nodded, her head on one side.

“Have we met?” she asked Neal.

“Yes. Hello again, Tink. It’s me, Baelfire.”

Tinker Bell pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes crinkling in a smile.

“Baelfire. Look at you, all grown up. I never thought I’d see you here again.”

“Likewise,” Neal admitted.

“Well,” Tinker Bell said eventually after another long pause. “We can leave the reminiscing to another day. We don’t have much time left. We need to get to the camp.”

The rest of the group busied themselves with packing up, and Emma and Neal stayed at the edge.

“So how do you two know each other?” Emma asked, nodding towards Tinker Bell.

“Tink’s been in Neverland a while, ever since she was banished here by the Blue Fairy,” Neal said. “She helped me escape the first time round. I wanted to bring her with me, but I couldn’t. I’m glad she’s ok.” He turned to Emma. “Have you given any thought to how we’re going to get home?”
Emma grimaced. “Not, perhaps, as much as we should have done. The Jolly Roger is pretty much irreparable at the moment but we’re hoping to get some pixie dust from Pan’s secret horde to patch up the ship and fly us home. I just want to get Henry safely with us; that’s all I can think about at the moment.”

“Hey, it’s ok,” Neal said. “I completely understand. It’ll be all right. We’ll get Henry, and we’ll get home. I mean, think of Hook what you like and my opinions of him aside, he’s definitely got out of here once and so have I. It’s not impossible. We’ll find him. Don’t worry.”

Emma nodded weakly and finally turned to face Neal again.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said eventually. “I know I might not look like it, or sound like it.”

“It’s fine. Your mind’s on other things.”

“But I am glad that you’re here, and I’m glad that you’re ok.”

Emma wasn’t quite sure who initiated it, or whether it happened by some kind of unspoken mutual agreement, but without any further words they ended up in a hug.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Any time.

They broke apart on hearing Hook’s voice beside them.

“We’re moving out,” he said. His expression was guarded, his words measured and careful, and Emma wondered if it was down to his tumultuous past with Neal or something else. She thought there was something else, but she put it to the back of her mind and they began to make their way away from the safety of Tinker Bell’s fairy ring and towards the Lost Boys’ camp, every step taking them closer to Henry.

When they were within sight of the large clearing, Tinker Bell, in the lead, held up a hand to stop them.

“We’re here. Looks pretty empty, we should be in luck. Ok, everyone, you know your positions. Neal, you go over there, between those trees.”

Neal left them and made his way towards his designated post. On her other side, Emma saw David give Snow a leg up into the treetops and she could just about make out the other woman creeping about in the canopy, searching for the perfect vantage point. She was amazed at how silently Snow could move around in the leaves, but then she remembered all the stories of her parents’ quest to retake their kingdom, and she remembered her mother standing up to ogres and shooting them at point blank range in the Enchanted Forest, and she remembered that Mary Margaret the mild-mannered school teacher and Snow White the bandit princess were one and the same, however much she might be used to seeing the former.

She focussed on the camp in front of them. If everything went to plan, then the next step would be finding Henry, and then they could think about getting home. She wrinkled her nose. Something smelled bad nearby, like burning hair, and as she moved around the camp, she saw with a sickening jolt that there was a large fire in the centre with the distinct shape of a human body upon it. Tinker Bell had assured them several times that Pan wanted Henry alive, but all the same, the sight made her shudder. These boys were young, but they were not children by any manner or means. Not whilst they were under Pan’s control.
Everyone was in place. Emma cast glances around the camp and found the other members of the party. They were ready.

Tinker Bell took a deep breath and walked into the camp.
“You and I are going to play a little game…”

As soon as Pan had spoken, he had vanished from view in the shadowy tunnel and Rumpelstiltskin wondered if the boy had ever truly been there in the first place. He knew - at least he thought he knew - what game Pan wanted to play. Toying with his emotions and the newly resurfaced memories of a long-buried past, he was trying to provoke a reaction, a chase. After everything that had happened and all the pain that Pan had caused, Rumpelstiltskin was very tempted to give him what he wanted out of a rising desire for grim revenge, but he resisted the urge. He could play Pan at his own game, and he had to keep in control, if he could. Pan was expecting him to lash out, but there was something far more precious at stake. Henry was here, somewhere, and he was in peril. Putting Pan’s taunts to the back of his mind, Rumpelstiltskin pressed on through the caves towards the main cavern of Skull Rock in search of his grandson. As he passed through into the large main chamber, there was still no sign of Pan, and Rumpelstiltskin began to feel a creeping sense of unease. When he had first come to Neverland, he had accepted the inevitability of his fate and his undoing. But maybe this event was now closer at hand than he had realised, and the anticipation of it was enough to make a stronger man than him shudder.

Before he could dwell any further on that dark train of thought, something caught his eye at the far end of the cave, and with it all other instincts were immediately directed towards that one singular entity.

“Henry!”

He rushed over to the boy, who was lying on a small stone ledge cut into the cave wall. He seemed to be asleep, eyes closed and face peaceful, and for a moment Rumpelstiltskin feared that he might be too late and Pan had already killed him. He felt for a pulse - weak and fluttering like a bird, but still there - and he felt warm breath against his rough skin.

“Henry? Henry, it’s me, wake up, please.” He knew that the hope that all was well and they could just escape and reunite with the others as if nothing had happened was a futile one. Pan had to have something up his sleeve. This was too easy.

“He’s not going to wake, you know.”

Rumpelstiltskin turned to see Pan in the centre of the cave, crouched on the ground beside a small trap door. He was holding something, tossing it carelessly from one hand to the other. It was glowing gold, and Rumpelstiltskin realised with a nauseating jolt of horror that it was Henry’s heart.

“Give that to me,” he snarled, leaving his grandson’s side and coming towards Pan.

“What, this?” Pan feigned dropping the heart, causing Rumpelstiltskin’s own to beat painfully in his mouth. “No, I don’t think I will. I’ve got great plans for this heart, and I’d hate for it to fall into the wrong hands.” He studied it carefully; as much as Rumpelstiltskin wanted just to rush him and grab the glowing organ, he knew that doing so would more than likely result in causing more harm to Henry.

“I wonder,” Pan continued. “Yes, I wonder just how much you want this heart, so bright and pulsing with young life. It wouldn’t take much to snuff it out really, would it? Just a little squeeze. You could
do it with one hand. Crush all the life out of it and turn it to worthless dust.” He balanced the heart on one palm, his grip light but still threatening to crush.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Rumpelstiltskin growled.

“Of course I wouldn’t, it’s far too valuable to me.” Pan scoffed. “But what about you, Rumpel? The boy that would be your undoing. Oh yes, I know all about that prophecy. Tell me, if I gave you this heart, all this power in your hands, what would you do with it? You can tell yourself that you’re working towards a noble cause, but if you could actually touch it, would the temptation to save yourself be too strong, I wonder? Self-preservation is a trait that runs in the family, isn’t it? You’ve done it before; abandoning your son for your own ends.”

“And whose fault is that?” Rumpelstiltskin replied, inching closer to the boy and more importantly, to Henry’s heart. Pan looked at him with an expression of faux shock.

“You surely can’t blame me for your abysmal failure as a parent, Rumpel,” he gasped. “I wasn’t even there at the time.”

“You know what you did,” Rumpelstiltskin said icily. “Now give me that heart!”

“You or you’ll what? Throw a fireball and risk barbecuing your grandson from the inside out? Actually, that would be a novel way of despatching him, and you could always claim that you were trying to save him. Oh, how these fortuitous little accidents do happen. No, I think I need to keep this as a little insurance policy. It’s a shame I need to surrender it to the island really, but sometimes we all need to make sacrifices in the name of the Greater Good.”

“What do you know of the Greater Good?”

“Oh, lot more than you, Rumpel.” With that, Pan put the heart into the trap door and Rumpelstiltskin lunged at him, but the boy just laughed, slamming the trap door shut and vanishing out of the way, leaving Rumpelstiltskin sprawled on the ground.

“Catch me if you can,” Pan taunted from behind him. “Or should I say, catch it if you can.”

Rumpelstiltskin pushed himself up onto his knees and glanced down at where the trap door had been, only to find that it had disappeared beneath him. Pan’s cruel laugh was ringing in his ears.

“Oh dear,” he said dramatically. “Wherever could it be? There’s only one way to find out.” He jumped down from his perch and approached Rumpelstiltskin again. “It’s just you and me, Rumpel; just like it always used to be. Does it bring back fond memories?” He shook his head with a sneer. “Not for me it doesn’t. But here we are. What are you going to do now?”

Rumpelstiltskin, by this time both truly riled and sure that Henry’s heart would not be caught in the crossfire, finally lashed out, launching a ball of flame at the boy, who lazily waved it away with a flick of his hand.

“Honestly Rumpel, is that all you’ve got? I’m not impressed. You’ve let yourself go. You know, I think it might be that little maid of yours. She’s turned you soft with dreams of flowers and matrimony. What happened to the black-hearted beast of the Dark Castle? Come on, Crocodile, show your teeth! Actually, on second thoughts…” Pan smiled, a nasty, dangerous smile. “We are in my domain, after all, my arena. My home, if you will. And since we’re in my home, we’ll be playing by my rules. You’ve been cowering behind your magic for so long now, Rumpel, I wonder how you would fare without it.”

Rumpelstiltskin flexed his fingers, preparing his next offensive, but the warming pulse of magic over
his fingertips did not come. Looking down, he found pink human skin in place of his shimmering scales, and as he got to his feet, pain shot through his injured ankle. There were such things as null fields, places protected from magical interference, but Rumpelstiltskin had never encountered one, and this could not be one anyway, since Pan was still bouncing around the cave quite happily, showing no signs of being affected. Rumpelstiltskin began to panic. For all Pan’s visible youth and gangliness, he had several advantages over Rumpelstiltskin, magic the least of them. From the various entrances into the cave, he could see several shadows drifting in, heeding some kind of summons.

“Right,” he muttered to himself. “This could get interesting.”

He knew he had no hope of defeating the shadows should they choose to attack him, or as was more likely, should Pan order them to attack him. Even if he’d still had his magic, it would have been nearly useless against so many of the formless foes. The only hope he had was his own shadow, the final card up his sleeve, and all he could do was pray that one free, unbound shadow was a match for several bound ones being controlled by a puppet master. Rumpelstiltskin looked around for an Eternal Light, but there was no sign of one anywhere. The brief flash of daylight that he had seen earlier must have had something to do with its conspicuous absence from Pan’s ultimate base of operations.

“They’re really quite useful you know,” Pan said as the shadows encircled Rumpelstiltskin, making no move to attack but allowing him no chance of escape either. “You should try it sometime. Oh wait, you won’t have the opportunity. You’ll be dead.” Pan tutted. “Such a pity.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Rumpelstiltskin saw his own shadow slip into the cavern from the direction that he had entered himself, and he caught its eye, trying to get it to go over to Henry without Pan noticing what he was attempting to communicate. Maybe if his shadow could take Henry back to the others then he would be safe, and Rumpelstiltskin’s inevitable mauling by Pan’s shadow army would serve as a nice distraction to allow the rest of the party to get safely away with the object of their rescue mission.

His shadow thankfully understood him and began to move towards the ledge where Henry was lying.

“Oh no you don’t,” Pan said, and with a flick of his wrist, another shadow swooped down from the ceiling and rushed into Rumpelstiltskin’s, bowling it over and grappling with it in mid-air. It was Pan’s own shadow, more temperamental and more vicious than the rest having been separated from its body for so long. Had he not been in such mortal peril and had a part of his own soul not been one of the combatants, Rumpelstiltskin would have been fascinated by the spectacle of the shadows fighting silently yet violently, a cross between a ballet and all-out warfare. He did not have time to think on it any more, however, as it was then that Pan gave the order for the other shadows to attack, and all Rumpelstiltskin could do was attempt to hold them off physically for as long as he could. With his shadow waylaid and so many spectral hands tearing at him, he thought that he could be forgiven for almost missing the arrival of another shadow on the scene, one that immediately went over to Henry’s prone form. When he did see it, he smiled in spite of his desperate situation. Emma’s shadow had joined the fray. Perhaps things could work out in their favour after all.
Enchanted Forest – Past

Although night had long since fallen, the fires of the forge were still burning brightly, illuminating the corner of the village where the mined metal was brought well into the small hours. The blacksmiths were still hard at work within, and with every strike of a hammer against an anvil, so another sword, shield, spear or piece of armour came closer to completion. Anyone looking in on the forge would agree that it was no place for a child, and yet, gazing out of one of the windows there was a boy of about fourteen years of age, his face grimy with soot and pinched from a lack of regular food. The smoke from the forge’s ever-burning furnaces obscured his view of the stars, but now and then a gust of wind would favour him and a break in the straggly cloud cover would grant him a glimpse of the Blue Star, the Wishing Star.

“I wish…” he began, but that was as far as he got before a voice from the depths of the forge hailed him.

“Boy! The fires are dimming! Get down here!”

The boy scrambled away from the window, fearing a beating if he didn’t get back to work, and he set to shovelling coal into the furnaces and pumping the flames with the bellows until they roared into life again.

“Come on boy, put your back into it!” one of the blacksmiths yelled. “There’s a war on, you know! The duke can’t defend you without swords and armour for his men, can he? Do you want everyone to know that when the land’s razed it was because of your idleness?”

“No sir.”

“I thought not. Now get back to work and don’t let those fires go out again!”

The boy sighed as he began to sweep up all of the cuts and shavings of steel to throw them back into the melting pot.

“Make sure you get all the scraps,” another man shouted. “We can’t afford to waste an ounce.”

The boy sighed again and muttered under his breath.

“I hate my life.”

“Hey!” The head of the forge grabbed his shoulder roughly. “You watch your mouth, boy. We took you in out of the goodness of our hearts when your father decided to go and get himself hacked to pieces on the battlefields. If you’d rather follow in his footsteps then the front is that way.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the door.

“Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

The blacksmith gave a derisive snort and pushed the boy back down to the floor where he began to gather the scrap metal again.

It was another few hours before the smiths, at last too exhausted to continue their work, finally put down their tools and let the fires burn out, leaving the forge one by one until only the boy was left, alone among the piles of steel that would next day be hauled off to the front lines for the army.

The boy swept the ashes out of the fire and lay a dirty old blanket over them, creating a warm bed for himself. From his place on the floor in front of the dying fire he could see out of the window and he could just about make out the sparkle of the Wishing Star against the inky backdrop of the night sky.
“I wish…” the boy began. “I wish I could just leave this place, this realm, this land even. Go somewhere where it’s just me, no-one to answer to. I’d be lord and master, king of all I surveyed, and I could do anything I wanted. Even fly. I’d be a great hero, and I’d call myself… Peter Pan.”

He looked again at the star, only just visible through the thick clouds. “That’s what I wish. If you’re listening.”

He waited a few minutes but there was no response – not that he quite knew what kind of answer he expected from a far-off star. When he finally accepted that nothing was going to happen, he turned over on his makeshift bed with a huff and closed his eyes.

“Malcolm.”

He hadn’t heard his real name for so long and had become so used to just being called ‘boy’ that it took him a moment to realise that someone was calling to him in a small, silvery voice. When he did make the connection, he shot to his feet, looking around for the source of the sound.

“I’m over here.”

He turned to see a tiny woman sitting on the window ledge in a sliver of star light, her entire form emitting a soft blue glow.

“Who are you?” Malcolm asked, afraid of this sudden new apparition. “What do you want with me, and how do you know my name?”

“I am Rheul Gorm, or the Blue Star, but you can call me the Blue Fairy. I know your name because I heard your wish, and I’m here to help it come true.”

“You were listening? In the star?”

“I’m always listening,” the Blue Fairy replied. Looking past her out of the window, Malcolm could see that the Wishing Star had vanished from the sky.

“Can you take me away from here?” Malcolm asked eagerly. “Please, I’d do anything.”

“There is a land where all your wishes can come true,” the Blue Fairy said, “but alas, I cannot take you there myself. My power is too limited.”

Malcolm’s face fell. What was the point in wishing on the Blue Star if she couldn’t help?

“I can, however, introduce you to someone who can,” the Blue Fairy continued. Malcolm looked around, but there was no sign of anyone else in the darkened forge. The Blue Fairy laughed. “It’s a simple enough piece of magic,” she said. “If you stand over there in the light of the fire; that should be sufficient. This may sting, but it will only be for a moment.”

Malcolm did as he was bid, and the Blue Fairy fluttered down from her perch and alighted on the grubby floor, examining his feet.

“Yes, this should work perfectly.” She waved her wand at the outline of his shadow that was flickering against the wall of the forge in the low firelight, and a moment later, Malcolm felt a sharp pain around the soles of his feet. The pain was immediately overtaken by a sense of fear as he saw the change in his shadow. It lifted itself away from his feet and moved independently of his body, and as he continued to watch, awestruck and mesmerised, he saw two yellow points of light flicker into life where the eyes should be.
“Your shadow will be able to take you to Neverland,” the Blue Fairy explained. Malcolm turned to her.

“What’s Neverland?” he asked.

“It’s a place far from here,” the Blue Fairy said. “It’s a magical land, and it can be whatever you believe it to be. It’s your belief in such a place that’s made your visit there possible. Now, we don’t have much time. Shadows prefer to work in the night time hours, not the day; they thrive best in the darkness from which they are made.”

Malcolm looked down to see that his shadow was holding out a hand. Tentatively he took it, expecting his fingers to go straight through the spectral shape and surprised when he encountered something solid and almost like flesh.

The shadow held on tightly and Malcolm felt himself being lifted off the ground. He couldn’t help but grin. He’d wanted to fly, and now his wish was coming true. The fairy took off as well, her wings shimmering until she was level with Malcolm and his shadow.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Oh yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

The shadow took off then, racing through the air as if it was an arrow show from a longbow, straight towards the window, which it pulled Malcolm through with no effort at all, soaring upwards into the night sky, the Blue Fairy keeping pace alongside them.

“This is amazing!” Malcolm cried. The Blue Fairy just gave him an indulgent smile. “So how do we get to Neverland?” he asked her.

“Second star to the right and straight on till morning,” the fairy replied.

“To the right of what?” Malcolm pressed, looking across the night sky at the myriad twinkling stars there.

“Your shadow knows the way.”

If he was troubled by the fairy’s evasive response, then Malcolm did not show it, too thrilled by his flight to pay more than cursory attention to what was said. Above him, the shadow twirled and looped, taking him on an aerial adventure through the night sky before he was finally lowered gently onto the soft earth of a lush, verdant island.

“Is this Neverland?” he asked, looking around in awe at the beautiful landscape that enveloped him.

“Yes,” the Blue Fairy said. “This is the place of your dreams. You belief has helped will it into being, and it’s what fuels this place. Anything can happen here, just so long as you believe it can.”

“This is wonderful,” Malcolm breathed as he wandered around the island. “It’s better than I thought it would be. Not another soul… I can rule over the land here, a great conquering hero, Peter Pan, having vanquished all enemies.”

“If that is what makes you happy, then let it be so,” the Blue Fairy said. “I can’t stay; I will have to return to the Enchanted Forest soon, but your shadow will take you back when it is time to go home.”
Malcolm shook his head. “I never want to go home. I’m going to stay in this place forever, and I’ll never have to worry about anything ever again.”

“You can’t stay here forever, Malcolm,” the Blue Fairy said gently. “Neverland is timeless and static. Nothing ages here, except you. You can’t remain young forever, and you can’t stay here. Everyone has to grow up, Malcolm, and to do that, you have to go home. Neverland is your refuge for as long as you believe and for as long as you remain a child, but the longer you stay here, the less potent its magic will become.”

“Then I’ll stay a child forever,” Malcolm declared defiantly. “There must be a way. I believe there is, so there has to be. This place is shaped by my belief, after all.”

The Blue Fairy shook her head.

“Your belief is powerful, it’s true, but it may not be powerful enough. Neverland is a large place, it requires much magic and belief to keep it static in this way. You’ll need more and more belief to keep it as stable as it is now for any great length of time. In order for Neverland and yourself to become truly immortal, the island would require a heart with so much belief that it would fuel it forever.”

“Then I’ll find such a heart!” Malcolm said, confidently striding over to the lagoon in the centre of the island. As he did so, various features of the place began to appear and reform in a hazy shimmer. There was nothing sudden or jarring in the motions, indeed it seemed as if the new structures had always been there and just never been truly noticed before now.

“A skull?” the Blue Fairy asked warily as a large rock took form in the middle of the lagoon.

“Why not?” Malcolm said flippantly. He hopped across the surface of the water on stepping stones that rose and fell as he jumped, until he reached the skull-shaped island. “I’ll call it Skull Rock. It sounds like something out of a pirate adventure. This will be my base of operations.” He turned to the Blue Fairy, giving her an inquisitive look. “If Neverland is timeless, does that mean that I can see the past and the future here?”

“Well, the island exists in both, as well as the present,” the Blue Fairy said. “Theoretically, it can see all time at once.”

“That’s very interesting…” Malcolm sat down on one of the knobbly bumps of rock that formed one of the skull’s teeth, and within moments he was deep in thought. He did not notice the Blue Fairy leave him, nor his shadow hovering ever-present nearby like a faithful guard dog. Finally he turned away from his unseeing perusal of the glittering blue lagoon, and he entered the large cavern, surveying one of the smooth walls.

“You’re alive, aren’t you,” he said, touching one wall and finding it warm under his fingers. “You’re as alive as I am, and you know everything. Oh, what I wouldn’t give to learn all your secrets. So… Show me the truest believer.”

It was a little while before any change to the stone could be discerned, but once it was, it was again as if it had always been there. Malcolm found himself looking at the face of a young boy carved into the rock, and he smiled. All he had to do now was wait for that person, and bring them here to Neverland. Then he would be able to stay here forever.

Presently his shadow floated over to him, taking his hand in a tight grip.

“Is it time to go already?” he asked. The shadow nodded once. “Can I come back again soon?”
Another nod.

Malcolm let himself be borne away from Neverland and back to his dull and arduous life in the Enchanted Forest once more. He was not as upset by the prospect as he had been at first, for now, he had a plan. As they raced over the treetops, Malcolm began thinking up the next stage of it.

“I need to find something to let me fly without your help,” he told the shadow. “Legends talk of pixie dust having flight properties.” He smiled to himself, a cunning smile. “If anywhere has pixie dust, I’ll bet that Neverland does.”

Neverland - Present

It was not uncommon for Tinker Bell to come into the Lost Boys’ camp to trade for supplies, but she did not do it often, preferring to stay within the magical protection of her fairy ring away from the island’s malevolent shadows. Nevertheless, she felt incredibly out of place as she walked into the clearing towards the campfire, as if everyone could tell that she was part of a plot to undo them. The gathered Lost Boys regarded her with mixed expressions as she passed them - some intrigued by her presence, some uninterested, others suspicious. She took a quick glance round and saw where the Eternal Light was being held, in a small cave towards the back of the camp where it could be defended. Although it was not actively being guarded, per se, there were a few Lost Boys sitting very close to the cave mouth with their weapons at hand, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. Tinker Bell gulped inaudibly, hoping that their planned distraction would be enough. One thing that perturbed her was the lack of shadows. Whilst they were not the easiest of things to spot, they could usually be seen gathered in clusters around the edges of the camp, occasionally trying to reunite with their owners whilst they awaited instruction. Today though, there were none, which could only mean that they were employed by Pan elsewhere. Tinker Bell thought of Skull Rock and Henry and the mysterious ritual that would soon be enacted, and she shuddered. Hopefully they wouldn’t be too late.

“Tinker Bell.” Felix got up from his position in the centre of the camp, by the fire, and he came towards her, strategically blocking her view of the lantern. “What brings you to our humble home today? I notice you’ve come empty handed,” he added, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, I’m not here to trade, Felix, I’m here to gossip. What’s going on with all the newcomers on the island? I feel like I can’t go more than five minutes without running into some hooligan with a sword. I’d have thought that you’d have despatched them all with your usual ruthless efficiency by now.”

Felix gave a nasty smile. “Pan says that they’re of secondary importance to us at the moment. There are bigger plans in motion.”

“Indeed,” Tinker Bell said. “But what if our uninvited guests get to Skull Rock before you can enact your grand master plan?”

Felix was visibly perturbed by the suggestion for a moment before the mask of nonchalance slipped back into place.

“Pan never fails,” he said airily.
“Hmm.” Her hands held casually behind her back, Tinker Bell signalled to the others in the trees around them, and on cue, one of Snow’s arrows whizzed through the air from the leaf canopy, lodging in a tree stump less than an inch from a young Lost Boy’s head. The response in the camp was immediate; it was clear that the boys were already tense due to the events taking place simultaneously on Skull Rock, and they all sprang to their feet almost as one, grabbing their weapons and looking around for their unseen assailant. Felix glared at Tinker Bell.

“You led them here,” he accused.

Tinker Bell shrugged. “They’re nothing to do with me,” she said sweetly.

A fireball from Regina flew past them in the other direction, almost singing the fairy’s eyebrows off.

“Felix, we’re surrounded,” one of the boys said nervously.

“No, there’s not that many of them. Go on, get out there and find them!” Felix exclaimed. He looked around the camp frantically. “Where are the shadows?” As he rushed towards the cave and the light, Tinker Bell thought she heard him mutter to himself: “why does this always have to happen when I’m in charge?”

She smiled, and caught Emma’s eye through the trees. It was time.

Emma had watched Tinker Bell’s progress through the camp with baited breath, but so far everything had gone off without a hitch, and now the Lost Boys were scattering to meet the rest of the group. Snow, David, Hook and Regina would be outnumbered, yes, but they only had to hold off the attack for long enough to allow them to grab the light. The main problem was Felix. Neal, Hook and Tinker Bell had all warned them that he would be their biggest threat, being as he was the closest to Pan and the most like him.

As soon as the Lost Boys began to move out, Emma moved in, keeping to the shade as much as possible. The boys who had been in front of the cave were dithering, obviously unsure whether to stay or go.

“Tinker Bell, you traitor!” Felix yelled as he rushed towards them. “Out of the way,” he snapped, making a lunge for the lantern. “Get the damn fairy and take her to Pan!”

Behind her, Emma could hear the clash of metal on metal and the soaring of arrows. Not long now, and it would all be over and they could go and get Henry.

Felix made it to the light and began to fiddle inexpertly with its panels, no doubt trying to call back the shadows from wherever they were hiding. Emma slipped out of her hiding place and stepped towards Felix, sliding the blade of her sword under his chin.

He turned to her, and for a moment Emma faltered. His eyes were wide and scared, no more than a child really. They were all no more than children, under the manipulation of an evil entity. They couldn’t really be blamed for what they were doing.

“Just give me the lantern, kid,” she said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Please,” Felix said fearfully. “I don’t want to die.”

“Just give me the light,” Emma repeated. Felix didn’t move, like a rabbit frozen in the headlights, and Emma lowered the sword with a sigh.

Felix just grinned maliciously and Emma cursed inwardly, furious with herself for having fallen for
his act.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to do it,” he said. “That’s why you’ll never win. You wouldn’t harm children. Luckily, Pan has no qualms about that. I wonder how Henry’s doing.”

Emma dropped her sword and flew at him with a scream. Felix side-stepped out of the way with a laugh and turned to exit the cave, bumping straight into another solid shape there.

“Hello Felix. Long time, no see,” said Neal. His tone was light and conversational but there was a hint of steel in it. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

There was a pause, then Felix said in disbelief: “Baelfire?”

“One and the same.”

Without any further pleasantries, Neal punched Felix in the face. The boy spun with the impact and let go of the Eternal Light, which flew in an arc through the air into Emma’s waiting hands.

“I’ve waited over two hundred years to do that,” Neal said, rubbing his knuckles. Knowing that he had been defeated, all Felix could do was glare.

“So now what?” Neal asked.

“Blow it out, I guess. Cover your eyes, this could get pretty blinding.”

Emma carefully opened the metal plates that shielded the light from the elements, and a bright beam shot out. Squinting against the rays, she blew into the lantern. The flame flickered violently but did not extinguish, and she sighed. This magical light was evidently going to need some kind of magical assistance. Emma closed her eyes and tried to remember all the things that Gold had taught her during their time together. She put all her will into the thought and blew out a huff of breath, white with misty magic, and she kept her eyes squeezed shut for a long time afterwards, unwilling to see if it had worked.

“Em? Emma, you can open your eyes now.”

Gingerly she opened one eye and then the other, and saw Neal smiling at her. Looking outside the cave, she had to blink several times at the sight that met her. It was broad daylight as she emerged, and the Lost Boys were coming back into the camp, as dumbstruck by the sight as she was.

“They’ve never seen this place in daylight,” Tinker Bell explained, easily shaking off the ropes that the boys had started to bind her with. “Neither have I, for that matter.”

“It doesn’t look anywhere near as threatening in the light,” Snow observed, dropping out of the trees and coming over to them with the rest of their group, picking up her arrows as she went. The skirmish had ended as suddenly as it had begun, and none of the Neverland residents knew what to do in the wake of this unexpected turn of events.

Regina let out a startled exclamation as something brushed past her shoulder, and Snow readied her bow on seeing a flock of shadows flying at full speed into the clearing, but the phantoms made no move to attack, each going over to its respective owner and attaching itself at the feet once more. One by one, each pair of glowing yellow eyes faded out until there was no trace of the strange magic, just several boys with shadows. Regina glanced down at her feet and smiled as she saw her own shadow settling itself into place, back where it should be. It was a strange feeling when it reattached itself; not quite pain but more a sudden heaviness, and she finally felt safe again for the first time since noticing that her shadow was gone. She was completely her own person once more.
“So now what?” one of the boys asked.

“Now we find Henry and we get out of here,” Emma said grimly, picking up her sword and sliding it back into its scabbard.

“We need pixie dust,” Tinker Bell said to the Lost Boys who had been holding her. “Can you help us get some?”

They nodded unsurely.

“We know where Pan keeps it. If we help you, will you help us to get out of here?”

Tinker Bell turned to Hook, her face politely questioning but her eyes hard and giving him no choice in the matter.

He sighed. “All right. It’ll be tight but you’ll all get on the Jolly. Provided she’s sea-worthy again.”

“You can’t do this!” Felix exclaimed, getting to his feet again. “Pan will…”

“Pan will do what?” asked one of the boys. “Use our shadows to make us do his bidding? Keep us ensnared with the Eternal Light?”

“You don’t have any hold on us any more, Felix, neither you nor Pan,” another of the boys said. “We’re going to go home now.”

“You can’t do this!” Felix repeated, although it was clear from his expression that his vehemence was wavering in the face of so much opposition. Emma wondered how long these boys had been enslaved by way of their shadows and what it was like for them finally to have their free will back.

“Besides, Felix,” said another of the boys, who was packing together his meagre possessions ready to leave. “Pan’s not exactly going to be very happy with you when he finds out that he left the Eternal Light under your protection and you managed to lose it.”

“Yes, Pan’s mercy is not something to be counted on,” Hook added.

Felix appeared to admit defeat at that point, however grudgingly.

“First things first, Henry,” Emma said, pulling all of their minds back to the task at hand. “We need to get to him as soon as possible.”

“The quickest way to Skull Rock is through there,” one of the boys said. “That’s where the pixie dust is too.”

Emma opened her hand and looked at the compass that still shone above her palm; it was pointing in the same direction as the boy. Hopefully that meant that her shadow had found Henry, and that she still had a chance of rescuing him. She didn’t know what her shadow would actually do once it found him, but maybe it would have some degree of common sense that the ones she had seen so far did not possess. She wondered where Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow was now and whether it was helping out.

“All right. We’ll go to Skull Rock and rescue Henry, and find the dust. The rest of you,” here Tinker Bell indicated to the Lost Boys who were not forming part of their pixie dust hunting group, “go to the North Shore where the Jolly Roger is grounded and wait for us there. And maybe try to fix her if you can.”
Hook raised an eyebrow at that, knowing the extent of the damage to the Jolly. Tinker Bell shrugged at him.

“We may as well try and make them useful if we can,” she said, her voice matter of fact.

“Follow us.” A few of the boys had set off in the direction of Skull Rock and the party of rescuers rushed to follow them.

“Are you sure we can trust them?” Regina hissed to Hook.

“Well, they have no reason to remain loyal to Pan anymore,” the pirate replied.

“Equally they have no reason to suddenly switch their allegiance,” Regina said. She feigned deep interest in the surrounding foliage as one of the boys turned to look at her, alerted by her voice, and Hook tried very hard not to laugh.

“We’ve just got to trust them,” he said. “I’ve seen first-hand what happened when the boys tried to escape Neverland in the past, but they still did it, which is a mark of their desperation to get away. Believe me, the end result was not pretty.”

“I’m still not convinced that we’re not walking into a trap.”

“Well, if we are then at least we have numbers on our side this time,” David said, joining in the conversation from his position behind them. “And we won’t have to worry about the shadows.” He glanced over at the lantern that Emma was still carrying carefully. “What will happen to it now?”

“Knowing the way that these things usually work, it’ll end up in Gold’s shop with all the other dangerous magical junk that we can’t find a proper home for,” Snow muttered. “Right now I’m more concerned with how we’re going to get past Pan himself. He has so much influence over the island as a whole, not just the shadows and the Lost Boys. I can’t help thinking that sheer force of numbers isn’t going to help us in this one and we don’t exactly have time to plan and mount a sneak attack like we did at the camp.”

“We’ll just have to go and see what we find,” David said.

“That’s a point though.” Emma turned to Tinker Bell and Neal at the head of the procession with the Lost Boys. “Can Pan even be killed?”

“He doesn’t age, but he’s not invulnerable,” Tinker Bell said. “He bleeds and hurts and is affected by magic just like any other human boy. It shouldn’t be impossible to harm him. The problem is usually getting close enough to do so. He’s been here so long that Neverland’s magic is part of him. A simple arrow to the heart would drop him, but he’d likely catch the arrow or get out of the way before it hit.”

“Great,” Emma said. “I’m really glad we’re talking about this now, when we’re about to go and face him head on in his lair.”

“If you think about it though, we shouldn’t need to harm him,” Neal pointed out. “The object of the exercise is to go and get Henry, not to defeat Pan. We’re all working on the principle that in order to get to Henry we’ll have to go through Pan, and maybe we will, but maybe we won’t have to.”

Emma shook her head, somewhat disbelieving. “I hope you’re right, Neal, but I really don’t see how you can be.”

“We’ll see when we get there.” It was obvious that Tinker Bell was trying desperately to cling onto
her rapidly waning optimism, but even she entertained a secret thought that their current mission was doomed. “Here we are,” she said brightly as they came through an opening in the trees onto the shores of the lagoon, Skull Rock standing tall and ominous in the centre. There were no signs of activity within the large cave from what little of it they could see through the openings in the rock, just the occasional flash of a fast-moving shadow racing across the back wall.

“I don’t like this,” Hook muttered. “It’s too quiet.”

Almost on cue as Hook spoke, what sounded like a howl of pain ripped through the air from Skull Rock, startling the rescue team into stillness.

“Henry?” Regina said faintly. Emma shook her head.

“No, I think that sounded more like Rumpelstiltskin,” she said. “Either way, we don’t have much time.”

Chilled by the scream, they moved towards the coracles moored at the water’s edge, wondering what kind of horrors awaited them.

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

“Come on Rumpel, don’t dawdle. We need to get there before sunset.”

“But Papa, my feet hurt.”

“It’s not far now, son.”

In the fading light of a harsh winter’s day, a man and a boy could be seen trudging along the North Road that led away from the forests that separated the duke’s arable land from that of the neighbouring Avonlea. The boy was walking a good few yards behind his father, who presently stopped and turned to his son again.

“Come on, Rumpel, this is important!”

The boy put on a burst of speed and promptly tripped on the hard, frozen ground. The man rolled his eyes.

“Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve you,” he muttered, going over and helping to set the boy back on his feet. “Come on, this is a matter of life and death.”

Had there been any fellow travellers on the North Road, they would have noticed that of the two, only the boy cast a shadow. Even in the low, weak sunlight that had almost disappeared behind the tree line, there was no sign of the long, dark shadow that should have been stretched out behind the man, beside that of his son. As they continued to walk along, the boy occasionally glanced behind them, both at their home that was receding into the distance and at the ground and the single shadow.

“Papa,” he began, his painful feet momentarily forgotten in his curiosity, “why don’t you have a shadow?”

“Why do you ask so many daft questions?” the father retorted. “Come on, pick your feet up, and never you mind about my shadow.”
“But where is it?” the boy pressed.

“Somewhere where it doesn’t have to listen to you prattling on.” The father took his son’s hand and pulled him along into the forest. The boy remained silent for a while as they trekked on, but as the sun began to vanish completely, he piped up again.

“Papa, why do we have to leave the village?”

“Because we can’t stay there. The war’s coming. Do you want to get eaten by ogres?”

“No, Papa.”

“Didn’t think so. Come on, we’re almost there.”

It was dark by the time they reached their destination, a cottage tucked away snugly in the middle of the woods. It seemed a homely sort of place, with lights burning in the windows, but the boy was wary of it, hiding behind his father as they approached.

“There’s no need to be such a coward, Rumpel,” the man said. “It’s just your aunts; they’re not going to hurt you.”

“I don’t like this place, Papa,” the boy whispered. As they moved towards the front door, his sharp young eyes caught sight of something moving between the trees, a darker patch of shadow almost, drifting in and out of the branches. Presently it seemed to turn in their direction, and he saw two bright yellow lights winking at him through the darkness like eyes. Instinctively, the boy squeezed his own eyes tight shut and when he finally dared to open one of them again, the mysterious shadowy figure had gone. In front of them, the cottage door was open and a woman was standing on the doorstep to welcome them in.

“You’re behind time, Malcolm,” she said, although there was no reproach in her voice. “We were beginning to worry that the forest might have got you before you arrived.”

“Yes, well, it’s no thanks to this one.” Malcolm pushed his son forward and the woman smiled at the boy.

“Oh, you shouldn’t be so hard on him,” said another female voice from inside the cottage. “He’s only small and it’s a long journey from the Frontlands.”

The woman in the doorway stepped back to let them in. It was not a large dwelling, mostly made up of a single room with a large hearth that was blazing invitingly. Despite his misgivings, the boy was cold enough from their long walk that the fire was like a beacon, and immediately he rushed over to warm himself by the flames.

“He can move quickly enough when it suits him,” Malcolm muttered.

“Malcolm!” The voice from the corner of the room was stern and the soft whirring noise that had been prevailing through the crackling of the logs and the bubbling of the cooking pots stopped. The boy looked over to see another woman, similarly attired to the one who had opened the door, sitting behind a spinning wheel and regarding Malcolm with a distinctly unimpressed look.

Malcolm ignored her and pulled a hip flask from his coat pocket, downing the last dregs and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. The boy, however, was fascinated by the spinning wheel and went over to investigate. The old woman’s face softened into a smile.

“You must be Rumpelstiltskin,” she said. The boy nodded unsurely. “I’m your Aunt Elvira. You
She indicated for him to take a seat beside her on the bench behind the spinning wheel. Do you want to have a go?"

Rumpelstiltskin took the carded wool from her and Elvira began to talk him through the basics of spinning. On the other side of the room, the other spinster watched them fondly as she stirred her stew pot.

“He’s certainly made himself at home,” Malcolm remarked.

“Well, he’s going to have to, isn’t he?” the woman said. “What are you running from this time, Malcolm? More debt?”

Malcolm just gave a derisive snort and made towards the door again.

“Leaving so soon?”

“I can’t waste any more time here, Miriam,” Malcolm said. “I’m delayed enough as it is and they’ll be riding through soon.”

“You’ve been drafted for the war.” Miriam’s voice was flat. “And you’re running away from conscription.”

Malcolm stopped in his tracks and shrugged before turning back to face the older woman.

“I’ll be damned if I’m dying on the battlefield for some idiotic duke who doesn’t know one end of an ogre from the other.”

“And what were you planning on telling your son?” Miriam asked.

“You can tell him whatever you want to tell him,” Malcolm said flippantly. “Tell him that I’m a coward, tell him that I’ve got common sense enough to get out whilst I can and tell him that I could have been living like a king if it wasn’t for his sorry self.”

Miriam’s face hardened.

“When our niece died bringing Rumpel into this world, Malcolm, we gave your our word that we would help you to raise her boy. But he needs a father in his life, a person he can look up to. You can’t just vanish like this.”

“My father did,” Malcolm snapped. “I turned out fine.”

“Some of us would beg to differ on that score,” Miriam replied dryly. “And what has been done to you does not excuse you doing it to someone else.”

Malcolm shook his head. “I’ve got better things to do than listen to your lectures, Miriam.”

He made his way towards the door again.

“For the love of the stars, Malcolm, grow up!” Miriam called after him. “You’re an adult, moreover a father. Act like one!”

“Not tonight,” Malcolm muttered as he left the cottage. “Not tonight, and not ever again.”

Tramping through the woods away from the aunts and his son, Malcolm looked up through the tree
canopy towards the bright full moon and the Wishing Star twinkling beside it.

“I wish I could go back to the beginning,” he murmured. “No ogres, no war, no interfering relatives. No Evanna and her damn pregnancy, no marriage, no Rumpel. Just me and Neverland. It was all so simple back then. I wish I’d never grown up.”

There was no response from the Wishing Star, no silvery tingle of fae magic and small glow of blue light like there had been before, and Malcolm scoffed.

“I see wishing on stars is only for children too.”

Just then there was a rustling noise behind him, and Malcolm froze. Miriam’s comment earlier about the forest at night was not an idle one, and it was a full moon after all. Slowly he turned around, expecting to see a pair of angry red eyes and a snarling mouth attached to a mangy grey body. What he found, however, startled him more than a wolf would have done.

It was his shadow, hovering behind him with its unnerving yellow eyes as it had always done when he was a boy.

“Hello there,” he said, once he had recovered his senses, and he gave a soft chuckle. “It’s been a while.” He paused. “Is it too late to go back?”

The shadow shook its head pointedly and held out a hand, which Malcolm did not hesitate in taking.

“No-one will follow us there,” he said to the shadow as they began to raise up off the ground into the night sky. “This is going to be perfect.”

It felt good to fly again, and Malcolm whooped for joy as they soared over the clouds, weaving in and out of the mountains and watching the countryside whizz past below them. He felt fourteen again, as light and carefree as he had been all those years ago. It was as if the intervening time was falling away, meaningless, and he was becoming young again, as young in body as he had always been in soul. He believed it was possible; after all, the Blue Fairy had told him that he would always find Neverland as long as he was young.

When he touched down on the sunny island and found that his body was once more young and strong, like it had been on his first visit here, it did not surprise Malcolm in the slightest.

Neverland – Present

Rumpelstiltskin had all but given himself up for lost when the shadows had begun to swarm him, and when he suddenly could not feel their spectral hands grabbing at him anymore, he had to wonder for a moment if he was dead. He didn’t dare to open his eyes and find out until he heard an exclamation of anger from Pan.

“No! What are you doing? Get back here!”

Cautiously, Rumpelstiltskin opened his eyes to see that the shadows were leaving, flying swiftly out of the openings in the rock and off into the forest, all moving towards a single point. He felt a shiver run down his spine; it was more than likely that they were congregating wherever Emma and the others were. But the fact that they did not respond to Pan’s summons gave him pause. They had blindly followed his orders before, bound as they were, but now they were completely ignoring his
entreaties, and he gave a grim smile. Somewhere along the line, the shadows had been freed, and not a moment too soon. Now though, Rumpelstiltskin had to deal with the far more immediate problem of what to do with Pan and how to get Henry out of there.

“Don’t be so smug yet, Rumpel,” Pan snapped. “This isn’t over. I still have another shadow at my command.”

Rumpelstiltskin looked over to where his shadow and Pan’s were still brawling, neither showing any sign of tiring. He had no doubt that they would have continued the bout forever if they’d had the opportunity to. Behind them, Rumpelstiltskin could see Emma’s shadow carefully manoeuvring Henry into her arms, ready to take him to safety. Pan followed his eye line and let out an angered roar, launching a spell at the pair and forcing Emma’s shadow to curl up on itself to try and protect Henry as best it could. Meanwhile, seeing the disturbance as well, Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow tore itself away from Pan’s and rushed across to aid Emma’s. Henry’s comatose body was out of danger for now, but it would only be a matter of time.

There was a moment of silence then, as both of the physical combatants took a minute to consider the scene and then Pan laughed, jumping down from his high perch and floating effortlessly to the ground.

“Oh Rumpel. So desperate to protect your grandson, the very person who’ll be your undoing. Mind you, you always were pathetically desperate to keep the family together. Still, your shadow really shouldn’t have done that.”

Rumpelstiltskin didn’t rise to the barb, rubbing his fingers together, trying to work up some kind of magic, even the tiniest spark would do. He could feel the warm pull of it running through his veins, so Pan’s magic was wearing off, but he still wasn’t able to cast yet.

Pan made a small gesture, barely perceptible unless, like Rumpelstiltskin, one was looking for it, and he continued to move leisurely towards Rumpelstiltskin, who backed up instinctively. For a moment he felt like a little boy again; confused and scared and betrayed. As if sensing its owner’s unease, his shadow broke away from Emma’s and tried to come to his side, only to be stopped in its tracks by an invisible barrier. Rumpelstiltskin felt his blood turn to ice. So that was what Pan had been doing.

“Your shadow can’t help you now, Rumpel,” Pan said conversationally. “I know I can’t control it, you’re too clever to have let someone else cut it away for you. I’ll give you that much. So I’ve done the next best thing. No shadows will be getting in or out of our little bubble. Just as well mine’s already inside then, isn’t it?”

With a lazy wave of his hand, the shadow flew at Rumpelstiltskin, rushing straight at him and passing through his body, semi-solid and semi-phantasm. It felt like all his organs were on fire, and Rumpelstiltskin screamed.

**Enchanted Forest- Past**

“You know, Rumpel, I think you’re a natural at this.”

Rumpelstiltskin smiled up at his Aunt Elvira briefly and returned his attention to the spinning wheel. In the few months that he had stayed with the spinsters in the woods, he had learned their trade quickly and easily, and he found that it kept his mind off other, more worrying things, like where his
father was. Every time he asked his aunts, they never gave him a straight answer.

“Aunt Elvira,” he said presently as he ran out of carded wool and the old woman began to wind the spun yarn into balls ready for market.

“Yes, Rumpel? You know, this wool is good enough for us to sell. You’re doing so well, lad.”

“Thank you, Aunt Elvira. But what I wanted to know was, where’s Papa?”

He was a sharp-eyed boy, it came from years of having to keep lookout for his father during his many confidence schemes. As such, Rumpelstiltskin did not miss the worried look that passed between the two spinster sisters, as if they were trying to have an entire conversation with their eyes alone. Eventually, Aunt Miriam spoke.

“He received a summons from the duke,” she said eventually. “He was told that he needed to go and take part in the war.”

“So he’s being a hero then?” Rumpelstiltskin asked eagerly. “He’s out fighting ogres?”

Aunt Miriam and Aunt Elvira exchanged another anxious look, both loath to lie to the boy but equally unwilling to shatter his innocent and childlike vision of his father as an idol to be looked up to, when both knew that he was nothing of the sort.

“If it makes you feel happier to think that, then yes,” Aunt Elvira said. “We don’t know what he’s doing at the moment. But perhaps you’re right, and he is out fighting ogres.”

“When will he be coming back,” Rumpelstiltskin asked.

“We don’t know, pet,” Aunt Miriam said gently. “I suppose it depends on how long the fighting goes on.”

“Ok.” Rumpelstiltskin fell into silence and grabbed another handful of wool from the pile that Aunt Elvira was carding, and he tugged on the small wheel to get it moving again. He glanced at Aunt Miriam, who was seated in the opposite corner of the room by the hearth, behind the large spinning wheel, taller than he was. He couldn’t wait to try that one out, but the spinsters said that he had to grow a bit first. He was honestly trying to grow, but it seemed that his legs just wouldn’t co-operate and get longer.

“He is coming back, isn’t he?” he asked.

Aunt Miriam did not look at him as she replied.

“I’m sure you’ll see your father again, Rumpel.”

Perturbed by the vague answer, Rumpelstiltskin was not quite sure. Still, he knew that he wasn’t going to get anything else out of his aunts, so he left the subject of his father alone and returned his full attention to his spinning.

“Are you happy here with us, Rumpel?” Aunt Elvira asked after a while of comfortable silence. “I know we’re not the most interesting of companions, and you’re far away from your friends, but I hope you’re happy nonetheless.”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged.

“It’s ok, I didn’t really have any friends in the village,” he said. “People didn’t trust Papa very
much.” He paused. “I like it here. I like spinning and watching the wheel turn. It helps me forget how much I miss Papa.” He sighed. “I miss Papa and that makes me sad. I wish that we could go back to the way we were before, when it was just the two of us. I want him to come back.”

Aunt Miriam smiled, but it was a sad smile that did not reach her eyes. She opened her mouth as if she was going to say something - perhaps a reassurance of some sort - but before any words could form she was interrupted by the thundering of hooves down the rough dirt track that led through the forest to the cottage.

“Whatever could that be?” Aunt Elvira asked, alarmed by the sudden noise. The sound of the horses grew louder and louder, but instead of passing on by the little dwelling, they stopped just outside. Aunt Miriam and Rumpel went over to peer out of the window at the scene outside as Aunt Elvira responded to the hammering on the door. Several soldiers were outside, sitting astride barded warhorses bedecked in the duke of the Frontlands’ colours.

“Good gracious,” Aunt Elvira said as she opened the door. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“We’re looking for a deserter, ma’am,” the leader of the troops said, taking off his helmet. “A man named Malcolm. He has not reported for duty despite several summons and he has run from his village. This is his last known whereabouts.”

Aunt Elvira shook her head.

“He’s not here, gentlemen. We haven’t seen him for months.”

The soldier raised one eyebrow, disbelieving.

“May we take a look around the place? Just to be sure.”

“By all means, but I can assure you that he is not here.”

A couple of men entered the cottage and took a cursory glance around, but it was clear that only the spinsters and the boy were resident there. One of the soldiers caught sight of Rumpelstiltskin, hiding behind Aunt Miriam.

“Who is your father, boy?” He asked.


“Do you have any idea where he might be?”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head.

“Oh, leave him alone, he’s only a child,” Miriam snapped.

“Yes, ma’am, but we have to be sure. You know the penalty for deserting the army.”

“Indeed we do, now if you have no more business here having seen that we’re not harbouring any fugitives, we’d ask you to move on please.” Aunt Elvira began shooing the soldiers out of the house with her carding brushes. Once they were gone and the noise of their horses’ hooves had once more faded into silence, Rumpelstiltskin looked from Aunt Elvira to Aunt Miriam and back again.

“Papa’s not gone to fight in the war, has he?”

Aunt Miriam shook her head. “No, pet. He was summoned, but he ran away instead.”
“And he’s not coming back, is he?” Rumpelstiltskin said.

Aunt Miriam sighed and shook her head again, but Aunt Elvira looked thoughtful.

“You know, there might be a way to see your father again,” she said, her voice ponderous. “Tell me Rumpel, have you ever heard of the Wishing Star?”

It was the middle of the night, but Rumpelstiltskin could not sleep, both too excited and too nervous at the thought of what he was about to do that slumber was not forthcoming. He was sitting in the window of the little attic room that served as his bedroom, whilst his aunts slept on in their box beds downstairs, beside the spinning wheels that formed the lynchpin of their lives. It was a cold, clear night, and the stars were shining brightly beside the big full moon. Not a sound could be heard except for the occasional howl of a lonely wolf in the distance. Rumpelstiltskin scanned the sky for the star that his Aunt Elvira had told him to look out for - Rheul Gorm, the Blue Star, the brightest star in the sky that could grant even the most desperate and heartfelt of wishes.

He spotted it, and he wondered if there was some formal way of wishing on a star, like praying. Dutifully he kneeled up and clasped his hands together, closing his eyes.

“Dear Wishing Star. I wish that I could be with my Papa again.” He paused then added “Amen” for good measure, just in case. It couldn’t hurt to cover every eventuality. After a few minutes of nothing happening, he opened his eyes and scrambled down off the window ledge, determined to try again the next night, but as he did so, he noticed that the Blue Star’s light seemed to be getting brighter, and shining straight towards him, until it solidified into something small and human-shaped. He jumped back in alarm.

“There’s no need to be afraid,” a small, silvery voice said. “I’m Rheul Gorm, and I’m here to grant your wish.”

She was a tiny, fairy-like creature with delicate wings, hovering in his bedroom window.

“Can you do that?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, her diminutive size not convincing him of her great magical powers.

“Of course I can,” she replied. “Because your father has also wished upon the Wishing Star in his time. He has been taken to Neverland, a place far away from here where there is no war or hardship.”

“It sounds like a good place,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “Can you take me there to see him?”

The Blue Fairy smiled. “I can arrange for you to go to him, yes,” she said, and she produced a small crystal from thin air, handing it to Rumpelstiltskin. On closer inspection, it turned out to be a bean.

“This is a magic bean,” the Blue Fairy explained. “They are used to travel between worlds. Be careful though, for they can only be used once, and this is the last bean in the fairies’ possession. Use it wisely.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded eagerly.

“I will.”

“Well, I wish you good luck, Rumpelstiltskin, and I hope you find your father.”
She left the window, flying away until she was no more than a distant star in the sky, shining brightly beside the moon.”

Rumpelstiltskin turned to pull on his boots, and he crept quietly down the attic stairs and into the main room of the cottage, the bean clutched tightly in his fist, going on tiptoe so as not to wake his aunts. Not that they could hear much above the sound of Aunt Elvira’s snoring, but it was better to be safe than sorry. He couldn’t wait to use the bean and finally be reunited with his father. Outside, he looked at the bean critically in the moonlight. It seemed very small to hold such great magic, but then, Rheul Gorm had been very small and she possessed huge power.

“Good things come in small packages,” he said, recalling something his Aunt Miriam had told him when he had been lamenting his lack of growth. He dug a small hole in the dirt with his hands, unsure if he needed actually to plant the bean or if it would work of its own accord.

“Take me to Papa, please,” he said to the small seed, and he dropped it into the hole. Immediately, a swirling green portal opened up, the force of it knocking him to the ground. As he scrabbled to his feet, he backed away from it warily, before taking a deep breath. This was his way to Papa, and he could trust the Wishing Star not to want to hurt him.

Rumpelstiltskin jumped into the portal, focussing on the coming reunion with his father. Soon everything would be good again. They would be together again in a safe place where nothing would tear them apart again. He closed his eyes and clamped his hands over his ears against the deafening rush of the portal, wondering when it would end.

Suddenly he landed with a thump on something warm and soft, and when the ringing in his ears subsided, Rumpelstiltskin realised that the sound of the portal had gone. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on a sandy bank beside a clear blue lake. The sun was shining brightly overhead, and all around him was the sweet scent of fragrant summer leaves and flowers. So this was Neverland. It was every bit as wonderful as he had thought it would be. All that was missing was his father.

“Papa,” he called, wandering along down the bank, keeping a lookout on both sides for any sign of Malcolm. “Papa, where are you?”

He thought he caught movement out of the corner of his eye through the trees and turned sharply towards it, but there was nothing there. It must just have been a shadow. The memory of the yellow-eyed shape that he had seen on the night that Papa had taken him to the aunts’ house came over him, and Rumpelstiltskin shivered. Maybe Neverland wasn’t quite such a good place after all. As he moved on, he caught another glimpse of something pale through the trees, and he ran towards it in the hope that he might find his father. The white shape that he had seen, however, was not a person but an island in the middle of the lagoon that he had landed beside. As he neared it, he realised that the rock was in the shape of a skull, and Rumpelstiltskin shuddered again. Neverland really wasn’t giving him a good impression now that he had been here for a few minutes. Still, he had come here to find his father, and that was what he was going to do. Once they were together again, everything would be all right.

High up in the trees, the boy who called himself Peter Pan was watching Rumpelstiltskin’s progress with an exasperated air.

“Honestly,” he muttered. “I came here to get away from you, you little parasite. How did you manage to follow me over here? Never mind that, let’s get you back to where you belong. Far away from here.”

He jumped down from his perch and landed effortlessly behind Rumpelstiltskin, who startled at the sudden sound and turned.
“Who are you?”

“I am Peter Pan,” Pan replied with a grandiose gesture, “ruler of Neverland. The more important question, though, is who are you? And why are you here? We don’t let just anyone in here, you know.”

“I’m Rumpelstiltskin,” the boy said. “I’m looking for my Papa. His name is Malcolm. Have you seen him?”

Pan shook his head.

“Neverland is the realm of eternal youth,” he said airily. “We can’t allow any adults here, it would defeat its purpose. There’s no Malcolm here.”

“Oh.” Rumpelstiltskin looked around warily. “But the Blue Fairy said that he’d come here. She gave me the bean to come and see him. Are you sure he didn’t come here?”

Pan sighed. “That meddling fairy. Always wanting the best for everyone, even when people’s interests collide,” he murmured to himself. Aloud to Rumpelstiltskin, he said: “Oh yes, he came here, but the point is that he could not stay here. Not whilst he was an adult.”

“So where did he go?” Rumpelstiltskin asked.

“He didn’t go anywhere.” Pan shrugged. “I said he couldn’t stay here whilst he was an adult, not that he couldn’t stay here at all.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You never did,” Pan said dryly. “You were always a little slow on the uptake, Rumpel.”

“You…” Horrible, grim realisation began to dawn in Rumpelstiltskin’s mind and he took a couple of steps backwards in alarm.

“Yes, Rumpel. Malcolm departed and I, Peter Pan, was reborn in his place.”

“You’re Papa?”

Pan sighed. “You really don’t get it, do you? In order to stay here, I have to remain young. I can’t do that and have a sproglet of my own in tow.” Pan glanced up at the trees surrounding them, catching his shadow’s watchful eye and nodding slightly.

“But what if you come home?” Rumpelstiltskin pressed.

“There’s something fundamentally important that you’ve overlooked, Rumpel,” Pan said, his voice bored. “I don’t want to come home. I don’t want to be your father. I don’t want anything more to do with you.”

“Papa?”

“Not any more, Rumpel.”

It was at that moment that Rumpelstiltskin felt two strong but not quite solid arms grab him around his middle, and he screamed as he was lifted off the ground by the yellow-eyed shadow.

“Papa! No! Don’t let it take me! Please!”
“Goodbye, Rumpel,” Pan said conversationally as the shadow bore the young boy away from Neverland. “Good riddance.”

Rumpelstiltskin fought against the shadow’s hold on him as he was whisked away from Neverland, but it was to no avail; for all that the shadow seemed to be made of nothing but air, its grip was like iron, and soon Neverland was far behind them.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked, fear of the unknown winning out over the desperation of being permanently parted from his father in such a brutal way. The shadow made no response, and all Rumpelstiltskin could do was to hang on lest he fall into the seemingly limitless ocean below. There looked to be no end to the rolling waves, and he was beginning to think that he might never see dry land again until suddenly the shadow released its hold on him, letting him fall to the ground. Rumpelstiltskin closed his eyes, crying out, but there was no splash or great impact. He landed with a thud on soft earth, and gingerly opening his eyes and getting to his feet, he saw that he was back outside the cottage where he had been earlier in the night. For a moment he wondered if it had all been a terrible nightmare, but then he saw the crater in the ground where the portal to Neverland had opened, and he knew that it had been all too real.

“Rumpel? Rumpel, where are you?”

The aunts were calling to him, and he saw them in the forest, a little way from him, looking around. Presently they noticed him and rushed over.

“Oh Rumpel, there you are, we’ve been so worried. When we woke up and you were gone, we feared the worst. Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head.

“Papa’s gone,” he murmured. “He’s not coming back, ever.”

Aunt Elvira and Aunt Miriam exchanged a look, then Aunt Elvira smiled sadly at Rumpelstiltskin.

“I’m sorry, Rumpel,” she said. “At least you tried. Come on in and have some breakfast. Then we can spin, and that will make you feel better.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded and followed his aunts into the cottage. None of them noticed the shadow in the trees, watching them with yellow, unblinking eyes.

**Neverland – Present**

The short boat journey to the island was a tense and silent one, each person wondering if perhaps they had been too late. There had been no more sounds from the rock after that blood-curdling scream, and no-one knew what to think.

“The pixie dust is stored down here,” one of the Lost Boys said as they reached the back of the skull, and he pointed down a narrow set of steps cut into the rock that disappeared down into its depths, below the line of the water. Hook and Tinker Bell exchanged a look and nodded, scrambling out of their respective boats and following the Lost Boys down the steps. The rest of the group continued on through the network of tunnels to reach the main cave that formed the inside of the skull’s face.

“So now what?” David asked from the back of the group, the tunnel being too narrow for them to go
more than two abreast. “What can you see?”

At the front, Snow and Emma peered into the cave as much as they could, and Snow did a double take on seeing what was ostensibly Gold wearing Rumpelstiltskin’s outlandish Enchanted Forest leather.

“Well, there’s something you don’t see every day,” she muttered. Emma ignored her and continued to scout the situation. It wasn’t looking good. In one corner, her shadow was standing guard over Henry’s seemingly lifeless form whilst Rumpelstiltskin’s tried frantically to break through some kind of invisible barrier like a demented mime, bashing at it with both fists in increasing desperation.

In the middle of the cave, Rumpelstiltskin was being held by Pan’s shadow, fighting against the strong hold that his arms were locked in behind his back, his feet held stationary by the shadow’s legs that were passing through them.

“So this is the end, Rumpel,” Pan was saying. “This is where it all began, and this is where it ends. I have Henry’s heart, and you’ve failed. Speaking of hearts, shall we take a look at yours? All those years of dark magic and cowardice and desperation. What a pretty sight it will be.”

“However dark my heart has become, yours will always be worse,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled.

“I’ve no doubt of that, but luckily, no-one’s ever going to see it,” Pan said lightly.

“We’ve got to do something!” Snow hissed. She made to rush into the cave but something stopped her, and she stumbled backwards, falling into Regina. “What the hell?”

Regina reached out and met the same resistance.

“It’s a shade field,” she said. “It’s pretty much the one thing shadows can’t penetrate. So naturally, anyone who casts a shadow can’t get through it either.”

Emma looked down at her feet and her lack of a shadow. It was all up to her now: to save Henry, to save Rumpelstiltskin, to save everyone. She glanced back into the cave.

“You would really do this to me?” Rumpelstiltskin was saying as Pan neared him, hand outstretched towards his chest and ready to plunge. For the first time he sounded panicked and afraid. “Your own son?”

“Son? Holy…” Emma turned to Neal who threw his hands up in defence.

“It’s news to me too,” he said.

Snow shook her head. “Our family tree is a mess.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Emma murmured. She unsheathed her sword, waiting for the right moment to strike.

“Emma, what are you doing?” Neal asked.

“I don’t have a shadow,” she replied simply, gesturing towards the back of the cave where her shadow was still hovering beside Henry. In front of them, Pan was laughing.

“Oh Rumpel, I think you should have learned by now that paternity really isn’t in my nature. Your mother was very pretty, and very… eager. We had no idea that you’d be the unwanted by-product. Enough of that. There’s work to be done.”
With the Eternal Light still hanging from her belt, Emma charged into the cave, her sword raised. Her distraction was enough to stop Pan in his tracks and he spun round, gesturing for his shadow to let go of Rumpelstiltskin, who fell to his knees, and swoop towards Emma. She swung her blade at it to no avail, but she knew that she had to keep trying. It was their only hope.

“Emma, the light!” Rumpelstiltskin called as he got to his feet. “Ignite it!”

Not entirely sure that it was a good idea, Emma nonetheless unhooked the lantern and opened it. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rumpelstiltskin lunge at Pan, crash tackling him to the ground. Neither of them noticed the small nod and smile that Pan gave to his shadow in that moment, Rumpelstiltskin too busy taking advantage of his upper hand to pin Pan down, and Emma too preoccupied with trying to ignite the light with magic. A split second before the wick burst into flame, the shadow vanished.

The cavern was flooded with light as once more night fell outside.

“Don’t close it!” Rumpelstiltskin called. “But close your eyes!”

Beneath him, Pan was screaming as the light became more and more intense. Emma could feel it burning her retinas even through her eyelids.

“What’s going on?” she yelled, eyes screwed up tight against the painful brightness.

Pan’s screaming stopped, and his form vanished from view.

“He’s been separated from his shadow for so long that he’s become part darkness himself,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “You can put it out now.”

Emma wasted no time in doing just that, and she opened her eyes again, taking in the sight that met her. Where Pan had been, there was just a small pile of ash.

Rumpelstiltskin was getting to his feet, brushing himself down, and Emma noted that his previous scaled appearance had returned as the other entered the cave, Pan’s magic dissipating in the wake of his defeat. He looked up at her.

“Thank you,” he said earnestly. “You saved my life.”

Emma shrugged.

“I’m the saviour, it’s what I do.”

She looked down at what had been Pan, scarcely able to believe that it was all over.

Neverland – Present

For a long time after Pan had been reduced to ash, no-one dared to move, almost as if they were waiting for him to pop up behind them, laughing his cruel laugh and mocking them for being taken in so easily, but nothing of the sort happened. Regina was the first to cut the silence.

“Is that it?” she asked. “He’s gone? It’s over?”

“Well, it would certainly appear to be,” David said tentatively, “but Pan’s proved us wrong before.”

Rumpelstiltskin moved, breaking the tableau that they had fallen into and springing forward to examine the ashes, taking a few grains between his fingers and scrutinising them carefully.
"Well, there's only one way to be sure." His expression was grim as he carefully opened the Eternal Light's casing once more and waved his hand to sweep the ashes inside before locking the panels closed. "I'd like to see him try to get out of that in hurry."

"This is all very well," Emma said, "but what about Henry?"

Her shadow was still hovering protectively over his motionless form, stroking his hair with silhouette figures that did not make any impression on him.

"He'll be all right as soon as his heart is returned," Rumpelstiltskin said, still checking that the lantern was fastened securely. "Speaking of which, we should start the search." He put down the lantern and began inspecting the floor, looking for the hidden hollow where the boy's heart was hidden away. As if on cue, Henry's eyes fluttered open and he began to stir.

"Henry!" Emma raced across the smooth rock floor to him, and as she did so, she felt a strange, sudden heaviness around her feet. Looking down, she saw that her shadow had reattached itself to her and become flat once more, just like Regina's had done. The yellow eyes blinked one final time before they faded out completely.

"Mom?" Henry's voice was weak and he sounded disorientated. "Mom, what happened?"

"lt's… complicated," Emma began, not sure how much of the past few days Henry remembered. "Oh Henry, I'm so glad you're ok!"

"Not ok just yet," Rumpelstiltskin muttered from the floor where Snow had joined him in his search. Emma ignored him and threw her arms around her son. With that desperate hug, realisation returned to the boy in a wave.

"Mom! You're here! You came after me! And Mom!" he exclaimed on seeing Regina over Emma's shoulder. "Dad! Grandpa, Grandma! You all came! I mean, I saw your arrow, and your lipstick, and your shadows, so I knew that you were here, but now you're here."

"We're here," Regina affirmed, coming over to Henry and hugging him as well, without Emma relinquishing her hold on him. "You know that we would never leave you."

"I know. I couldn't believe that you would."

"Aha!"

There was an exclamation of triumph from the floor and Rumpelstiltskin leapt up.

"You've got it?" Emma called over to him.

"Oh yes, pure and bright and shiny and completely unharmed." He turned to them; cupped gently in his hands was something small, just bigger than a human fist, and glowing with an exquisite golden light.

"Oh my," Regina breathed. "In all my years I've never seen anything like that before."

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. "Neither have I."

Henry, who had leaned back instinctively on seeing Rumpelstiltskin's unusual appearance, now craned forward, Emma and Regina's arms around him preventing him from getting up fully.

"Grandpa?" he asked. Rumpelstiltskin gave a little bow.
“One and the same.”

“You look… different.”

Rumpelstiltskin raised one eyebrow. “Indeed,” he said dryly, before moving closer with Henry’s heart.

“Is that…” Henry began, looking mesmerised at the golden glow.

“It’s your heart,” Emma said. “Pan took it.”

“Why is it golden?” Henry asked.

“It’s your belief,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “The heart of the truest believer. It shines so brightly because no matter what, you still believe. No-one in the world has quite as much raw belief as you do.”

“That’s why Pan wanted it,” Henry affirmed. “But who told him that I was the one?”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. “I guess that’s one thing we’ll never know.”

“Will it hurt when it goes back in?” Henry asked. Emma automatically looked to Regina for an answer, but the other woman just shook her head with a somewhat worried expression.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “My experience lies in taking them out, not putting them back in.”

“It won’t hurt,” Rumpelstiltskin said, holding out the heart to Emma. “I promise.”

“Ok, ready?” Emma asked Henry. He nodded nervously.

“Wait, wait!” Regina exclaimed. “You’ve got it upside down!”

A ripple of laughter ran around the group as Emma corrected the heart’s position but it died away into silence as she placed it on Henry’s chest and paused for a moment before pressing it back into his body. He gasped as it set back into place, the golden manifestation fusing with flesh and blood.

“Are you ok?” Emma asked.

Henry nodded. “It doesn’t hurt but it’s really heavy, like a weight on my chest. I think you don’t realise just how heavy your heart is until you haven’t had it for a while.”

“A heart is a heavy burden, as my mother used to say,” Regina said.

“I think I’d still rather have one than not,” Henry replied, shuddering at the thought of Cora and all the years that she had lived without a heart. Finally his mothers let him get up, and he looked around Skull Rock. “So, how are we going to get home?” he asked the gathered adults.

“Well, we came by Hook’s ship,” Emma began. “Well, some of us did,” she amended, looking at Neal. “Although getting back might be trickier.”

“We were focussing on making sure that you were safe first,” Snow added.

“Worry not.” Another voice arrived on the scene and Hook appeared in the cavern, a large sack slung over his shoulder. Tinker Bell and a couple of the Lost Boys followed on, each carrying another sack.

“Enough pixie dust to get us home and back again once the Jolly’s seaworthy again,” Hook
continued, “although I doubt that anyone is going to be anxious to return here any time soon.”

“The boys led us straight to the stash,” Tinker Bell said. “We’ve got the island’s entire supply here. It seems to have been drying up recently. Hi,” she added on seeing Henry awake and ostensibly well. “I’m Tinker Bell. You must be Henry.”

Henry nodded. “Pleased to meet you.”

“And I you. I’m glad to see you in one piece.”

“Aye, it’s good to see you lad,” Hook said. “So, now that we’re all happily reunited, shall we start getting out of here? I know I speak for most of us when I say I don’t want to spend any more time than absolutely necessary in this hellhole.”

The others all voiced their agreement and they wasted no time in making their way towards the tunnels that led to the boats that they had arrived on the rock in. Before they could reach them, however, the cavern gave a tremendous lurch to the side, throwing everyone to the ground. There was an ominous creaking sound, like material under immense strain, and as Neal helped Emma to her feet, the noise reached its peak before stopping, enveloping them in silence once more.

“What the hell was that?” Emma asked.

“Earthquake?” Snow suggested.

“Is it over?” David asked, his voice hopeful, but just as the words left his mouth, the creaking began again, accompanied by the ear-splitting shriek of rock cracking in two. “Evidently not,” he added. “Everybody run!”

“It’s not an earthquake!” Henry yelled as they weaved their way through the damp tunnels out of the rock. “Neverland is stopping!”

“Stopping? What do you mean, stopping?” Regina asked.

“It’s dying! The land is dying and the machinery that keeps it timeless is stopping without my heart!” Henry explained frantically. “It needed my belief to keep it going or it’s going to cease to exist! This is the land destroying itself through lack of belief!”

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire,” Rumpelstiltskin commented. “Well, looks like we’ve got no time to lose. Just how badly damaged is your boat?” he asked Hook as they emerged from the tunnels towards the small rowing boats, where Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow was waiting for them patiently.

“Not too bad,” Hook replied. “And she’s a ship, not a boat!”

All thoughts of the Jolly Roger’s naming conventions were swept aside by the rumbling of what seemed to be thunder from above them. Emma looked over in horror at the mountain and waterfall beside them, where a huge fissure was beginning to appear.

“We’ll worry about the Jolly when we get back there, or we won’t get back there at all!”

They all got into the boats, loading them up with the all-important pixie dust, and they had just cast off from the crumbling remains of Skull Rock when half of the mountainside broke away and slid straight down into the churning waters below, causing a tidal wave that threatened to overwhelm the tiny boats. Emma could only watch, dumbstruck, as Regina and Rumpelstiltskin both threw their hands up in an attempt to stop the oncoming water with magic.
“Come on, Emma, we’ll need your help, it’s too big for two of us!” Regina yelled.

“Are you a magician or not, dearie?”

“I…”

*Think about what you want to protect.*

Emma shot out her own hands and the force field came together over their little flotilla just as the wave hit them.
Enchanted Forest - Past

The port was bustling with activity; several ships due to be departing with the high tide were being loaded with cargo ready for their long journeys to far-off countries, sailors scurrying about heaving crates and barrels and several of the townsfolk gathering to wave the intrepid voyagers off. Of all the vessels waiting to leave, the largest and most impressive of all was the *Flying Dutchman*, in pride of place in the best berth in the dock. Its captain cast a striking figure in blue frock coat and tricorn hat, peacock feather waving in the salty sea breeze as he strode down the dock towards his ship. His face and hair were grizzled from a lifetime spent on the open sea, many scars showing signs of adventures long past. Everyone who passed him in the harbour recognised him by sight immediately, and they would murmur in hushed tones as he went by: *Davy Jones, the most revered and feared smuggler on the high seas, trusted with secret cargo by the king himself.*

Captain Jones surveyed the ship for a long time until he was satisfied that all was well on the outside, and finally he boarded. The reaction to his presence was immediate on board the ship, all his crew members saluting or nodding to him as he moved through the vessel. It was clear that he was a captain respected by his crew.

“Welcome aboard, Captain,” said the cabin boy, a young man around fourteen years of age, as the captain came up onto the main deck and took the telescope offered to him, looking through it out to sea. “It’s looking lovely out there. We should make good time.”

The captain looked for himself and saw that the open ocean beyond the harbour did indeed look calm and balmy. There were no clouds in the sunny blue sky and the wind was strong enough to fill the sails without being overpowering. He handed the telescope back to the cabin boy and took a deep breath of air. His expression was grim; despite the perfect sailing conditions he looked worried.

Finally he turned to the cabin boy.

“Killian, what are you doing here?” he asked, his words turning into something of an exasperated sigh.

“You promised, Pa,” Killian replied with a grin. “You said that I could come on your next trip and start working through the ranks. So here I am. One cabin boy reporting for duty, Captain.”

He saluted and drew himself up to his full height.

Captain Jones gave his son a tight smile that did not reach his eyes.

“Next time, lad,” he said. “Go on, be off with you now, we’re almost ready to go, and I don’t want any stowaways.”

Killian scowled.

“You said that last time,” he pointed out accusingly.

“I know I did.” Jones sighed and put an arm around the boy’s shoulders, steering him towards the bow of the ship away from the hustle and bustle of the crew making ready to sail.

“We’ve had a last minute change to the manifest,” he said quietly once they were out of the crew’s earshot, and he looked around to make doubly sure that they wouldn’t be overheard. “The king has
trusted me with a large shipment of gold for the Frontlands’ war effort.”

“Really?” Killian exclaimed.

“Keep your voice down!” Jones hissed. “If the crew realise then there’ll be a mutiny!”

“Pa, no-one would mutiny against you, they all love you too much.”

“When it’s a question of our country’s gold going to help another nation’s war instead of our own poor and hungry, anything is possible,” the captain muttered. “When you’ve been carrying politically sensitive cargo for as long as I have, Killian, you learn these things the hard way.”

Killian looked at the deep scar on his father’s cheek and gulped.

“To get to the Frontlands we’ll have to take a detour through Demon’s Pass,” Jones continued. “It’s treacherous enough water even in the best of weather, but I’ve got a bad feeling about these conditions. It’s too quiet. Feels like the calm before the storm.”

He clapped Killian on the back.

“Next time son,” he said. “I promise. It’s only a short trip. You’ll be back on the Dutchman before you know it. I might even let you take the helm.”

Killian gave a snort of laughter as they began to make their way down through the ship towards the gangplank.

“Pa, I know full well I’ll be swabbing the decks for at least a month before you let me anywhere near the helm,” he said. “I don’t expect special treatment just because I’m your son. I’ll make my way on my own merits, just like you did.”

Jones smiled fondly. “And that, my boy, is what will make you a fine captain of your own ship one day.”

“Won’t I get the Dutchman after you retire?” Killian teased.

“Retire!” Jones exclaimed. “Sailors don’t retire, Killian. They go down with their ships, or their ships go down with them.”

Killian shook his head. “I don’t like it when you say things like that. It makes me worry that this time you’re not going to come back.”

“Oh Killian, that’s a risk we take every time we leave the harbour. It’s part of being a man of the sea, the dangers we face, you know that. But you also know that no matter what happens, the water will always carry us home, wherever that home may be, whether it’s back to port, or onwards to a new adventure.”

They had reached the gangplank by this point and Killian threw his arms around his father.

“Be careful Pa, please,” he said. “And make sure the water carries you back to port.”

“You know I’m always careful, son. You take care of yourself whilst I’m gone.”

The embrace was cut short by the arrival of the first mate, who interrupted them with a small cough.

“Captain, we’re ready to set sail now.”
Killian ran down the gangplank, which was soon hauled away to allow the ship to cast off. Waving goodbye to his son, Captain Davy Jones took up his position at the helm to steer the ship onto the deceptively calm horizon.

X

There had not been a storm like it in his lifetime, Captain Jones was sure of that. The wind was howling and bitterly cold, blowing right through him to his bones as he gripped the helm with white knuckles, struggling to keep his eyes open against the relentless pelting sting of salt water borne on the gale and the rain that blew in every direction. The Flying Dutchman had already lost one of her sails to the tempest, and it was all her captain could do to keep her from capsizing altogether as she pitched and rolled on the deadly waves. Jones had never been gladder to have refused his son passage on his ship before. Peering through the storm, he searched in vain for the lights of the shoreline or another ship that could come to their aid – not that it was likely that any ship out in this weather would be in a position to offer assistance.

“Captain!”

Jones turned, just able to make out his first mate’s voice above the roar of the wind, and he saw the younger man struggling to make his way across the slippery deck to the helm.

“We’ve got to turn around,” the first mate gasped as he reached the captain. “We can’t continue through the Pass in this weather; we’ll be killed on the rocks for sure, or the waves will take us.”

Jones shook his head grimly.

“It’s not too late!” the first mate pleaded. “We can turn around and stop at Arendelle to make repairs then set off again once the storm has died down!”

Again Jones shook his head.

“We’ll never manoeuvre her back through the entrance to the Pass in winds like this,” Inside the Pass where they were, the rocky walls acted as a tunnel, intensifying the gale. He looked at his map and compass where he had tied them to his sleeve; they were only about a quarter of the way through the treacherous stretch of water. He turned to the first mate as a thought struck him.

“Man the lifeboats!”

“Captain, are you…”

“Man the lifeboats! The Dutchman’s too large to get through the pass entrance safely, but the boats will make it. You can tie them up to the rock face if you need to, to wait out the worst of the wind. Go!”

The first mate nodded and ran down from the helm, shouting for the rest of the crew to abandon their positions and proceed to the lifeboats.

Below them, the ship gave a terrible lurch as the cannons came loose from their berths and began to move freely in the gun deck, their weight causing the ship to roll until it was almost horizontal. Jones spun the wheel, trying to regain control; a few of the crew were thrown overboard and plunged into the icy waters below. The captain couldn’t see if they had survived or not, but he prayed that the lifeboats would be able to pick them up. One by one, the smaller vessels were released from the ship, landing in the tumultuous sea with a crash. Jones watched as the men struggled with the oars against the heavy waves, the winds buffeting the flimsy wooden boats, but in the shadow of the Flying Dutchman, her immense size protecting them, they were able to make headway towards a cove just
out of the gale’s reach. All the captain had to do was hold her steady, something easier said than done.

“Captain!”

The first mate was calling again from where the last lifeboat was ready to cast off. He could see the weather-scarred faces of the rest of the senior crew looking at him with fear in their eyes; these were all hardened seamen like himself who had lived through many a storm, but he knew that none of them had seen one like this one.

Jones thought of his son waiting anxiously for him back in port, and he thought of his crew and his duty as their captain to protect them. He shook his head.

“I have to keep her stable to buy you time!” he yelled. “I’ll see you on the other side! Go!”

Still visibly unsure, the first mate would not disobey a direct order from the captain, and he jumped into the lifeboat before the rest of the crew lowered it into the water. Once they were safely away from the ship, Captain Jones turned his face into the wind once more and swung the wheel. He could not go back, so he would have to go on, and trust the sea to guide him home.

X

The *Flying Dutchman* was the talk of the small port town for the rest of the week, and everyone who saw Killian there, standing by the empty mooring where his father’s ship usually stood would whisper in passing about how dreadful it was for a boy to lose his father in such a way. Mixed reports were coming in from other ships that had been out that fateful night that claimed to have seen the *Dutchman* – some said that she had made her way to port in Arendelle and was being repaired; some said that she had vanished in Demon’s Pass, others said that the crew had got out in lifeboats while others yet said that they had all perished on the treacherous rocks.

Killian had fallen asleep on the docks waiting for firm, truthful news when the sounds of a ship mooring in the berth beside him woke him in the early morning and he sprung to his feet, expecting to see the *Flying Dutchman* there and his father striding down the gangplank as if nothing had happened. The ship was not, however, the *Flying Dutchman*. It was the *Princess Helga*, an Arendelle ship that had taken the *Dutchman*’s berth as the only available one in the dock. Still, all hope was not lost. This was the first ship from Arendelle to come into the port since the storm; perhaps her crew could give news of what had happened to his father’s ship.

“Hey!” he called to the Arendelle crew who were unloading barrels of pickled herring from the ship’s hold. “Hey, excuse me, is there any news of the *Flying Dutchman*?”

The nearest crewman shook his head.

“She went into the Pass, but she did not come out again,” he said. Killian’s heart beat painfully in his chest. “Just lifeboats.”

There was a chance, then.

“What happened to the lifeboats?” he sked frantically. If they were stranded on an island somewhere then he would damn well commandeer a boat and go to rescue them himself. The crewman pointed towards the *Princess Helga* and Killian looked up to see some of the *Flying Dutchman*’s crew disembarking. He rushed over to the first mate as soon as the man set foot on dry land, but his expression told him everything he needed to know.

“I’m sorry, Killian,” the first mate said. “Your pa… He went down with the ship. A true captain till
the end.”

Killian didn’t hear the rest of the first mate’s speech. He could only stare out at the deceptively calm and benign waves, the sea that had betrayed him and his father and failed to carry Davy Jones home.

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**Neverland – Present**

The boats rocked wildly as the wave crashed over them, but the combined efforts of the three magicians meant that none of them were flooded or capsized, and once the water had passed by, they were able to move on again, those with oars paddling furiously to reach the shore. Tinker Bell and the Lost Boys were the first to set off, and with their guidance the journey back to the *Jolly Roger* did not take anywhere near as long as it would have done had someone unfamiliar with the island been navigating. When they reached the beach and the stricken vessel, the remaining Lost Boys swarming over it and doing their best to fix it, Rumpelstiltskin stopped in his tracks.

“No, that’s not that badly damaged at all,” he said sourly, taking in the mast in two pieces and the torn sails.

“You’re welcome to stay here if you want,” Hook snapped in response. Behind them, there was another almighty groan from the centre of the island and a shockwave ran around the forest, causing a few of the tallest trees to snap as easily as if they were just twigs in a slight breeze.

“Stop that,” Snow said sharply, turning to the two bickering men. “You’re behaving more like children than the Lost Boys are. We will all help to mend this ship and we are all going home.”

Abashed, Hook and Rumpelstiltskin made their way over to the ship and climbed on board with the rest of the fleeing party. The Lost Boys had made good headway in the little time that they’d had – the teamwork they’d so often used whilst under Pan’s control had not died and they had cleared most of the debris from the deck, and now they were engaged in trying to manoeuvre the heavy canons into their proper places so that the ship would regain some equilibrium.

“Oh,” Hook said. “I’m going to need that pixie dust, Tinker Bell.” For once, the fairy didn’t argue with him, just handing over her sack and clambering up the torn rigging to see what she could do to help.

Emma scrambled up onto the deck and looked around at a complete loss. The extent of the destruction was overwhelming and she knew that she was expected to use her magic to help, but she had no idea where to start. She glanced over at Rumpelstiltskin and Regina, the dark-coloured magic swirling around their fingertips as they manipulated torn sails and shattered wood back into place seemingly effortlessly. Neal and David had gone below to lend their strength to the Lost Boys, and Snow and Tinker Bell were springing about quite happily on the ropes and masts, sealing breaks with a touch of pixie dust.

“Hey, Emma, over here!”

Hook and Henry were struggling to hold a sail together in the wind that was blowing across from a sea that was getting ever choppier as the island broke up. Another almighty crash from behind them heralded the ultimate collapse of the mountain and Skull Rock, and the shockwave that it generated almost bowled Emma over as she raced across to take the sail from Hook and let him throw pixie dust into the long rents down the canvas. They did not repair themselves completely, but Hook
nevertheless moved away, gesturing for a couple of Lost Boys to hoist the sails back into place.

“That’ll have to do!” the captain yelled to the others. “We’ve got to get going now, there’s no more time!”

Emma could see that he was right; the island was beginning to sink away into the sea, starting at the centre and moving rapidly outwards. It was a matter of minutes before it reached them and they were sucked into that terrible void as well.

“Everyone brace yourselves!” Hook shouted. The air around them was glowing a greeny-silver colour, and Emma realised that it was the pixie dust, the two magicians now manipulating it to cover the whole ship. One of the Lost Boys got a hit of it in the face by accident and started to fly up towards the main sail; Tinker Bell caught his ankle and pulled him back down.

“Believe me, humans trying to fly with pixie dust never ends well,” she muttered.

“Are you done yet?” Hook called to Rumpelstiltskin and Regina.

“You can’t rush things that require finesse, dearie!”

“You can when we’re all about to die!”

Rumpelstiltskin spun to face the captain with a flourish, and in the same moment, Emma felt a wobbly lurch beneath her feet as the Jolly Roger began to rise up off the beach where she had landed, her battered hull creaking ominously.

“Finished,” he said sweetly. Hook just rolled his eyes and made his way over to the helm, taking the wheel and steering deftly away from the island just as the land they had rested on mere seconds before started to sink away.

No-one spoke for a long time. Charming, Neal and the other Lost Boys came back up onto the deck, and the Jolly Roger’s makeshift crew watched as Neverland continued to disintegrate beneath them. Pan’s reign had truly come to an end.

“So what happens now?” Henry asked.

Emma moved closer to him and put an arm around her son’s shoulders. “Now we go home, hope no-one’s too traumatised from this latest adventure, and start getting on with life again.”

She glanced over at Neal, who was standing a little way off with Tinker Bell, and she gave him a small smile. There was still so much to be said between them, even more so in the wake of everything that had happened, but that could wait until they were back on solid ground. As much as they had escaped from Neverland, they still had to get home in one piece, and Emma knew better than to take something like that for granted. Presently, she caught sight of Rumpelstiltskin hovering nervously behind Neal, and she nodded to him. Neal glanced over his shoulder, and Tinker Bell moved away with a smile. Away from the influence of Neverland’s magic, Gold’s normal skin tone had returned, although his suit and tie hadn’t. His appearance, however unusual, seemed apt for their position, sailing between two worlds as they were.

Neal turned to face his father fully, and for a long time, nothing was said. The silence was not exactly awkward, but it was clear that neither man had any idea where to begin.

“I thought I’d lost you again,” Gold said eventually. “For good.”

There was a slight quaver in his voice, one that Emma had not heard before.
“But your shadow found me,” Neal said. “I brought me the dagger.”

Gold shrugged. “I had to hope.”

Neal drew the dagger out of his belt and held it out to Gold, who shook his head, making no move to take it.

“No, it’s come to you for a reason.”

“And as I told the shadow when it brought me the thing, I don’t want it. It’s your responsibility. If we’re going to do this, if we’re going to have this conversation, then we’re going to do it properly.”

Gold nodded. “Yes. I agree.” He clicked his fingers and a moment later, a dark shadow swooped down over the deck, causing Tinker Bell to give a squawk of alarm. It hovered next to Gold, yellow eyes blinking, and he handed the dagger over to it.

“You know what to do,” he said. “You know where to take it.”

The shadow gave a single curt nod and the dagger disappeared into the folds of its spectral garments before it flew away, blending in with the inky night sky, a true night having fallen over what had been Neverland.

“There. Now no-one’s tempted to meddle.”

Neal nodded his approval, and they fell quiet for another moment before he spoke again.

“You never told me Peter Pan was my grandfather.” It wasn’t what he had intended to say first, but it was the first thing that had come into his head. Gold raised an eyebrow.

“Would you really have wanted to know that you were related to that demon?” he asked. Neal shook his head.

“I’m not really sure. It’s beginning to explain a lot about you though.”

“Oh dear.”

“Your childhood was just as messed up as mine,” Neal observed. “When you didn’t come with me, I’d always assumed it was because you loved the power more than me. Now I’m not so sure.”

“They do say that we’re all destined to re-enact our greatest traumas,” Gold said.

“I’m beginning to think that our family line is destined to grow up without fathers.” Neal looked over at Henry, who was standing at the stern of the ship with Emma and Regina, watching the stars go by.

“Maybe you can break that cycle,” Gold said. “It’s a bit late for us, but you and Henry still have a chance.”

Neal nodded and they lapsed back into silence.

“I don’t forgive you for what happened,” he said eventually. “I can’t. Not yet. But I’m starting to understand.”

Gold nodded. He was disappointed and despondent, that much was clear to see from his face, but there was hope there too. Understanding was at least a step forward, and they could work with that.

The moment was broken by Hook’s voice from the helm.
“I hate to break it to you all, but we’ve got a problem.”

Emma turned to him, her brow furrowed.

“What kind of a problem?”

“A navigational problem.” Hook sighed and, keeping his hook on the wheel, he turned to the rest of the Jolly Roger’s passengers. “In short, we’re lost.”

Neverland – Past

There were some distinct advantages to Neverland, Killian thought, swinging his cutlass in an arc through the air to swipe at the overhanging vines that were trying to ensnare him and his crew with every step that they took. On the face of it, a land of eternal youth where they could stay as long as they liked without aging seemed like a very good thing, but after their experiences on this island of infinite darkness, Killian was beginning to think that the reason no-one grew old in Neverland was because no-one ever lived that long. The Jolly Roger had come to this cursed place with a full complement of crew, but now only half their number remained, the others having been taken by the bloodthirsty Lost Boys and their tyrannical leader, the vicious mermaids, or just lost to the island itself. More than once during their time here – Killian had lost all track of days, weeks, months and even years – the captain had received the distinct impression that the land itself was sentient, and doing everything that it could to disturb and disarm them. Just last week (or perhaps it was only yesterday, he couldn’t tell), one of the seamen had ventured into the dense forest to look for supplies and had vanished, as if into thin air.

They had struck a deal with Pan in the end, it was the only way that they could reach any kind of truce, or they would have no doubt faced complete annihilation at the hands of the boys and their terrifying shadows. Killian didn’t exactly enjoy handing boys over to Felix when they arrived in the seemingly infinite seas surrounding the dread island, knowing their fate as he did, but ultimately he kept his crew safe, and that was a captain’s role wasn’t it? Making sure his crew was safe. Killian’s father had died making sure that all his crew were safe, and Killian certainly wasn’t going to let that sacrifice be in vain or not learn from it. All the same, he couldn’t help but wonder what Davy Jones would have done in his position, given the choice between safeguarding his crew or the fates of innocent children.

“Well, he probably wouldn’t have got himself into this mess in the first place,” Killian muttered under his breath, taking a vehement swing at a singularly tough overhanging branch.

“What was that, Captain?” Smee asked from behind him. Killian and Smee did not often leave the ship and venture onto dry land any more, the Jolly Roger being the safest place in the entire land, but today Pan had asked to meet with them so it had been unavoidable. It appeared that Baelfire had escaped from Pan’s clutches and so the boy had instructed Killian to keep a lookout. As if handing Milah’s son over to the Lost Boys hadn’t been bad enough the first time… Killian hoped that he wouldn’t have to do it again. Still… The rest of the crew was safe.

“Nothing, Smee,” he answered his companion eventually as he finally won the fight with the branch and pushed it roughly to one side before continuing through the thick undergrowth, back towards where they had left their launch. “I was just thinking about my father, that’s all.”
“He was a good man,” Smee said reverently. “A good sailor. I mean, so are you, Captain…” The smaller man tailed off before he could dig himself any further into his hole, but Killian just snorted. Before he could ruminate any longer on the late Captain Jones, however, something whizzed past his face at eye level, immediately putting him on alert. He glanced over at the projectile; it was a knife of the kind the Lost Boys used and he spun around to face the direction it had come from, raising his blade.

“Don’t move, or the next one goes between your eyeballs.”

Killian’s brow furrowed, because their assailant’s voice definitely did not belong to one of the Lost Boys. It was female, for a start, and Killian had not seen a woman at all on the island for as long as he had been there; the mermaids excluded, and one of those could hardly be hiding in a tree. He peered up into the leaves, surprised to see a fierce elfin face glaring back at him, and one hand raised with another knife ready to throw.

“Erm, Captain?” Smee hissed. “What do we do now?”

Killian ignored the other man for a moment and took a step towards the stranger, only to be stopped in his tracks by another blade shooting past him.

“I’m not going to warn you again,” she said, and Killian dutifully stuck his cutlass back into his belt, putting his hands up and indicating for Smee to do the same.

“You’re new around here, aren’t you?” he said to the young lady. She snorted.

“That depends entirely on your perception of time,” she said icily. “Right now, it feels like I’ve been here for a very long time.”

“I still think we’ve been here longer,” Killian pointed out. “How did you get here in the first place? I doubt that the shadow brought you.”

“I could ask you the same question. It doesn’t matter how I got here. What matters is how we’re going to get back.”

“How we’re going to get back?” Killian raised an eyebrow. “I’m not usually in the habit of making deals with young women holding me at knifepoint.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like you’ve got much of a choice, does it?” she snapped in reply. “You’re the pirate, aren’t you?”

“I prefer the term ‘dashing rogue’, ” Killian said, “but pirate works just as well, yes.”

“I have a way of getting us both out of here,” the woman said, and a moment later, she dropped down out of her hiding place in the branches and drew herself up to her full, rather diminutive height, although she still did not lower her knife. “You have a ship, but no way of getting home. You already used the last bean to get here.”

“How do you know all this?” Smee yelped. The woman glared at him.

“I listen,” she said coolly before turning back to Killian. “I have the means to get home, but no ship. A partnership in these circumstances would be mutually beneficial, don’t you think?”

Killian nodded slowly.

“Captain, the island’s sent her insane,” Smee muttered in his ear. “I’ll distract her, you make a run for
it and get back up.”

Killian waved at him to be quiet.

“What sort of means of leaving this place do you have?” he asked. It was true that he didn’t want to stay there any longer than necessary, but he still didn’t know if this strange young woman could be trusted.

“Here.” She bent down and scuffled in the underbrush for a moment; Smee took the opportunity to make a run for it but even though she was not looking at them, she still caught the movement and waved the knife at him, forcing him back to his place beside Killian. At length she stood again, holding up a leaf coated in a shimmering, green-tinted powder.

“Pixie dust,” she said triumphantly. “All fairies know that pixie dust grows in Neverland. Pan normally sends his scouts to gather up the new buds ever morning, well, what passes for morning here, but I’ve managed to collect a stock of it. It should be enough to take a vessel out of the realm. So what do you say?”

Killian raised an eyebrow again. “You’re a fairy?”

“Yes, but that’s not an answer to my question.”

“How did a fairy end up in Neverland?” Smee asked.

“That’s not important right now,” the fairy said quickly. “Getting out of Neverland is important. So what do you think of my proposal.”

“Forgive me for not immediately trusting someone whose first move of introduction is almost to take my eye out,” Killian said. “Do you have a name?”

The fairy paused for a moment before lowering the knife and sticking it back into her belt.

“Tinker Bell,” she said.

Killian gave a snort of laughter. “What kind of a name is Tinker Bell?”

“What kind of a name is Killian Jones?” Tinker Bell countered. “I listen,” she said again on seeing Smee open his mouth; the other man quickly shut it again without making any comment.

“I want to see this stash of pixie dust with my own eyes,” Killian continued. “I’m not convinced this isn’t all one of Pan’s tricks.”

Tinker Bell conceded that point with a nod.

“Very well. Follow me.”

They cut back in the direction that they had come from, walking through the dense jungle for a few minutes until they reached a clearing. It was evident from the few scant possessions tied to the tree branches that this was where the fairy made her home, indeed a fairy ring of mushrooms was beginning to grow around the edge of the clearing. As he stepped inside the circle after Tinker Bell, Killian became more and more convinced that perhaps this plan could actually succeed. The thought of leaving Neverland at long last was an intoxicating one, but it wouldn’t do to get carried away and forget the practicalities. Tinker Bell had disappeared up into the highest branches of the largest tree and Smee was keeping a lookout for any slightest sign that something was not as it seemed; Killian kept his hand on his cutlass handle, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. Although part of their deal
with Pan meant that theoretically no tricks or ambushes of this sort should be set upon them, the wretch was liable to change the rules of the game at any point.

“There,” Tinker Bell said. She shimmied down the tree again, holding a large hessian sack. She came over to the two sailors and showed them the contents: the same green-lustred dust as before. Killian went to take a handful but she pulled the sack away. “Ah, it took me a long time to collect all this. We can’t waste it. So, do we have a deal?”

Killian looked up at the fairy.

“I believe we do.”

Neverland – Present

For a long time after Hook made his declaration, no-one spoke. Emma was the first to break the silence, her voice cool, calm, and brokering no arguments.

“What do you mean, ‘lost’?” she asked.

“I mean lost!” Hook exclaimed. “The stars are all wrong. I can’t navigate from them like I could last time!”

“How can the stars be wrong?” Regina asked. “Stars are stars.”

“Yes, thank you for pointing out the blindingly obvious,” Hook snapped. “But the stars are not the same as they were when I last left Neverland, I’m telling you!”

“Do you know where we are?” Charming asked.

“Yes,” Hook said confidently, with only a touch of sarcasm. “We’re quite literally in the middle of nowhere. We’re no longer truly in Neverland – well, it would be quite hard to still be there since it’s ceased to exist – but we’re not anywhere else either.”

“Don’t you just follow the second star to the right?” Henry asked. “Second star to the right and straight on till morning.”

“Yes,” Hook said levelly. “I know that. That’s how I got back last time, and that’s how I know that the stars have changed. The second star to the right of what?”

The gathered crowd of adults and Lost Boys all looked up at the sky. There were hundreds of thousands of stars glittering there, but certainly none that showed any kind of distinguishing feature.

“Can’t we go by the North Star?” Emma suggested. “That’s usually where sailors navigate from, isn’t it?”

“Yes, in your land,” Hook said. “The stars are different here, just as they’re different in the Enchanted Forest, and Wonderland, and wherever else you want to go. We need a star that’s constant throughout all of them.”

“Rheul Gorm.” Tinker Bell’s voice was calm in the middle of the group. “The Blue Star, the Wishing Star. The brightest star in any sky.”
“Yes!” Hook exclaimed, his frustration mingling with gratitude that someone had actually cottoned onto what he was talking about. “Thank you. But Rheul Gorm isn’t there!”

It couldn’t be denied; there was no singularly brightest star in the sky.

“Why does everything always come back to that blasted fairy?” Gold growled. “There’s no Blue Star in the sky because it’s currently running a convent in Storybrooke.”

No-one said anything. The collective euphoria they had felt on escaping from Pan and Neverland had died away into a very real fear of what was coming next.

“I hate to be the one to ask the obvious question, but how are we going to get home?” Snow asked. Hook spread his hands.

“I’m open to suggestions,” he said. “If we keep sailing long enough then we’ll reach land, but I’ve no idea where that land will be.”

“Well, any land is better than no land,” Snow said, although her tone was doubtful. “Perhaps wherever we land, there’ll be a way to get us home. Portals do tend to find us with alarming regularity.”

Gold just gave a cynical snort and Snow turned on him. “Hey! At least I’m trying to think of a plan!”

“Wait, I think I’ve got it.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Henry. His brow was furrowed in concentration.

“The brightest star in the sky is a fairy, right?” he continued eventually.

“Yes. A fairy who’s currently not in residence on her cloud,” Gold muttered.

“But what if another fairy could take her place?” Henry looked over at Tinker Bell. “Could you find the Blue Fairy’s place in the sky?”

Tinker Bell nodded slowly. “Yes, I suppose I could, but…”

“There we are then,” Henry said excitedly. “Tinker Bell’s a fairy. She can take the Blue Star’s place and we can guide from that.”

“Henry, you don’t understand.” Tinker Bell shook her head sadly. “I’m not a real fairy. Not anymore.”

“How can you just stop being a fairy?” Henry asked.

“My wings were taken. That was why I was in Neverland in the first place. If I’d had my wings, I would have left as soon as I could. But I can’t fly. I have no wings, no wand, no magic. I can’t take Blue’s place without at least one of those things.”

“Well, we’ll just find a way to make you fly again,” Henry said. “There’s got to be a way. I mean, look at the Jolly Roger, we made that fly. And Nibs, he started to fly when some pixie dust got spilled on him. We’ve got loads of it left. Surely that would work.”

“Pixie dust flight is really not something to be advised for living creatures,” Tinker Bell said. “You’ve all seen what happens when it goes wrong,” she added to the Lost Boys. The boys looked somewhat uncomfortable, but Nibs piped up.
“Yeah, but that’s because they didn’t know what they were doing. They were desperate.”

“We’re desperate,” Tinker Bell pointed out before looking around at the others.

“Yes, but you’re used to flying,” Nibs pressed. “You’ve done it before and you know where you’re going. You’ve had practice. You’ll be able to control it. They others who tried getting out with pixie dust couldn’t do that.”

“I suppose that is true. You never really forget how to fly once you know how,” Tinker Bell conceded. Henry nodded.

“Like riding a bike,” he said.

The rest of the travellers looked at each other.

“Well, it’s worth a shot in my opinion,” Neal said. “We’ve got faith in you, Tink. You can do it.”

“Yeah, we believe in you, Tink,” the Lost Boys chorused.

“Pan always said that all it took was faith and trust,” Nibs added. “Maybe that’s why it never worked so well for us on the island, because we didn’t trust him.”

Tinker Bell gave a wary nod. “Ok. Let’s try it.” She went over to the depleted sacks of pixie dust and took out a pinch. “Right. How do we do this?”

“Magic’s always more potent when inhaled,” Gold said, and Neal shot him an incredulous look.

“You’re really encouraging her to snort that stuff?” he exclaimed.

“People have snorted worse in my presence,” Gold replied, completely matter of fact about the whole thing. “At least I’m fairly certain that this isn’t going to turn you green.”

Regina, knowing that the comment was intended for her hearing, simply rolled her eyes.

“Thanks,” Tinker Bell said dryly. “Well, here goes nothing.” She took a sniff of the dust. For a long moment nothing happened, then she gave a dainty little sneeze, a cloud of powder coming out of her nose. Still, nothing happened in terms of the fairy’s feet leaving the deck of the Jolly Roger. She shook her head with a sigh.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t think I can. It’s been so long since I last flew. I just don’t think I’m strong enough.”

**Neverland – Past**

“You know, Captain, I’m really not sure about this.”

Killian and Smee were back on board the Jolly Roger, keeping a lookout on the stern whilst the rest of the crew slept. Killian didn’t respond to Smee’s words immediately. He too had his misgivings about the whole thing, but at the same time he couldn’t help but hope that it was their ticket out of Neverland, however suddenly and unexpectedly it had come.

“It just seems very convenient,” Smee continued.
Killian nodded slowly. “It does,” he agreed hesitantly. “I will admit I’d always thought that pixie dust was a myth. Something that powerful just doesn’t grow on trees.”

“Well, apparently it does in Neverland.” Smee’s voice betrayed his obvious unease. “It would be all right if we could just test it out, you know? To make sure that it can do what she claims it does. I feel like I’m being lulled into a false sense of security.”

Killian knew the feeling. “It’s almost too good to be true.”

“And you know what they say about fairies and Neverland,” Smee added sagely.

“What do they say?”

“Fairies go to Neverland when they fall,” Smee whispered, his voice conspiratorial. “If a fairy loses her wings she falls to Neverland. So whatever she did in the Enchanted Forest, it must have been pretty awful if she lost her wings.” There was a long silence as the two men mulled over this information. “Are you sure we can trust her?”

Killian frowned. “I don’t know. She does seem as desperate as we are to get out of here.”

“Well, no-one would want to stay,” Smee pointed out. “But what might the consequences be for us if we take her back out of her banishment?”

Killian pondered the ramifications for a while. On the one hand, Tinker Bell had offered them a way out of their hopeless situation, and it would be dishonourable not to take the facilitator of their escape along with them when they made good on it. On the other hand, their doing so could cause even more problems than they would be leaving behind.

“The Blue Fairy is not someone you want to cross,” Killian agreed with Smee eventually. “All the same, it would be foolish not to take this opportunity on an off-chance.” He sighed again. On yet another hand, he still wasn’t entirely convinced that this wasn’t all some kind of elaborate deception on Pan’s part.

“Perhaps there’s some kind of way of getting the dust without the fairy?” Smee suggested. Killian raised an eyebrow.

“Stealing it, you mean?”

“More… borrowing.”

“It’s not borrowing if you don’t give it back,” Killian pointed out. “The very word ‘borrowing’ implies a temporary arrangement, and you can’t get more permanent than taking something to a different land.”

“Well, maybe not borrowing then. But all the same, that stuff needs to be tested before we let it loose.”

That Killian could agree with, and a plan began to form in his mind.

“Wake Morton and Winter and put them on the watch,” he said to Smee. “We’re going to do some investigation.”

A few minutes later found Killian and Smee retracing the steps that they had taken earlier in the day towards the fairy’s hideout. Although he had learned to map the island pretty well in his time there, Killian could never be sure that it wouldn’t suddenly do something to disorientate him, and he was
pleasantly surprised when he found the fairy ring in the same place that he had left it. Indicating for Smee to stay put in the tree cover, Killian crept forward and peered through his telescope. Tinker Bell appeared to be sleeping soundly in a hammock hung between two overhanging branches of the largest tree, and above her Killian could see the sack of pixie dust tied securely.

“Now what?” Smee hissed. Killian waved at him to be quiet and ventured a little further into the fairy ring. He was going to have to climb up and get it; there were no two ways about it in the absence of quantifiable magic or a bow and expert marksman who could shoot it down from its precarious perch without waking the fairy beneath. Killian could climb well enough; he could swarm up ropes and rigging as fast as the next sailor, even with only one hand, but the necessary stealth might be an issue. Part of him, a part that sounded an awful lot like his father, was telling him that it was a far better idea to wait till morning and renegotiate with Tinker Bell until he was satisfied, but the rest of him didn’t want to take that chance.

He continued to inch towards the fairy’s tree, and when she showed no signs of waking with his approach, he grabbed the lowest overhanging tree branches and swung himself up into the canopy. So far so good. He wondered at Tinker Bell’s ability to sleep so soundly in a place like Neverland; he knew that he certainly wouldn’t have been able to shut his eyes on the island itself. But then again, she had very little choice in the matter, and a hammock up high in a fairy ring was at least safer than simply passing out from exhaustion in the middle of the forest.

Killian moved up closer to the dust and a branch cracked under his weight; he managed to grab a sturdier bough for purchase but the noise that the fallen wood made was deafening in the eerily quiet night. Killian froze, but Tinker Bell still did not wake, simply snuffling in her sleep and turning over, curling even further up on herself inside her hammock. His brow furrowed; there was no way that she should have been able to sleep through such a cacophony right beside her. He saw it then as he continued up towards the pixie dust. The sack, stolen from the Lost Boys, was old and worn, and there was a small tear in it. With every movement of the tree in the soft breeze, so a little powder sprinkled out of the sack, straight down onto Tinker Bell’s blissfully unaware face.

Hook paused for a moment, his hand on the handle of his knife, ready to cut the sack of dust away from its bindings and send it down to Smee, poised to catch it on the ground below. Here was his proof that the stuff was indeed the incredibly powerful magic of legend; and that was what they had set out to prove on this venture. All the same… He looked once more at Tinker Bell’s sleeping face. A fairy fallen from grace who had survived for who knew how long in Pan’s realm – he still did not trust her, although he did now trust the magic that she provided.

Killian shook himself out of his train of thought and cut the sack down; Smee caught it before it could make a sound and in a flash, Killian was back on the ground and the two men were making their way back to the Jolly Roger at speed, now not quite as worried of disturbing Tinker Bell’s drugged slumber.

“You’re doing the right thing,” Smee said as they clambered back onto the ship.

“Am I?” Killian muttered to himself. “Yes. For the good of the ship. The good of the crew.” Smee nodded his agreement, and together they opened the sack carefully. Killian took out a handful of the shimmering powder and shook it out over the deck. Almost immediately there was a bright glow of silvery-green as the dust permeated the wood, but then it died away just as quickly. All the same, Killian thought that he had felt the ship shift beneath him slightly, an effect almost of lightening, as if they were rising a little above the waterline.

“Is it working?” Smee asked hesitantly. Killian nodded.

“Wake the crew. All hands on deck. We’re going home.”
Smee scrabbled to his feet and raced down below the deck to rouse the rest of the sailors, and Killian sprang into action, throwing handfuls of pixie dust over every inch of the ship that he could feasibly reach. Soon enough, the rest of the crew were pouring onto the deck, galvanised by the prospect of going home and eager to do everything that they could to help. It did not take long to coat the *Jolly Roger* in the dust after that, and with each handful that sank into her sturdy wood, so she rose higher and higher out of the water. Once the sack was empty, she was far above the sea, and Killian could feel her bobbing along on the air currents just as she would pitch on the waves. He made his way over to the helm, but before he could swing the wheel and set off, he heard a voice hailing them from below.

“Hey! Wait! Come back! Please!”

There was no anger in Tinker Bell’s voice, which was what Killian would have expected on her finding out that she had been robbed whilst she slept. There was only fear, and a horrible sense of betrayal.

Killian took a deep breath and turned the wheel. He didn’t know which direction he was going in yet, but he knew that any direction which took him away from Neverland was a good one. He didn’t look back to see Tinker Bell’s stricken face as her lifeline and ticket out of Neverland sailed away from her until it was nothing more than a faint green glow on the horizon.

“You did the right thing,” Smee assured Killian as the ship flew on through the night.

“I saved my crew,” Killian said, his voice measured. “The prerogative of any decent captain.”

“You father would be proud,” Smee agreed.

Killian didn’t respond, staring straight ahead into the clouds and stars. For all he had been a smuggler, Davy Jones had been an honourable man, and his son was not entirely convinced that Smee’s words rang true.

Neverland – Present

It seemed that they were stuck in a stalemate. The pixie dust wasn’t letting Tinker Bell fly and there was still no way of navigating home.

“I don’t get it,” one of the Lost Boys said. “Faith, trust and pixie dust. That should be all you need.”

“But if Tink doesn’t have faith in herself, then it’s not going to work,” Henry pointed out. “We all believe in you, Tinker Bell,” he said to the fairy. “You got this far without magic. Just think what you can do with your wings.”

“I know.” Tinker Bell sounded to be on the verge of tears of frustration. “I know that. I know I’ve survived this long and if I want to survive any longer I’ve got to keep going, but I can’t help being afraid!”

“Afraid of what?” Snow asked gently.

Tinker Bell looked over at Hook. “Of being left behind again.”

Everyone turned to Hook. It was no secret that he and Tinker Bell had history, and most had guessed
what that history was, but now it had been confirmed. Hook let go of the helm and came down towards the group gathered around Tinker Bell.

“No-one’s getting left behind,” he said. “Not even him.” He jerked his hook in Gold’s direction. “Once you’ve got your wings back you can follow us on the right course, and once we’re on our way you can just fly back to the ship. I know you can do it. I know you’re strong enough.”

Tinker Bell snorted. “How can you possibly know that?”

“Because you’re still here. Because in all the time I was in Neverland, I never saw another fairy, even though I know that there must have been more. You survived. You were the only one, the last of your kind, and you survived all that time. You’re probably the strongest person I know. I trust you. You can do this.”

“If you think I’m so strong and you have that much faith in me, why did you leave me behind?”

Hook took a deep breath.

“Because I was scared,” he admitted. “You were a fallen fae, I didn’t know what you’d done to end up in Neverland, and I didn’t trust you. And I’m sorry.”

Tinker Bell gave a slow nod. “But you trust me now.”

“Because whatever you might have done in the Enchanted Forest, you’ve never sold out to Pan. Not like I did. So whatever happened, you’re better than me. Have some faith in that, at least. Even without that final battle, you still mastered Pan.”

The fairy gave a small smile.

“Thank you.”

“Erm, Tinker Bell?” Henry began. Tinker Bell glanced over at the boy and he pointed to her feet, which were hovering an inch or so above the deck.

“I told you. All you need is faith, trust and pixie dust,” Nibs said, sounding wise beyond his years. Tinker Bell looked down in amazement.

“Well, here we go.”

Steadily she began to rise towards the sails, a calm, controlled ascent, not like Nibs’ earlier flight.

“You can do it, Tink!” Henry called to her from the deck, but Tinker Bell did not look down, unwilling to break her concentration. Almost there, back amongst the stars where she had once belonged.

“I can do this,” she muttered to herself. “I’ll show Blue I’m sure as hell not a lost cause.” She gave a snort of grim laughter. “Why does it feel like I’m always cleaning up after you, Blue? First my baby and now this. And without my wings, too. Oh Blue.” She sighed. “You might have banished me, but you’ve made me stronger than you ever know.”

Back in what had once been her rightful place, Tinker Bell could feel the traces of fae magic in the air, and she reached out to touch a faint trail of fairy dust, so light that it was almost an echo. Blue was not the only fairy no longer in the night sky; all her sisters had vanished as well. For the first time since her banishment, Tinker Bell couldn’t wait to see them all again, to tell them the truth and all that had happened. Sugar Plum would understand. Sugar would be proud of her.
The tendril of fairy dust danced around her fingers, warm to the touch. It was clinging to her, bending to her command. It recognised her as a true fairy, not one who had been lost. The soft hum of magic began to pulse through her veins once more, where it had lain dormant for so long that she had begun to think it had died altogether.

Maybe…

Tinker Bell wriggled her shoulders, but nothing happened.

“Come on,” she murmured. “Come on, if the fairy dust works then this has got to work.”

She tried again to no avail, but the fairy dust was agitated now, swirling around her fingers, and as she moved upwards through the fairy realm towards Blue’s place from where her light would shine out and guide the sailors, so several more of the faint traces were floating over to her, attracted as if by magnetism. She just had to get a little bit further.

“Third time lucky.” Tinker Bell shook her shoulders and this time, in a burst of bright green glittering light, her wings unfolded, strong and steady and carrying her with ease, as if they had never been parted from her. Tinker Bell couldn’t help but give a laugh of utter joy, and far below her on the ship, she could just about make out similar exclamations. She smiled but did not look down; there were more pressing things to be done, and she flew on confidently towards Blue’s place in the sky.

Down below on the Jolly Roger, the crew had watched with bated breath as Tinker Bell had risen up and up into the night, all of them trusting her to be able to do it, but all of them fearful that she might fly up uncontrollably forever, and they had cheered when they saw her bright light in the sky. Back at the helm once more, Hook looked up at the stars, which finally looked right again and he turned the wheel, setting their course for home. It did not matter where that home was, the second star to the right would guide them home. He turned the wheel, setting their course for home. It did not matter where that home was, the second star to the right would guide them home. He looked up at the tattered sails above him and the masts barely held together by magic, pixie dust glittering in the holes and cracks. He only hoped that the magic would be enough and she would be able to last the journey. He could tell that she was not truly fixed; the helm was sluggish and heavy in his grasp and the ship was moving slowly and awkwardly through the sky. He caught Neal looking up in the same direction as him, and the two men exchanged a somewhat worried look.

“It doesn’t look good,” Neal said. “I’m surprised you haven’t got Regina and Rumpelstiltskin making more repairs.”

Hook shook his head. “Too risky whilst we’re fling. I’d like to at least attempt to get you all home in one piece.”

Neal nodded. “Thanks.”

Dawn was beginning to break on the horizon. At the bow of the ship, Snow turned to David.

“Almost home,” she said. “Do you think much has happened whilst we’ve been away?”

“Considering Storybrooke’s track record, I wouldn’t like to think,” David muttered. There was a soft shimmering noise behind them and they turned to see Tinker Bell alighting on the deck.

“This is it,” she said, but before she could comment further, the ship gave an ominous lurch beneath her. “Oh dear. That doesn’t sound promising.”

“Oh no, not again!” Hook pleaded at the helm. “Don’t give up on me now, old girl, not when we’re so close.”
They were close; Emma could see the Maine coastline and the trees, but no sign of Storybrooke itself. Neal turned to Gold.

“How are we going to get through your protection spell?” he asked.

Gold simply made his way over to the side of the ship and waved his arms in a grand sweep, casing a rush of golden-coloured magic to ripple through the air, revealing the town below it. Emma gave an impressed nod.

“Neat.”

“Oh hell! No!” Hook exclaimed as the ship gave another lurch. “Everyone hold on, it’s going to be a crash landing!”

“For the love of…” Gold sighed and grabbed onto a rigging rope as the ship pitched bow first into a dive and began to shudder as it descended over the town, residents scattering far and wide. “This is getting ridiculous!”

Hook managed to steer the ship towards the docks, where it landed in the water with a terrific crash. Its passengers only had a moment to take a breath before it continued to dive down below the surface.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle didn’t think that anyone in Storybrooke could have missed the *Jolly Roger* flying overhead and tumbling down towards the docks. For a horrifying moment as she rushed out of the pawn shop she thought that the ship would miss the sea entirely and crash and splinter on land, smashing everyone on board to smithereens, but joining the exodus of Storybrooke inhabitants who were all running towards the water, she saw it swoop down close over the buildings’ roofs, breaking off a weather vane, before it pulled up again, finally coming to rest in the water. It teetered for a few seconds, still propelled by the swift momentum from its flight, but with a blood-curdling screech of wood under strain, it tipped forward like an unbalanced box on a shelf and within less than half a minute it had disappeared beneath the churning surface, the harbour’s waters like a whirlpool sucking in everything around it.

For a minute, the gathered crowd was silent, shocked by what they had just seen, and Belle was the first to move, pushing forwards through the spectators to the very edge of the docks for a better view. The whirlpool was still not subsiding, and with a chilling sense of horror, Belle recognised it for what it was.

“It’s a portal!” she exclaimed, grabbing Leroy whom she had ended up beside. “It’s like the portal that they went through to get to Neverland! We’ve got to get them out of it!”

“How?” Leroy asked frantically, evidently as eager as Belle was to mount a rescue mission but equally convinced of its futility. “Those things tend to be a one-way trip, sister, and I really don’t think that us ending up in a galaxy far, far away is going to help them!”
“We’ve got to do something! We can’t just leave them, who know where they might end up?” Belle looked again at the whirlpool, out in the bay, still churning away and becoming ever more violent, and a thought struck her. “They haven’t gone through all the way yet,” she said. “The portal would have closed if they weren’t still inside it. There’s got to be some way of pulling them out.”

Leroy was visibly torn by the suggestion for a moment, then he nodded. “Ok, let’s go.”

“What’s going on?”

Belle turned to see Ariel, Wendy and Grimsby approaching them at a run.

“We saw what happened from the hospital,” Wendy explained, panting. “Where did the ship go?”

“Down there,” Leroy said grimly, pointing to the maelstrom. “We’re going to try and pull them out.”

Ariel turned to Grimsby, signing to him: We need to help.

“Ariel, that’s likely to result in certain death,” Grimsby replied faintly. She rolled her eyes, her hand movements sharp and angry and she signed again: Fine, I’ll go by myself.

“I’m not letting you go by yourself.” He sighed. “All right, let’s get the boat ready.”

They made to leave their position on the docks to get back to where Ariel and Eric’s fishing boat was moored, Leroy following. A few other residents who owned boats were joining in as well, certain that no matter what the consequences might be, action was better than inaction and they had to at least try.

“Coming, Belle?” Leroy asked. Belle nodded and rushed to follow them down to the boats.

“Wait for me!” Astrid was running along after them. “It looks like you’ll need all the help you can get. Besides, you did promise that I could come on your maiden voyage.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t really expecting that maiden voyage to possibly be my last,” Leroy said dryly. “Well, if you want to risk it, I won’t stop you.”

They had reached the landing stage by this point and the boats set off towards the whirlpool, four in total, with Belle and Astrid passengers on Leroy’s. Wendy had opted to remain on the docks.

“Can you see anything?” Astrid asked above the roar of the wind and the magic from the portal. Belle craned her neck to try and see down inside the pool, but it was impossible with so much running water, and they could go no closer for fear of getting dragged in themselves. Beside them, Ariel’s more powerful motor boat inched a little closer and the former mermaid stood up on the bow, peering through binoculars whilst Grimsby busied himself with the nets, gathering them up ready to cast them down into the maelstrom. The other boats followed his lead, and Astrid helped Leroy to secure a rope to their own boat.

Ariel gestured frantically to her shipmate and he went over to her, taking the binoculars and staring down into the swirling abyss. He nodded grimly and called across to Leroy and Belle.

“We can’t see them. Ariel thinks that they’re in the space between worlds.”

“The what?” Leroy asked.

“The space between worlds,” Belle said. “Water connects all the worlds, there are no barriers between them in the water, so there are these gaps between them, the space between worlds.” Leroy
just looked at her incredulously. “I’ve been reading up on it!”

“Can we get them out?” he asked.

Belle nodded. “I think we should be able to, theoretically.”

“Ok then, here goes nothing. If we end up on the yellow brick road, so be it.”

He tossed the end of the rope towards the portal; it was sucked in immediately and the boat creaked a little under the strain, but it did not move, the force of the portal not strong enough at this distance to pull them in fully. Leroy shook his head.

“Well, it doesn’t feel like anyone’s pulling on it yet,” he said. “Still, we can hope.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Belle saw movement over on Ariel’s boat and she heard Grimsby give an exclamation of alarm.

“Ariel, what on earth are you doing?”

Belle looked over; Ariel had taken the helm of the fishing boat and had put it into hard reverse, swinging around and heading back towards the harbour. As they went past Belle, Leroy and Astrid, Grimsby shrugged, completely clueless as to what the young woman’s plan was, and Belle could see that Ariel’s face was a picture of cold determination.

“I hope she knows what she’s doing and isn’t just leaving us in the lurch,” Leroy said. Belle nodded her agreement, a little worried by Ariel’s sudden departure. Hopefully she would be back with a good idea. In the meantime, they could only wait and try to save those stranded under the water.

Ariel had indeed had a good idea; she just hoped that her hunch was correct and the stunt would pay off as she manoeuvred her battered boat back into harbour as best she could, ignoring Grimsby’s pleas to at least give him some kind of sign as to what was going on.

Stay here, she signed to him as they reached the dock again and she jumped off the boat onto the landing stage.

“Ariel!” he yelled after her. “Oh, I give up.”

“Ariel, what are you doing?” Wendy asked, running after her friend as she raced away from the water, racing down the deserted main street past the shops, past the hospital and the houses, with only one destination in mind. The two women skidded to a halt in front of the pawn shop.

“Ariel, what on earth are we doing here?”

Ariel brushed off the query and entered the shop, giving the front room a cursory look over before making a beeline for the curtain and the closed off back room, opening all the cupboards and drawers that she could see and rifling through them.

“What are you looking for?” Wendy pressed. “If you let me know I can help you search.”

Ariel turned to her friend and patted her throat. Wendy understood immediately.

“We need your voice.” She joined in the hunt, turning the room upside down in their efforts. “Well, hopefully Rumpelstiltskin won’t mind a bit of a mess when we’re saving his skin in the process,” she observed, glancing around at the destruction. Suddenly, Ariel stopped in her tracks. When she turned
to Wendy from the drawer she was rummaging in, she had a triumphant expression on her face and was holding up a small glass vial containing a pulsing miasmic substance emitting a soft glow.

“That’s it?” Wendy asked. “That’s… not what I was expecting. Still, let’s go.”

They rushed back towards the docks where Grimsby was still waiting for them.

“Do you know what’s going on?” he asked Wendy plainly. She nodded unsurely.

“I think so.” She turned to Ariel. “Are you sure about this?”

Ariel nodded and made her way past the boat to the very edge of the landing stage before taking a deep breath, uncapping the vial and swallowing the concoction inside, much to the consternation of her watching friends.

“Did it work?” Wendy asked tentatively.

Ariel grimaced and then began coughing violently. Wendy rushed forward but Ariel held up a hand to stop her.

“It’s ok,” she said. “I’m ok.” She turned to Grimsby. “Follow me in the boat. And hello, by the way, since I’ve never said it before.”

With that, she turned and dived neatly off the end of the landing stage into the harbour’s murky waters below. She did not resurface for a long time, and her waterproof trousers floated to the top before a brilliant flash of glittering jade green mermaid’s tail flapped in the water, heading towards the portal at a breakneck pace.

Grimsby gunned the fishing boat’s engine with a somewhat stunned expression.

“Well, that’s something you don’t see every day.”

X

It was a very long time since Ariel had swum as a mermaid, but as soon as she had her tail back, she immediately fell back into the rhythm of flapping the powerful fin to propel her along, so much faster than her human legs could take her through the water. It was even longer since she had swum to cross worlds. She had only done it once before, back when she had been a child in Neverland. She had only had to make sure that Wendy was all right then, and she had no idea how many she was looking to rescue this time. Moving swiftly towards the whirlpool, Ariel started to wonder if she had bitten off more than she could chew, but perhaps with the aid of the portal’s momentum, she would be able to make it through. Reaching the choppy underwater cyclone, she paused for only a second before plunging into it head first.

She had never swum in conditions so bad, not even in the deepest waters of Neverland with her mer-brethren lashing at her, and she was about to give up and turn back when she suddenly broke the surface of the water, cursing loudly with the strenuous exertion. She blinked at the sight that met her.

“Well,” she said to herself. “That worked.”

She dived under the surface again and swam towards the _Jolly Roger_. The ship, looking rather the worse for wear, was inside what was obviously the same whirlpool that they had seen in Storybrooke, swirling around and round on the edge like a speck of soap scum going down a plughole. Hook was at the helm, his grip on the wheel white-knuckled as he tried desperately to keep the ship from going any further down. The others were clinging onto whatever ropes, lines and
rigging that they could, although it was clear that the wood could not take much more pressure. Spiralling as it was, Ariel decided that it would be easier to just stay stationery and let them come to her; she grabbed a hold of the stern and pulled herself up.

“Hey!” she called, waving frantically with one hand whilst hanging on for dear life with the other, the motion of the ship threatening to fling off into the watery abyss at any moment. “Over here!”

Neal was the first to spot her, and he looked at her as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Ariel?” he yelled over the roar of the water. “Is that you?”

“Yes, I grew a tail. Easy when you know how. I’ve come to get you out of here!”

“How?” Emma asked, the rest of the Jolly’s passengers having been alerted to the mermaid’s presence.

“I can swim you back to Storybrooke.”

“We’re in the space between worlds,” Hook shouted from the helm. “We started to come down before we truly left Neverland’s influence so we’re stuck here literally in the middle of nowhere!”

“I can swim you back,” Ariel repeated, “but we’ve got to be quick! How many of you are there?”

“Nineteen!” Regina yelled, performing a quick head count.

“Nineteen! What did you do out there, recruit an army?”

Neal looked over at the Lost Boys, huddled together around the mast. “Sort of.”

Ariel shook her head in despair; this was going to be harder than she had anticipated, but she had faith in herself. She could do it.

“I can take two at a time,” she said. “But you’ve got to keep the ship as level as possible for as long as you can.”

“Not a problem,” Hook said through gritted teeth, giving the wheel an almighty heave and finally bringing the Jolly Roger back onto a more even keel. “Well get going then!” he yelled to the others. “I can’t keep her like this forever!”

“Henry and the boys first,” Emma said, and no-one disagreed with her. The young ones began inching their way towards the stern of the ship, and Ariel hooked her tail around the railing to give her a good launch, grabbing two of the boys each by the hand and diving back into the violent water.

Back above the surface in Storybrooke, the boats were still floating in their vigil around the whirlpool, all with lines cast down into it. Everyone had seen Ariel vanish into the abyss and they were waiting with bated breath for her to return.

Presently there was a tug on the end of Leroy’s rope and he and Astrid scrambled to haul it in.

“Henry!” Belle exclaimed joyfully as his head broke the surface of the water and he took a huge gulp of air.

“There are more coming,” he panted as they helped him and the boy who had surfaced with him into their boat. Belle knew better than to question the other teen’s presence and busied herself with making sure that they were both all right whilst Astrid and Leroy threw the rope back out towards the maelstrom. Boys kept coming up in pairs, pulled into the waiting boats, and Belle saw that others
had come to help them. Once Belle had counted ten unfamiliar boys and Henry, there was a pause before the next person surfaced, a woman with pale blonde hair whom Belle had also never seen before, spluttering and thrashing about.

“Tinker Bell!” Astrid exclaimed, and she reached out a hand to help her long-lost friend onto the boat.

“Fairies aren’t designed to swim.” Tinker Bell coughed and spat out a mouthful of sea water. “I’m never doing that again!”

Belle looked across at Tinker Bell. Something in the back of her mind registered that this was her mother, less than three feet away from her and blissfully unaware of her daughter’s presence, but she pushed the thought away, not wanting to deal with it whilst there were other far more important things at hand. Snow, Charming and Regina had all since arrived in the harbour and were being helped into other boats, and Belle bit her lip, looking out for Rumpelstiltskin anxiously.

There was another tug on their rope, and Belle’s heart soared when Rumpelstiltskin’s head appeared, bedraggled and cursing but definitely still alive.

“Rumpel!”

He looked over on hearing her voice, and in spite of it all, he managed a smile. As soon as he was safely in the boat, Belle threw her arms around him, uncaring for his sodden clothing.

“I told you I’d see you again,” she murmured, relishing the feel of his arms around her after all the worry that she might never see him again.

“I’ve learned my lesson about not believing you,” Rumpelstiltskin replied with a chuckle. “But I certainly don’t plan on taking a trip like that any time soon, that’s for sure.”

It was only once they finally broke apart that Belle took in his state of dress, the leather and dragonhide that he had definitely not left Storybrooke wearing, and she raised an eyebrow.

Rumpelstiltskin looked slightly sheepish.

“Well, my suit got ruined,” he said by way of explanation, but Belle just grinned.

“Oh no,” she said. “I like it. I’ve missed this side of your dress sense. I think you should dress like this more often, if I’m honest.”

Rumpelstiltskin laughed.

“For you, my dear, anything is possible.”

“Who’s left to come back?” Leroy asked, bringing their attention back to the present. “We can’t take any more passengers.”

Rumpelstiltskin looked across to see Neal and Emma clambering onto the fishing boat.

“Just Hook and Ariel,” he said.

It was at that moment that the portal closed, leaving the surface of the water as calm as it had been before, with no trace of its dramatic maelstrom.

X

Ariel gave Emma and Neal a push towards the surface and with a powerful sweep of her tail, she
turned back towards the *Jolly Roger* for the final time. Her body ached all over and her tail was numb from exhaustion, but she kept pushing through. If she never swam again after this, it would be too soon.

“Come on, Killian!” she called to the captain, still stoic at the helm of his ship. “She’s not going to hold much longer, even I can tell you that.”

Killian shook his head.

“No. As soon as I take my hands off this wheel the ship will go down and drag us both with it. I’ll give you a head start.”

Ariel realised the gravity of what he was about to do.

“You have no idea of where that portal is going to take you!” she exclaimed. “It could be any realm, anywhere!”

“I’ll take that chance,” Killian said. “It’s just another adventure. I’m a sailor. The water always takes us home eventually. We trust it.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. As a very wise seaman once told me, a good captain always goes down with his ship.”

Ariel made to spring away from the ship again. “Good luck!” she called, diving into the foam.

Killian smiled to himself. “I’m going to need it,” he murmured.

As soon as Ariel was far enough away from the ship and he could no longer see her scales glittering in the water, Killian spun the *Jolly*’s wheel, directing her down into the portal, his ultimate destination unknown, but safe in the knowledge that he had finally done something that his father would condone.

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**Storybrooke – Present**

There was an air of anticipation as Ariel’s head bobbed up above the surface of the calm water, everyone expecting to see Killian pop up beside her, but as she paddled towards her boat, it quickly became clear that the final member of the party was not returning.

“What happened?” Emma asked as Grimsby lifted Ariel out of the water and set her down gently on the deck, her tail stretched out limp in front of her.

“He chose to go down with the ship,” she replied quietly. “He took the *Jolly* into the portal to give me time to get away.”

Emma nodded, unsure of what to say in the circumstances. She had always taken Killian as a rather self-serving person, but her experiences over the last few days had changed that perception somewhat. In a way she was sad that she hadn’t said a proper goodbye.

“Thank you,” she said eventually. “I don’t know how we would have got out if you hadn’t come for us.”
Ariel shrugged. “Well, I thought that every bright idea might help. I’m just glad I was able to do it. I don’t think I’ll be swimming for a while yet though.” She sighed and looked back out at the still space where the portal had been, giving a long sigh for the person she had not managed to save.

“He’s not dead,” Neal said, coming to sit beside Emma. “He’s still out there, in one world or another. You never know, with the amount of realm-jumping that this family does, you might see him again and be able to thank him.”

The reminder that he was still out there somewhere cheered Emma, and she smiled at Neal. Whether it was by chance, exhaustion, or some kind of subconscious design, she found herself leaning into him as they made the short voyage back to the docks.

The trip itself turned out to be but a brief moment of respite; as soon as they were back on dry land, the rescuers and rescued alike found themselves accosted by Granny and the other staff from the bed and breakfast and diner, handing out towels and blankets and mugs of tea and soup. Belle smiled; she knew that she could count on Granny to make order out of chaos with the aid of hot beverages. The older woman gave Rumpelstiltskin’s attire an intrigued look as she handed him a blanket, and she gave Belle a knowing nod.

“You’ll have fun getting that off later,” she said.

Belle blushed furious scarlet, and Rumpelstiltskin’s hand found hers, squeezing it tightly.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go and dry off.”

Belle leaned in and kissed his cheek before casting a final glance back over her shoulder. Tinker Bell and Theresa were locked in a tight embrace, dancing around the dock in their jubilation at being reunited.

“What is it?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, following her gaze.

Belle shook her head. “Nothing. It can wait.”

They continued to make their way back towards the pink house, neither of them noticing that Rumpelstiltskin still cast no shadow in the early evening sun.

X

“Grimsby,” Ariel began with a yawn.

“Yes, Ariel? You know, it really is strange for me to be hearing your voice after all of these years.”

“It’s strange for me to be using my voice after all of these years. It’s strange having a tail again after all of these years.”

“May I ask how many people knew of your aquatic origins, or was I the only obtuse one in the court?”

Ariel shook her head. “It was just Wendy.”

“And Eric, I presume.”

“No. Not Eric.” Ariel looked up at Grimsby. “Eric didn’t know. That’s what I wanted to ask you. Will you take me to Eric, please? I think after all this time, it’s time he knew the truth.”

Grimsby nodded.
“Of course.”

Eric had been dozing in his hospital bed ever since Ariel had raced off to investigate the tall ship flying overhead, but he woke on hearing the door to the ward open and he looked over at it, startled to see Grimsby carrying Ariel, and even more startled to see that Ariel had a shimmering mermaid’s tail poking out from beneath the blankets that she was wrapped in.

“I’ll leave you two to talk,” the older man said, having put Ariel down on the end of Eric’s bed.

“Ariel?” Eric began.

“Hi Eric,” Ariel said. “This is, um, me. I just wanted you to see me as I really am before I get my legs back. And I want to say I love you. Actually say it, since I have a voice at the moment. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Eric murmured, overwhelmed by this revelation.

They continued to talk for a few minutes as Ariel explained her story, then they fell into silence. They were so used to a silent relationship that even though they could now hold a two-way conversation, it did not occur to them to do so.

“You don’t have to turn back for my sake,” Eric said eventually. “If you don’t want to.”

Ariel smiled and shook her head.

“Of all the decisions I have made in my life, there are two I will never, ever regret. The first was bringing Wendy to the Enchanted Forest, and the second is giving up my voice for legs. Without those decisions, I would never have met you. In a choice between telling you I love you, and staying on land by your side and showing you how much I love you every day, then legs win. Every time.”

Taking out the vial that had held her voice, she carefully spat the glowing ball back into it, contentedly curling up beside her husband as her legs began to reform.

X

Night had fallen over Storybrooke, but anyone who was still awake would notice that one resident was still very much active. Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow, yellow eyes bright and alert, was hovering by the clock tower, as if it was keeping a look out for something. A sudden movement close by caused it to hide behind the brickwork, peeping out at what had disturbed its vigil.

It was another shadow, drifting furtively along the main street in the direction of the pawn shop. It stopped and cast an inquisitive gaze around the place before slipping in behind the loose board that covered the broken window it had made the previous day.

A few seconds later, it reappeared, carrying something. It was the Eternal Light that Emma had brought back from Neverland – true to form it had ended up in Gold’s shop.

Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow watched as the other shadow bore the lantern away from the town towards the heart of the woods, where it opened up the panels.

A light breeze was blowing and it stirred the ash inside the lamp, blowing it about and out of the metal casing altogether. Hidden behind a tree, Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow looked on as the ash began to solidify and reform until it was once more a human shape.

Pan exchanged a nod with his shadow and gestured for it to pursue Rumpelstiltskin’s, watching as
the two spectres raced away through the night, and he waited until they were gone before violently stamping down on the Eternal Light, shattering its light and warping the metal irreparably.

He smiled to himself. Neverland might be gone, but he was here now, and he could create a new Neverland to rule over…
Emma took a moment to double check her facts from the file that she’d been given by the bond agency, and she glanced over at the chat window that was open on her laptop screen. It was definitely the right mark. Ryan Evans, embezzled several thousand from his employers and then jumped bail and hot-footed it to Boston leaving a wife and family behind. Emma could understand why he’d done it – people often panicked in the heat of the moment, especially if they couldn’t afford the bail – but what she couldn’t understand was how he could do it. How could he abandon his loved ones and just vanish like that, and how could he now be trawling internet dating sites? Unless he was playing a very long con, which Emma doubted since he was intelligent enough to skim profits but not intelligent enough to cover his tracks and not get caught, then there was no reasoning behind it except being a complete dirtbag. It almost made her shudder. Still, these were the kind of people that she dealt with in her line of work so it shouldn’t have come as too much of a shock.

She looked over at the calendar and sighed. What a way to spend your twenty-eighth birthday. Smoking out yet another bail jumper whilst wearing the most uncomfortable shoes known to man and a cocktail dress borrowed from a colleague because she didn’t own anything nearly fancy enough for the restaurant that they had agreed to meet at. It was almost time to leave, but a message from Ryan had popped up on the dating site’s IM service. Perhaps he was cancelling at the last minute having got wind of who she really was. Thankfully, he still seemed oblivious.

Looking forward to meeting you, he said. It’ll be nice to talk in person.

Enna gave a wry smile. Not for Ryan, it wouldn’t be; not when he’d heard what she had to say.

“Keep telling yourself that,” she muttered under her breath as she typed out a generic response. A little while later another message came through, and they continued to chat for a while.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the past, Ryan said presently. You know. If you could go back and undo things and do them differently, what would you do?

Was he perhaps feeling guilty about what he’d done? It wouldn’t be the first time that someone had had a last minute crisis of confidence. But Emma didn’t think any further into the words from Ryan’s point of view; she couldn’t help but glance over at the blanket folded over the back of the chair in the corner. The one thing she would want to undo most was still out of her power. She couldn’t control whether her parents kept her or not. But all the same, she thought about her own baby, whom she’d never really met, never even held before he was taken away. It was better that way, she’d figured at the time. Best not to get too attached. But somewhere in her heart, she wondered what it would have been like if she’d kept him.

Nothing really, she typed to Ryan, although in her head she was undoing her entire past and living it again, wondering if she could have made her life any different, any better.

Storybrooke – Past

“Madam Mayor. To what do I owe the pleasure today?”
Regina was always somewhat suspicious of Gold’s ability to tell she had entered his shop without him looking up from whatever it was that he was seemingly absorbed in.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked.

Gold looked up and gave her a somewhat reptilian smile.

“Well, the only other person who can walk around this place as if they own it is me, and I’m already here. So spit it out, dearie, I’m a very busy man.”

Regina gave an annoyed huff. “I was hoping that you could arrange something for me. You seem to be the go-to for anyone wanting anything in this town.”

Gold smirked. “I aim to please. What can I get for you today?”

This is a request of a somewhat delicate nature,” Regina began carefully.

“Fear not, Madam Mayor. Discretion is my middle name.”

“Really? What’s your first?”

“A closely guarded secret.”

“Well, A-Closely-Guarded-Secret Gold, I’m looking for a child.”

Gold just raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t you be better off asking our dear sheriff to assist you in that matter?”

“I’m talking about a child of my own, not finding a lost one.”

“So am I.” The pawn-broker’s gold-capped tooth glinted dangerously.

Regina pushed down her spark of annoyance. She was going to have to be more careful about her liaisons with Graham. If Gold, who barely left his shop, had noticed, then she wondered if the rest of Storybrooke’s residents had.

“I’m looking to adopt a child,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Really?” Gold raised both eyebrows this time but still didn’t move. “I wonder what’s brought on this sudden maternal urge. Some kind of gaping hole in your heart that you can’t quite fill?”

Regina felt her fists clench. He couldn’t know, he couldn’t remember. It was impossible. She was the only one to have taken a memory potion; he had been in that dank dungeon, he couldn’t possibly have…

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” Gold said eventually. “Given my past… reputation.”

He turned and limped towards the back room of the shop, indicating for Regina to follow him with a vague wave of his hand, but she stayed put.

“What about your past reputation?” she asked, her voice guarded.

Gold glanced over his shoulder at her. “I used to be a lawyer,” he said mildly. “Didn’t you know that? I thought you knew everything about everyone in this town.”

Regina nodded. She hadn’t planned out every single detail of her subjects’ cursed lives, but that
made sense. All the same, she wasn’t entirely convinced that Gold wasn’t hiding something, or that he knew more than he was letting on. She followed him into the back room to find him pulling various papers out of a dusty filing cabinet. Regina trailed a finger through the grime and wrinkled her nose.

“Have you ever thought of getting a cleaner in here, Gold?” she asked. “I know a wonderful girl who could do for you.” Oh, wouldn’t that be a thrill, having his precious Belle right under his nose and him blissfully unaware. On the other hand, perhaps it would be better not to risk it. She still wasn’t sure just how blissfully unaware he was. As it was, he did not take her up on the offer, simply giving a disdainful scowl.

“I assure you, Madam Mayor, that your attempts at assistance are neither necessary nor appreciated. Shall we get down to business?” He pressed a wad of paperwork into her hands. “If you take a read of that, it should tell you all you need to know about the process.” He paused, leaning heavily on the workbench, and looked up at her with a smirk that Regina was not entirely sure she liked the look of playing on his lips. “Although, we might run into a few… logistical problems.”

“What kind of logistical problems?” Regina asked.

“Storybrooke’s a small town. Out of the way. We don’t get all that many visitors. Certainly none who stay. Plus, I believe our nearest adoption agency is in Boston. I’m not quite sure how you were thinking of going about this.”

Regina tightened her hold on her paperwork.

“I don’t care how you do it,” she said. She would resort to what limited magical intervention she had if necessary. “Just make it happen.”

“Oh, I’ll be sure to work my magic, my dear,” Gold said mildly, and Regina turned sharply at the words. He didn’t seem to be showing any other signs of awareness. “But I’ll take this opportunity to warn you. Are you sure that this is something such an upstanding member of the community as yourself wants to be getting into? We wouldn’t want you to be undoing all the hard work it took you to get into this position now, would we?”

Regina matched his dangerous smile with one of her own.

“Well, you said it yourself,” she replied calmly. “It’s a small town. Out of the way. Who’s going to know?”

Gold’s expression was enigmatic and it reminded Regina very much of a crocodile.

“Who indeed?” he said. “Aside from myself, of course.”

“Of course.” Regina leaned over the table and she did not ignore the way that Gold leaned back away from her. “But I don’t have to worry about you, Gold, do I?”

The question was genuine. She hoped that she could get some kind of an answer out of him that would let her know just how much he knew, or didn’t know. She did not get a satisfactory response.

Gold raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth turning up in a sneer.

“Well, you’re in charge, Madam Mayor. Now it appears that I have some important phone calls to make, and the longer you stay standing there, the longer it will take for me to make them.”

Reluctantly, Regina turned to leave the back room of the shop, taking in all the junk therein and
wondering how much of it he actually remembered the origins of.

“Before you go, Ms Mills…”

Regina glanced back over her shoulder but Gold wasn’t looking at her, sitting at the workbench poring over reams of paperwork.

“Yes, Mr Gold?”

“Are you sure you know what you’re getting into?”

**Storybrooke – Present**

“If you keep stirring that cocoa you’re going to turn it into a milkshake, you know.” Granny’s sage voice pulled Emma out of her despondent daydream and she looked down at her mug. All the whipped cream had melted into the lukewarm chocolate and the cinnamon sprinkle had turned to an unattractive brown scum on the surface that was trickling down the side of the mug where she’d been a bit too exuberant in her stirring.

“Oh.”

Granny smiled and took the untouched drink away. “I’ll get you a fresh one. So what’s got you so down in the dumps then?” she asked as she placed a clean mug piled high with cream down in front of Emma. “I’d have thought you’d have been in a celebratory mood after everything that had happened.”

“I’m happy that we’ve all survived, don’t get me wrong,” Emma said hastily, taking a big gulp of her cocoa and nearly spitting it out again when it proved to be too hot. “I just have no idea what happens now. It feels like every time we get the chance to lead normal lives, something else happens to throw a spanner in the works.”

“Hey, don’t jinx things now,” Granny said sternly. “I’ve had quiet enough of curses and portals and magical catastrophes to last me a lifetime and I’d like things to stay calm for as long as possible. I’m not sure our fryers can take any more trauma.”

Emma had to laugh, and Granny gave her an encouraging smile.

“It’ll all work out, Emma,” she said. “Maybe not quite in the way that you expect it to, but you’ll get through whatever life throws at you. You’ve always done it before.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, I can do this. You’re right.”

The diner door opened and Emma glanced over to see Neal entering. He smiled when he saw her and came over, taking the seat beside her and accepting the mug of coffee that Granny held out to him.

“Thanks. Hey.” He turned to Emma. “I’ll be honest, I wasn’t sure if you’d come.”

“Neither was I,” Emma admitted. “But whatever happens, we need to talk about how this is going to work with Henry if nothing else.”
Neal nodded.

“He’s a great kid, Emma, and I want to be part of his life. I want to be his dad. I know I’ve missed so much, and I’m sorry for that.”

Emma shrugged. “Hey, I missed most of it too. It’s weird. I’ve been thinking about it so much over the last week while we were looking for him. Wondering about all the things I would have done differently if I could go back and do it all again.”

“Yeah.” Neal gave a snort of hollow laughter. “I probably shouldn’t have trusted Pinocchio. Should have seen that one coming from a mile off, really. It’s just that when you’ve spent so long running from something, your first instinct is just to keep running.”

Emma nodded her agreement. “Yeah, we’re both really good at that. It wasn’t all that long ago since I was attempting to run away with Henry. And yet here we are. Still here. Not running away. What happened?”

“I think we became parents,” Neal mused. “Parents who instinctively didn’t want to do the same as their own parents.” He paused. “I’ll be sticking around for a while,” he said. “There’s a lot of stuff to get through with my father and that’s going to take time.”

“What about your life in New York?” Emma asked.

“What about your life in Boston?” Neal said by way of reply. “Like I said, we just keep running. And even if we aren’t running, we’re always ready to run. Nowhere is really home.”

“Yeah, but my life was always transient. The only place I ever stayed was Tallahassee!” Emma broke off. She didn’t want to think about Tallahassee at that moment, not when she and Neal were having a decent conversation and behaving like responsible adults.

“We must have missed each other,” Neal muttered.

“Pardon?”

“We must have missed each other in Tallahassee.”

Emma was wrong-footed for a moment, then changed the subject away from Tallahassee because she really didn’t want to think about it.

“I mean, there was nothing tying me down in Boston. Your life was different. You were settled. You had…”

She trailed off before she could say “you had a fiancée”. After their return from Neverland the previous evening, Henry and his rescuers (with the exception of Gold, whom everyone had unanimously decided not to disturb) had exchanged the tales of what had happened during that frantic week, and Tamara’s sacrifice had not been overlooked.

“I had a fiancée I loved and who turned out not to be the person I thought she was,” Neal finished for her. “And now I have so many questions that I’ll never get the answers to, and I’m not going to lie, it hurts.” He shrugged. “Maybe I had decided to settle down. But be that as it may, I was always still ready to run if I had to. Even in New York.”

“Will you go back?” Emma asked. Neal shook his head.

“I don’t know. This feels like a fresh start in a way. A chance to do things better.”
It was a fresh start for both of them in a way. With one thing leading to another leading to another, it was only now that they were truly able to take a step back and begin to deal with it all.

“What about you?” Neal asked. “Are you sticking around?”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, I have roots here now. Not roots that I put down, more roots that were already here that reached up and grabbed me. I have family here. More family than I know what to do with, if I’m honest. It’s kind of overwhelming sometimes. But in the end, I think that was always what we were looking for.”

“Yeah.”

They fell into silence again, a slightly awkward silence, until Neal gave another snort of laughter.

“We don’t really do normal, do we?”

“Nope,” Emma replied. “Normal went out the window the moment I killed a dragon in the library basement. But hey, all we can do is live with it.”

The diner door opened again and they both looked over to see Regina coming in. There was something a little reticent in her manner and if Emma didn’t know better then she’d say that the other woman looked nervous.

“Hey,” she said. “I was hoping to find you both. I called at the loft but they said you’d come here.” She came over to the empty seat on Emma’s other side. “May I?”

“Sure. What can we do for you?”

“It’s about Henry,” Regina began. “What… How are we going to do this?”

“We’re just trying to figure that out ourselves,” Neal replied.

“I know I’ve not been the most… responsible person when it comes to custody,” Regina admitted, “and in the space of about three months he’s gone from having one parent to having three. But all the same, I still want to be his mom. I still am his mom. I’ve just never been very good at sharing.”

“Well, it’s never too late to learn,” Emma said. “I think the best thing would be to let Henry decide what he wants. He’s the one it will affect the most, after all. It’s not like anyone’s going to be going anywhere any time soon. We’ve got time to work out all the kinks and compromises.”

Regina smiled. “Thank you. Weird how it takes a trip to another realm to put things in perspective.”

“I think it was more likely to be losing Henry that put things in perspective, for all of us,” Emma added. “Even though it wasn’t any of our faults, it still makes you feel…”

“Yeah,” Neal and Regina agreed. None of them needed to say it.

“Henry should be along with David and Mary Margaret later,” Emma said. “He’s sleeping in at the moment. Can’t say I blame him after everything. I should probably get to the station, find out what chaos has reigned supreme whilst we’ve been gone. Steve seems like a pretty competent guy though; I might keep him on as deputy.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Won’t your father have something to say about that?”

Emma shrugged. “This is twenty-first century Maine, not the Enchanted Forest. The will of the people means something here. They got organised and chose people to lead them in our absence and
Regina nodded. “Yeah, I think the mayor’s office can wait another day. I’ve got to do something… If I don’t do it now I’ll never do it.”

“What’s that?”

Regina grimaced. “Facing up to some past mistakes. I’ve got a lot of apologising to do. Like I said, it takes a trip to another realm and a stolen shadow to put things in perspective.”

“Well, I guess we can all reconvene for lunch with Henry,” Emma said, sliding off her seat and grabbing her jacket. “Neal?”

Neal shook his head.

“I’ll stay here for a bit,” he said. “I’ve got to work out what to tell Tamara’s mom.”

Emma gave him a sad smile. “Well, if you need anything done in an official capacity – letters, phone calls, whatever, just let us know.”

“Thanks.”

Regina and Emma left the diner and stepped out into the morning sun.

“So the daily grind begins again,” Regina said. “I’ll see you later.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, see you…” Her brow furrowed. “Did you see that?”

“What?”

“Over there.” Emma pointed into the shaded space between two buildings across the street. “I could have sworn it was a shadow. I saw the eyes.”

Regina peered in the direction that Emma was pointing. “I don’t see anything.”

“Maybe Neverland has made me paranoid.”

“Whose could it be, anyway?” Regina asked. “Yours and mine are both attached again.”

“Did Gold’s ever come back?” Emma suggested. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Ok, something definitely just moved there, but it might have been a cat.” Regina didn’t sound all that convinced.

“Yeah, I’m going to check it out. I’ll see you back at the diner.” Still unsure, Emma made her way across the road to investigate, a horrible feeling of dread churning in the pit of her stomach.

**Storybrooke – Present**

The sun was streaming into the bedroom but Rumpelstiltskin felt no desire to get up and start the day. Belle was curled up beside him, her warmth a constant reassurance that she really was there and he really was home and this wasn’t one of Pan’s little Neverland games. Her hand was resting lightly over his heart, and Rumpelstiltskin laced his fingers through hers, looking down fondly at her sleeping face.

“I can feel you watching me,” she mumbled sleepily, and she yawned and stretched out all her limbs
like a cat before finally opening her eyes and gazing up at him. “I could always tell if you were peeping in on me back in the Enchanted Forest. I know when you’re checking up on me.”

Rumpelstiltskin chuckled. “I’m not checking up on you now. Just checking I’m not hallucinating.”

“I assure you, I am extremely real, Rumpel.” Belle shifted around in his embrace until she could lean up and kiss him without craning her neck, and Rumpelstiltskin pulled her in closer.

“Does that feel real enough?” she asked once she finally released him.

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head.

“I’m not sure. I think you might need to do it again just to be on the safe side.”

It was Belle’s turn to laugh, and she batted his shoulder playfully.

“Insatiable,” she scolded.

“Incredible,” Rumpelstiltskin countered. He sighed, twirling one of her curls loosely around his forefinger. “You know, I still can’t quite believe that everything worked out for the best.”

“I can.” Belle propped herself up on one elbow and smiled down at him, a slightly self-satisfied, mischievous little smile. “No-one’s destiny is ever set in stone, Rumpel.”

“But the seer…”

“That’s in the past,” Belle said firmly. “You can’t change the past, but you can change your future. No-one decides your fate but you. There will be no undoing in the near future.” She grinned and leaned in to whisper in his ear: “Unless I’m the one doing the undoing.”

Rumpelstiltskin smiled and twisted to capture her lips once more, but before any undoing in any shape or form could occur, there was a sharp knock on the front door. It was a polite summons, but nonetheless one full of a barely disguised desperation – or perhaps eagerness.

Rumpelstiltskin groaned. “How long have I been back? Less than a day and people are already begging favours. Go away!” he yelled in the direction of the front door. “We’re closed!” He sighed. “It must be bad if they’re making house calls.”

Belle gave him a small amused smile. “I’ll go,” she said. “It’s probably Theresa. I promised her that I’d help her to get Herr Drosselmeyer turned back human once you came back, and now that they’ve brought some pixie dust back from Neverland, you can complete the deal.”

Rumpelstiltskin looked at her through narrowed eyes.

“Do I have to?” he grumbled.

“Rumpel.” Belle’s voice was stern as she slipped out of bed, but Rumpelstiltskin was only half paying attention to the admonishment in her words, the other half that had still not fully woken up was too busy appreciating the outline of Belle’s body beneath her sheer nightdress.

“You never go back on a deal,” she continued, putting on a robe and throwing Rumpelstiltskin’s towards him. He had enough presence of mind to catch it before it landed over his head.

“I have no intention of going back on the deal, I merely don’t see why it needs to be fulfilled right now, when there are other, far more important things to be done.”
Belle rolled her eyes. 

“I hope you realise Rumpel, that should you get this out of the way now, we’ll have the entire rest of the day to ourselves to do all kind of more important things.”

There was a stalemate for a moment, then Rumpelstiltskin capitulated as the urgent knock came again.

“All right,” he sighed. “Let them in. But I’m not performing life-saving magic in my dressing gown, and if it’s not Theresa, we’re going back to bed.”

Belle nodded.

“Fair enough.”

X

It was indeed Theresa; the fairy was practically bouncing up and down in her excitement, and she had not stopped talking from the moment that she had entered the house.

“Where are the others?” Belle asked as she poured out tea. “Astrid and…” She somehow couldn’t bring herself to say Tinker Bell’s name. Thankfully, Theresa seemed to understand her sudden reticence and her happy grin faded into a more wan expression for a moment.

“They’re still at the convent, getting Tink settled in, although I think she might have escaped to go and catch up with Neal. We can be a bit much when we all get together,” she said. There was a pregnant pause, the first real silence since Belle had opened the front door. “We haven’t told her,” Theresa said eventually. “We thought it best to wait a while, and let you come to your own decisions about what you want to do.”

Belle sighed. “I’m not sure. It’s all happened so suddenly.

“Well, who knows?” Theresa’s expression lightened. Maybe this will bring you and your father closer together.”

“Hmm.” Belle’s reply was unsure. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?” Rumpelstiltskin appeared in the doorway, fully dressed and as impeccably turned out as always despite having woken up only ten minutes previously.

“Nothing,” Belle said quickly. She thought that the revelation of her fae heritage could probably wait for another day. Whilst she did not anticipate a truly negative reaction from her love, she didn’t want to rock the proverbial boat just yet.

“Well, that’s all right then,” he said. “Now, if we’re all ready, I suggest we proceed and rescue Herr Drosselmeyer from his unfortunate state so that those of us with plans for the rest of the day can get on with them and those without can do whatever it is that fairies do all day.” He made to move towards the front door and Theresa rose to follow him, but Belle cleared her throat and he stopped in his tracks.

“Erm, Rumpel?” Belle indicated her night attire, and Rumpelstiltskin snapped his fingers, leaving her dressed, made-up and hair styled within a split second.

“Rumpel…”
“You said it yourself. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner…”

“Yes, yes, all right,” Belle cut in hastily. “Just don’t do it again.”

Together the three left the house and made their way towards the pawn shop in the morning sun. Theresa’s excited chatter had died down now, and she kept glancing over at Rumpelstiltskin, remembering the last time they had spoken and the dreadful deal that had been made then. Still, Belle was smiling which looked like a good sign.

“It’s strange,” Belle said presently, linking her arm through Rumpelstiltskin’s as they walked. “It seems like nothing has changed. The town is just the same as it always was despite everything that’s happened.”

“Hmm.” Rumpelstiltskin’s tone wasn’t so sure, and he was glad of the cloud cover that had passed overhead to obscure his missing shadow where it should have been stretched out in front of him beside Belle’s. Luckily neither she nor Theresa appeared to have noticed its absence. Something was still not quite as it should be, or else his shadow would have returned to him. Still that could wait for now; there was no use in worrying Belle yet or engendering tedious explanations to Theresa.

They reached the shop in good time and Rumpelstiltskin waved them all through to the back. Theresa didn’t speak as he took the nutcracker down off the shelf and placed it carefully on the couch, and he turned to her, holding out one hand.

“I trust you have upheld your end of the deal?”

Theresa nodded and took a small pouch of pixie dust out of her cardigan pocket. She almost handed it over but then drew back, her brow furrowed.

“He will be ok, won’t he? You said that you would save his life.”

“And so I will. My word is good. I never break an agreement.”

Theresa still looked unsure.

“He’s been like that for three years, not including the curse,” she said. “Is he going to be all right after that?”

“He’ll be incredibly confused,” Rumpelstiltskin pointed out dryly. “But this stasis will have had no effect on him for better or worse. Call it a sleeping spell, if you will.”

Finally, Theresa seemed satisfied and she handed over the pouch of pixie dust.

Rumpelstiltskin opened it, taking out a pinch and examining it critically before nodding and moving over to the workbench, collecting various ingredients and beginning to mix them in a vial. There was something a little bit haphazard in his manner, although Belle knew from experience that his hand movements were sharp and precise behind the chaotic façade. For a moment she was reminded of the Enchanted Forest and the stolen moments she had spent watching him make magic in his tower when she had been ostensibly cleaning. Theresa perched on the little chair beside the couch, her eyes flickering from Herr Drosselmeyer to Rumpelstiltskin and back again. No-one spoke, afraid to break the silence and Rumpelstiltskin’s concentration.

“Right,” he said eventually. “I’m ready.” He stowed the pixie dust in an inside jacket pocket and Theresa raised an eyebrow.

“Why did you ask for the pixie dust if you didn’t need it for the spell?” she asked.
“All magic has a price,” Rumpelstiltskin said, his voice matter of fact. “The price must be proportionate to the magic. Surely you, as a magic user yourself, understand that. A price will be extracted no matter what,” he continued. “This way, I get to control the price it extracts from me. Your generous offering will be suitable recompense for the magic of saving your friend’s life.” He patted the pocket where the pixie dust sat and Theresa nodded unsurely before turning back to Herr Drosselmeyer as Rumpelstiltskin came over with the potion. He dripped a few droplets onto the tin doll, and for a long time, nothing happened.

“Rumpel,” Belle began.

“Just wait for it,” he replied patiently. Sure enough, a few moments later, swirling smoke began to envelop the nutcracker, and once the mist cleared, a human man was lying in its place. His eyes were closed and his hands were folded neatly over his chest. It didn’t look like he was breathing.

“Herr Drosselmeyer?” Theresa said tentatively, touching his shoulder lightly. “Herr Drosselmeyer?”

At length the man took a deep breath, spluttered, and opened his eyes. He blinked several times, then looked over at Theresa with an expression of pure confusion.

“Herr Drosselmeyer!” Theresa threw her arms around him. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re all right!”

“It’s very good to see you too, Sugar Plum,” the man said. “I say, have you grown or have I shrunk? I had the strangest dream. I was a nutcracker…”

Theresa laughed. “It’s a very long story, Herr Drosselmeyer, but we’ll tell it to you in a minute. I must go and fetch Clara. She’s been waiting for you. Don’t go anywhere! I’ll be back in two minutes.”

“Well I’m not likely to be going anywhere, I haven’t the foggiest idea where I am.”

“I’ll explain soon!” Theresa called as she bounded out of the room.

Rumpelstiltskin raised an eyebrow. It appears we’re going to be hosting a family reunion,” he muttered.

Belle just smiled. “Oh, it’s a good thing, Rumpel,” she said. “Just look at how happy you made Sugar Plum, and think of how happy Clara will be when she gets here.”

“Hmm.” Rumpelstiltskin refused to commit to an answer, and Belle went over to speak to Herr Drosselmeyer and try to ease his confusion a little. Rumpelstiltskin pottered around the shop, only half-listening to their conversation. Presently he heard Belle ask: “Why did you do it?”

“When you love someone,” Herr Drosselmeyer replied, “there is nothing that you will not do, suffer, or sacrifice to make sure that they are safe, to ensure their happiness.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s hands stilled on his potion vials and he glanced down once more at his absent shadow.

He knew that sentiment well.
Regina made her way carefully down into the vault and took a deep breath. She had seen these rows upon rows of boxes so often since she came to Storybrooke, and in her castle before then, and she had become so used to the sight that she almost didn’t register them anymore. Now though, she forced herself to take a good long look at all those innocent little boxes.

How was she going to go about this then? It had been so long and she’d taken so many that she had no idea whose hearts belonged to whom. Most of her guards were in here somewhere – she’d needed a way to keep them nice and docile since most had been loyal to Leopold and would continue that unwavering loyalty towards his daughter. Other than that, she had no idea. Regina glanced down at her shadow and was relieved to find it still there. As difficult and no doubt unpleasant as the experience was going to be, it had to be done. At least Henry would be proud of her. He’d probably offer to help out in some way if he knew what she was doing, but she thought it would not be a good idea for him to be anywhere near this rather sordid part of her world.

Well, no time like the present. She opened the nearest compartment and took out the heart within, holding it in one palm and looking at it critically. One second thoughts, maybe it would be better to do this in a place other than the crypt. Like her office. She put the heart back into its box and picked it up, ready to take it out of the crypt, but as she did so, something caught her eye in the shadows. She turned sharply, but there was nothing there, and she scolded herself for jumping at imaginary shades. All the same… She knew from experience that shadows could do an awful lot of harm, and she was certain that she had not been seeing things earlier when Emma had pointed out something moving in the dark and she too had seen it.

Cautiously she turned again, peering into the dingy blackness for any kind of movement, the slightest thing out of the ordinary. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing on end, and she was certain that she was being watched. She’d felt it so often whilst she was in Neverland, but she knew that it wasn’t just the memory of unease. She was not alone in the vault.

“I know you’re there,” she said to the darkness, and she felt the tongues of flame begin to lick over her fingertips. She raised the fireball to eye level, peering into the darkness. Shadows feared light and fire. There was nothing to see, but Regina still wasn’t convinced, and she knew that simply leaving and shutting this mysterious spectre in down here with all her most dangerous magic wasn’t a good idea. Gathering up the box with the heart in, she turned full circle, holding out her handful of flames to all the darkest nooks and crannies.

It all happened very suddenly after that. Something hit her sharply in the small of her back, sending her flying and landing sprawling on the ground, her fireball immediately going out and the box clattering away from her on the floor. Regina gave a wince in sympathy, hoping that its owner wasn’t pained for this manhandling. Staggering to her feet, she felt a clammy cold hand strike the back of her neck; only semi-solid. She fell again, hitting her head against the shelves of hearts. Through fuzzy vision, she made out a pair of yellow eyes staring at her in the darkness. Then the shadow flew up out of the vault, and before Regina could get a spell off to stop it, the mausoleum had slammed closed again, trapping her underground.

Regina knew that she ought to warn someone, but that was as far as she thought before unconsciousness overwhelmed her.

X

On entering the alley, it quickly became clear that there was nothing there. Not only was there nothing to see, Emma couldn’t feel any kind of presence watching her and putting her on edge like she had done in Neverland. Nevertheless, she had been so certain that she’d seen something down
here. She kept going down the alleyway until she reached the other end, but there were still no signs of the mysterious presence.

Emma was still perturbed. After everything that had happened she was not really one to believe in coincidences or twists of fate like that, and since both she and Regina had seen something, it warranted further investigation. Shadows liked the dark and places they could be easily concealed, so if it wasn’t in the alley it must be hiding elsewhere.

“Where are you?” Emma muttered. “And are you friend or foe?” Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow has taken his dagger away, but she had not seen it return. Who knew what other shadows might be out there, unrelated to Neverland and Pan? Had they simply opened up a whole new can of worms? For a moment she considered going to the pawn shop and asking for the Eternal Light back, but she decide against, figuring that might do more harm than good. She looked around for suitable shadow hiding places and it was then that she saw it, just briefly out of corner of her eye. It was peering around the corner of what had been a packing warehouse but had never officially been in use whilst she’d been in Storybrooke and as she turned in its direction it vanished again.

Emma gave a hurry of frustration.

“Look, I know you’re there,” she said plainly, moving towards the corner of the building. Her hand went to her hip for her gun before she realised that it probably wouldn’t be all that effective against a shadow and she put it away again.

To her surprise, the shadow peeped out again, directly into her line of vision, and Emma had to take a step back at its sudden appearance.

“Ok then,” she said, caught off guard. “How are we going to do this?”

The shadow came out from behind the building fully and Emma could make out Rumpelstiltskin’s outline against the dull sky.

“Well, at least I think you’re friendly,” Emma muttered, taking a couple of steps forward. “But shouldn’t you be attached to your owner again? What’s going on?”

The shadow didn’t respond – she hadn’t exactly been expecting it to – and simply shot off away from her, towards the forest that surrounded the town. Emma shook her head in despair.

“Someone needs to tell these shadows to move at the speed of their human counterparts,” she muttered. “This is just ridiculous.”

The shadow paused and looked back over its shoulder at her. It obviously wanted her to follow it, and Emma decided that if she was going to get to the bottom of this, it was going to be best to comply. She took off a run, racing to catch up and keep up.

“If you’d asked me six months ago what I’d be doing today, ‘chasing a shadow’ would not have been my answer,” she grumbled as she ducked into the forest. “Where are we going?” she yelled to Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow. “I thought you were supposed to fly to your soul’s desire! I don’t know what kind of a mission Gold put you on, but…”

She tailed off as the shadow stopped suddenly, hovering in mid-air, and Emma almost tripped over her feet to stop herself running into it.

“Are we here?” she asked. The shadow nodded once, and Emma looked around, panting heavily to get her breath back from her unexpected exertion. “I don’t see anything.”
The shadow didn’t move, and Emma bent over, still breathing heavily.

She saw it then, right at her feet. It was the Eternal Light, or at least it had been. It was broken now, beyond repair.

“What the hell?” She picked up the burned out candle end and made to dust it off, but it was clean. There was no trace of Pan’s ashes anywhere, and the weather was mild enough that the wind could not have scattered his remains. The answer was obvious, and yet Emma really didn’t want to think of the possibility of it. Pan had escaped. Somehow, somewhere… He was loose in Storybrooke, and Emma knew that did not bode well. She needed to warn someone or call for backup, or do something, but the shadow was indicating for her to follow it again, and she thought she ought to see if the day was about to get any worse before she reported anything back.

As the shadow guided her to the well, she was glad that she’d waited. Steam was rising from it, greenish-purple, obviously magical steam.

“Well, Pan’s certainly been busy since his resurrection,” she said. “I said something would go wrong. I should have just kept my mouth shut.”

Whatever this magic was, it was well beyond Emma’s remit; she needed Gold or Regina for this, and she pulled out her phone, dialling Regina as her first choice.

“Come on, Regina, pick up, pick up.” The phone rang and Emma was on the verge of giving Regina answered.

“Emma?”

“Regina, Pan’s back, he’s escaped, don’t ask me how, but he’s done some kind of magic at the well, and I really don’t like the look of it and…”

“Emma…”

Regina’s voice was weak and a little slurred and Emma was alarmed.

“Regina, are you ok?”

“Hit my head… There was a shadow… Attacked me… Fell over…”

The line was bad and Regina’s voice was fuzzy, but Emma could piece together what had happened. Pan and his shadow were working in league again.

“Where are you?” she asked Regina.

“Vault.”

“Hold on, I’m coming.”

Emma took off away from the well, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Rumpelstiltskin’s shadow shoot away in the opposite direction. The day just kept going from bad to worse.

**Storybrooke – Present**
Regina squinted against the light as the mausoleum opened and Emma and David’s faces swam into view.

“Regina! Are you ok?” Emma raced down the steps to help her into a sitting position and she grimaced on seeing the dark blood matting in Regina’s hair and trickling down her face.

“Yeah, I’ll be ok… I think.”

“Come on, we need to get you to the hospital,” David said from the top of the steps where he had remained in case the shadow struck again. Regina nodded her acquiescence, wincing as she put a hand up to her head and felt the extent of the damage.

“Why would it even be down here in the first place?” Emma asked, taking a look around the dingy crypt and giving an involuntary shiver as she took Regina’s arm around her shoulders.

“Is everything ok?” Snow rushed onto the scene. “I left Henry at the diner with Neal. What’s happening?”

“Well, it looks like we’re not quite out of the woods yet,” David said dryly. “It appears that Pan has escaped confinement and is wreaking havoc again.”

“Oh no,” Snow said, her face pale. “What could he want down here?” she asked.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Emma muttered.

Regina looked around the vault, at all the various artefacts placed there for safekeeping, all her most potent magic.

“I know what he wanted,” she said quietly, and she indicated an empty space on one of the shelves. “The shadow took the Dark Curse.”

“The one that brought us all here?” David looked puzzled. “Why would it do that?”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t know, but whatever he wants it for, it’s already working its murky magic up at the well.”

“Can you stop it?” Snow asked Regina as she and Emma came up out of the vault.

“No,” Regina said sadly. “This won’t be the same curse. The point of the Dark Curse was to bring us here, and we are already here. It won’t work in the same way, not when Pan is probably using pixie dust to alter it. There’s no telling what it might do or where it might take us.”

“There’s got to be something we can do!” Snow exclaimed. “Where would Pan want to take us all anyway?”

They came out of the crypt into the daylight and hurried with Regina towards the yellow bug.

“Where do you think?” Regina replied. “Neverland, of course.”

“But there is no Neverland anymore,” David pointed out.

“Exactly,” Regina snapped back. “That’s why he needs the curse. To create a new Neverland. Do you think Storybrooke was here just waiting for us all to land in when we came over? The curse created it out of nothing for me. That’s what Pan will do for Neverland with the Dark Curse, just create it over from scratch.”
“Didn’t you need to sacrifice a heart to get us here?” Snow said.

Regina nodded, letting Emma fold her into the passenger seat of the car and batting Snow’s hands away when she tried to fuss over her injury.

“There’s a first aid kit in the glove box,” Emma said, getting into the driver’s seat. Regina rummaged around for it and found a dressing pad to hopefully do some good for her cut.

“Yes,” she said at length. “I needed to sacrifice the thing I loved most, but like I said, that was to get us here, and we’re already here! I don’t know what kind of ingredients he needs to take us away from a Land Without Magic! I had always intended this to be a one-way trip!”

“Gold would know, he created the curse in the first place,” Snow observed.

“We’ll find him, you get to the hospital, and then we’ll think up a way to stop this thing,” David said.

“Good idea.”

Regina closed the passenger door and Emma started the engine, speeding the little bug away from the cemetery in the direction of the hospital.

“Watch it!” Regina warned as they hurtled around a corner.

“I can arrest myself for dangerous driving later,” Emma said. “Right now I’m more concerned with the fact we’re all about to be transported to who knows where by a three-hundred year old teenager who’s supposed to be dead and who happens to be my son’s great-grandfather. I knew that the peace and quiet was too good to last.”

Regina didn’t respond and Emma glanced over at her, worried that she might have lost consciousness again.

“Regina? You doing ok there?”

Regina nodded and Emma focussed on the road again.

“I just hope Gold’s got a miracle fix at not too extortionate a price,” Emma muttered. “I’m beginning to think he’s got an emergency box of magical doo-dads for every time we run in there needing help. It’s happening alarmingly regularly.”

“Hmm.” Regina sounded unconvinced and Emma glanced sideways at her again. The other woman was staring out of the window, avoiding Emma’s eyes, and cold realisation raced through Emma’s veins in an icy flood.

“You don’t think there’s a way to stop it, do you?”

Regina shook her head.

“If there was a way to stop the original curse, don’t you think that your parents would have done everything in their power to do so?” She turned, finally meeting Emma’s eyes, and her expression was just sad. Emma nodded, she hadn’t thought of it that way. “This curse will have a different effect, but it still uses the Dark Curse as a base. Curses… You can’t generally stop them in their tracks. You can break them. All curses can be broken.”

“True Love’s Kiss breaks any curse.”

“Yes, but we have no idea what will happen to us, if we’ll remember, anything. We can’t rely on
that. And the only other option, well, a curse can be undone if its caster wishes. I’m beginning to think that might be our only option here.”

“I doubt Pan will want to undo his own curse,”

“I don’t mean Pan’s. I mean mine.”

Emma looked at her again. “Reverse the curse and take everyone back to the Enchanted Forest?”

Regina nodded.

“It would negate Pan’s curse,” she said. “We’d all go back. It wouldn’t exactly be as if it never happened because time has passed there. But we would all be back. Except…”

“Except?” Emma prompted.

“Except Henry. He’s never been to the Enchanted Forest. He was only conceived after the curse was already in place. It hasn’t affected him. He wouldn’t come back over with us.”

“Oh.” Emma had no idea how to reply to that, but in that moment, it paled into insignificance next to a terrifying thought that had just occurred to her.

“Henry!” she exclaimed. “Pan might not need a heart to make the curse happen, but he’ll want Henry’s to make it stick, just like he did in Neverland!”

Regina returned Emma’s look of wide-eyed fear, and Emma swung the car around, heading away from the hospital and towards Granny’s.

Storybrooke – Past

Regina was restless, drumming her fingers along the edge of her desk and glancing over at her silent phone every few seconds. To one side of her chair there was a neatly filled-out stack of paperwork that had been faxed over to the adoption agency in Boston; every possible legal document that she could think of and some that she couldn’t, more signatures and declarations than she could count. On the desk in front of her, constantly agitated by her ever-moving fingers, was a polaroid snap of a baby boy wrapped up in several blue blankets. Soon he would be here. Soon he would be hers.

Presently the phone burst into life and she grabbed it, answering before the first ring had died.

“Yes?” she said warily, now unaccountably nervous that something had gone wrong somewhere along the line.

“I’ve got him,” Gold’s smooth tones said through the phone. “Would you like to come and be introduced?”

Regina needed no further encouragements and hung up without saying goodbye, grabbing her car keys and the polaroid off the desk and rushing out of her office to make the few blocks’ drive to Gold’s shop. His Cadillac was parked outside in its usual spot, and there were no signs of any other cars around. She didn’t waste time wondering the hows and wherefores of her son coming to Storybrooke. People came to the town by necessity to deliver goods, but they never stayed longer than absolutely necessary, the curse pushing them out again and leaving them with only a hazy
memory of having been there. The agency had obviously dropped the boy off with Gold and left in a 
hurry.

She raced into the shop, sending the doorbell into a veritable conniption fit as she did so. The 
pawnbroker was nowhere to be seen and for a brief moment she thought that perhaps his former 
personality had asserted itself and he had made off with the child.

“Gold?” she called through to the back room. “Gold, where is he?”

“Sh.” Gold’s voice came from behind the curtain and a minute later the man himself appeared, 
cradling a bundle of blue blankets against his shoulder. “I’ve only just got him back to sleep.”

Regina’s empty heart soared into joyous life again as she beheld her child, her son, dozing happily in 
Gold’s arms with a chubby fistful of his pocket square. He looked so peaceful, so innocent, and such 
a contrast to the two adults in whose presence he was sleeping blissfully unaware. She felt jealous of 
Gold and the fact that the boy was so at ease with him.

“Well?” Gold began. “Are you going to take him or not? I’m sure I can find another willing mother 
in the town if you’ve changed your mind.”

“Of course I haven’t changed my mind,” Regina snapped.

“Well, hurry up, dearie,” Gold said snidely. “I’d rather not have to have vomit cleaned out of this 
suit; it’s Armani.”

Carefully, fearing every moment that she was going to drop him, Regina took the baby from Gold 
and tucked him in close against her chest, looking down at his peaceful face.

“He’s mine,” she breathed.

“Indeed,” Gold observed. He sounded a little bored. Regina wondered if he had dealt with so many 
infants in his previous life that they all seemed the same to him now. She turned back to her son.

“I’ll keep you safe, little one,” she crooned as he began to stir and whimper in her arms. “Nothing’s 
going to come between us, I promise.” She would keep him at all costs, she knew that much. He was 
 hers, the missing piece she needed to fill the hole in her heart, and she looked up at Gold, who was 
still watching her shrewdly. “Do we know anything about the mother?” she asked. The last thing she 
wanted was someone coming to town years down the line in search of reconciliation.

Gold shrugged. “I thought that was the entire point?” he said mildly. “It’s a closed adoption. The 
records are sealed. Besides, aren’t you his mother now? Have you decided on a name?”

Regina narrowed her eyes. She really did not trust the man as far as she could throw him.

“How apt,” Gold said. “I can do some digging if you want, see if I can find anything on his 
parentage for you.”

Regina nodded. “Do it.”

“Ah now, what’s the magic word, Madam Mayor?” Gold asked lightly. “It wouldn’t do to be 
teaching bad manners to your son at such an early age now, would it?”

Regina just glowered at him. “Please.”
Gold smiled, the seemingly benign smile that always unnerved her a little.

“Very well. I expect that you’ll be wanting to give Henry the guided tour of the town, and I’ve got some research to do.” He moved around the counter to open the door for her. “There’s just one thing more, my dear.”

Regina raised an eyebrow at him.

“I asked you before if you knew what you were getting yourself into,” Gold continued. “Parenthood changes people, you know. Once you have a family, you have to put them first, no matter what obstacles might stand in your way. Your child’s life has to come before your own, and people will do all kinds of things when their children are threatened. So just ask yourself, Madam Mayor. All your grand plans, all your schemes for this town… They’re all at risk now. What will you do if everything starts coming undone around you? Because you’ve got another person’s happiness to think of now.” He glanced down at Henry.

Regina set her mouth in a thin line.

“Nothing is going to come undone,” she snapped, and she turned on her heel, leaving the shop without another word.

Once Henry was safely strapped in his new car seat, Regina looked at him in the rear view mirror.

“Nothing is going to go wrong,” she assured him. “I promise that we’ll be happy, just you and me.”

X

Gold frowned at the papers in his hands as he read over the responses to his queries regarding Henry’s parentage. Most had not come up with anything, but there was one that seemed to have borne fruit.

Emma Swan. Emma.

As he read the name, Gold had a sudden flash of memory: a darkened cell deep underground and Mary Margaret Blanchard heavily pregnant. A vast castle, tumbling brunette curls and beautiful blue eyes.

He blinked and the vision was gone, leaving just emptiness and confusion in its wake, and Gold shook himself crossly, refusing to allow himself to get carried away on fancies. All the same…

He lit a match and held the flame to that particular paper, watching it turn to ash before his eyes. His gut instinct told him that sharing this information with the mayor would not be a good idea. After all, he had said he would do some research for her. He had never said that he would let her see it.

Storybrooke – Present

No-one really reacted when the diner door opened and an unaccompanied teenager in rather outlandish garb walked in. Everyone knew that the Lost Boys had been brought back from Neverland and they assumed he was one of their number, checking out what the town had to offer. The only people who were at all perturbed by the boy’s appearance were Neal and Tinker Bell, and to those patrons who were not aware of what had gone on in Neverland, their reaction might have
seemed somewhat extreme. Neal immediately jumped off his stool at the counter and Tinker Bell followed suit, both of them instinctively moving to hide Henry.

“Oh hell no!” Neal exclaimed. “This can’t be happening!”

“Looks like it is,” Tinker Bell muttered. “I knew it was too good to be true.”

“What the hell do you want, Pan?” Neal snarled. “Why are you here?”

“I want the same thing that I’ve always wanted,” Pan said benignly. “And this time, I’m going to make it stick.”

“Yeah, just you try that.”

Neal glanced across at Granny behind the bar, who had produced her crossbow from wherever it was normally hidden, and was aiming it at the youth in the doorway, much to the consternation of the customers who had no idea what was going on.

“Granny, I really don’t think…” Tinker Bell began, but it was too late, and Granny fired.

Pan raised an eyebrow as he caught the bolt easily an inch from his chest.

“Really?” he said, his tone bored. “Is that the best you can do?” He turned the bolt over in his fingers and then suddenly threw it back towards the counter like a dart; it sailed through the air and lodged in the wall where Granny’s head would have been had she not ducked. The older woman’s eyes narrowed.

“Right, that does it,” she muttered.

Meanwhile, Tinker Bell had turned to Henry, encouraging him to slip down and leave the diner unnoticed out of the back door, when he was stopped in his tracks by the appearance of Pan blocking his escape route. The teenager shook his head and tutted.

“You’re not going to get away that easily.”

Henry backed up towards Neal, who grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back protectively. Pan just sighed.

“For a land supposedly without magic, I’m not feeling any ill effects,” he said conversationally. “It’s very simple, Henry. Come with me and I’ll let all your friends and extremely extended family live in my wonderful new world.” He looked around the diner. “You can all consider this your warning,” he said. “There’s a new land coming, or rather, you’re all coming to a new land with me. My land. With my rules.”

“Oh no you don’t, grandpa,” Neal spat, pulling Henry behind him and sending him to Tinker Bell before charging at Pan. He knew it would be futile, but he couldn’t just stand by and do nothing whilst Pan sacrificed his son and destroyed the lives of everyone in the town.

Pan just snapped his fingers, and everyone in the room dropped apart from Henry, who looked around fearfully.

“Oh, don’t worry. They’re just asleep,” Pan said. “They’ll wake up. Eventually. But by that time, it’ll be too late.”

Henry turned on his heel and ran towards the diner entrance, but another snap of Pan’s fingers had
him frozen in place.

“Oh Henry.” Pan sighed. “When are you going to learn that running never actually gets you anywhere?”

He grabbed Henry and opened the diner door with a sweep of his hand before flying out through it, off in the direction of the well.

X

“Henry!”

The diner was just beginning to come around as Emma and Regina rushed inside, and Emma knew with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that they were too late; Pan had already been and gone. She raced over to Neal as he was picking himself up off the floor.

“What happened?” she asked frantically.

“Pan got him, Em, I’m so sorry, I don’t know where they went.”

“I do.” Emma pulled Neal towards Regina and the door. “We need to get to the well. We don’t have much time. Pan’s planning to create a new Neverland!”

They piled back into the yellow bug and sped off; in the rear view mirror Emma could see David and Snow just pulling up outside the pawn shop and getting out of the truck, and she caught their confused expressions as the bug raced past them, still nowhere near the hospital and now with Neal in the back. She glanced across at Regina but the other woman was already on her phone.

“David, he’s got Henry.”

That was all that she said; it was all that she needed to say. Emma didn’t catch David’s response, but she could see them speaking to Belle at the pawn shop door. Then she focussed her attention on the road again, putting her foot down.

“We should have time,” Regina said. “Henry’s heart is useless until the curse has fully taken hold. There’s still time.” She didn’t sound convinced, and Emma wasn’t either. Just because he couldn’t use the heart yet didn’t mean that he wouldn’t have taken it.

“I hope you’re right,” Neal murmured from the back.

X

Drosselmeyer was tentatively sipping a cup of tea with Belle and Rumpelstiltskin in the back room of the shop when they heard the truck pull up outside with haste. Rumpelstiltskin raised an eyebrow at Belle over the top of his teacup.

“I told you,” he said. “Less than a day.”

Belle peered through the blinds. “I don’t know, this looks serious. I’m going to see what they want.” She smiled at Rumpelstiltskin. “I’ll try to head them off at the pass for you.”

She got up and went through to the shop, opening the door and leaning out, and Rumpelstiltskin followed, keeping just out of sight but wanting to know first-hand what was going on.

“Pan’s got Henry!” David exclaimed. “And there’s a curse taking us to who knows where but Pan’s got Henry!”
Belle’s face went pale. “Rumpel…” she called, and she startled slightly when he stepped out from behind her.

“Not for long he hasn’t,” Rumpelstiltskin growled, and he vanished from the shop in a swirl of inky purple magic.

“Belle?” Theresa was rushing down the road with a young girl and her parents in tow. “Is everything ok?”

“Something’s come up,” Belle said, her voice fearful. “Take care of Herr Drosselmeyer!”

With that parting comment, she dived into the truck with David and Snow and they sped away towards the forest.

X

When Henry came to from his enforced stasis the first thing he saw was the well and the bubbling, swirling, purplish green magic there, the tendrils of smoke just beginning to creep down the sides of the little stone structure and move off almost unnoticed over the ground. The sudden return of movement and momentum made him topple over onto his hands and knees, but before he could collect himself, a deceptively strong pair of hands on his shoulders pulled him back to his feet.

“You can’t do this!” Henry exclaimed. “You can’t just create a new Neverland!”

Pan gave him a withering look.

“Well, since you and your rag-tag family managed to destroy the old one, I’m left with very little choice. I really don’t see why you’re so opposed to the idea. This one will be even better with the addition of your belief and stability.”

Henry shook his head. “What if I don’t believe anymore? What if I think that none of this is real and it’s all just a dream?” He was panicking, he could hear it in his own voice, but he had to try something, anything, to stall Pan and let help come, because he knew that help would come.

Pan gave a nasty smile.

“I don’t think that’s going to work. You might tell yourself that you don’t believe and that this is all a nightmare, but you know as well as I do that this is very real. Here.” He pressed his hand over Henry’s chest, above his heart, and Henry could feel his pulse racing. “That’s fear,” Pan continued. “That’s belief. Oh, this is happening all right.”

“They’ll stop you!” Henry yelled as Pan moved away towards the well, still bubbling away like a cauldron. “Mom, Dad, Mom, everyone. They did it before.”

Pan looked down at himself and raised an eyebrow.

“They didn’t exactly do it very well,” he remarked. “Which casts some doubt over their abilities a second time. Besides, it can’t be stopped now. It’s already begun. Nothing can stop the darkness now. It just needs one finishing touch.” Pan pulled a small vial of pixie dust from a string around his neck, and unstoppered it before pouring the contents into the well. The change was immediate, like a pot going from a simmer to a rolling boil, and the swirling steam-like mist began to flow away from them, down through the trees and creeping towards the town.

It occurred to Henry that Pan still hadn’t taken his heart despite ample opportunity, and therefore he must be saving it for some reason. If he could just get away, perhaps there was still a chance. He just
needed to wait for Pan’s attention to be distracted for a moment and then he could make a run for it. He probably wouldn’t get very far, but he had to try. Pan looked down into the depths of the well, and Henry sprang away. He had gone all of two steps before he found himself rooted to the spot, and he glanced over at Pan, who was holding out a hand but showed no signs of having looked up.

“I thought I told you before, that running really wasn’t going to get you anywhere.” He finally tore his attention away from the well and strolled casually over to the boy, struggling against the invisible bonds that held him in place.

“You know,” Pan continued, “I was going to wait to take your heart. I thought it would be best to take it as fresh as possible. But if you’re going to persist in being difficult then I’ll just have to stop you being a nuisance now.”

He reached out towards Henry’s chest, and Henry closed his eyes in anticipation of the pain of having his heart ripped from his body, but before Pan could make contact, a fireball shot past them, missing Pan’s head by a few inches, and a furious roar rang out through the woods.

“GET AWAY FROM MY SON!”

X

Emma wasn’t even sure what she was casting as she ran through the trees from where they had abandoned the bug, her anger and fear for Henry overruling every other notion in her mind. Behind her she could hear Regina and Neal yelling at her to slow down in case she hit Henry by accident in her frantic ire. As she neared the well, she held back. The curse was in full flow now and there would be no way to stop it, she knew that. And there they were, Pan and Henry, and as soon as she had attracted his attention with her haphazard fireball, Pan had grabbed Henry, pulling him in close against his chest and using him as a human shield. A second later, Henry felt a short, sharp blade pressing against his throat.

“I can still get his heart out in tact before he bleeds to death,” Pan warned. “I’ve no use for the rest of him.”

Emma stopped in her tracks.

“Very good,” Pan said. “You can just stay right there.”

He waved one hand lazily and Emma felt her legs root, heavy and paralysed. The rustling of Neal and Regina behind her also stopped.

“Henry!” she called; at least her voice hadn’t been frozen with her legs.

“I’m ok,” Henry said, his voice small and wavering in his fear.

“You may as well face it, you can’t stop me,” Pan said. “I never fail. Even killing me didn’t stop me.”

“No. It didn’t. But I can.”

The voice was low and incredibly dangerous, and as Pan turned in disbelief, Emma saw Gold standing there. Even more than he had in his outlandish leather and sparkling skin in Neverland, now he looked like the fearsome dark magician that so many had feared and avoided in the Enchanted Forest.

“You, Rumpel?” Pan scoffed. “You really think you can stop me? You couldn’t before. In fact, take
away your power and your magic, and you’re pretty pathetic, aren’t you? A pathetic coward, just like you always were, ever since you were a child.”

“I’m the coward, and yet you’re the one cowering behind your great-grandson,” Gold observed calmly.

Pan let go of Henry and pushed him away; he stumbled forward into Emma’s arms and she held him close. Pan didn’t seem to notice that his quarry had escaped, instead walking towards Gold with open arms.

“Go on then,” he goaded. “Take your best shot. I’m right here. You can’t miss me.”

But Gold didn’t move. Regina took advantage of his turned back to launch a spell of her own, but it didn’t connect, merely ricocheting off some kind of invisible shield. Pan glanced over his shoulder.

“You weren’t invited to take part,” he said critically. “There are rules to be observed, you know.” He turned back to Gold and gave a high, cold laugh. “You can’t even hit me now! Are you really so unsure of yourself that you won’t even risk it?”

Gold shook his head.

“You know as well as I do that I don’t need magic to destroy you,” he said.

“Magic can’t destroy me!” Pan exclaimed, gesturing to the ground and his absent shadow. “That was taken care of that a long time ago. When I said I wanted to remain young forever, I meant it.”

Gold nodded. “True. No-one can be fully destroyed as long as their shadow still walks. And a shadow cannot be destroyed unless it is attached.”

Pan smirked. “Precisely.”

He turned away from Gold and made his way leisurely across the clearing, back towards Henry and Emma.

“You’re not the only one with no shadow, Papa,” Gold said, his voice almost matter of fact. “And unlike you, I removed my own.”

It was at those words that Pan stopped dead, and for the first time, Emma saw genuine fear spread across his face.

“You wouldn’t,” he breathed. “You couldn’t. You don’t have the guts.”

“When it comes to protecting my family, I have more guts than you know.” Gold’s words were steely now, determined. “But then again, that’s not something I would expect you to understand.”

“Papa, no!” Neal yelled. Emma had no idea what was going to happen next, but she could tell that it wasn’t going to be pretty, and she kept Henry’s face turned away.

Gold shook his head. “I’m sorry, Bae. I love you, son, so much, but this is the only way.”

“Please!” Neal pleaded.

Gold put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, and a second later, a writhing dark shape swooped out of the sky above them. It was two shapes, actually: two shadows battling for dominance, Pan’s shadow biting and clawing at Rumpelstiltskin’s where it held him tightly around the waist. Gold held up one hand and his shadow wrestled one hand free, tossing something down towards the ground. It
glinted in the air as it fell, and Emma recognised it for what it was. Horrible realisation dawned and she felt the blood run from her face.

Gold caught his dagger as it dropped out of the sky into his waiting hand, and he gestured down towards his feet with it. Above them, his shadow nodded its understanding, diving down out of the sky and reattaching itself to Gold’s feet, Pan’s shadow remaining trapped in its embrace.

“There’s nothing to say it has to be attached to its own body,” he said calmly.

There was a split second when Emma thought that he might not go through with it and that it was all some big setup and there was another, less drastic way to defeat Pan.

But then Gold grabbed the flailing shadow’s semi-corporeal shoulder, pulled the form back against him and plunged the jagged blade through the dark shape into his own chest.

“Goodbye, Papa,” he whispered, as the shadow began to melt away under his fingers.

Suddenly, everything seemed very far away to Emma, as if she was listening to things through a tube. She was aware of Pan’s high, pained screaming as his body aged in front of her, finally ripped apart into the same melting darkness as his shadow. She was aware of Regina’s gasp of shock behind her, of Neal’s yelling ‘no!’ beside her, but none of it seemed real; it was almost as if she was watching it all on a TV screen.

It was Belle’s voice that brought her back to reality with a heart-wrenching, sobbing scream.

“Rumpel!”

She raced past Emma, Regina and Neal, and Emma turned to see David and Snow running after her. Belle skidded to a stop beside Gold as he crumpled to the ground; he toppled into her arms and brought her down with him in a tangle of limbs until Belle managed to get his head resting in her lap.

“No,” she was sobbing. “No, no, no, it can’t end like this!”

“I’m sorry, Belle,” Gold rasped. There was blood in his mouth and he coughed wetly; Belle wiped his lips with the corner of her cardigan.

“Please,” she whispered, choked. “Please, you can’t go. I love you.”

“I love you too. You… You’ve given me the strength… Belle…”

Belle shook her head. “Please…”

Neal came over and knelt by his father’s other side, taking his hand. He felt a brief squeeze, but then there was nothing. Gold closed his eyes, and a bright light began to emerge from where the dagger was lodged in his chest, rippling over him until it consumed his body entirely. When he light faded he was gone, leaving no trace that he had ever been there.

Belle collapsed, her hands over her face as silent sobs wracked her tiny frame, and Neal reached over, wrapping his arms around her and burying his own tears in her shoulder.

Emma finally released her hold on Henry, who looked up at her with wide, scared eyes.

“Is it over?” he asked. Emma nodded.

“Yes,” she said, unable to keep the quaver out of her voice. “Yes, Pan’s gone.”
Regina came over to them, touching Henry’s shoulder lightly, and she nodded over at Neal and Belle’s huddle on the ground. Emma knew that there was no love lost between Regina and Gold, but even she looked upset and shocked by what she had just witnessed. On shaking feet, Emma made her way over to the grieving pair, reaching out a tentative hand to squeeze Neal’s arm, offering what comfort she could. Snow had also come over to offer her solace, and out of the corner of her eye, Emma watched the well, still bubbling away.

Pan may have been defeated, but the curse he had begun could not be stopped.

**Storybrooke – Present**

“Are you sure that this is the only way?”

It was a somewhat strange crowd gathered by the town line, as far away from Pan’s oncoming curse as possible. Snow and David were flanking Emma, both looking concerned and fearful of the pending upheaval. Neal had an arm around Belle, both still in shock from their terrible loss, and Henry was in the middle of it all with Regina. Granny, Leroy and Tinker Bell made up the number, having surmised what was happening at the diner and come to offer their assistance.

Regina nodded.

“There’s no time to try anything else,” she said. “Even if there was…” She trailed off and her eyes flickered in Belle and Neal’s direction. Emma knew what she meant. Even if they had time, they would still need Gold’s expertise.

“We can’t leave Henry alone,” Snow said plainly. “Is there any way of bringing him with us?”

Regina shook her head. “No. Not this time. But he’s not going to be alone.” She held out a hand and in a swirl of purple magic, a tiny glass vial appeared, half-full of a misty blue potion. She held it out to Emma, who took it warily.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It’s a potion I took to shield me from the effects of the Dark Curse,” Regina explained. “So that I could keep my memories intact and keep what little magic I could. There’s enough left for one more dose. You should take it; you’ll be immune to the curse then.” There was a pregnant pause. “It has to be you,” she said eventually. “You’re the saviour. You need to save Henry now. If we ever need you again, if you ever need us again, you’ll find us.”

Emma shook her head. “What’s the likelihood of that? I can’t do this, Regina, I love Henry and I want to be his mom but I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“It’ll be all right. You’ll know. It’ll be a better life. Better memories.”

“You don’t think you’re coming back,” Emma said.

“It’s a risk we’ve got to take. A likely one.” Regina sighed. “The Dark Curse was cast for several reasons, not all of them my own, but none of those matter anymore now. Everything will be undone.” Regina glanced over her shoulder back towards the town. “There isn’t much time.”

Tinker Bell came over to them, handing over a tiny pouch of pixie dust to Regina.
“It’s all I had on me, but it should be enough. Use it wisely.”

Regina nodded and turned back to Emma. “This is it,” she said.

Emma looked at the potion and took a deep breath before downing the vial. She grimaced at the taste.

“Thank you,” she said eventually. “For giving me this chance.”

“Just make the most of it,” Regina said. “Take care of Henry.”

Henry came over to Regina and she threw her arms around him, unable to rein in her emotions any longer.

“I’ll miss you, Mom,” he said.

Regina gave a weak laugh. “You won’t even remember me.”

“That’s not the point.”

Emma felt a hand on her shoulder and she turned, finding herself enveloped in a three way hug with David and Snow. She was still getting used to this amount of love and affection being shown to her but in that moment, she didn’t want to forget it. Sure, she would always have had Henry in this new life, but this would be missing from the new memories.

“We love you,” Snow whispered, her voice quivering with unshed tears. “We always have and always will.”

David kissed the top of Emma’s head. “We’re so proud of you and who you’ve become.”

Emma shook her head. “I won’t remember.”

“We’ll remember for all of us,” Snow said. “And you’ll know, deep down. Even when we were under the curse, there were things that we just knew.”

Emma didn’t want to let go, but she had to. There were other words to be said to other people. Regina had reluctantly let go of Henry and he had gone over to Neal and Belle, and Emma hung back to let them say goodbye. Granny came over and patted her arm.

“I put my pancake recipe in your glovebox,” she said with a wink, indicating the yellow car parked up nearby, and Emma had to give a snort of laughter at that. She turned her attention back to Henry.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get much chance to be a dad,” Neal was saying. “But I’m so glad I met you, kid.”

Henry nodded. “Me too. I’m sorry about Grandpa.”

“Me too.” Neal hugged Henry tightly. “Be good for Emma.”

Emma laughed. “No chance.”

“I’m always good!” Henry protested. Emma didn’t contradict him with the many scrapes he’d got into since she’d met him, and looked up at Neal.

“I’m so sorry about the way things went,” he said.

“So am I,” Emma replied. “But fate brought us together again and whatever we had, or have, or
whatever… It brought us Henry.”

“Yes. It did. I can’t ever regret that.”

Emma paused. “And now fate’s splitting us up again. And you and Henry…”

“I know he’s in good hands,” Neal said, saving her from trying to find a suitable way of expressing her sadness that Neal’s chance to be a father had been taken away from him by forces beyond his control. “I’ll miss you, Emma.”

She just nodded; she couldn’t reply. Within a few moments her memories of him would just be the sad and bitter ones that she’d held for so long and that she had only recently begun to let go of.

“Take care of each other,” she said to Neal and Belle.

“This isn’t the end,” Neal said. “I’m sure of it. We’ll meet again. All of us.”

There was a moment of silence in which Emma hoped against hope that Neal’s words would ring true, then Regina’s voice broke the quiet.

“It’s time.”

The curse was almost there, and Regina was manipulating a glowing cloud of pixie dust and magic in front of her. She waved her hands and it swirled around Emma and Henry.

“It will take hold as soon as you cross the town line,” she said. “Storybrooke will vanish from your memory as it vanishes from this world, and you’ll just… go home. Everything will be as it should be.”

Emma looked over at Henry. “I guess it’s time for us to go then.”

Henry nodded and they got into the bug. He twisted around in his seat to wave a final melancholy goodbye to his family, and Emma glanced in the rear view mirror. She saw Regina turn and face the oncoming magic, raising her hands and pushing it back.

Then there was a glare of sunlight which made her avert her eyes. When she looked back, all she could see was woodland, and she wondered why she had been looking behind her in the first place.

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**Enchanted Forest – One Year Later**

Grumpy was the first to see it; the dwarfs had been maintaining a watch around the clock just as they had done all those years before. It was unnoticeable at first, creeping along the horizon, but as it came closer it was clear that this was not an ordinary mist drifting down from the mountains.

Dark in colour, a murky green that couldn’t quite decide if it wanted to be purple, and rolling along, consuming everything in its path like the first curse had done. It was coming and there was nothing to be done to stop it. The heavy barricades around the castle that had been placed in readiness, turning the peaceful palace into a veritable citadel, would be useless against the oncoming magic and everyone knew it.
Grumpy kicked Sleepy awake and rushed over to the bell, ringing it as hard as he could.

“It’s coming!” he yelled, but already he could hear the sound of running footsteps as the occupants of the castle began to prepare. One set of heavy footfalls came ever closer up the tower steps and Charming burst out onto the parapet. Grumpy handed him the telescope without a word.

“This isn’t a false alarm, Your Majesty,” he said, but Charming wasn’t looking at the cloud of dark magic coming towards them. On the forest path far below, a hooded figure was riding along just ahead of the cloud, only just managing to outpace it.

“Open the gates!” Charming yelled.

“Are you crazy?” Grumpy exclaimed, but Charming had already thrust the telescope back at the dwarf and was running back down the staircase to help out inside their makeshift fortress. Grumpy looked at the rider again and gave a nod of recognition.

“Open the gates, Nova.”

Nova, who had been hiding behind one of the crenelations watching the approaching curse from between her fingers, shook herself and drew herself upright, waving her wand to send a shower of pink sparks through the air. A moment later, a responding shower of purple sparks shot up from the ground and the heavy gates began to creak open. The rider was spurring the horse on, gaining ground on the curse, and they slipped through the crack in the gates, leaping onto the half-raised drawbridge and continuing the gallop into the courtyard. Charming raced into the open space, exchanging a nod with the latecomer as they dismounted and kept going at a run, pushing through the panicked crowds, through the castle, and out to the sea shore, where Neal was standing by the water’s edge, a conch in his hands and his gaze fixed on the darkening sky above him.

“Did you get it?” he asked the rider.

Belle pulled down her hood and nodded, holding up a tiny obsidian vial.

“I had a lucky escape,” she said. “This is our only chance, Neal.”

“I know, but we’ve got to take it.”

He brought the shell to his lips and blew into it, the eerie sound echoing around the bay, sounding hollow below the roar of the oncoming curse.

As the last note died away, the water began to swirl and bubble, and Ariel’s head popped up above the surface. She looked around.

“Well, it’s really happening,” she said. “I’m not sure what I can do about it though.”

“We need you to go to the Land Without Magic,” Neal explained. “Find Emma, tell her that her family needs her, her parents need her.”

“Please, Ariel, she’s our only hope,” Belle added.

Ariel nodded. “Of course.”

“Give her this if you can.” Belle tossed the vial towards the mermaid who caught it in one webbed hand and nodded her understanding again.

“Thank you, Ariel,” Neal said.
“Thank me when it works,” she said dryly. “Good luck, both of you.”

She turned and dived into the water again, her powerful tail flapping above the surface as the curse finally hit the castle, ripping apart the newly-repaired roof once more.

“We’re going to need it,” Neal muttered.

He and Belle hugged each other tightly as the cloud enveloped them.

END OF SEASON 3A
Three short scenelets that never made it into the final cut of Once Upon A Different Time, season 3A. They were cut due to pacing issues.

From Episode 10 - “Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust”

Maurice and Tinker Bell are reunited.

Moe heard the shop door open just as he was manhandling a very large rose bush around in the back.

"I'll be out in a minute," he called, and, sweating, he finally succeeded in shoving the outsized terracotta pot into the corner where it would sit until someone decided they wanted the world's most ridiculously big potted rose bush. He wiped his brow on a rag, probably causing a smear of earth to appear there, and went through to the shop, stopping in his tracks when he saw who was standing nervously in front of the counter.

Tinker Bell. She didn’t look a day older than the last time he had seen her, all those years ago when she had left never to return. He, on the other hand, was most definitely not the same young man he had once been when they had courted back in the Enchanted Forest. The years had not been kind to him.

When she saw him, she gave a weak smile.

“Hello.”

It was one word, but it still managed to render Maurice speechless. He couldn’t quite believe that she was real and here. Were it not for Belle’s very real presence in his life (well, until she had gone with Rumpelstiltskin and all the fallout from that decision had come), he would think that part of his life had all been a very pleasant dream.

“Hello,” he finally managed to say in response, and Tinker Bell’s smile widened a little before failing altogether.

“I just wanted to see how you were,” she said. “Sugar directed me here. I… I can come back if it’s a bad time. Or not come back. Or… Whatever.”

Tinker Bell watched him nervously. When she had left he had been setting up a new life: a wife, perhaps children with her, and just possibly her own daughter if Sugar Plum had been able to deliver her. Tinker Bell hadn’t asked about her baby - she’d be a grown woman now - when she had been reunited with her best friend. Despite the years that had passed in Neverland, being back in the presence of her fellow fairies made the pain of separation all too fresh and she didn’t want to think about it, not when she had regained her freedom and her wings and could begin to rebuild her life. It would never be the same as it had been, but she could make a start. She would have to find out eventually: the anguish of not knowing was eating her up inside. But for now, there were too many emotions to be dealt with. This was the present and the future, and she did not yet have the strength to revisit the past. She looked over at Maurice. He’d aged, but she had been prepared for that. Age
couldn’t change his eyes. He still had the same eyes, widened in dumbstruck wonder as he looked at her, unable to believe what he was seeing.

“It’s not a bad time,” he said eventually.

Tinker Bell smiled.

“It’s good to see you again, Maurice.”

“You too, Tink.”

*From Episode 11 - “Undone”*

**Snow and Charming consult Rumpelstiltskin again.**

“I want to go back and see Rumpelstiltskin again.”

Snow was standing by the nursery window, staring out at the overcast sky and fidgeting with her rings restlessly, twisting them round and round her fingers. Charming sighed and looked over at her.

“He’s not going to tell us anything that we don’t already know,” he said. “And if we go again, whatever he says will probably just make you even more worried.”

“It’s a chance I’m willing to take to make sure our daughter is safe and has her best chance in life. We’ve got to know that we’ve covered all the options. What if there’s a possibility of breaking the curse early, or undoing it altogether?”

Charming crossed the room to his wife and took her in his arms. As loath as he was to go along with her suggestion, he knew that she would worry until the curse came if she did not satisfy that niggling thought in the back of her mind that perhaps, just perhaps, there were other avenues to be explored.

“All right,” he said. “One more time. But then no more.”

Snow nodded her agreement and gave him a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

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“Well well. Snow White and Prince Charming, back again already. I’m not quite sure what else you expect to get out of me. I can’t think of anything else I want from you.” The imp glanced around his prison. “Well, apart from getting out of here, of course,” he hissed, grabbing the bars and leaning in towards Snow as far as he could. Charming made to draw his sword, but Rumpelstiltskin just gave an explosive giggle and jumped back before the prince could make contact, gesturing grandly around the cell. “Please tell the owner of the establishment that the decor is passable but the food has been absolutely atrocious.”

Snow took a deep breath. She had known that coming back down here was a bad idea, but in that moment her desire to know, to be sure, outweighed all her other feelings on the subject.

“Is there any way to stop this curse?” she asked. “Can it be undone?”

“Of course!” Rumpelstiltskin said. “All curses can be undone. I thought you knew that already.”
“I thought you said that nothing could be done to stop it?” Charming said warily, his hand still on the hilt of his sword. “That it would be broken only after twenty-eight years, when Emma returns to us.”

“Precisely.” Rumpelstiltskin grinned, a terrifying leer that showed his mossy teeth. “And I was not lying. But you, Charming, were never a man of great talent with words. You need to be more specific.” He punctuated the last words with vicious jabs of his finger through the bars of the cell, pointing accusingly towards Charming. “I can’t be expected to give you clear answers when you don’t give me clear questions. Do you want to stop the curse, break it, or undo it? The meaning is always important, dearie. Which is it to be?”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” Snow asked wearily.

“Of course they aren’t the same thing!” Rumpelstiltskin yelled, and Snow took a couple of steps backwards into Charming’s arms as his snide, teasing manner gave way to rage in the blink of an eye. A moment later, his calm demeanour returned and he leaned idly against the bars of his cell, picking at his claw-like nails with an air of boredom.

“The curse can be broken. The curse can be undone. The curse cannot be stopped,” he said.

“How can we undo it?” Snow pressed.

“You can’t,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

“You just said!” Snow spluttered in indignation, and Rumpelstiltskin reached through the bars, holding up one finger to shush her.

“It can be undone. But not by you.”

“By who, then?”

Rumpelstiltskin smirked. “That’ll cost you.”

Charming sighed crossly. “And what price will you extract this time? Given your current circumstances you’re hardly in a position to be dictating terms.”

Rumpelstiltskin gave a huff of laughter.

“Then I suppose the information will simply have to remain unknown.” He moved away from the bars into the darkness at the back of the cell. The conversation was closed, and they would not get any further information from him. “Just remember, that for a curse to be undone, it must first be done. And once the curse is in play, well, none of us are going to remember this conversation, are we?”

Snow shivered at the harshness of his tone.

“Snow, let’s go,” Charming murmured, guiding her away from the cell. Snow looked back over her shoulder. The curse was coming and could not be stopped. All she could do was hope that his foresight would hold true and Emma would return and break the curse. All the same, she couldn’t help but wonder who could undo it, and what price Rumpelstiltskin would extract for that knowledge.

Perhaps it would be best just to trust Emma to find them.

*From Episode 11 - “Undone***
Belle meets Tinker Bell.

“Sugar!”

Sugar Plum spun round and grinned on seeing Tinker Bell rushing down the street towards her.

“I only just managed to escape,” Tinker Bell said as she reached them. “I know they mean well, but so much attention after so long with only trees for company can be slightly overwhelming. I’m amazed that you managed to get away. What are you up to then?”

Sugar Plum laughed. “It’s a very long story, Tink. I’ll tell it to you later. It’s about my fairy child.”

“You got a fairy child? My my, Sugar Plum, you’ve moved up in the world since I last saw you.”

“Technically, you last saw me yesterday,” Sugar Plum pointed out. Behind her, Rumpelstiltskin gave a small cough. “And we’re in a bit of a hurry,” she added. She glanced over her shoulder towards Belle, her arm still intertwined with Rumpelstiltskin’s and her expression curious as she regarded Tinker Bell. The fairy was still blissfully oblivious to her daughter’s identity, and Sugar Plum was not going to be the one to make that decision. It was up to Belle whether she wanted to be known or not, and up to Tinker Bell if she wanted to try and remake the connection she had been denied all those years ago by the circumstances of her life. But that didn’t mean that the two had to remain completely estranged for all time.

“I think there’s time for introductions though,” she said quickly, when it looked like they were about to move on. “Tink, this is Belle. She’s been protecting the town whilst everyone was away.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Tinker Bell held out a hand which Belle took warmly. “From what I’ve seen, that’s an impressive feat.”

“Well.” Belle leaned in closer to Rumpelstiltskin’s side. “I had help.”

Sugar Plum watched the two interact, wishing that she didn’t feel so sad about the whole thing, and wondering what would have happened had Belle grown up among the fae. For a moment, as they continued to exchange small talk, she thought she caught the slightest hint of recognition on Tinker Bell’s face, a small flicker of maternal instinct pushing through and creating a little spark, but she pushed the thought down as a matter of wishful thinking. There would be time enough for that later, and if a reconciliation was not to be, then it was not Sugar Plum’s place to force it.

All the same, she couldn’t help but glance over her shoulder again after the goodbyes had been said and they were moving on towards the pawn shop. Tinker Bell was still standing in the middle of the pavement, watching them move on, wearing the same expression of intense curiosity as Belle had done.
“Could you pass the eggs please, Emma?”

Emma grabbed the carton of eggs out of the fridge and set them down by Walsh’s elbow, wondering if she ought to warn him they were there in case he knocked them off. He didn’t, of course, simply reaching out and taking three without looking, cracking them into the pancake batter with an expert hand. That was what Emma liked about Walsh. He was dependable like that. Solid. Ever since he had come into their lives – nearly a year ago now – he had been a nice solid presence, not that he was particularly solidly built man: slim and slightly gangly. He was something real in a world that felt a little hazy at times. When Emma tried to think back to a time before her and Henry’s move to New York and the arrival of Walsh, she couldn’t ever put her finger on anything concrete. As soon as she tried to concentrate on any one memory, it managed to slip away. Long term memory loss was worrying, but Emma didn’t feel the need to consult professional help just yet. If she started forgetting what had happened the previous day then she would be more concerned.

She slipped her arms around Walsh as he began frying the pancakes and he glanced back over his shoulder at her, grinning. Yes, they could both remember the previous night very well.

“Don’t burn the pancakes,” she warned.

“Morning Mom. Hi Walsh.”

Emma sprang back from Walsh as if she’d been stung on hearing Henry’s voice, running a hand through her hair awkwardly as she turned to face him.

“Hi Henry,” she said, overly brightly. “Walsh came over for breakfast.”

Henry raised an eyebrow as he set about making cocoa.

“Sure. Walsh came all the way from Brooklyn in his pyjamas. I’m thirteen, Mom, I know you guys have sleepovers.”

Emma exchanged a glance with Walsh, who shrugged, as if to say ‘well, he’s your son’. She decided not to push the point and retuned her attention to the more pressing matters of finding the cinnamon and the syrup.

“I can’t understand how you two have cinnamon on your cocoa,” Walsh remarked as he brought the plate of pancakes over to the table. “You’re ruining a perfectly good drink by adding spicy dust to it.”

“Walsh, I would have thought that after a year you’d have learned not to have this conversation with us,” Henry said with a sly grin. “It’s two against one, you’re never going to win.”

Walsh threw his hands up in defeat. “Well, just see you keep your cinnamon on your side of the table,” he said, pointedly taking a sip of his own unadorned drink and pushing the tin of spice towards Henry. They ate breakfast in a companionable silence for a while, and Emma began to think. She had a feeling that something was about to happen. She didn’t know what it was, but it was a sense of foreboding. The last time she’d felt it had been… She shook her head; the memory
wouldn’t come but she knew that she’d experienced the sensation before.

“Do you ever get that feeling,” she began, but she didn’t know how to go on. Walsh looked up from his pancakes expectantly.

“That feeling?” he prompted.

“That feeling that something’s going to happen.” Emma trailed off and shook her head. “Forget it, it’s silly.”

“I think you’re just paranoid, Mom,” Henry said helpfully, reaching across and patting her hand before snaffling another pancake from the stack in the middle of the table.

“Gee, thanks kid,” she muttered. “Now I’m really at ease.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Henry said. “Unless your spidey senses are telling you that I’m going to thrash you at Mage Dungeons tonight, because that’s definitely going to happen.”

Emma gave him a look of mock annoyance. “Oh really? And you’re sure of this because?”

“Walsh has been giving me tips,” Henry said, his voice cheerful, without looking up from his breakfast. Emma turned her attention to Walsh.

“I see how it is. All right then. Game on.”

Walsh sighed and spread his hands in defence. “Way to get me in trouble, kid.”

“Maybe it’s only that,” Emma said, but before she could say anything else to assuage the niggling feeling in the back of her mind, there was a knock on the apartment door. It was a sharp knock, carrying a sense of urgency, and the breakfast table fell silent, Emma’s earlier words of foreboding still clear in their minds.

“How’d they get into the building?” Henry asked.

“Someone must have left the door open,” Emma said, but for some reason she could still taste the metallic fear at the back of her throat. “Or they’ve got the wrong apartment number. Maybe it’s the UPS guy. Are you expecting a parcel I don’t know about?”

Henry shook his head, and the knock came again, more insistently this time.

“Want me to get it?” Walsh asked.

Emma didn’t reply. In any other circumstances she would have got up and gone to the door with a comment along the lines of the fact she hunted down bail-jumpers for a living so she was perfectly capable of opening her own front door.

Walsh made the decision for her as the persistent person outside the apartment began to knock again.

“All right, all right, keep your hair on,” he said, unbolting and opening the front door.

The caller was a young woman with dark red hair plastered around her head and beginning to dry in messy, salt-matted rats’ tails. She was wearing a man’s coat several sizes too big for her that completely covered her to her ankles, and Walsh could see that she was barefoot, her toes red with cold and grubby from the New York streets.

He’d never seen her before.
The woman, however, looked rather surprised to see him, and took a little jump back as the door opened to reveal him, her mouth forming a perfect O shape with no sound coming out.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

The woman just stared at him, her eyes fixed intently on his face. There was something altogether ferocious in her expression and Walsh gave an involuntary shiver.

“Can I help you?” he repeated.

The woman still did not reply and instead started trying to peer around him into the flat beyond. Walsh’s eyes narrowed and he stepped into the space, closing the door as much as he could to limit her view.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The woman opened her mouth as if to speak, but then shut it again, and went up on tiptoes, craning her neck to try and see over the top of his head.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Emma had come over to investigate and she took the door, opening it wider so that she could see what was happening in the corridor; Walsh took a step back to allow her to take control of her own domain.

The red-haired woman outside the door smiled at her eagerly, but Emma was drawing a blank. She was vaguely aware that she might have seen the woman before – perhaps she looked like someone off the TV, or she’d seen her hanging around in one of the less salubrious parts of the city – from her attire she didn’t look like she was all that financially secure. All the same, she knew that she didn’t know their unexpected visitor, and she had no idea why the woman was standing outside her apartment.

“Can we help?” she asked.

The woman mouthed something but there was no voice behind the words. If Emma didn’t know better, then she’d say that the pale pink lips had formed the shape of her name. Then, as suddenly as she had arrived, she took off, racing back down the corridor and round the corner towards the stairwell.

Emma shut the door.

“Well, that was weird,” she muttered. Walsh nodded his agreement and they made their way back into the kitchen, where Henry was waiting for them expectantly.

“Who was it?” he asked.

“No one,” Emma replied. All the same, she was still perturbed by that faint flicker of recognition.

“I should probably go and get ready for work,” Walsh said, leaving the table and dumping his plate in the sink. “I’ll see you later?” he asked Emma, his voice hopeful.

It took Emma a moment to realise that he was speaking to her, and she eventually nodded.

“Yeah, see you later.”

Walsh left the room and Henry tilted his head on one side.
“Are you ok, Mom?” he asked.

Emma nodded, forcing a smile onto her face that she already knew Henry would see right through, but she could think of no other way to reassure him.

“Yeah, Henry. I’m absolutely fine.”

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“Is everyone here? Is everyone ok?”

James looked around, trying to perform a headcount as the mist cleared. He had no real idea where they were in relation to anywhere else, he just knew that they were home, if it could be called that. Storybrooke had been their home for so long that this place felt alien now.

“Don’t make too much noise,” Snow muttered beside him, and he had to double take on seeing her with long, flowing hair again. “There might still be ogres about.”

“I thought Rumpelstiltskin banished all the ogres,” Grumpy remarked, picking his brothers up off the ground where the force of the reversing curse had winded them.

“It may have escaped your notice, short stuff, but Rumpelstiltskin hasn’t been here for the past thirty years and…” Regina narrowed her eyes and glanced over towards Belle and Neal, who were talking to Granny. “He’s not going to be here again.”

“All right, all right, just making an observation” Grumpy muttered. “Keep your hair on, sister.”

“Don’t you ‘sister’ me!” Regina snapped.

“Hey, just because you’re done up like the Evil Queen again!”

“Stop it!” Snow exclaimed. “Both of you! This has come as a shock to all of us, we’ve all lost things and people, and life won’t be any easier if we ignore everything that happened in Storybrooke and go straight back to the way we were before, snapping at each other’s throats! We cannot act like nothing’s changed!”

Grumpy and Regina glowered at each other, then at Snow, for a few moments.

“Snow’s right,” James said, coming up beside his wife and placing a supportive hand on her shoulder. “Things have changed since we were last here and we have to respect that. The boundaries have blurred. We’ve all grown as people.”

Grumpy and Regina seemed to concede this point and backed off, Grumpy going back to his brothers and Regina wandering off towards the forest edge to try and get her bearings.

“We don’t have to worry about ogres.” James turned to see Belle and Neal coming up behind him. He almost had to double-take, he’d never seen either of them in Enchanted Forest garb before. “I grew up in an ogre warzone,” Belle continued.

Neal nodded. “Same.”

“I know their patterns, and there’s no ogre activity near here. We’re safe for now.”
James nodded his thanks and changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on Rumpelstiltskin’s loss with them any more than he had to.

“Is everyone back?” he asked.

“Hard to know for certain. It was an entire realm’s worth of people to transport. I imagine that most people will already be making their way back to their own villages. We were all fairly close together when the magic hit,” Neal said, looking around the clearing. “That would explain why we’re all together now.”

“And this is our kingdom,” Snow said. “I recognise the foliage. I imagine everyone from other kingdoms, like Ella and Thomas, will have returned there. The curse was reversed, after all. With a few modifications,” she added hastily, looking at Belle and Neal.

“I will admit to being glad not to be locked in a tower this time around,” Belle said lightly, glancing over at Regina.

James winced. “We have so much diplomatic work to do,” he muttered.

“You’re a king, James,” Snow said cheerily. “Diplomacy comes with the territory.”

“You know, I never had any ambitions to be a king,” James grumbled. “I would have been quite happy to stay as a shepherd if my brother hadn’t got himself killed.”

“Ah, but then you would never have met me.” Snow smiled, but the expression soon faded into melancholy. James could fill in the gaps for her. He would never have met her and they would never have had Emma. And now she had been ripped from them again.

“No matter what we’ve lost, we still have each other,” James said. “We can pull through together, I promise, and we will find a way to see Emma and Henry again.”

“I know.” Snow sighed and leaned into James’ shoulder heavily, and he put his arms around her. “It just feels like we keep being separated, every time we think we’ll finally have a chance to be a normal family.”

“Snow, our daughter is the same age as us. We’ll never be a normal family.”

“I know that!” Snow’s voice was frustrated, and she sighed against James’ shoulder. “But as near to normal as we can be.”

James held her closer.

“I know. I know how much this is hurting you because it’s hurting me too. You’ve just got to have hope. You had hope before, when we put her into that wardrobe. You’ve got to have hope again now. Emma will be all right, and she will find us again. But we’re in a different world now, and Emma can take care of herself in the Land Without Magic. You said it yourself; we’re rulers here and right now our priority has to be with our people and making sure that they’re safe. As soon as things are settled, we can think about reuniting with Emma, I promise.”

Snow nodded. Although the words were not what she wanted to hear, they were very true. Their responsibilities as their society’s leaders had been somewhat ignored in Storybrooke thanks to the culture of the Land Without Magic. Now they were back in their own domain and it was time to step up.

“We should get back to the palace, it’ll be easier to co-ordinate things from there,” Snow said. “As
soon as we can find our way, of course."

“That way.” Regina pointed through the forest. “I know where we are. Your palace is that way, mine is that way.” She pointed across the green plains into a misty distance. “The mountains are behind us with the Dark Castle beyond. If I’ve got my bearings correct then there should be a village a couple of miles out through the forest, hopefully there will be horses there to make the journey quicker.”

James nodded. “All right, that’s the route we’ll take then.” He looked over at Neal and Belle. “You’re very welcome to join us.” It wasn’t as if either of them had really had a home in the Enchanted Forest immediately before the curse first hit, and he doubted that either of them would want to return to the Dark Castle so soon in the wake of Rumpelstiltskin’s death. Belle nodded her thanks, and they began to make their way towards the edge of the woods. Granny and the dwarfs fell into step with them, being part of the close-knit circle of friends who had surrounded the king and queen when the curse had been cast, they accepted these roles easily again now. Snow turned, noticing that Regina was hanging back.

“Regina, aren’t you coming?”

The former mayor looked over at the gathered group. “Forgive me for feeling somewhat awkward in the company.”

“So much diplomatic work to do,” James muttered again. “We’ll work all that out when we get to the palace,” he said aloud. “Right now, it’s probably best if we all stick together.”

“We have a common goal, after all,” Snow added. “You want to be reunited with Henry, we want to be reunited with Emma. We can work together towards that.”

Eventually, Regina nodded, bringing up the rear as the group moved further into the forest. Grumpy was leading the way, with Jiminy buzzing along beside him, and suddenly he stopped, the cricket alighting on his shoulder.

“Grumpy? What’s wrong?” Snow called.

“I don’t know, but I really don’t like the sound of these woods,” the dwarf said grimly. “Something’s up.”

“I can’t hear anything,” James said, perplexed.

“That’s the problem.” Grumpy looked up at the treetops, squinting against the bright shafts of evening light that filtered through the trees. “There should be insects, or birdsong, or something. It’s too quiet.”

Almost on cue, there was a rustling noise from high up in the trees to their right. Snow recognised it for what it was from her time in the forest as a younger woman. It was a decoy, and she turned to the left, seeing a pair of glowing yellow eyes leering through the leaves at the group of travellers below. At first she thought that it was a shadow like the ones they had encountered in Neverland, but as it moved in the green canopy, she made out its form and crouched position.

“Everybody get down!” she screamed, as above them, a huge winged monkey launched itself out of the trees towards them, snapping and snarling as it swooped in low towards the newly returned group.
New York – Present

“I think I know why you’ve got that foreboding feeling,” Henry said sagely, and Emma glanced across at him, her mind still semi-preoccupied with the morning’s strange visitor. They were on the subway, heading out towards the bail bond office to collect Emma’s latest assignment. As it was the school holidays, Henry had come along for want of something to do, Emma having expressly forbidden him from staying indoors playing *Mage Dungeons* for twelve hours straight.

“Oh yes?” she said. “Well, you’re doing better than me if you can figure it out.”

Henry nodded, looking far wiser than his thirteen years would ordinarily allow.

“I didn’t want to say anything over breakfast because Walsh was there, but I think I know what’s going to happen.”

“What is it? Or do I have to play twenty questions?”

“I think Walsh is going to propose,” Henry replied, his voice matter of fact, and Emma had to double take, staring at her son bug-eyed.


“Walsh is going to propose,” Henry repeated, in answer to her first incredulous question. “I don’t know how, exactly, but I guess the usual presenting you with a ring and saying something along the lines of ‘will you marry me’. Why? Well, I’m assuming for the same reason that most people ask other people to marry them. He loves you. And finally, I came to this conclusion because the last time we went over to his place he was hiding jewellery catalogues. Specifically the ring pages. And I overheard him booking the *Blue Iguana* for tomorrow night.”

“We had our first date at the *Blue Iguana*,” Emma mused.

“Exactly,” Henry said, his voice heavy with expectation. “Loads of couples end up recreating their first date when they propose. I read it online somewhere.”

“Sometimes I worry about what you read online,” Emma muttered. She leaned back against the subway car window. “Wow. This is…”

“Unexpected?” Henry suggested.

“I was going to say fast,” Emma replied. She stared across at the empty seats opposite. “But I suppose unexpected works as well.”

“You’ve been dating nearly a year,” Henry pointed out.

“Precisely,” Emma said. “We’re not even living together. By relationship standards we’re practically still starting out.”

“Well, it looks like it’s going to happen,” Henry said. “You can’t control that. You can only control what happens next.”

Emma sighed.

“Why are you telling me all this?” she asked. “Walsh won’t exactly be happy with you ruining his big moment.”
“I know you don’t like being caught unawares,” Henry said with a shrug. “This way you’ve got more time to prepare your answer. And I guess it’s because when you said that you thought something was going to happen, you seemed pretty certain that it was going to be something bad, and I thought that maybe if you knew what it was you’d be reassured.” He paused. “Or not. You don’t seem too happy about it.”

Emma shook her head.

“I don’t know what to think,” she said. “I’ve never really thought about it before. Marriage never really seemed to be on the cards for me.”

“First time for everything,” Henry said. They reached their stop and left the subway, coming up into the sunny morning.

“Yeah, but getting married to someone isn’t exactly something that you can have a go at and then decide it’s not for you three weeks later and never do it again, like yoga or sky-diving. Once you’re in, you’re in for life.”

“You don’t sound all that enamoured by the prospect,” Henry said dryly.

“It’s not that. There’s nothing wrong with getting married, but hell, Henry, it’s a huge step. I don’t know what to do. What do you think?”

“Well, for a start I’m thirteen so I’m really not qualified to be giving relationship advice.”

“Yes, yes.” Emma waved his point away. “But this decision affects you as well. This isn’t just about me and Walsh. You’re my son, your input is important.”

“I suppose.” Henry sidestepped a Dachshund without an owner and continued. “Secondly, it hasn’t happened yet, so there’s no use in worrying prematurely. It might not even be on the cards.”

“All the signs so far seem to be pointing that way,” Emma admitted.

“You never know, Walsh might chicken out last minute.”

Emma turned to Henry. “Seriously, have you been keeping tabs on Walsh?” she asked her son.

He shook his head. “No, I’m just observant.”

“I think we could use your skills on the team,” Emma muttered. “Mini bounty hunter holiday apprenticeship to keep you out of trouble this summer? There’s dental.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I like coming along on jobs with you but I think watching from the side lines is my forte.”

They continued on in silence for a while.

“You’ve got to be sure,” Henry said eventually. “If you decide to go for it then you have to be sure that it’s really what you want. And I have to say it, Mom, right now you don’t sound very sure.”

“I’m not,” Emma conceded.

“I knew telling you in advance was a good idea.”

They turned the corner around the back of some non-descript warehouses close to the river’s edge.
“Would you be ok if it happened?” Emma asked Henry.

He nodded. “As long as you’re happy, I’m ok with it.”

“You’re not old enough to have that kind of attitude yet. Wait till you’ve got kids of your own before you start worrying about other people’s happiness coming before your own.” Emma ruffled his hair and he squirmed away from her. “Having said that, you’re going to be too tall for me to do that soon. Stop growing, young man. You’ll be giving me a complex. Now, tell me honestly. How would you feel if Walsh joined the family?”

Henry considered the question for a long while, then gave a slow nod.

“Yeah, I’d be happy,” he said. “It would take a bit of getting used to, but it’s not like he’s never over at the apartment.”

“Yeah, about this morning…”

“Mom, it’s fine, honestly. I like Walsh. He’s the first guy I can remember who really makes you smile.”

Emma frowned. Now that she thought about it, she couldn’t remember any of her boyfriends since Neal. She knew that she must have had some, but in her mind everything skipped straight from Neal to Walsh, as if the intervening years had never happened.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” she concluded.

“He’s nice,” Henry said. It seemed to be damning the man with faint praise, but it really was the best word to use in the circumstances. Walsh was nice. Dependable. Real. Again she found herself using that word in relation to him, and she wondered why she was so fixated on that one particular abstract. “I wouldn’t mind him as a stepdad. But I don’t want you to be unhappy. We’ve always got on fine just the two of us, and there’s no reason why that has to change.”

Emma thought back through her blurry memories of Henry’s life. She remembered feeling happiness, but she wished that she could pin it down to a more specific occasion.

“I suppose I can always say that I need more time to think about it,” she said.

“Of course.” Henry gestured over his shoulder. “We just missed the office,” he said helpfully.

“Oh. Yes. So we did.”

Emma stopped and turned on her heel, and as she did so, she froze. The red-haired woman from the corridor was peering out of the space between two buildings, her gaze intense and focussed on Henry and Emma. As she caught their attention, she mouthed something, and this time Emma was left in no doubt of what she was trying to say.

_Emma Swan_

“What is it?” Henry asked.

“She was the one who knocked on the door this morning,” Emma said, nodding towards the woman.

“Oh. Do you think she followed us?” Henry murmured.

Emma didn’t know, but it was too much of a coincidence for her liking. She followed people all the time in her line of work but that didn’t mean she couldn’t dislike it when it happened to her. All of a
sudden, the woman’s appearance seemed far more sinister.

“Henry, I’ve changed my mind about you playing *Mage Dungeons* all day,” she muttered. “Run back to the bagel place round the corner. I’ll meet you there once I’ve been into the office.”

Henry knew better than to question her, especially when she was talking in the low, measured tones she used when she was casing a situation that looked unfavourable. He left her and went back in the direction they had come from. The red-head ignored him as he passed her, and Emma waited until he was out of sight around the corner before making her way across to the mysterious stranger. It was time to get to the bottom of the day’s odd events.

**The Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“Everybody get down!”

They all ducked on hearing Snow’s warning, and seeing the terrifying shape appear out of the trees, and by the time that it had made its first pass, those of the company with weapons had drawn them and were getting back to their feet. Granny loosed off a crossbow quarrel at the beast, catching its wing and receiving a menacing growl in return as the monkey wheeled around and came in for a second pass. In the same moment, two more of the creatures appeared out of the trees and the attack became triple-pronged. James drew his sword, swinging it in a huge arc but falling short of the monkey.

“Is this better or worse than the ogres?” he asked Snow, who gave him an exasperated look from her position on the ground.

“Not sure yet,” she replied sourly. James whirled around in time to see one of the monkeys go for Belle, grabbing a handful of her hair and pulling until she sent it sprawling with a ferocious yell and an elbow to the nose, Neal adding insult to injury with another fist to the thing’s face as it fell. Seeing their comrade injured, the other monkeys hissed their displeasure, redoubling their efforts. A fireball zoomed past James’s ear, catching one of the monkeys’ tails, and the squawking cacophony it gave was piercing and painful as it swooped around in the sky trying to put itself out, the other monkey attempting to assist it. Granny’s eyes were tracking them as they moved, another bolt flying from an expert hand to tear the original attacker’s wing again. That seemed to startle it more, and it retreated, dragging its singed friend with it as it flapped away unsteadily over the treetops. With a sinking heart, James realised that the monkeys were going in the same direction that they were – towards the palace.

The monkey that had attacked Belle was still on the ground, winded from Belle and Neal’s defence, and James rushed over, sword at the ready.

“Are you all right?” he asked Belle, who nodded, and James raised his sword, ready to despatch their assailant once and for all.

“No!”

An arrow shot from a longbow sailed past James’ hand, unsteadying him and causing him to drop his sword, and he looked up as two figures rushed into view through the trees.

“Mulan?” Belle, Snow and Neal all said in unison as the young woman in eastern imperial armour approached them. James decided not to say anything, but picked up his sword. Granny re-aimed her crossbow at the two newcomers, and a fresh ball of flames licked at Regina’s fingertips. Mulan
stopped, raising her hands in supplication.

“You can’t kill them,” she pleaded.

“They attacked us,” James said.

“They’re cursed,” Mulan continued. “They don’t know what they’re doing.”

“They used to be men,” the man with the longbow added. “Something evil has changed them and taken over their minds. They were our friends and we hope to save them yet.”

The monkey on the ground had got back to its feet at this point, snarling as its wings began to beat, and Regina raised her fireball. The creature squawked in fear at the sight, taking off and moving away rapidly in the same direction as the others.

“They fear fire,” Mulan explained. “That’s how we’ve been keeping them at bay.” She turned to Neal, looking a little puzzled. “It’s good to see you well, Neal, but how come you’re back? How come any of you are back?”

“And how come you all know each other?” James asked, still perplexed, as he handed Snow up, the rest of the group all ascertaining that no-one had been injured.

“We’ll explain everything, but first it would be best to get out of the woods. Those aren’t the only three, and they’ll be back. Whatever force is controlling them, it’s a persistent thing,” the archer said. He slung his weapon over his shoulder and bowed respectfully to Belle. “Are you all right, Belle?”

“Robin!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t recognise you. It’s been a while.”

“How do you know all these people?” Grumpy asked in amazement. The group began to move away through the forest, Mulan leading the way with Neal and Robin and Belle at the rear. James glanced at Snow.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Who are these people?”

“Mulan helped me and Emma when we were trapped here after the wraith attack,” Snow explained. “Come on, we can do introductions later.”

They reached the edge of the forest and saw a small campsite set up, with a regular perimeter of low-burning bonfires around it. A little boy poked his head out of one of the tents and ran over to Robin with a cry of ‘Papa!’ as Belle looked on fondly. The rest of the camp’s inhabitants emerged and greeted the new arrivals; most were archers like Robin, and they gave Regina suspicious looks as she entered the fire circle. Finally, Aurora came out, and she came over to embrace Snow warmly.

Once they were all seated and provisions were being shared around, Mulan began to speak.

“The presence came not too long ago,” she said. “Just after you left.” She nodded to Neal before going on. “It brought the monkeys, well, some of them, with it, and it made short work of the ogres. But the monkeys have been attacking our group ever since, and we don’t know why. Aurora and I were travelling with Philip, and we met up with Robin Hood and his men here. The monkeys have taken five men, including Philip, and whatever happens to them in the palace, they return as monkeys themselves.”

“How can you tell it’s them?” Regina asked.

“Philip came back to us as a man,” Aurora said, her voice mournful. “He was badly injured,
staggering into the camp. But before he could tell us what had happened or who was behind it, he transformed before our eyes.”

Snow winced.

“You say that the presence is hiding out in the palace,” James said. Robin nodded.

“Yes. We’ve never seen it, but we believe it’s some kind of sorcerer. We’ve tried to get closer to the castle and investigate, but there are powerful wards in place to prevent us getting too close.”

Regina cracked her knuckles. “Shouldn’t be too difficult,” she said darkly. Robin and his men continued to regard her with suspicion. “What? I’m trying to help!”

“We’ve put our differences with Regina behind us for the moment,” James explained. “Right now we’re working towards the same goal.”

The tension in the air remained, but at least the lines had been drawn, that Regina was on their side and whilst trust was hard won, there shouldn’t be open hostility on either side.

“Do you know why the monkeys keep coming after you?” Snow asked.

Mulan shrugged, shaking her head, but Aurora’s expression remained pensive.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Unless… Unless they want my baby.” She pressed a hand over her abdomen, not showing yet but undeniably there.

Jams looked across at Belle, whose eyes widened.

“They went straight for you, Belle. Do you think…”

Belle shook her head. “We were… careful,” she said, the colour in her cheeks heightening.

“Can we change the subject?” Neal asked, pained.

“Yes,” Belle and Mulan said quickly, and Mulan continued. “I’m curious. You’ve all returned, but where’s Emma?”

Snow sighed, her eyes downcast, and she looked over at Regina and James.

“It’s a long story,” she said.

As they began to relate the events of the past few days, Belle got to her feet, moving towards the edge of the camp and taking a deep breath of the cool evening air as the darkness began to settle in, feeling the pain of Rumpel’s loss afresh.

“You know, if you are…”

She turned to Neal as he came over to her.

“Neal, I’m not pregnant. Your father and I both know how birth control works.”

“I was just going to say, if you are, then I’m here for you,” Neal finished. Belle’s shoulders slumped and Neal put an arm around her.

“I just miss him,” she sighed. “He went to Neverland fully expecting never to return, and I was certain he would. And he did, and we were ready to make a life together… We had all of a day
before we were ripped apart again. And it feels wrong to grieve when there’s so much other upheaval going on, and we’ve gone straight from one mess to the next, but I can’t help it.”

“Told you exactly how you feel,” Neal agreed. They didn’t say anything more, he just held her closer, and they looked out towards the mountains together.

“Is everything all right?” Robin had come over, his son perched on his shoulders and giggling, and in spite of it all, Belle had to smile.

“We’ll be all right eventually,” she said. “Neal, this is Robin Hood, highwayman and outlaw of the honest kind. Robin, this is Neal. He’s Rumpelstiltskin’s son.”

“A pleasure.” Robin and Neal shook hands. “Belle and I met at the Dark Castle. She got me out of a predicament with your father.”

Neal smiled. “I’ve heard that she was quite good at that.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Robin added.

“I’m Roland!” the boy on his shoulders said brightly, since no-one had introduced him. Robin sighed.

“Yes, this one with the impeccable sense of timing is my son, Roland.”

“Hello Roland.” Neal reached up and shook the boy’s hand solemnly, and after a few moments, Robin took his leave of the two grieving friends and returned to the centre of the circle. Snow and James had finished recounting the tale of the previous few days’ events, and now plans were being made.

“Aurora and I were on our way back to Aurora and Philip’s kingdom,” Mulan was saying. “We’re happy to accompany you to the palace if you like, it’s on the way.”

“Maybe once we break off, we’ll distract the monkeys,” Aurora said, giving a cynical snort of laughter.

“Hmm.” David glanced over at Neal and Belle as they returned to the group, not entirely convinced of that.

“What I don’t understand is where this mysterious sorcerer came from, and why they’re wreaking havoc,” Grumpy said.

“Well, we’re quickly learning that there are many more worlds beside this one.” Snow shrugged. “They could have come from anywhere.”

“And want anything,” Regina agreed. “The timing is convenient. They came here at a time when the Enchanted Forest was practically deserted. It’s an easy takeover. I suppose we shall find out when we get there.”

“If we get there,” Grumpy muttered. “Those things were vicious.” He shook his head. “What kind of person uses flying monkeys as henchmen?”

“Oz.” Neal spread his hands as the others looked at him in disbelief. “What, are you telling me that none of you watched the Wizard of Oz when you were in Storybrooke?”

“Neal, that’s fiction!” Snow exclaimed.
Neal rolled his eyes. “According to the Land Without Magic, we’re all fiction, yet here we stand.”

Snow nodded. “Ok, I can see your point. Mysterious forces from Oz it is. The question remains though; how the hell did they get here?”

**New York – Present**

A little cautiously, Emma made her way towards the red-headed young woman, who was still staring at her intently. *Em**ma Swan*, she mouthed again, and Emma stopped in her tracks, nodding slowly.

“Yes, I’m Emma Swan,” she said, voice wary. “What do you want?” She paused. “Do I know you?”

The woman appeared to be considering the question carefully, and seeing that it was a simple yes or no answer, this did nothing for Emma’s increasing sense of unease. She took another couple of steps forward.

“Why are you following me?” she called out to the stranger.

The woman didn’t reply, and just waved Emma over towards her frantically.

“There’s no-one around,” Emma said. “Can you tell me what you want? It’s just you and me, that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

The woman nodded, her expression pained as she patted her throat.

“You can’t speak?”

Another nod in response, and Emma came forward a little more, grasping in her jacket pocket for her taser, just in case. It was the wrong move; the woman was immediately spooked and took off down the narrow alley on pattering bare feet. Emma threw her hands up in defeat and looked up to the sky for assistance from any of the myriad deities she didn’t believe in. It would be incredibly easy to just turn around and go back to the bail bond office, pick up her next mark and go about her life as before, but she knew that it would only be a matter of time before the red-head turned up on the doorstep again having recovered from her scare. Against her better judgement, she took off down the alley after her mysterious stalker.

“Hey, wait up! Come back!”

She arrived at the other end of the street and looked around, catching a glimpse of red hair disappearing around the corner one block up. There were more people on this street, and from the few baffled faces that were lining the route, it was clear that this was Emma’s quarry’s direction.

“Hey!” she yelled again, sprinting down the road and ignoring the confusion around her. “Hey! Slow down!”

She turned the corner; the red-head was peering out of a doorway and Emma leaned on the wall to catch her breath.
“I’m sorry I scared you,” she said. “Will you please just talk to me? Well, write something down, maybe? Because I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen you before. Ever.”

All the same, even as she said it, Emma couldn’t help feeling the twitch of discomfort at her flicker of recognition.

The woman stepped out of the doorway carefully, and Emma had almost reached her when she began to run again, down the maze of back streets with Emma in hot pursuit. Finally they arrived at the water’s edge, and Emma saw the woman standing on the edge of the pier out into the Hudson.

“Oh hell no! I’m not having any suicides on my watch!” Emma ran down towards the pier. “Don’t you dare! You seriously don’t want to go for a dip in the Hudson, it’s disgusting! Get back here!”

The woman ignored her, fiddling about with the collar of her coat and pulling out a small bag on a string around her neck. Inside this bag was a small bottle, which she uncapped and swallowed the contents of, before coughing violently. Emma had almost reached her almost close enough to grab the belt of her coat, when she vaulted over the pier railing and dived neatly into the water.

“Oh, for crying out loud!”

Emma paced the end of the pier for a moment, watching as the oversized coat floated leisurely to the surface.

“Fantastic,” Emma muttered. “Absolutely fantastic. I knew something bad was going to happen. I knew it. This is karma. For something.”

The sound of the water surface breaking snapped her attention back to the river. The red-head was there, bobbing along quite happily and scraping her hair out of her eyes.

“What the hell?” Emma said faintly.

The woman spat out a mouthful of river water.

“You’re right, it is disgusting,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“What? You can talk? You said you couldn’t!”

“Well, I couldn’t before, but I can now. It’s a long story,” she added hastily. “I’m Ariel.” She held out a hand.

“Ariel. As in, Disney princess mermaid Ariel.”

“Yes.”

“Oh…” Emma reached through the railing to take the offered hand, not entirely sure that she wouldn’t be pulled forcibly to her doom, but then jumped back with a yelp.

“Holy…”

“What?”

“You have webbed hands!” Emma yelped. “And… scales!”

Ariel blinked. “I’m a mermaid,” she said, as if that explained everything.

“Mermaids don’t exist!” Emma exploded, but she was forced to sit down heavily on the end of the
pier when a shimmering green tail bobbed up beside Ariel’s head.

“I think I’m dreaming,” she muttered.

“Sorry.” Ariel gave a tight smile by way of apology. “You’re very much awake.”

“In that case, Starbucks have started putting hallucinogens in their coffee.”

“Erm, no, that’s not true either,” Ariel said. “And we have met before, you just don’t remember. Here.”

She reached into the little bag around her neck and pulled out a tiny black bottle.

“This is for you,” the mermaid – Emma was still having trouble getting to grips with this sudden revelation – continued, holding out the bottle for Emma to take. Emma just stared at it. “Neal and Belle sent me.”

“Neal? As in, my Neal? Neal Cassidy? Where the hell is he?”

“A very long way away,” Ariel said.

“He’d damn well better be!”

Ariel winced. “Just, take the potion,” she said. “Everything will become clear.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Ok, now I’ll admit to not having made the most sensible choices in my life but even I know that drinking weird things given to you by strangers is a really bad idea. Especially when the stranger appears to be another species and they’re calling it a potion.”

“Please, Emma,” Ariel wheedled. “I’ve swum a long way to get to you and I’m not going back to Storybrooke having failed as their last hope.”

“Sorry, did you say Storybrooke?” Emma’s brow furrowed. The name sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

“Yes.” All things considered, Ariel was being remarkably patient. “Emma, I was sent by your family to get you, and convince you to come back to Storybrooke. They need your help. They need you to save them.”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t have any family.”

“You do. You’ve got a lot more than you think. You just can’t remember them.” Ariel swam a little closer, and Emma gave a squawk of alarm, scrabbling sideways as the mermaid launched herself out of the water to sit on the end of the pier beside her, her fin dangling into the Hudson.

“This will help with that.” She put the little dark bottle down on the pier between them. “From what I can tell, it’s a memory potion.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my memory!” Emma exclaimed, although she knew that wasn’t entirely true; she’d been worrying about it only a couple of hours earlier. Ariel raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure about that? Think back to over a year ago. Last spring. Do you have any concrete memories of that time?”

Emma cast her mind back, trying to find something, anything. But the last twelve years were a haze.

Ariel gave a knowing nod.

“That’s the point at which your memories were altered,” she said. “That’s why you remember that moment but nothing since.”

“My memories were altered?” Emma felt a chill in the pit of her stomach. “How…”

“Magic,” Ariel said, with an utterly unhelpful shrug.

“There’s no such thing as magic!” Emma yelled, exasperated.

“You also said that there was no such thing as mermaids, and yet here I am,” Ariel pointed out sagely.

“Yeah, well, I’m not entirely sure I’m not dreaming,” Emma muttered.

“If you are dreaming, what’s to stop magic existing? And if you are dreaming, then no harm can come of taking the memory potion.”

Emma sighed. Logically she knew that she wasn’t dreaming, that magic and mermaids didn’t exist, and that something very weird was happening to her day. On the other hand, the gaps in her memory that she just couldn’t shake… At least she knew that Henry would raise the alarm if she went missing; he’d probably be calling her any minute from the bagel shop to find out where she was.

She picked up the little bottle and looked at it critically before easing out the stopper and taking a sniff. The smell wasn’t exactly appealing, it was sharp and medicinal, but there was nothing to be done about that.

“Cheers,” she said, voice grim, and she downed the contents in one. It didn’t taste any better than it smelled, and she coughed violently. “That is absolutely disgusting.”

“Well, stuff that does you good usually is.” Ariel created ripples in the water with her fin. “Except perhaps the Hudson. That wouldn’t do anyone any good.”

For a moment, nothing happened, but then the memories started coming back to her, as if the floodgates had been opened. Flashes of her real life since Henry’s birth. Him arriving in Boston as a fresh-faced ten-year-old. Her parents. The Enchanted Forest. Neal. Losing him again. Neverland. Finding him again. That terrible stand-off at the well of Nostos, Pan’s curse, Rumpelstiltskin dying to save them all. Regina reversing her curse, losing Neal again, crossing the town line for the final time… It was almost too much to bear, and she grabbed the pier railing to steady herself as the memories continued to stream in unabated. Graham dying, Henry dying, True Love’s Kiss, Neal meeting Henry for the first time, her parents promising that they’d remember her, Belle screaming by the well, saying goodbye to everyone, the gnawing knowledge that her wonderful life with Henry had all been a lie.

“Hey, hey, it’s ok.”

Gradually Emma came back to herself, aware of cold hands on her chest and shoulders, and she realised that Ariel was holding her upright. She shook off the mermaid’s touch and stared out over the river, wiping her face where she hadn’t realised that she’d begun to cry.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” she muttered, fishing for a tissue and blowing her nose. “The fact I
forgot all that or the fact that what I did remember isn’t real.” She turned to Ariel. “You said that my family needed my help. What happened?”

Ariel shook her head.

“I don’t know. Mine and Eric’s kingdom is on the very edge of the Enchanted Forest, we’re a bit cut off from everyone else. All I know is that another dark curse was coming, like the first one that brought us all here. Something had happened, some new power had risen. Neal and Belle sent me to warn you, and get you to Storybrooke if I could.”

Emma nodded. “Are they ok? Neal and Belle?”

“They looked ok the last time I saw them,” Ariel said. “That was a few days ago and the curse was nearly upon them then.”

Emma nodded, still reeling from the revelation.

“Well, it looks like my next job is taking me to Storybrooke,” she said. “Do you think they’ll remember me?”

Ariel shrugged. “I don’t know. I was spared the curse because I was already on my way here. I have no idea what might have happened, or if they reached Storybrooke.”

“I think they did.” It was a few days ago that Emma’s unease had begun to rear its head, and it was too much of a coincidence.

“Well, if they did, I’d better get back there.” Ariel slipped back into the water. “I think swimming away quietly will attract less attention than my first landing did. I’ll see you in Storybrooke?”

Emma nodded, and with a wave and a flick of her tail, Ariel was gone, diving below the surface again.

Emma continued to sit on the end of the pier for a long time, until her phone began to ring. Sure enough, it was Henry.

“Hey Mom. Where are you? I was getting worried.”

“I’m ok, I’m on my way.” She scrabbled up and began hurrying back towards the bagel shop. “Something came up; I bumped into an old friend who had a job for me.”

“Ok.”

“Yeah, Henry, we’re going to need to go out of town for a while. We have to go up north for this one and I really don’t know how long it might take.”

“A road trip? Cool!”

Emma gave a weak smile at Henry’s enthusiasm. For all she might remember, she knew Henry did not and there was no more potion.

This trip might prove trickier than anticipated.
The camp broke up early the next morning to begin the journey to the palace, stopping off at the village Regina had correctly predicted to pick up supplies and horses. The locals were completely agape to find not only that Snow and James and the others had returned to the realm, but that they were working with Regina. The stares and whispers were making the former queen distinctly uncomfortable. She was very aware of public opinion of her and always had been, but now she felt no great sense of distinction or relish in seeing people’s fear and mistrust, and there was a definite sense of unease, feeling as if the presence of Snow and James was her only protection. Had she been alone, she had no doubt that the people would have been cowering, but as it was, there was a sense of defeat in the air. Her defeat, to be specific. In the end, the scrutiny became too much and she moved away to wait for the others at the edge of the village. Noticing her separation from the rest of the group, Robin came over to her. His manner was casual, but Regina could tell that he was still on his guard.

“Checking up on me?” she asked. She hadn’t intended it to sound malicious, but it came out with a hard edge.

“Yes,” Robin said simply. “Their majesties might trust you, but I’m not usually one to trust those in a position of power at the best of times, however benevolent they might be.”

“I suppose this is the price to be paid,” Regina said with a sigh.

“Well, there is that about it. The people here – myself included – haven’t been party to the mended bonds and truces of Storybrooke. We’ve missed out on thirty years of negotiations and as far as we’re concerned, the status quo and infighting remains the same. There’s also the fact that I spent most of the past few years prior to the curse on the run from your guards, so I’m sure you’ll forgive my cynicism.”

“That is certainly a good reason not to trust me, I suppose. Although I don’t have a battalion of guards to hand at the moment.”

Robin smiled. “That does provide a little consolation. Still, I’m prepared to keep an open mind. People can change.”

“Children change you,” Regina said. Robin nodded.

“I’m sorry you had to leave your son. I don’t know what I would do if I were separated from Roland.” His words were earnest and Regina gave a weak smile.

“Thank you. I know that Snow and James have hope of being reunited with Emma again, but…”

“You don’t have hope for Henry?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple. All magic comes at a price, even magic with good intent. Rumpelstiltskin told me a while ago that losing Henry might be the price I have to pay. I think that maybe he was right after all. Losing Henry is the price I have to pay for reversing the curse.”

“Maybe.”

Regina gave him a sideways glance. “You’re not very reassuring, you know.”

“I wasn’t trying to be. But I can be understanding, even if I don’t understand why Snow and James
trust you.”

Regina snorted. “Sometimes I don’t understand that myself. But that’s the thing about inherently good people. They’re always seeing the best in others.”

Roland toddled over at that point, and the fact that he seemed completely oblivious to the fact that Regina was an enemy and showed no fear of her was reassuring. Regina smiled, remembering how precocious and curious Henry had been at that age. She wanted to ask about Roland’s mother, but something stopped her, a sense that she didn’t want to know and didn’t want to rock the boat.

Almost instinctively, Robin reached out to grab his son, settling him on his shoulders where he sat so often, and Regina couldn’t say that she blamed him for wanting to keep Roland away from her, at least until she’d proved herself trustworthy. She wondered how she was going to go about that. All the same, Roland didn’t take his eyes off her, fascinated by her opulent dress. Not for the first time, Regina found herself wishing that the curse reversal had seen fit to provide her with some slightly more practical clothing. At least they hadn’t arrived back in what they’d been wearing when they left - Snow in a bloody nightgown and Belle in prisoner’s rags might have attracted more than a few raised eyebrows.

“You’re really pretty,” Roland said presently, bringing her out of her thoughts and back to the present. There was something dreamy and rapturous in his voice, and both Regina and Robin had to laugh at how thoroughly smitten he sounded.

“Thank you, brave Knight Roland.” Regina gave him a little curtsy and Roland giggled. “You might be a little too short for me to dance with though.”

Roland shrugged. “That’s ok. You can dance with Papa instead.”

Roland looked up at his son, raising an eyebrow.

“Roland, you’re far too young to be matchmaking,” he muttered. His face was red when he looked back to Regina. “Sorry about that. You know what they’re like at that age. They’ll say anything that comes into their heads.”

“Oh, I know. Henry was just the same.”

They lapsed into silence again, but unlike before, it was not awkward, and Regina found herself enjoying Robin and Roland’s quiet company until it was time for them all to start moving again.

New York – Present

Emma paused in the middle of packing her bags, wondering just how much stuff she was going to need to take. Ariel hadn’t given her any details but if the Enchanted Forest had returned to Storybrooke, then something catastrophic must have happened. Would any of them even remember who she was, or would everything be reset to the way it was before? The entire town oblivious to their true identities? She thought about how long it had taken her to break the first curse. Would it even work that way again since she already believed? With a sigh, she threw a few more pairs of socks and underwear into the bag and looked around her room again. Would she even be coming back here after their trip to Storybrooke? Before, her life had always been transient and she’d never made her home anywhere. Now…
Well, even now, New York was only the illusion of home. All the same, this was where her life was. This was where Henry’s life was. Henry. Still blissfully oblivious. She had no idea how she was going to handle Storybrooke, a town where everyone knew him and yet he would remember no-one. For a moment she wished that everyone in town’s memories would be wiped as well and she wouldn’t need to worry.

Then there was Neal. Emma didn’t really want to think about Neal, not when she was so nicely settled with Walsh, who was about to propose, for God’s sake. Still, he had a right to be part of Henry’s life if he wanted, and she knew that he did want it – and that Henry wanted it too, even if he didn’t remember that right now.

She peered out of her room and through into Henry’s where he was doing his own packing, and she called to him.

“Henry?”

“Yes Mom?”

“I…” She trailed off, steeled herself, and went over to his doorway. “Henry, there’s something I need to tell you about this trip and the place we’re going.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“It’s, well…” Emma sighed. “Your dad’s going to be there.”

“Ok.” Henry sat down on his bed and Emma came across the room to join him. “Is that going to be a problem?” he asked. “Considering what happened before I was born… I mean, I’ve never met him, and you’ve never been all that complimentary about him.”

Emma cringed. “Yeah, I know. But I’ve had some news about him, and he’s not a bad person, Henry. He’s just… He trusted the wrong people and I got the wrong impression of him.”

“Ok.” Henry was lost in thought for a moment, and then his brow furrowed and she shook himself.

“What’s up?” Emma asked.

“Nothing, just déjà vu, I think.”

“Really?”

“Yeah… I just seem to remember something about my dad… When you mentioned him I had this really strong memory of eating pizza downtown. But I couldn’t have been eating pizza with him, right? He doesn’t even know about me.”

Emma gave a wan smile. “Maybe in another life, kid.”

“So who was that woman earlier?”

“Which woman?” Emma cringed at just how unconvincing she sounded and Henry just raised an eyebrow. “She was an acquaintance of a friend,” she said eventually.

“Right.” Henry still wasn’t buying it. “Is there a reason why she wasn’t wearing any shoes and looked like she’d been swimming in the East River?”

“It was the Hudson, actually,” Emma said mildly. She sighed. “Henry, I’m going to need you to trust me on this one, ok? I promise that I’ll explain everything as soon as I can, but this whole thing is so
complicated at the moment. Just know that we’re going to catch some bad guys and that it will all be clear later.”

Henry looked at her for a moment, his expression thoughtful.

“Ok,” he said. “I’ll leave it alone for now and just enjoy the vacation.”

Emma smiled. “Thanks kid. I promise it will all make sense soon.”

“I know. It’s just been a pretty weird day, that’s all.”

“You’re telling me,” Emma muttered. “You all packed? We need to get going, it’s a long drive to Maine.”

There was a shrill ring of the doorbell and Emma rushed to answer it in case it was Ariel coming with last minute instructions for her.

It wasn’t Ariel. It was Walsh.

“Hi,” he said brightly. “I brought lunch…” He held up a couple of paper bags. I was in the area and I thought…” He trailed off and his brow furrowed. “Is everything ok, Emma?”

“Yes, no, oh, I don’t know. Look, Walsh, it’s really sweet of you to come over, but it’s really not a good time right now.”

“Emma, what’s going on?” He peered past her into the apartment, taking in their bags in the hall and Henry with his backpack, hovering. “Are you going somewhere?” he asked.

Emma nodded and took a step back to let Walsh into the apartment fully.

“Yeah, it’s my latest job. I have to go to Maine for a while. Henry’s coming with me.”

“A while?” Walsh said. “How long will you be away?”

Emma didn’t want to think about the possibility that, depending on what she found in Storybrooke, she might not be coming back, at least not any time soon. She felt so bad for Walsh, and she was suddenly unsure where he fitted into her life now that she had a completely new set of memories. On the one hand, she now remembered her tentative reconciliation with Neal. On the other hand, this past year had been real. Her relationship with Walsh was genuine, and her feelings towards him had been – and still were – one of the few real things that she had left to cling to. She couldn’t just up and walk out on him like he was nothing. He wasn’t nothing.

She pulled him into her bedroom, away from Henry’s ears, although why it was so important for her to have this conversation in private wasn’t quite clear to her.

“Walsh,” she began. “This latest case… It’s going to be a complicated one. I don’t know how long it might take.”

Walsh nodded his understanding. “There’s something else, isn’t there?” he said softly. “Something’s bothering you, Em.”

He reached out to take her hand and Emma snatched it back, covering the action by combing her fingers through her hair.

“I… Walsh, I’ve found my family,” she said eventually. “They’re in this town I’m going to. My mom and dad are there, and I want to go and find them.”
Walsh smiled. “Then I’d like to come with you.”

“Pardon?”

“I’d like to come with you,” he repeated earnestly. “I know how much your family means to you and I know how much you’ve wanted to find them. But I know that this is going to be an emotional time for you and I’d like to be there to support you and Henry. You need a backup.” He shrugged. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Emma’s first instinct was to immediately shut the suggestion down, but the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. If Walsh came with them then he could keep Henry company in oblivion about the town’s true nature, and maybe she’d be able to keep Henry in the dark for a little while longer.

“Henry’s father is going to be there too,” she warned. Walsh shrugged.

“I like to think I’m a civilised guy that you can trust around exes.”

Emma gave a weak smile. Considering she had no idea how much anyone in Storybrooke was going to remember, it might all be a moot point.

“Ok,” she said eventually. “I think it’ll be good for Henry too to have you there.”

Walsh smiled and leaned in to kiss her cheek tenderly. “I’ll go home and pack.” He remembered the lunch bags then, pressing them into her hands before leaving the room and the apartment.

“Everything ok?” Henry asked once Walsh had gone.

“Yeah,” Emma said. “Yeah, everything’s going to be fine. Walsh is going to come on the trip with us.”

“Cool.” Henry grinned. “It’s really turning into a family road trip. Maybe he’ll propose once you’ve caught the guy.”

“Henry!”

He disappeared back into is room before Emma could think up a response and she sighed, hoping she had made the right decision to let Walsh come with them. He and Henry were the two real things in her life, and she was damned if she was going to lose either of them.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Henry was fast asleep in the back of the bug when they pulled into Storybrooke but Walsh, who’d fallen into a doze in the passenger seat, jolted awake as Emma parked up. It was dark, night having long since fallen, and Emma was reminded of the first time that she had driven into Stoyrbooke.

“Is this it?” Walsh asked, looking around at the quiet town. Emma nodded. Part of her expected Archie and Pongo to come around the corner at any moment.

“There’s a bed and breakfast just around the block, I’m going to get us a room. You stay here with Henry.”
“Sure,” Walsh agreed affably, continuing to take in the limited scenery. He was probably regretting his decision to come with them, but Emma was glad. If the town did remember, then she needed to forewarn them that Henry didn’t. She got out of the car and began to make her way towards Granny’s with trepidation. The diner looked to be its usual self, but she didn’t go in, and no-one noticed her pass on her way round to the inn.

It looked exactly the same as her first visit, and with a little jolt she realised that she wouldn’t be meeting Gold this time. Sure, their relationship had been antagonistic but he’d taught her so much, and his fate, now that she remembered it, was a poignant one. Ringing the bell for attention, she rocked back and forth on her feet expectantly.

Granny bustled out of the back room, completely unchanged, and she stopped in her tracks when she saw Emma standing at the reception desk.

“Hi.” Emma waved nervously, and Granny smiled.

“Emma. It’s so good to see you. You… remember?” she hedged. Emma nodded.

“Yes. Even some things I’d rather forget. But I remember. And you do, too.”

“We do. What about Henry?” Granny asked eagerly. “Is he here with you?”

“Yes, he is, but Granny, he doesn’t remember. Ariel only brought enough potion for one.”

Granny nodded. “I understand. I’ll warn Ruby not to be too familiar.”

They got the accommodation sorted out, and Granny gave a sigh.

“Your parents will be so happy to see you.”

“They’re here? They remember me?”

“Yes. They’re still in the loft where they were.”

Emma gave a grateful nod. “Thanks Granny.” There was a somewhat awkward silence, then Emma turned to leave. “I’ll just go and get the guys.”

Henry had woken up by the time she got back to the bug, and he was looking somewhat unimpressed by his new surroundings.

“Yeah, it’s nothing special, but it’s going to be home base for the next few days whilst we get this sorted out.” Emma got back into the car and drove around to the inn’s small carpark. It looked like they were the only patrons, and that thought gave Emma a momentary comfort. Whatever it was that had threatened her family, it had not come from outside, and they didn’t have to worry about another stranger having found the town, like Greg. Although he hadn’t exactly been a stranger… Emma glanced sideways at Walsh. He was the new stranger in town, and she hoped that he wouldn’t notice any of the unusual goings on. Did the town even have magic any more since the advent of this second curse, or had everything reset completely to the way it had been before? She looked over at Henry as he got out of the car and made his way up the steps to the bed and breakfast. In a way she hoped that he would see something odd going on and that it would trigger his real memories to return.

Granny was as good as her word, giving no indication that she already knew Henry and just welcoming him and Walsh to the town. As they were making their way up to the room, Henry stopped.
“Are you ok?” Emma asked, taking in the puzzled look on his face.

“Yeah.” Henry didn’t sound all that sure. “Just déjà vu again. I got this weird feeling that I’ve been here before, and that I’ve met Granny before.”

It was so tempting to say ‘you have’, but Emma left it, just giving him a bright smile that felt forced.

“Well, it’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “Come on, let’s get settled in. It’s been a long day and I’ve got a couple of things that I want to do now that we’re here.”

“Mom, I really don’t think that anyone’s going to be doing anything at this time in a down like this,” Henry said sagely.

“Well, you know what they say. Evil never sleeps.”

“Bit dramatic huh, Mom?”

Emma laughed, but she was a lot more convinced of her words than Henry and his understandable scepticism.

Once they were settled in the room, Walsh trying to get wifi signal on his phone to no avail and Henry installed on the sofabed playing *Space Paranoids*, Emma grabbed her jacket again.

“Right, I’m going out for a little while, I’ve got some people to see.”

“We’ve only just got here,” Walsh said. “And it’s late.”

“I really need to check in as soon as possible,” Emma said, the half-lie coming easily. “And I shouldn’t be gone too long.”

She left the room before any more protests could be made, rushing down the stairs. She was almost out of the door when Granny’s voice called her back.

“Emma?”

She looked over her shoulder. “Yes?”

Granny was looking worried as she came over. “You’re going to see your parents?” she asked. Emma nodded.

“Is there a problem with that?”

Granny shook her head. “No, no, it’s not a problem, but just remember… A year’s gone by for us, too.”

“Right.” Armed with that cryptic warning, Emma made her way through the sleepy town to the building where she had lived with Henry, Mary Margaret and David. As she climbed the stairs, she felt uncharacteristic nerves growing in the back of her mind. Sure, Granny remembered, and she’d said that her parents remembered too, but Emma still didn’t know what had happened to bring them here. Maybe she should have asked Granny what was going on, but Ariel had said that her family needed her help, so she was going to see her family. She knocked sharply on the door, and David answered a moment later.

For a few seconds they just looked at each other as they each tried to work out how much the other remembered.
“Hi,” Emma said eventually. “I’m here.”

“Emma.” David smiled, and in the split second before he threw his arms around her, Emma could see tears welling in his eyes.

“Hi Dad,” she said, patting his back. Whilst she’d become far more accepting of hugs during her previous time in Storybrooke, she still wasn’t the most tactile of people.

“Who is it, honey?” Mary Margaret called from the living room. Thankfully David released Emma from the tight embrace before he replied, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand.

“Our daughter,” he replied.

“Emma!”

There was the sound of something being thrown to the floor and footsteps.

“What happened?” Emma asked as David stepped back to allow her into the apartment, but she stopped short on seeing Mary Margaret. Her mother was very obviously and undeniably pregnant, and suddenly the question ‘what happened’ seemed redundant.

“We don’t know,” Mary Margaret said, hugging Emma as tightly as her bump would allow. She didn’t hold on for as long as David, remembering that Emma didn’t like to be touched in times of emotional upheaval. “Well…” She patted her bump. “We don’t know why we’re back. The last thing we remember is saying goodbye to you at the town line and then we woke up here again, and a year had gone by. And I’m, well, ready to pop if I’m honest.”

“It was a bit of a shock for us, too,” David said, indicating for Emma to sit down before going to put the kettle on. Emma just sat, dumbfounded for a moment. She had no idea how she was supposed to react to this news, even though she knew, logically, that Mary Margaret and David were perfectly able to have more children, the idea of it had never crossed her mind and she still couldn’t process it, so she decided to put it to the back of her mind and ignore it for now.

“Do you not remember anything?”

“Nothing,” David said, bringing the tea over. “How do you remember?”

“Ariel found me, she gave me a memory potion and told me that Neal and Belle had sent her. Are they ok?”

“Yes, they’re living in Gold’s house.” Mary Margaret bit her lip. “There’s a funeral tomorrow… since we didn’t have the chance to have one before and we can’t remember having one in the Enchanted Forest after we got back there.”

“Of course,” Emma said. After Gold’s sacrifice it was the least she could do. “What about everyone else? Are they all ok?”

“So far as we can see. There are a few more come over this time, we’re working with Regina to do a full census so we know who everyone is, but even they don’t remember, all they remember is the day we arrived back there.”

Emma took a sip of her tea. It seemed like her task was going to be harder than she had first thought it would be, and she had her work cut out for her.

“Emma, whatever happens and whatever has happened, we are so glad to see you,” Mary Margaret
said earnestly.

Emma smiled, and her reply was genuine despite her tumultuous emotions.

“I’m glad to see you too.”

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**Storybrooke – Present**

Walsh looked out of the floral curtains of Granny’s Bed and Breakfast, and he wondered for a moment if there had ever been a place quite as stuck in the past as Storybrooke was. It hadn’t had an update since the last time it was here, if all reports were to be believed. There was no-one about. Small town. Not much of a night life. He missed New York; at least there everything had seemed vibrant and alive. This place reminded him too much of the small towns in Kansas that he’d been brought up in. Still, at least that meant there was no-one around to question his motives.

He glanced back into the room towards Henry, who was lounging on one of the beds with his Gameboy. Henry fit here, somehow, better than he’d fitted in New York. The town didn’t give him the creeps like it did Walsh.

“Hey, Henry?”

Henry looked up, head on one side.

“What’s up, Walsh?”

“Will you be ok if I go and take a walk for a bit? All that time cooped up in the car and now cooped up in here; I need some air.”

“Sure,” Henry said. “I’ll be fine. It’s not like all that much can happen in a town like Storybrooke.”

He looked around the chintzy furnishings with typical teenage distaste. “Mom seems to think we’ll be here a while. Makes sense to get your bearings.”

Walsh nodded gratefully. “Yeah, I think I’ll do that.”

“Who would run here?” Henry mused. “I mean, sure, it’s out of the way, but it’s a small place. Strangers will stick out.”

He went back to his game and Walsh smiled wryly to himself. Who indeed would come here?

“There’s not much to see,” Henry said without looking up. “Just the Main Street, and everything’s closed after seven apart from the diner and that seedy nightclub we passed on the way in.”

“Been here before, have you?” Walsh chuckled.

“No.” Henry’s fingers stilled on his console and he looked puzzled for a moment. “Just an impression, I guess.”

“Ok. I’ll see you later, kid.”

Walsh left the room, looking around furtively for any patrons or for Granny herself. There was no-one in sight and the reception desk was unmanned, so he slipped out of the building, turning his collar up and keeping his head down as he walked purposefully in the other direction to the main
street, down towards where the buildings ended and the road led out of town. He veered off suddenly up a dirt track that he knew had not been there the first time around, tramping up it in the waning light towards the house at the top of the hill, a ramshackle old building with no lights in the windows. For a brief moment he wondered if something had gone wrong, but then he saw a flicker of movement, a twitching lace curtain. She'd been watching out for him.

The door opened before he reached it, but there was no-one to see in the gloom behind it. There was no mistaking her voice though, as cold and cruel as it had always been.

“And?” she snapped. He could see blood red fingernails gripping the edge of the door. She was nervous. It was a new look on her. “Were you successful?”

Walsh just smiled.

“Yes, Mistress. The saviour has come to Storybrooke. Looks like she’s here to stay. Unfinished… family business.”

Her grip on the door relaxed.

“Well done, pet,” she cooed. The hand reached out to touch his face but Walsh recoiled.

“I have to get back, they’ll be missing me. Maintain cover at all times, that’s what you said.” He paused. “Besides, I heard you had a new pet.”

“He bites.” The voice was clipped, snarling. Walsh knew that he’d touched a sore spot and he smirked at the small victory.

“I’ll report in soon,” he said, stepping away from the door as it closed and making his way back down the track.

There was no-one around to see his eyes flicker hideous yellow in the moonlight.
313 - Monkey Business

Storybrooke – Present

The day had dawned grey and overcast, and as Emma pulled on her black jacket, she thought how grimly appropriate it was for a funeral. She was surprised by how many people had come to the cemetery to pay their respects, but she supposed that in a society based almost entirely on fairy tales, deeds of great heroism were celebrated no matter who performed them, and sacrificing one’s own life ought to rank pretty highly on the heroism stakes. Standing at the graveside, she caught Neal’s eye where he was standing with Belle, one arm protectively around his pseudo-stepmother’s shoulders as she cried, and they exchanged a brief, melancholy smile. It felt wrong to be feeling so glad at such a sad occasion, especially such a sad occasion for Neal, but Emma was just so relieved to see him in one piece having survived whatever it was that had happened in their missing year.

As people began to drift away from the grave in dribs and drabs, David and Mary Margaret came over to Belle and Neal slipped away from the group, making his way over to Emma.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself. I’m sorry about all this.”

“Yeah, I am too.” Neal paused and looked back over his shoulder at the headstone. Rumpelstiltskin. Beloved father. “Regina got it made up,” he said. “We’re not quite sure how come we’ve still got magic here but for now I think we’re grateful.”

“Maybe whoever brought you here knew that they would need it.” Emma glanced over at Regina. “I don’t suppose you know what happened or why you’re here?”

Neal shook his head. “No, we’re all as in the dark as each other.”

“Well, I’m here now, just as you and Belle asked. Let’s see if we can’t get to the bottom of this.” She looked over at Regina again, and Neal followed her sightline.

“You think she did it again?” he asked. Emma shook her head slowly.

“No, I don’t think so. It feels wrong somehow. Why would she? And why not just reset to the original curse?”

“True. I guess if we knew what happened in the Enchanted Forest we’d know if anyone had a motive.”

“Just another mystery to be solved.” Emma thought of Ariel’s message, that her family needed her and were in danger, and a shiver ran down her spine. Sure, there weren’t any creepy shadows floating about or direct threats, but the invisible evil lurking around the corner was always scarier than the physical thing that you could see and pick a fight with.

“Yeah, one that’s got the whole town on edge whilst we’re still trying to come to terms with the last huge thing that threatened us and the fallout from that.” He gave a weak smile. “I know I’m not in the best mood right now, but it’s really good to see you, Em. I’m so glad you’re ok.”

“I’m really glad that you’re ok too,” Emma replied. “However strange or awkward the circumstances might be.”
“Yeah. How’s Henry doing? Granny says he’s shot up like a beanstalk.”

Emma laughed. “He has, it’s scary.” She paused. “He doesn’t remember you, Neal.”

“Yeah, Granny said that too.” Neal sighed. “I’m not going to try and insert myself back into your life and act like nothing’s happened and a year hasn’t passed, but I don’t want to just pretend that everything that did happen before you went to New York didn’t, if you know what I mean. He’s a really great kid, Emma, and I want to be his dad.”

Emma nodded. “Yes, I want that too. And I know that when Henry remembers, he’ll want it as well. I just don’t know when that will happen. If it will happen,” she added as an afterthought just in case. “I can’t make you wait forever to be his dad… If you don’t mind starting from scratch again then I think it would be good for you both to meet, if you want.”

They had wandered away from the grave at this point, back toward the yellow bug that Emma had arrived in. Belle was hosting the wake in the diner but Emma didn’t really want to go; not out of any disrespect but because she really didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that she was here and she was apparently going to save them all again.

Neal nodded. “I’d like that. You never know, my dashing good looks might trigger a memory.”

“Yeah, he got déjà vu meeting Granny yesterday so… maybe not.”

“Granny has very dashing good looks! I’m going to tell her you said that, you know.”

In spite of it all, Emma had to laugh, and Neal did too. It was good, as if nothing had happened, but ultimately the reality of the situation caught up with them and they fell back to silence as they made the journey back to the inn.

X

Neal was unaccountably nervous as he went up the stairs towards Emma and Henry’s room.

“Em,” he began, knowing that his question was likely to sound petty and stupid but unable to avoid giving voice to his fear. “What if this time around he doesn’t like me?”

“Emma didn’t respond for a long time, until they were standing outside the door.

“I don’t know, she said eventually, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t know anything anymore, Neal. I don’t even really know why I’m here. All I can say is that even though Henry doesn’t have a memory of you, you’re both still the same people that you were.”

“That’s very true. And if it makes you feel any better, none of the rest of us know why we’re here either.”

“I suppose we’re just going to have to take each day as it comes, like we always used to,” Emma said.

She opened the door and Neal entered with her. He knew that she’d come to town with a partner as well as Henry, but he was still somewhat surprised to see the other man as he came over and greeted Emma with a kiss on the cheek.

“How was the service?” he asked.

Emma nodded. “It was good. Well, as good as a funeral can ever be.” Her eyes flickered from Walsh
to Henry, who had looked up from his Gameboy and was watching the proceedings with curiosity, and then to Neal.

“Walsh, Henry, this is Neal.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Walsh held out a hand, his manner affable, and Neal shook it unsurely. Although he had not noticed it at first, now that he paid the man his full attention, he could see that there was something familiar about him, and the thought made Neal uneasy. With such a huge gap missing from his memories, the slightest flicker of recognition could either be a curse or a blessing.

“Have we met before?” he asked plainly, although he wasn’t convinced he’d get any kind of satisfactory answer.

“Possibly. Ever bought furniture in Brooklyn?”

Neal shrugged, still not entirely convinced of Walsh’s benignity. He couldn’t deny that he’d lived in New York for a time, but that little stab of familiarity seemed to be much more recent. Within the last twelve months.

“Walsh, could you give us some time please?” Emma asked. “The diner’s closed for the wake but there are a couple of other places open.”

“Sure. From what I’ve seen of the town it’s not exactly easy to get lost.” He grabbed his coat and left the room, his eyes lingering on Neal for a while that made him wonder if the feeling of déjà vu was mutual. “Call me if you need anything.”

Emma nodded, closing the door after him and resting her forehead against it.

“Mom?” Henry hedged. “Everything ok?”

Emma moved away from the door, the brightness in her voice painfully false as she replied.

“Yes, everything’s fine. Neal, why don’t you take a seat?”

Neal did as bid, sitting down in the chair whilst Emma sank onto the end of the bed. Henry kept looking between them.

“You’re my dad, aren’t you?” he asked Neal plainly.

Neal nodded. “Yeah, I am. Sorry it took this long to meet you.”

“That’s ok. I guess you didn’t know.”

“Yeah.” It was a perfect mirror to their first meeting in New York, and it broke Neal’s heart to think of all the things they’d been to as a strange little family that Henry no longer remembered. Although… Abduction, Neverland, Pan, shadows… Maybe some things were best left forgotten.

“I know it’s not a great time at the moment, but I’d really like to get to know you better,” Neal began, reasoning that honesty was probably the best policy.

“Is this the part where you suggest that we go fishing?” Henry asked, but there was humour behind the sarcasm and, Neal thought, the faintest hint of hope. He shook his head with a laugh.

“No, I don’t know one end of a fishing rod from the other, but it might be an exercise in comedy if nothing else. Maybe just going for pizza?”
“All right.” A smile began to spread over Henry’s face. “But you know that the best pizza in the world is in New York, right?”

“Good to know that you’ve inherited my excellent taste. I guess I’ll have to come to New York in the future, but Luigi’s here in town could work as a stopgap, yeah?”

“Sure.”

There was silence for a few moments but although it wasn’t entirely comfortable, it wasn’t wholly awkward either.

“I’ll see you tonight for pizza at Luigi’s then,” Neal said eventually. “Your mom and Walsh can come along too. We’ll seat them at another table though so that they don’t cramp our style.”

“Hey!” Emma protested, and Henry laughed.

“I should probably get back to the wake and relieve Belle,” Neal said, rising. “She’s so strong but even she’s got a breaking point. You’re very welcome if you do want to come. Regina made lasagne.”

Emma nodded. “I might look in in a while. We’ll see you later though.”

“Yes. It was good to meet you, Henry,” he said, and he gave a sigh. “I know I don’t have all that much experience at being a dad, but I had a really complicated relationship with my own dad, who, well…” He indicted his black suit and tie and Henry gave a sage nod of understanding. “So I just want to make sure that you don’t have the same problems as I did.”

Henry nodded. “That’s cool. Thanks.”

Emma got up to get the door, stepping out into the corridor with him.

“Thank you,” Neal said.

“I know it’s not ideal, and it’s not the same as it was…”

“It’s better than nothing. Way better than nothing. And starting from scratch again isn’t the end of the world. We all just have to do what we can.”

“Yeah. I just wish it didn’t have to be that way.”

Neal took Emma’s hand, squeezing briefly before letting go. “We’ll make it work. That’s one thing that you and I are good at. Making life work.”

“Thanks, Neal.”

He left them then, heading out of the inn and back towards the diner, and he saw Walsh on the street opposite, wandering along and looking in shop windows. He appeared harmless enough, but as Neal knew from experience, appearances could be deceptive.

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

They reached the edge of the forest that led out to the castle within a few days of travelling and
Robin stopped them at the treeline.

“We can’t go any further than this,” he said. “The wards in place are powerful and whoever’s inside has the monkeys on guard at all times.”

“I’m telling you,” Neal muttered from the back of the group. “It’s the Wicked Witch of the West.”

“We need Jefferson,” Regina remarked. “If anyone could tell us if Oz exists or not then it’s him.”

“Yeah. Unfortunately he’s a jumper and he could be anywhere,” Charming pointed out. “His hat in Storybrooke might been destroyed but it’s not the only one in existence.”

“Wicked Witch or no Wicked Witch, we can’t have someone arriving out of nowhere and terrorising the local population,” Snow said firmly. “What kind of wards are we talking about here?”

“Impenetrable.” Robin shrugged. “It’s like a forcefield. Things can get out, but nothing gets in.”

Regina took a couple of steps forward out of the tree coverage and, when nothing immediately terrible happened, she kept going, striding out confidently into the no-man’s land between the forest and the castle.

“Regina, what are you doing?” Charming hissed.

“Finding out what we’re up against,” she replied calmly, taking another measured step forward and reaching out to touch the invisible force that prevented her going any further. A shower of angry green sparks hissed at her when she made contact and she withdrew her hand sharply before waving it in a wide arc, revealing the full extent of the shield around the palace. It formed a sickly green dome over the surrounding area and the sight of it made Snow feel somewhat queasy.

“That’s strange,” Regina muttered, reaching out towards the dome, close enough for sparks to form and start spitting but not close enough to touch them.

“What is?” Seeing that no attack was forthcoming, the others left the trees and came over to her.

“The colour of the magic,” Regina continued. “Green is unusual. Magic depends on the emotions being used to cast it. Negative emotions produce dark magic – purple, blue, red. These are the colours I use, and my mother and Rumpelstiltskin both used. Light magic is positive and white or grey. Magic created from love is golden. True love’s kiss shines every colour of the rainbow.” She shook her head. “I’ve never seen green before.”

“Wicked Witch of the West is looking ever more likely,” Belle said dryly. “So now what should we do?”

“We could try and send a message,” Snow said. “We can’t get through but perhaps something else could. A peace offering of some sort, to show that we mean no harm and we want to come to some kind of agreement.”

Regina and Robin both gave her an incredulous look, but Charming just shrugged.

“It’s worth a shot,” he said. “Come on, right now anything’s worth a shot.”

“How do you suggest we go about that then?” Regina asked. “It might have escaped your notice but there’s a great big green barrier in the way of most forms of communication. Unless your plan was to make large signs saying ‘we come in peace’ and wave them at the castle from here.”
Snow rolled her eyes with an exasperated sigh.

“No,” she began, but before she could elaborate on what her plan actually was, she was interrupted by the sound of Mulan drawing her sword.

“Incoming!” she yelled, and the group all turned to see three flying monkeys winging their way from the castle. They were flying fast and low, and it was clear that they were coming in for the attack. Snow immediately took up her bow and fired, but the arrow bounced off the green forcefield and landed uselessly at her feet.

“Fall back to the trees!” Robin yelled, waving at the others to go and readying his own bow, bringing up the rear of the retreating group as the monkeys plunged effortlessly through the protection and swooped down.

The adults reached the forest quickly, seeking cover, but little Roland, set down from his father’s shoulders, tripped over the long hem of his cloak, falling flat on his face in the open space.

“Roland!” The boy was more shocked than hurt, scrabbling to his feet rapidly, and continuing to stumble until Regina raced out of the forest again, grabbing him firmly under the arms and pulling him close to her chest to protect him as one of the monkeys lunged in for the kill. An arrow whizzed past, white-fletched, one of Snow’s. She’d been aiming to miss, to scare the beast, and Regina went one step further, setting the arrow alight as it continued on towards another monkey, which flapped away in fear. Satisfied, she rushed back to the group, Roland clinging to her for dear life, his face buried in her shoulder. Mulan and Robin, who had remained nearer the border, began falling back again as the monkeys appeared to start retreating, but Aurora’s brow was furrowed.

“Something’s not right,” she said. “They’re not usually scared off that easily.”

“You’re right,” Robin agreed. “They’re feinting.”

Standing at the edge of the treeline, there was something of a stand-off between the monkeys hovering inside the protective barrier – evidently they could come and go as they pleased – and the humans, all those able to bear weapons with them drawn up at the ready. The silence was tense, both parties waiting for something to happen.

“Why aren’t they attacking again?” Charming whispered.

“I don’t know,” Mulan replied. “Unless…” Her eyes widened and she whirled around with her sword in the same moment as Charming realised what was happening.

“Unless they’re just a distraction,” he groaned, as two more monkeys, larger than the ones that had previously attacked, crashed through the trees towards them from behind.

“Right, that’s not good.” Robin notched another arrowed and the rest of the merry men did likewise, Regina sending a burst of fire to ignite all the tips.

“Everyone head back to the camp!” Mulan yelled, readying her sword, and the unarmed part of the group began to move away through the trees, splitting up to distract the monkeys, but the beasts seemed to be intent on attacking the group who had remained near the boundaries to the magical wards. Flaming arrows were let fly at the creatures, who dodged instinctively to avoid them, letting out terrifying, inhuman cries. The largest of the monkeys didn’t seem to be perturbed by the fire, happy to let its comrades take the brunt of the attack as it kept on swooping towards the ground. Mulan and Charming swung their swords, slashing at its foot and making it hiss with pain, but it still did not pull back and they flung themselves to the ground to avoid its sharp claws.
“John, watch out!”

Robin’s warning came too late. Little John looked up from his bow to see the monkey heading straight for him, and he threw the weapon to the side, taking up his quarterstaff from the ground and using it to hold the beast off. The monkey, however, had other ideas, grabbing the staff from John’s grip and tossing it away into the trees before lunging in to grab the large man around the waist, claws digging into his bulk. John screamed as the monkey took off, powerful wings beating hard, and he fought against the iron grip that he was held in.

“No! John!”

Robin abandoned his own bow and ran after the monkey. The other creatures were falling back now, forming a guard group around the monkey holding John. One of the other merry men grabbed John’s quarterstaff from where it had fallen and tossed it to Robin, who frantically held it up, hoping for John to be able to grab the other end, but the monkey had already gained too much height. A fresh wave of fire and arrows shot past him as he ran, and they fell uselessly at the wards. Robin came to a stop, panting heavily as the magic pushed him back. He looked up, seeing a shimmer high above him as the wards opened just enough to let the monkeys through, and they flew on towards the castle.

Robin slammed his fists against the invisible forcefield, green sparks shooting out around him and crackling dangerously. When it became clear that the monkeys were not going to return and the fight was over, Charming, Regina and Mulan ventured out from the tree cover towards the boundary line.

“We’ll get him back, Robin,” Mulan said. “We’ll get back everyone that they took, I promise.”

“Yes, we’ll get to the bottom of this.” Charming put a friendly hand on Robin’s shoulder as he slumped in defeat.

Together they made their way back towards the camp where the others had gathered; Roland had been sitting with Aurora, who was pinning the hem of his cloak up to prevent any further mishaps, and he rushed over to Robin and Regina when they appeared.

“You’re all right!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, we’re all right.” Robin sighed. “The monkeys took your Uncle John though.”

“Oh. Is he going to be all right?”

“Yes,” Regina said definitively, and there was an edge of steel in her voice as she spoke, a determination that she was going to keep her unspoken promise. “Yes. He’s going to be all right and we’re going to get him back. We just need to make a plan.”

Roland’s scared young face brightened for a moment, and his utter faith in Regina’s ability tugged at something painful in her heart, reminding her of Henry, and she gave a small smile that did not reach her eyes before moving away, back towards Snow and Charming.

“We need a plan.”

X

John had given up trying to fight the monkey’s vice like grip on him; he was so high in the sky now that if the creature let go, he’d fall to his death. They were heading towards the castle, swooping in through a large open balcony window. The monkey summarily dropped John and he sprawled painfully on the hard, tiled floor. He looked around as he picked himself up; the monkeys were all flying up to rest in the eaves, their yellow eyes leering at him from their perches.
“Well well well.” The voice was cold and cruel, with a nasty little laugh to it, but as John glanced around the room, he could not see who was speaking. “You’ve done well, pet. This one will make a fine addition to our ranks.”

He caught sight of a cloak swishing over the floor and looked up, his eyes widening in fear when he saw the owner of the voice. Before he could say anything, a gloved hand waved sharply through the air and a wave of magic enveloped him, making him scream in pain as his shape began to change.

**Storybrooke – Present**

The wake was winding down as Emma entered the diner, only a few people still hanging around. Neal was alone at the bar, staring into the depths of a half-drunk cup of coffee, and Belle was sitting in one of the booths at the back, leaning on Mary Margaret’s shoulder. They both looked absolutely done in.

“Hey.” Neal looked up as Emma slid onto the stool beside him, picking at the final portion of cold lasagne.

“Hey.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. “I just wish I knew what happened last year. I know this is my father’s funeral and I should be thinking about that, but at the end of the day, that’s over, finite. He’s not coming back and that’s clear. But this missing memory… I can’t help but wonder what happened that was so awful that someone didn’t want us to remember it.” He paused. “You said that Belle and I sent you a message via Ariel. That we were in trouble and we needed your help.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah.”

“That’s what worries me. Because looking around at us now, I can’t see what’s wrong. Everything’s much the same as normal and there’s no imminent danger. That’s more unsettling than magic battles and other… weirdness.”

“Like a false sense of security,” Emma agreed.

“And a kind of paranoia,” Neal added. “Everyone’s looking at everyone else out of the corners of their eyes, wondering who’s responsible and why. I just wish that we had some kind of clue.”

“I suppose we can’t even fall back on what we know from the previous curse because there are new people in town this time around. It could be anyone.” Emma sighed. “Something’s got to be done sooner rather than later or we’ll end up with a mob mentality on our hands.” She shuddered as she remembered the uproar in the aftermath of the first curse breaking.

“Maybe we need a town hall or something, so that we can all pool our kind of non-existent knowledge and come up with a plan.”

“Yeah…” Emma tailed off as the sound of raised voices outside the diner reached them. “Or we could just improvise.” She rolled her eyes, slipping off the stool and going out into the street, Neal on her heels and Mary Margaret and Belle following close behind.

The group causing the disturbance wasn’t exactly unexpected. A few of the dwarves were standing with folded arms and glowering expressions, and Regina was on the defensive, hands at the grab-ready. They all looked over at Emma as she came onto the scene, and it wasn’t for the first time that
she felt the weight of her status as ‘the saviour’ heavy on her shoulders, as if her mere presence could make everything all right.

“Please, guys, I haven’t officially been sworn in as sheriff again yet and I’ve been back less than a day, please don’t make me arrest anyone for disturbing the peace. What’s going on out here?”

“We were just speculating on who brought us here,” Leroy said, throwing a dark look at Regina who threw her hands up in defence.

“Why is everyone blaming me for this?” she exclaimed.

“Well, you do have precedent,” Belle pointed out.

Regina gave a cry of frustration. “I have no memory of the last year either! Do you really think I’d cast a curse and not remember why?”

Leroy shrugged. “You never know.”

Regina shot him a withering look. “Please, credit me with more intelligence than that.”

“Ok, ok, everyone calm down. We’re all in the dark here and the last thing we need is infighting,” Mary Margaret said. “Whatever it is that’s threatening us and brought us here, we need to show a united front against it.”

“That’s all very well, unless we’re forming a united front with the person who’s threatening us,” Leroy grumbled.

“For the love of… I can’t remember either, you imbecile!” Regina yelled.

“I thought I said ‘calm down’,” Mary Margaret muttered, burying her face in her palm.

“Well, how do we know that you aren’t just saying that?” Leroy snapped back.

“What do you want me to do, take a lie detector test?”

“Ok, that’s enough,” Emma said. “We’re going to get to the bottom of this, and we’re not going to do it in the remains of a funeral. Let’s go to the station and you can all air your grievances officially.”

Although looking somewhat mutinous, the others acquiesced and the little convoy set off in the direction of the sheriff’s office. Neal, Belle and Mary Margaret remained behind, and although Emma couldn’t blame them, she could have used the moral support.

David looked up in alarm from the deputy’s desk as they all trooped in, and he looked to Emma with raised eyebrows. She sighed.

“I’m attempting to stop the lynch mob before it starts,” she explained.

“Right.” David sat back down and grabbed a large pad of paper from the desk drawers. “I’ve got to admit, I’m surprised it’s taken us this long to come to blows.” Regina glared at him and he shrugged. “Just saying.”

“Look, I just want answers,” Leroy cut in. “Why are we here, who brought us here, and are we in any danger from anything?”

“Leroy, we already established that no-one knows anything when we first got back, and we haven’t finished the census to see if anyone can shed any light on the situation. Robin Hood’s down two
merry men and we don’t know whether they’re somewhere here or still in the Enchanted Forest.”

“Yeah, well, maybe people know more than they’re letting on.”

“I’m not staying here and listening to this!” Regina stormed out of the station and Emma ran after her, leaving David to deal with the dwarfs.

“Regina, wait!”

“No!”

“Regina, please, I’m on your side!”

“Well, you’re the only one.” Regina finally stopped and Emma caught up to her. She sighed, not meeting Emma’s eyes. “The stupid thing is that I don’t even know. It might have been me. The more everyone thinks that it was me, the more I think that maybe it was.”

“No, I don’t think that it was you.”

Regina finally looked up at her. “Really?”

Emma nodded. “Yeah. I know that my superpower is hit and miss and it’s only got more so recently, but I believe you when you say you didn’t cast the curse. I was saying to Neal earlier that it didn’t make any sense for you to have done it. I guess not everyone in the town thinks as logically as we do.”

“Everyone in town thinks that I’m the evil queen.”

“And I know that you’re trying to do better. You came with us to Neverland, you helped us defeat Pan, you rolled back a curse that had been so precious to you to save everyone. You gave me such a wonderful gift, of memories with Henry. I don’t think any of that would have happened if you were still the same person who cast the first curse.”

Regina sighed. “I know. Just sometimes it’s easier to live up to the stereotypes that people think of you than try to change them.”

“Believe me, I know all about that,” Emma said. “But if you work with us then we can clear your name and get to the bottom of all this.”

Regina leaned back against the outer wall of the sheriff’s station, silent for a long time, and then she nodded.

“Yes. That’s the best idea. What do you need me to do?”

“I have no idea,” Emma admitted. “Is there any way to create a memory potion like the one I took to wake me up?”

“I could try.” Regina said, but she didn’t sound all that convinced. “Curses are all different though, and all memory potions are different as well. If I had a sample of yours then maybe, but otherwise I could be here for days trying out all the different permutations.” She snorted. “How ironic. The one person who could tell us what to do is the one person we just metaphorically put in the ground. Rumpelstiltskin’s been around long enough to know all this at the drop of a hat.”

“Well, you’re definitely the next best person we’ve got when it comes to magic,” Emma said, and Regina smiled at the compliment.
“Right, I think that I’ve got the dwarves’ grievances aired.” David came out of the sheriff’s station rubbing his forehead. “You know, I think the best thing to do would be to go round the people who’ve come through for the first time and see if they can remember anything about what was going on before we got back. That might shed some light on it.”

Emma nodded. “Yes, that’s as good a suggestion as any.” She turned to Regina. “Want to come?”

Regina nodded, a little hesitantly.

“There’s a group camping out in the forest by the town line,” David said.

“Then that’s where we’ll start.”

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“Belle?”

Belle looked up to find Mulan hovering next to her, and she patted the log that she was sitting on, inviting the other woman to join her.

“Neal told me about what happened with Rumpelstiltskin,” she said. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Belle sighed. “I know. He died a hero and I know I should honour that, but deep down, a little part of me is really mad at him for leaving us like this. Everything was meant to be happy; we were together again and we had Neal back and nothing should have got in the way of that. And I know I ought to just leave it alone and let him rest in peace, but…” She took a long breath, finally giving voice to the thought that had been plaguing her ever since she had overcome her initial shock and had been able to think clearly about Rumpelstiltskin’s death. “But I don’t think that he is resting in peace. His body vanished and so did his dagger. If he was truly dead, then there would be a body to bury and mourn.”

Mulan nodded her understanding. “I don’t claim to know anything about how the Dark One’s curse works, but something that powerful that’s been around for so long and prevents its host from dying a natural death, well, I don’t think that it would be defeated so easily.”

“I don’t know.” Belle sighed, picking at a blade of grass and tossing it towards the fire. “Rumpel accepted death willingly, and that ought to count for something, but if there’s one thing that I’ve learned about the darkness within him, it’s that it always tries to protect itself, even if that hurts the good parts of him. It’s a constant struggle, one I don’t want him to lose after an act of sacrifice that came from a place of pure love.”

They remained in silence for a few minutes watching the fire, until Mulan began rummaging in her pack, finally unearthing an old book and presenting it to Belle.

“Here, this is yours. Now that you’re back I feel I ought to return it to you.”

Belle took the book, the same one that she had used to track down the yaoguai, and smiled at the memory of the adventure that had brought her and Mulan together in the first place.

“That’s right. You know, it helped us to get Philip back when his soul was lost,” Mulan said. “Maybe it can help you work out what happened to Rumpelstiltskin. There are certain things – entities I suppose – that cannot die and are bound to life. Perhaps the Dark One is one of those.”
“It’s as good a place to start as any. Thank you, Mulan.” Belle closed the book and put it with her own belongings.

“You’re welcome.” The two women sat staring into the fire for a little while longer, and presently Mulan gave a snort of laughter and a low sigh. “It’s silly really. We spent all that time finding Philip again and we were heading home. With the baby, this was meant to be a proper new start for us all and now we’ve ended up losing Philip again. I know it’s not the same as your situation because we know that he’s still alive. Well, we think he is. I guess what I’m trying to say is that Aurora and I know what you and Neal are going through, and if you need us, we’ll help you if we can.”

“I understand. Thank you.”

Belle gave a weak smile and gestured for Neal, sitting alone on the other side of the fire, to join them. He came over.

“What’s up, Belle?”

Belle took a moment to consider her answer.

“I’m going to go back to the Dark Castle,” she said eventually. “I know that I probably ought to leave well alone, but I can’t shake the feeling that there was something not quite right about Rumpel’s death. I don’t think that he’s moved on properly and I could never live with myself if I knew that I had the chance to rescue him from whatever fate he’s been given and I didn’t take it.”

She sighed. “I keep rationalising it with things like his expertise being useful against whatever it is that we’re facing, or helping you get back to Emma and Henry, but really it just comes down to the fact that I love him and I miss him and even if there’s nothing I can do to bring him back, I want to be sure that wherever he is now, he’s all right.”

Neal nodded. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting the best for your loved ones, even after death,” he said. “I don’t think that anyone would blame you for doing what you’re doing, least of all me. Especially here, and in Storybrooke… I think it’s safe to assume that perhaps death isn’t always as finite as we first thought, especially for a magical being as powerful as Papa was.”

“Exactly. If you want to come with me then you’ll be very welcome, but I can understand if you don’t want to prolong this grief with what might be false hope.”

“No, I’ll come,” Neal said. “There’s so much left unfinished and unsaid and most people don’t get the chance to right those wrongs. So I’ll take it if I can. And even if it comes to nothing, the Dark Castle is full of magical resources. We still might be able to find something useful.”

Belle nodded. “Yes, whatever happens, it won’t be a wasted trip.” She got to her feet, checking that her belongings were packed away. “I’ll go and tell Snow and Charming our plan.”

She made her way across the camp to the two royals, who were deep in serious conversation with Regina. It didn’t look like they were agreeing with each other.

“Neal and I are going to go back to the Dark Castle,” Belle announced, and the three of them looked up at her in surprise.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Snow asked. “There’s safety in numbers, after all.”

“Well, two’s better than one,” Belle countered. “Besides, I don’t think that whoever’s in the castle will pay much attention to the two of us quietly slipping away. The other people who’ve peeled off to go back to their own villages haven’t been attacked, and we’d be going away from the source of the monkeys, not towards it.”
“True.” Charming’s voice still betrayed his unease. “I still can’t help thinking of that first attack when the monkey went straight for you, almost single-mindedly.”

“But it hasn’t happened since,” Belle pointed out. “Whatever was going through its head that first time, nothing’s attacked me directly again. Besides, I’m no damsel in distress. I’ve dealt with beasts before.”

The others looked at each other, unsure what to say to that, and Belle rolled her eyes. “I was talking about hunting yaoguai with Mulan and dealing with rogue shadows in Storybrooke whilst you were all in Neverland,” she said. “Neal and I might not be great warriors but we know how to take care of ourselves.”

Snow gave a slow nod. “Well, we can’t stop you, even if we think it might be unwise, and if anyone’s going to be able to find their way around Rumpelstiltskin’s knowledge then it’s you two.”

“It’s not just the knowledge though, is it?” Regina had remained silent on the subject up until that point, and her voice was curiously soft and quiet. “Belle, you lived with him for years, surely you of all people must know what he always said. Dead is dead and magic can’t change that.”

“I’m well aware of that rule.” There was steel in Belle’s words, a grit and determination that belied the gentle and compassionate nature so often taken for granted in her. “But I have reason to believe that death, for the Dark One, is a little bit more complicated than that.”

“Well, we wish you all the best in your journey and we hope that you find what you’re looking for.” Snow stood up and gave Belle a hug. “Remember to keep in touch with us, and if you need anything, just let us know.”

“We will. And if we find anything that might help with the monkeys then you’ll be the first to know.”

Snow and Charming came over to Neal with Belle to extend their well wishes and saying goodbyes to the rest of the group took a few more moments. At last they were ready to depart. It would be a two day ride through the forest and the foothills of the mountains to get to the Dark Castle, and Belle wanted to get there as soon as possible.

“Ready?” She turned to Neal, who nodded.

“Let’s go.”

Watching the two of them ride away, Snow couldn’t help feeling saddened that their little group was now smaller, but she couldn’t begrudge Neal and Belle’s decision to leave them.

“Do you think they’ll be all right?” Charming asked. “It only just occurred to me how little we really know them properly. We only really know Neal as Henry’s father and Belle as Rumpelstiltskin’s true love, but not as themselves.”

“They’ll be all right,” Mulan said. “They’re both strong and sensible. Belle might be impulsive, but she’s very clever. They’ll be fine. They know what they’re doing.”

Reassured, Snow nodded and went back over to Regina, who was holding a bluebird at arm’s length with an expression of distaste.

“Your message is ready,” she said. “Are you sure that this is going to work?”

“No,” Snow said, carefully taking the bird from Regina and letting it perch on her finger. “But right
now we don’t have a lot of options and there’s always the chance that it might work. Doing nothing won’t have any positive effect, but doing something might.”

“Doing nothing also won’t have a negative effect,” Regina pointed out. “But I do know what you mean. We can’t keep watching our backs for monkeys the entire time and I’d quite like a roof over my head that isn’t made of canvas.”

Snow took it as a testament to Regina’s change for the better that she had not simply poofed herself back to her own castle at the first sign of danger, but if these negotiations didn’t go to plan, then they might all end up having to do just that. The forest was no place for a permanent base of what could well end up being a military operation. She stroked the bluebird’s head.

“You know what to do?” The bird nodded and took off, flitting away in the direction of the castle.

“Will it even get through?” Regina asked. Snow nodded.

“Yes. Birds and insects seem to pass through the barrier with no problem. Now all we have to do is wait.”

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It was late into the evening before any response arrived, and Snow had almost given up hope of a reply to her message of peace, but then a familiar bird flapped its way through the tree cover to land on her shoulder, holding out its leg and the message tied there. It was brief and to the point, in elegant green ink, inviting her, Charming and Regina to negotiate and requesting that they come to the barrier alone at noon the next day.

“How do we know that it’s not a trap?” Charming asked.

“We don’t. We just have to keep our wits about us and take the bait, or else we might never get to the bottom of all this.”

Despite the firmness in her words, Snow somehow could not make herself feel the same kind of confidence within. She was getting the distinct impression that this was one opponent that she really shouldn’t underestimate.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Robin Hood and his merry men had been in the Land Without Magic for less than a week and they had come to the distinct conclusion that they did not trust it. It was all right for the Storybrooke citizens who had been there before, who still had implanted memories of the first curse and all the memories of the time after, and who knew how everything worked, but Robin had made the decision – one that his group had wholeheartedly agreed with – that until they got to the bottom of what had brought them there in the first place, they would stick to what they knew. That was why, having taken some tips from David and Mary Margaret, they had raided Storybrooke’s only outdoor store and set themselves up in a camp in the forest. It was the way they’d always lived and felt safe, and they knew they could protect themselves with the cover of the trees.

“Papa?”

Robin looked up from his brooding contemplation of the campfire and smiled as Roland plopped himself down on the log beside him.

“What’s up, Roland?”
“Are Little John, Much, Aurora and Mulan ever going to come back?”

Robin sighed heavily.

“I don’t know, Roland. I hope so.” The truth was that he had no idea. He had vague memories of the day the rest of the people had arrived back in the Enchanted Forest, and the attacks by the flying monkeys that had rattled them for a few days before then, but after the flash of light that had heralded their return, there was nothing. He had no idea if their travelling companions were even alive or not.

Roland was silent for a few moments, digesting this information, but then he piped up again.

“Papa?”

“Yes, Roland?”

“Are there any flying monkeys here?”

“I sincerely hope not.” There had been no signs of the dread beasts in the past few days, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything.

“Right.” Roland was quiet again, solemnly looking at his shoes, until rustling in the trees caught both his and his father’s attention, and they looked at each other. Robin grabbed his bow.

“Wait here,” he said to his son, but on looking around to find that Alan and Tuck had not yet returned from hunting, he thought better of it. “On second thoughts, come with me. Hold tight.”

Roland grabbed his father’s hand and trotted along happily beside him as they went to investigate the disturbance. Passing through the trees, it was hard to see anything, and the sounds seemed to be coming from above them. Robin’s heart sank to his boots as he scoured the tree canopy for signs of yellow eyes and vicious claws.

“Look, Papa!” Roland tugged on his hand excitedly, pulling him forward, and Robin tried valiantly to get the boy to stay behind him as they continued onwards, closer to the town boundary. The rustling was closer now, louder, and Robin tightened his grip on Roland’s hand.

“Roland, stop. We’re almost at the town line and we don’t know what will happen if we cross it.”

Roland stopped obediently, standing close to his father’s legs as the noise grew closer and more violent, from a rustling to a crashing through the trees. Robin notched an arrow, aiming his bow at the source of the sound, ready to let fly at a moment’s notice. The shape crashed into sight and the arrow soared through the air, lodging in its target and eliciting a horribly human scream.

“Little John!” Robin dropped the bow and ran over to his fallen comrade. The arrow was sunk deep into his shoulder; it wasn’t bleeding heavily but he was evidently in terrible pain. “Oh God, I thought you were a flying monkey, I’m so sorry. Roland, grab my bow. Come on, let’s get you back to the camp.”

The two men staggered upright, Robin taking most of John’s weight as they stumbled back through the trees towards the camp, Roland leading the way.

“Where have you been?” Robin asked. “We haven’t seen you for days!”

“I don’t know.” John’s voice was genuinely perplexed. “One minute I was with you in the Enchanted Forest and the next minute, well, this is the next minute.”
John’s complete lack of memory worried Robin. At least he could remember the last couple of days camping out by the town line, but John didn’t even have that. Where had he been, and why hadn’t he come through with the rest of them?

They reached the camp to find Alan and Tuck still not back, and John looked around, bewildered.

“Where are the others?”

“Alan and Tuck are hunting,” Robin said, sitting John down on a log and snapping off the end of the arrow in his shoulder. “Much, Mulan and Aurora, I have no idea. They didn’t arrive here with us, like you didn’t.”

John shrugged his good shoulder. “Can’t help you there.”

He shifted his seat on the log uncomfortably and reached beneath him into his back trouser pocket, pulling out what was annoying him. Robin, trying to assess the damage his wayward arrow had caused, paid no attention.

“Erm, Robin?”

Robin looked up and felt his veins turn to ice as he recognised the object that John was holding up. It was Tuck’s rosary, which had been on his person just a couple of hours ago when he and Alan had gone out to hunt. With a jolt, he realised that the wood was stained with blood.

“John…”

“I swear I don’t know, Robin.”

“Robin!” There came a yell through the trees and the sound of thundering footsteps; a moment later Alan burst into the camp ground, his face looking as if he had seen a ghost and his breath coming in heavy pants.

“Monkeys!” he exclaimed, gesturing back the way he had come. “One attacked me and Tuck by the town line, he’s hurt really badly!”

Alan stopped short on seeing John, and started on seeing the rosary, backing up a couple of steps.

“Robin…”

John looked up at Robin, his eyes terrified and pleading. “Robin, I swear…”

Robin stood up, wishing that he knew what to do.

“Roland, go into the tent.”

Roland obeyed, but Robin could still see him peeping out through the flap.

“Robin, he’s a monkey!” Alan exclaimed, almost hysterical. John meanwhile was holding his head in his hands, rocking back and forth on the log and muttering to himself.

“John what’s going on?”

John looked up at the two other men, his eyes sickly yellow and full of fear.

“Oh God, I’m a monkey,” he whimpered, and a split second later, the transformation began. The scream John gave was chilling as wings and a tail sprouted from his back, and then he snarled, features becoming inhuman and apelike as coarse hair began to grow over his face. Within only a
The monkey swooped down and Robin fired, aiming over its injured shoulder. The arrow whizzed past its ear, startling it, but it was undeterred. Robin and Alan dived out of the way, and Robin was aware of more footsteps and shouting in the undergrowth, and suddenly a ball of flame swept into the clearing, clipping the monkey’s wing. That got its attention and it flapped up into the sky awkwardly, away from the magician.

“You want more?” a voice yelled. “There’s plenty more where that came from!”

Another fireball soared, missing the thrashing monkey but setting alight to the tree behind it. The beast squawked with alarm, flapping away, and Robin was finally able to look up and see the identity of his saviour. He was somewhat taken aback when he saw the evil queen standing there, flames licking over her fingertips and a ferocious expression on her face as she stared down the retreating monkey. Robin got to his feet, scrabbling over to her as she raised her hand and prepared to let the fire fly, a killing blow.

“No!” Robin exclaimed, trying to stay her arm and receiving a murderous glare as she pulled herself free. “No, please don’t kill him, he doesn’t know what he’s doing, he’s a friend!”

The monkey showed no signs of doubling back and Regina let the flames die, her hand dropping limply to her side.

“Thank you. You saved our lives. If not from death then from a fate similar to John’s.”

Regina’s fierce expression softened and she nodded. “You’re welcome. What was that thing?”

“Flying monkey,” Robin said. “Up until a few minutes ago it had been Little John, one of my merry men.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Merry men?”

“Regina!” Another woman raced onto the scene, one whom Robin had not seen before, and she nodded towards the smouldering tree; a wave of Regina’s hand put out the fire and returned it to its original green splendour.

“Hi,” the newcomer said, holding out a hand. “Emma Swan, sort-of sheriff, pleased to meet you.”

“Robin Hood, likewise. You’re not associated with the Sheriff of Nottingham by any chance are you?”

“Not that I know of. Should we maybe sit down and talk about what the hell just happened? Namely the flying monkey which I’m pretty sure only exist in the Wizard of Oz?”

They made their way over to the camp.

“Robin, what about Tuck?” Alan pressed. “He’s hurt bad.”

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Emma said, slipping back into her sheriff persona as easily as she had left it behind her. “Where is he?”
Alan showed her through the trees, leaving Robin and Regina alone together.

“So what brings you out into the forest, Your Majesty?” Robin asked. Although incredibly grateful for her intervention, he couldn’t help but be wary of her intentions.

“Actually, Emma and I were looking for you,” Regina said. “And I’m not a queen here. Just Regina.”

“Very well. Why were you looking for me?”

“We’re trying to get to the bottom of who cast this second curse and brought us back here, because despite what you might think, it wasn’t me.”

Her tone was brittle and defensive, and so unlike the callous queen whose guards he and the men had spent so much time hiding from back in the Enchanted Forest. He decided to reserve judgement.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to help,” he said. “We remember as little as you. Only the monkeys. They arrived a few days before you came back to the Enchanted Forest. And they’re here now. Emma mentioned that they were from Oz?”

Regina nodded. “It’s another realm, like the Enchanted Forest. We weren’t even sure if it was fact or fiction, but with the monkeys here, it seems likely to be fact. Were they always so aggressive?”

Robin nodded. “As far as I can remember, yes. It’s a little hazy.”

Emma came back through the trees and flopped down onto the log on Regina’s other side.

“Tuck’s on his way to the hospital, the EMTs said he would be ok. He was right on the borderline though. Do you think that the monkeys are acting as gatekeepers perhaps, preventing people from leaving the town?”

“Sounds likely. So whoever cast this curse has a horde of flying monkeys and some way of creating new ones from unsuspecting victims. This is definitely new information that we can use.”

There was a long pause before Emma replied.

“What do we know about Oz? Apart from what I’ve read in L. Frank Baum’s stories?”

Regina shrugged. “Nothing. No-one’s been, except maybe Jefferson, but we can’t pin him down. We could see if Belle could draw something from Rumpelstiltskin’s collection.”

“Well, it looks like we’re on the hunt for the Wicked Witch of the West at the moment. I suppose it’s too much to hope for that she’s still green?”

Regina snorted. “Likely.”

The two women got up and made to leave the camp. Regina turned to Robin. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“Happy to help,” Robin said. “The sooner I can get my merry men back to normal, the better. Besides, I should be the one thanking you.”

“Yes, thank you for saving Papa!” Robin pitched in from the tent, and Regina smiled.

“For the record,” Robin said, “I don’t believe you cast this curse. Not after what you did for us.”
“Thank you.”

Roland waved exuberantly as Emma and Regina picked their way through the forest back towards the bug.

“You know, I think you might have a small admirer there,” Emma said with a grin.

Regina’s cheeks went distinctly pink.

“Shut up.”

Enchanted Forest – Missing Year

It was time, and nothing was happening. Snow wasn’t sure if that was more or less disconcerting than an ambush would have been. She looked across at Regina and Charming as they stood at the boundary waiting for the barrier to be lifted. They both looked as she felt: wary and suspicious, but still with the vaguest of feeble hopes that the entire thing had been a huge misunderstanding and everything could be hashed out to a satisfactory conclusion. Another minute passed with no movement. Although she knew that Robin, Mulan and the others were only a few yards away at the tree line, Snow couldn’t help feeling rather exposed out in the open. The more she thought about it, the more it felt like a trap, and her eyes kept scanning the skies for monkeys.

“All right. Looks like it’s showtime.”

Charming gestured towards the castle. Two monkeys had flown out from the balcony and were hovering about halfway between the castle and the boundary. Looking up, Snow could see the sickly green barrier beginning to tumble down, and she felt the pulse of magic pass her as it came down to the ground. For a moment none of them moved, all too afraid of something irretrievable happening, but then Regina took the plunge and Charming and Snow quickly followed. The wards sprang back up behind them as the approached the castle, and the feeling of foreboding increased. Escorted by the monkeys, they reached the already open doors and stepped inside, moving through the courtyard and into the castle properly. The place was dark, all the shutters closed, and Snow shivered. It was just as bleak as it had been when she and Emma had come, if not more so. Every so often, she caught the glimpse of a monkey’s yellow eyes watching their progress from the shadows. There was no sign of the magician currently taking up residence there.

“Hello?” Charming called into the gloom. “Where are you? Show yourself!”

“What are you doing?” Regina hissed. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“I’m trying to get some answers,” Charming retorted. “The longer we go without seeing anyone, the more I’m inclined to be suspicious.”

“Well, you need be suspicious no longer. Here I am, since you want so badly to see me.”

The trio turned towards the voice, and Snow startled at the sight that met her, melting out of the shadows. The woman was dressed all in black, but her skin was bright emerald green. Her blue eyes were cold, and there was anger and cruelty in them.

“It’s considered rude to stare, you know,” the woman snapped. “As royalty, I’d expect you to understand that. Of course, only one of you is actually royal by birth, aren’t you, Snow White?”
“How…” Snow began weakly, but the green woman waved a hand airily to cut her off.

“Oh, believe me, I know an awful lot about you. I’ve been watching you all for a long time. Some more closely than others. Such a shame you didn’t bring your lovely daughter with you. I’m sure she and I would have got on so well.”

“What do you want with Emma?” Charming growled, going to draw his sword, but the witch snapped her fingers and the blade vanished from his scabbard, appearing in her own hand.

“You know, two can play at that game.” Regina waved a hand and the sword vanished entirely.

“Impressive.” The green witch smiled. “Since we’re all on the same page now, shall we discuss my terms?”

“First, shall we discuss who you are, where you’re from, why you’re here and most importantly why your simian soldiers are attacking innocent people?” Snow asked.

“Touchy touchy.” The woman tutted. “Your manners really are terrible.”

“From the woman squatting in our home and terrorising our people, that’s pretty rich,” Charming snapped.

“Details, Prince Charming, details. Since you’re so eager to know, my name is Zelena, I am from another realm, and I am here because I have a job to do, and I need certain… ingredients that can’t be found at home.”

“Surely there’s no need for the monkey assaults?” Snow pleaded.

“Of course there’s no need for them. I just rather enjoy them. One has to maintain one’s reputation after all. Besides, after years of running from the Black Guard, surely a few winged monkeys should be a walk in the park in comparison.” Zelena smiled sweetly at Regina. “Got to keep the munchkins on their toes, after all.”

“Zelena, this has to stop. This is our home, and we will not let you usurp our country from us.”

“Perhaps you ought to have taken better care of it whilst you were off in your little adventures in Storybrooke and Neverland. Very careless, losing your grandson by the way. Or step-great-grandson. God, your family tree needs pruning. I’d offer to do it myself, but I’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

Flame was crackling over Regina’s fingertips and as she spoke, her voice was a snarl.

“You have no right to talk about Henry!”

“Regina.” Snow reached across and put a hand on her arm. “Let’s try for a diplomatic solution to this.”

Still glowering, Regina extinguished the flames.

“If it was diplomacy that you had in mind when you came here then I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted trip,” Zelena said, her voice matter of fact.

“If you had no intention of negotiating then why did you invite us in?” Charming asked, his eyes darting around the room in search of anything untoward.

“Oh, I promise you that this isn’t a trap,” Zelena said. “So suspicious. Although, when you’re
dealing with a wicked witch, I suppose that comes with the territory. Which reminds me, I did want to congratulate you on the wonderful harmony with which you’re working together considering how many family members you’ve killed off between you. No, I just wanted to meet you in the flesh and size you up for myself. Kind of disappointed, if I’m honest. I was expecting more, well, just more.”

“Sorry not to live up to your expectations, Regina said coolly. “But since diplomacy is off the table, perhaps something else will suffice.”

She launched a gout of flame at Zelena, who caught it, swirling it around her fingers before sending it back.

“Genuine dragonfire,” she said. “Now I’m actually impressed.”

“Well, I did learn from a dragon.” Regina dissipated the flame as easily as she’d summoned it and cast a new spell, this one causing the window shutters to slam open and a huge wind to fly in, swirling around Zelena, but the other magician just threw the magic back on itself.

“A dragon? I thought that you were Rumpelstiltskin’s star pupil. Where is he, by the way? I can’t imagine he’d pass up an opportunity like this to cause chaos.”

“If you’ve been watching us as closely as you say you have then you know damn well where he is,” Charming said. “Regina, we’re not going to get anywhere like this.”

Snow, not to be perturbed by Charming’s words, loosed off an arrow at Zelena. The witch simply vanished out of the way, reappearing on the other side of the room. It was clear that she and Regina were equally matched in terms of power and Snow’s arrows would have little effect.

“This is not a fight we’ll win easily, let’s go,” Charming said firmly.

“Yes, I think you ought to go.”

Zelena snapped her fingers and there was a loud peal of thunder, and the trio found themselves back outside the green dome of magic protecting the castle.

“What happened?” Robin and Mulan were running over.

“Well, let’s just say that the peace talks broke down,” Charming said dryly. “We’re going to need a plan of attack.”

“Regina?” Snow looked over to the other woman, finding her pensive, brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just remembering something that Rumpelstiltskin told me when I was learning magic,” she said. “A warning whenever I was trying to get ahead of myself. A cautionary tale of an old student of his who’d managed to turn herself a particularly virulent shade of green.”

Enchanted Forest – Missing Year

“Well, I think that went about as well as could be expected.” Zelena was unusually chirpy for the first time since they had come to the Enchanted Forest and Walsh watched her closely from his roost in the ceiling high above her. Presently she looked up, directly at him, smiling her nasty, red-lipped
smile, the make-up at odds with her skin colour. She wore it purposefully, to distract and disorientate and make it hard to look her in the eye when she was trying to intimidate. It worked for the most part.

“Don’t think I don’t know you’re up there;” she said sweetly. “You can glare at me disapprovingly all you like, but you know I’m right.”

She swept across the room to the heavy ornate chair that Snow had used as her throne when she had been living here, and she sat down with an air of entitlement and confidence.

“You know,” she said, stroking the ornately carved wood of the armrests, “I think that I could get used to this. I can quite see why the royals were so keen to get it back.” She glanced back up at Walsh again, snapping her fingers and beckoning him down towards her. Powerless to resist the complex enchantments that held him in thrall, Walsh left his perch in the eaves and swooped down. His wings were sore; Snow’s flaming arrows had caught his fur and it was still stinging. He landed in the centre of the room and Zelena beckoned him closer. He could feel the pull of her magic enveloping him as he loped across the floor, his gait becoming straighter and the wings receding into his back. The transition back to his original human form was always painful and he grit his teeth against the excruciating waves of magic, not wanting to show any weakness to the witch in front of him. He’d long since learned that grim and silent defiance was the only way to stop her gaining a full hold over his mind and will. By the time he reached her side, he was fully human again, and despite the pain of the transition, it felt good to be back in his true form. He straightened the cuffs of his coat; he knew that Zelena hated it when he did that and she narrowed her eyes at his small vanity. She vastly preferred it when he was a beast she could command more easily.

“So what do you think, pet?” she cooed. “I think we’re doing rather well.”

Walsh raised an eyebrow. “I think you’re missing two of your key ingredients,” he said. “They didn’t bring two of them back with them.”

“I know that.” Zelena grinned. “But I see no reason why this operation can’t cross the realms again. We’ve already done it once, after all. And the most important work has got to be done here. I have a new job for you, pet.”

“And what might that be? I thought your primary objective at the moment was the Dark One’s maid.”

“I’ve changed my mind. She’ll be of more use to us unharmed for now. I have a plan for her co-operation. Right now, you have a far more noble task.”

Zzelena waved a hand elegantly through the air and a crystal ball appeared there, swirling misty tendrils finally clearing to show an image in the depths. In spite of himself, Walsh peered into the ball. The people in the picture were familiar. A woman with long blonde hair and a dark-haired boy in his young teens, laughing inaudibly together as they unpacked boxes haphazardly in a half-furnished apartment.

“The saviour herself,” Zelena continued. “I need you to keep an eye on her for me. A close eye. You need to get her to the right place at the right time.”

“And if I’m in another realm, how will I know when and where that is?”

“Oh, you’ll know.” Zelena’s expression was cryptic. “Heroes always work in the same way when push comes to shove. They’re nice and predictable, unlike you and I.”
Walsh sighed. He knew that he had no choice in the matter. He was going to keep tabs on the saviour whether he liked it or not.

“So how do I get there?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Zelena reached into the pocket of her dress and took out a small object, glittering slightly in the dim light of the throne room. The shape of a large bean, made of misted glass. Walsh knew immediately what it was. A magic bean.

“It’s the last one,” Zelena warned. He reached out to take it but Zelena held it out of his arm’s length. “So don’t go messing this up now. Remember who your master is. Even though I might be in another realm, I still own you, my pet.”

Walsh narrowed his eyes, hating the reminder that he was no longer his own person.

“I won’t let you down,” he said icily.

“You’d better not. Even across the realms I can still track you down, and you’ll suffer for the slightest failure. This is a delicate operation we’re performing, pet, and one false move could bring it all crashing down. I’ve come too far to let that happen now.”

Walsh nodded. He had been with her throughout her planning and he knew the effort that had gone into the scheme.

She held out the bean and Walsh took it.

“Careful now.”

“Of course.”

Walsh moved away from Zelena to the centre of the throne room, and he tossed the bean towards the ground, the swirling green portal opening beneath him. He closed his eyes and jumped, the sound of the portal roaring in his ears and deafening him. When everything was quiet once more, he opened his eyes to an overcast morning in the Land Without Magic.

It was time to get to work.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Walsh looked around furtively as he made his way down the main street in the darkness. There were a few more people out and about on the streets tonight; it felt as if Emma’s return had reawakened them somewhat. Still, they paid him no mind, avoiding him almost. Word had got round, evidently; he was a stranger and he didn’t know the town’s secrets, so it was best to be wary. Walsh didn’t care and smiled to himself. The less scrutiny he was under, the better. It gave him the freedom he needed to enact his own plans.

He saw a lace curtain twitch in the front window of the farmhouse as he walked up the path, and a moment later the front door opened. She’d been expecting him. He quickened his pace and reached the front door; the house was dark beyond and Walsh wondered if he was going to be stepping into his doom as he entered.
“You’re late,” Zelena snapped as she closed the door behind him. It took Walsh a moment to readjust to the dimness in the hallway and for a moment he was grateful for the excellent vision that his simian counterpart had gifted him. Zelena was looking unimpressed. Walsh still couldn’t get used to her looking a normal colour; he’d only ever known her green until she had come to this realm. She looked good. He hadn’t expected that and it wrongfooted him slightly.

“I’ve got a cover to maintain,” he said calmly, refusing to be cowed in the face of her ire. “I can’t afford to look suspicious.”

Zelena snorted, moving through the house to the kitchen. “I think that ship sailed a while ago.”

“It’s all right for you,” Walsh snapped. “You can just hide away in here all day and no-one’s any the wiser. I’m the one who…”

There as a sharp crack as Zelena’s palm connected with the side of his face and Walsh hissed in response, his eyes flashing yellow. Zelena just smiled, a nasty smile with no compassion in it, and she stood back, folding her arms with a grim sense of satisfaction.

“I think you need to remember your place, pet,” she said, her voice soft and dangerous. “Just because you’ve got a little more room to spread your wings now, you shouldn’t forget who owns you.”

The kettle whistled on the stove and Zelena went over to pour tea for them both. Walsh gave her back a mutinous glare.

“So how goes the integration into this pathetic little backwater of a town?” she asked lightly, the altercation of a few moments prior all but forgotten.

“As well as can be expected. No-one pays any attention to the mild-mannered furniture salesman tagging along with the saviour after all.” He paused. “Neal’s not convinced though. He doesn’t trust me.”

“The Dark One’s son?” Zelena laughed cruelly. “That’s just blind jealousy, pet. And the more he’s blinded by it, the better it is for us. I’d use that if I were you. A little touch of the green-eyed monster never hurt anyone.”

“Well, you would know,” Walsh quipped.

Zelena glared at him. “It was an accident and it was Rumpelstiltskin’s fault,” she snapped. Walsh hid a smile in his teacup. It really was fun to needle her about her greenness in the other realms. It was a sore point that she’d never quite managed to get over.

“Since you’re here, you might as well make yourself useful.” Zelena went over to the side and took up a tray containing a bowl of what looked like cold, solidified porridge and a cup of water. Walsh grimaced as he took it from her.

“Good to know that your cooking skills haven’t improved,” he muttered. Zelena raised an eyebrow.

“I’d watch your tongue if I were you, or you’ll end up back on the gruel as well,” she snarled. “Just feed the beast, and don’t spend too long chatting.”

Walsh rolled his eyes and gave a mocking salute, speeding out of the kitchen before Zelena could retaliate and making his way down into the cellar, groping for the light switch. Even with the light, the place still looked bleak, and Walsh winced as he neared the cage at the end of the room, still half in darkness where the flickering single bulb could not reach it. Its occupant was out of sight in the shadows, but Walsh’s sharp eyes could still pick out the movement.
“Hey, it’s dinner time,” he called, coming over to the grating and offering the bowl through the mesh. He startled as a shape sprang out of the darkness, smacking against the side of the cage and rattling it.

“Let. Me. Out.”

Walsh looked at Rumpelstiltskin, at the frantic, wild look in his eyes, his fingers clawed around the wire. Dirty, dishevelled and desperate. Walsh felt sympathy for him, and offered the bowl again. Rumpelstiltskin ignored it, his eyes boring into Walsh’s.

“You know I can’t do that,” he said eventually. “But your son is safe. I saw him today. He’s safe.”

Rumpelstiltskin jabbed a finger through the mesh and stabbed Walsh sharply in the ribs.

“No-one’s safe with that witch on the loose,” he snarled. “And when I get out of here, you won’t be safe either.”

Walsh couldn’t help feeling slightly scared. He pushed the bowl and cup through the bars, Rumpelstiltskin’s gaze still unwavering.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he retreated back towards the stairs. “I’m really sorry.”

Once Walsh had gone and the cellar was once more plunged into darkness, Rumpelstiltskin moved away from the mesh, collapsing onto his knees and pressing his hands over his face, shaking with silent sobs.
The Wonderful Wizard

Kansas – Past

Walsh had not been sure of a lot of things in his life, but he was sure that after this particular escapade then he was definitely going to be fired. If he was still alive and still in the same state, of course. It was his first time taking the balloon out on his own, and he’d managed to get himself caught in a tornado. His passengers, who had been expecting a nice little pleasure ride over the Kansas State Fair, would definitely ask for their money back, and Walsh couldn’t say he blamed them. They had just been tossed out of a hot air balloon basket, after all. The only reason that Walsh himself was still able to cling on for dear life was that he had tied himself to the basket with spare rope, determined not to lose the precious balloon that was his and his family’s livelihood. He had to save the balloon or he’d be dead meat when he got back to the ground.

He looked at the swirling winds around him and pulled his goggles down over his eyes, hunkering down in the bottom of the basket and clinging to the wickerwork with bleeding fingers. The tornado had come out of nowhere, none of the weather reports had shown anything but bright clear skies all day. It was perfect gentle ballooning weather. No storm warnings, no klaxons, no frantic rush for people to get into shelters. The tornado had sprung up out of nowhere, devastating the fair with not even the slightest storm cloud on the horizon. The balloon’s guiding ropes had snapped like fragile twigs, and before he knew it, Walsh was being flung through the air. The burners had long since gone out, and the balloon was partially deflated as it blew about in the storm; it was clear that there was nothing Walsh could do except wait it out and pray that he and the balloon were both still in one piece at the end of it all.

The tornado was like nothing he had seen before. The dust whirling around him had a green tinge to it, and despite the lack of clouds in the sky, there were thunderclaps to be heard under the roar of the violent winds, and small spikes of lightning bursting through the clouds. The first few raindrops began to patter down onto his head, but through the brief glimpses outside of the tornado, he could still see bright sunshine outside of his twister. He’d known tornados before, he’d grown up and spent all his life in twister country, but he’d never seen one this incredibly localised before. Walsh closed his eyes and prayed, something he hadn’t done since he was a child.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw that the tornado was definitely getting more violent and the clouds were getting ever greener. Walsh was now convinced that praying wasn’t doing him any good and it was possible that he was being abducted by aliens for reasons unknown. He wasn’t exactly a prime example of humanity – too gangly, too skinny, not all that much muscle and, for a hot air balloon operator, an unnatural fear of heights.

The tornado showed no signs of abating. There were strange purple flashes in among the green smoke, crackling with something that looked like film special effects trying to show something magical or extra-terrestrial.

Walsh closed his eyes again. Right now all he wanted was to survive, and he could worry about the aliens later.

The wind was rushing and roaring in his ears and when it did eventually stop, it took Walsh a few moments to realise that the storm had died down, and it was only when the balloon canopy fluttered down and filled the basket around him that he realised he was in fact on the ground and not being blown around in the sky. He quickly fought himself free of the canopy, a task easier said than done, and set about untying himself from the basket and assessing the damage. The canopy was torn, but
hopefully that could be patched, and the basket had a few twigs sticking out at odd angles, but other than that, the damage was minimal. Although it should have been a reassuring thought, it made Walsh even more unnerved. Surely it was impossible for him to have come through such a huge storm and escape so relatively unscathed. Maybe it was the aliens. Maybe his fervent praying for deliverance had worked.

There was no getting around it. He was going to have to get out of the basket and the safety of the canopy and work out where he actually was and how he was going to get the balloon back to the state fair before anyone realised that it was missing.

He chanced to peer up above the level of the basket, peeking out from under the canopy, eyes widening at the sight that met him.

Well. He definitely wasn’t in Kansas anymore, that was obvious. In fact, he wasn’t even sure if he was still on earth, let alone anywhere in the United States. Unless he’d hit his head without knowing and somehow injured his brain, but he thought he’d have a bruise or headache to that effect. As it was, he was remarkably free from pain, even if his ears were still ringing with the force of the tornado. There was no sign of the twister now, the sky as sunny and clear as it had been at the fair.

What unnerved Walsh was the colours. Everything seemed to be oversaturated with colour, as if someone had dialled red, green and yellow up to eleven. It was unnatural in its brightness, and Walsh couldn’t think of anywhere in the remote vicinity of Kansas that would have looked anything like this place.

He had landed on a road of yellow brick bisecting an incredibly green field, and as he followed the road into the distance, a huge, sparking green city was visible on the horizon. Walsh thought again of the aliens. There was nothing to be gained from staying in the balloon – everything that could have helped him had been swept out into the storm, and it wouldn’t provide that much shelter against the elements. He got out of the basket, patted himself down for injury again, and set off in the direction of the shimmering city. For a brief moment, he wondered if he was dreaming and his broken and battered body was lying comatose under the balloon in the middle of a Kansas field somewhere. Whilst the thought of being horrifically injured in the real world wasn’t at all comforting, the idea of this being a particularly psychedelic dream world at least gave him enough peace of mind to go with the flow.

He had not gone too far towards the city when he became aware of a gaggle of people coming along the yellow brick road towards him. Walsh’s first instinct was to try and dive into the nearest bush, but the vegetation was so sparse as to be non-existent, and he stood rooted to the spot as the people – aliens? – swarmed around him. They were all dressed in various shades of green to match the city and they seemed to be utterly fascinated by him.

“Sir!” The person who seemed to be the leader of the group tugged on Walsh’s sleeve excitedly. “Sir, are you the man who fell from the sky in your magnificent flying machine?”

Walsh looked over his shoulder at the balloon. It wasn’t looking all that magnificent now. “Erm, yes?”

“It’s him!” the leader exclaimed excitedly. “It’s the wizard!”

“I’m not…” Walsh tried to protest, but he was drowned out by the excited group who were ushering him towards the city gates, expressing their pleasure at meeting him and all of them trying to shake his hand at once, welcoming him to Oz and the Emerald City. Walsh was even more convinced that he was dreaming.
"It was foretold that a great power would arise in Oz and would cross the sky on this day," the leader explained. "And with your coming, the prophecy is fulfilled!"

"It’s just a balloon," Walsh said feebly, watching as a group of the Ozians hoisted up the balloon on their shoulders and began to parade it along the road. "I’m not a great power. I’m not a wizard. I’m a hot air balloon pilot from Kansas. I got caught in a tornado."

His protests were lost in the cheering and welcoming that was going on, whilst the leader pressed him for information about how his flying machine worked.

"Fascinating!" the Ozian leader exclaimed. "You must be a powerful magician indeed, sir, to be able to fly with such a contraption. We’ve never known anyone other than the four Cardinal Witches to be able to fly before. Perhaps at last their power can be challenged."

"I, erm, I don’t like the sound of that." Walsh gulped. Being hailed as a powerful wizard was one thing, but being expected to fight a bunch of witches was entirely another.

"Oh, they’re not so bad really," the leader said airily. "It’s a long time since any of them did anything bad. It’s just nice to think that there’s someone who could challenge them if the need arose."

"I’m really not a wizard," Walsh kept protesting as he was ushered into the city, but none of the Ozians paid him any attention, and he shrugged, deciding to go along with it. It was all a dream, after all.

**Storybrooke – Present**

David and Mary Margaret looked up at the vast mansion that loomed above them. It was one of several buildings in Storybrooke that had arrived with the second curse, and in an attempt to take a census of all the town’s new residents, they and Regina were going door to door and finding out the newcomers’ identities. David stepped up to the imposing front door and knocked, the heavy clang of the knocker echoing through the calm afternoon air. There was no sign of anyone coming to the door, and Mary Margaret picked her way around to one of the large windows, cupping her hands around her face as she peered inside. David shook his head in despair before following her.

"Nosy, much?" he commented. Mary Margaret shot him a look.

"Considering our rather precarious position at the moment, with some unknown evil running around the town, I think it’s best to be proactive. I’m sure that whoever owns this place would agree with me." She peered through the window again. "I don’t think it is occupied though. It looks kind of like a show house, if you know what I mean."

David joined her at the window and took a look inside, and he had to agree. The place was beautifully furnished, but it did not look lived in, there was nothing personal in the place.

"I wonder why it appeared," David pondered aloud as they made their way down the driveway away from the deserted house.

"Maybe whoever brought us here wanted to have a choice of living places and thought that this one was too flashy?" Mary Margaret suggested. "I don’t know, I don’t hope to understand the first thing about magic. We’ll just chalk that one up as abandoned and move on." She paused. "Maybe we could move the Merry Men in there; I do worry about them out in the woods, especially with that little boy."

David chuckled. "You probably couldn’t pay them to sleep with proper roofs over their heads, not whilst whoever brought us here is still out there. They feel safer in the trees. You did too, for a long
time, if I recall correctly.”

Mary Margaret thought back to her time living rough in the forest, and she smiled. It was true, the trees had made her feel safe.

“And Roland’s lived outdoors all his life,” David added. “They can take care of themselves.” The came to a stop on the winding path up to the next stop on their tour of the town, and David pressed a hand over Mary Margaret’s bump with a smile. “I know that you’re worried about everything. Believe me, I am too. But you don’t need to protect everyone all the time. Leave that to the mayor and the sheriff.”

Mary Margaret sighed. “I know. I just feel like I’m in a perpetual state of worry at the moment. Now that Emma’s back – which I’m thrilled about, don’t get me wrong – it feels like it’s all more real. Something bad is going to happen and I just want everyone to be prepared.”

“We will be,” David said, taking her hand and leading her along the path again. “I promise.”

The next house on their list was a slightly dilapidated farmhouse on the edge of the town. As they approached it, Mary Margaret thought that it was even less likely to yield an occupant than the last place, but she soon saw that the house’s windows were open, light voile curtains fluttering in the breeze.

“Well, this looks more promising.” David gave her a bright smile and squeezed her hand before letting go and going to knock smartly on the door. This time there were definite sounds of movement inside and a few moments later, the door opened.

“Hello!” the young woman behind the door welcomed them enthusiastically. “I’ve been wondering if you might come soon. Come on inside, I’ve just put the kettle on.”

David and Mary Margaret looked at each other and shrugged. “Well, I’m sure that we can spare a few minutes,” Mary Margaret said. “And I could really do with resting my feet.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.” The woman ushered them inside and through to the kitchen. “It looks like you’re ready to pop there.” She pulled out a chair for Mary Margaret. “I’m Zelena, by the way.”

“Welcome to Storybrooke, Zelena,” David said. “We apologise for the upheaval that’s happening at the moment whilst we try to work out what on earth’s going on.”

“Of course, of course, I’ve just been keeping myself to myself and letting you all get on with it, but if there is anything that I can do to help, do let me know. It’s such a stressful time for you I can imagine, with the little one nearly here. You should be focussing on that, rather than the flying monkeys and all the other shenanigans going on in the town. Still, I suppose that’s the mark of a true ruler, putting the people’s needs above your own.”

“Yes.” David wasn’t quite sure what to make of this chatty woman, and he was glad when the kettle boiled and she got up to make tea for them.

“So what can I do for you?” Zelena asked as she came back over with the mugs.

“We’re just going around all the new arrivals, trying to work out if anyone knows anything from before the curse that we could use to work out what happened,” Mary Margaret explained. “So far we haven’t had much luck, apart from the flying monkeys.”

“Oh dear me. Well, I don’t think that I can help you, I’m afraid. I was just going about my life as normal when suddenly I woke up here. A bit of a culture shock, I can tell you.”
"I can imagine. Mary Margaret took a sip of her tea. There was something about Zelena that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Certainly, she and David didn’t know the names and faces of every single one of their villagers, but something must have been different about Zelena for her to be placed here in the veritable middle of nowhere rather than in the centre of the town with the others. Something didn’t add up.

“What did you do before we came here?” she asked.

“Oh, this and that. I kept chickens and bees, a very sedate life compared to yours. Maybe that’s why I’m here in the farmhouse, although the curse didn’t see fit to provide me with any bees or chickens.”

Well, that didn’t exactly help. Mary Margaret took another sip of tea and she gasped when she felt her baby move. Zelena laughed.

“I guess we woke him up. May I? I love babies.”

“Erm, sure, I guess.”

Zelena moved her chair a little closer and pressed her hand over Mary Margaret’s bump, where the baby was kicking, and she smiled.

“Not long to go now, I suppose,” she said. “He certainly feels alive and healthy in there. My sister was a midwife, she’d have been so excited to be here with a royal birth imminent.”

“Is she still in the Enchanted Forest?” David asked. Zelena shook her head.

“Oh no. Sadly she passed away, a few years ago now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you, but it’s in the past. No more talk of things that we can’t change when we should be focussing on the future. Does the little one have a name?”

Mary Margaret shook her head. “Not yet. We’re going to wait and see what happens.”

“Probably wise, given the circumstances.”

Although the words were spoken in Zelena’s light, friendly tone, Mary Margaret couldn’t help a certain feeling of foreboding from creeping up on her with them. She put down her half-drunk tea.

“Well, thanks for that but you know, we really must be getting on, lots of people still unaccounted for, lots of places to check out.”

“Are you sure? I have cookies.”

“Yes, very sure, come on David.”

Once they were making their way back down the drive towards the main road, Mary Margaret shivered. David frowned.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes… No… I don’t know. She seemed so nice, and yet I got such an odd feeling above her. Like something’s not right, like she’s waiting for something almost.” Unconsciously her hand came to her belly. “Waiting for the baby.”
David didn’t look convinced, but he knew better than to question his wife’s instincts, simply putting a comforting arm around her and walking her away from the farmhouse without a backward glance.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Looking up at Game of Thorns, Belle took a deep breath, inhaling the heavy floral scents that burst from the shop. As much as she was not looking forward to the inevitable confrontation, she knew that this was the only decent place in the town to buy flowers. Rumpel deserved better than a cheap pre-packaged bouquet of limp blooms from the gas station.

She pushed open the door and strode in confidently, her determination masking the fear that she was feeling. She hadn’t spoken to her father for a long time, since he’d tried to send her over the town line and erase her memories of Rumpelstiltskin. Whilst Rumpel had made steps to reconciliation, her father had not – and to be fair, she hadn’t reached out to him either.

Moe almost dropped the potted azalea that he was holding when he saw her.

“Belle?” he said softly, as if he couldn’t quite believe that he was seeing her there.

“I’d like half a dozen red roses please,” Belle said, horribly aware of how much her voice was shaking.

“Belle…” Moe put down the azalea and moved around the counter, coming towards her but stopping short, one hand reached out towards her but just not able to make that final push. Belle wrapped her arms around herself, physically holding herself together.

“Half a dozen red roses please,” she repeated firmly. “And tie them with black ribbon.”

Moe paused for a moment, then he nodded with a sad smile, moving back around the counter to the buckets of roses. He took his time selecting the best blooms and tying them in cellophane and black ribbon.

“Belle,” he began eventually, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Belle snorted. “Admit it, Papa, you’re glad he’s gone.”

Moe shook his head. “No, sweetheart, I’m not. Whatever my feelings towards Rumpelstiltskin were, I know you loved him and I know you lost him, and my opinion aside, you lost someone you loved and that’s what important. I know how much it hurts, believe me. And I’ve come to realise that it was far better you were happy with him than hurting without him.” He sighed. “I’m sorry for your loss, Belle. I truly am.”

Belle took the flowers that he held out to her. “Thank you, Papa.” She could feel the tears beginning to prick her eyes and although she desperately did not want to cry in front of her father, the weight of Rumpel’s loss was still so raw and fresh.

“How much?” she asked, her voice croaky with unshed tears. Moe shook his head.

“On the house.”

“Papa…”

“A few roses are the least that I can do to help you grieve, Belle. And if there’s anything else I can do, just say.”
Belle wiped her eyes. “It’s sad that it’s taken this for us to reconcile.”

Moe nodded. “It is.” He sighed. “I’m the last person who should judge you for following your heart. Just ask Sugar Plum and Tinker Bell. I just didn’t want you to get hurt in the same way that I’d been hurt. Magic is a dangerous thing to meddle with.”

Belle nodded. “I know. I was never afraid, Papa. And in the end, it didn’t even matter. I got hurt anyway and nothing you could have done would have stopped that. Rumpel sacrificed himself for all of us, Papa. Even you.”

“I know, Belle. Believe me, I know.”

“He died a hero, after everyone saw him as a villain for his entire life.”

Moe closed his large hand over Belle’s small one where it was clutched around the flowers.

“And hero or villain, everyone deserves to be mourned by those that loved them.”

Belle looked up at him and gave a weak smile on seeing the earnestness in his expression. She may not have seen eye to eye with her father, but she knew him well enough to know that he would never take advantage of her grief and pain.

“If you ever need me, you know where to find me,” Moe said, squeezing her hand.

“Thank you, Papa.” The air wasn’t clear between them, and Belle knew that it wouldn’t be for a while, but she was in no fit place to try and start repairing things right now, not when everything was still so raw. The most ridiculous thing was that she couldn’t remember anything; perhaps they had already reconciled during their time in the Enchanted Forest. All the same, it gave her hope that her relationship with her father could be fixed.

Moe let go of her hand and let her go with a smile, and Belle stepped out of the shop into the waning sunlight. Neal was waiting for her on the corner, and together they moved off towards the cemetery.

“So, you handled your dad ok?” Neal asked presently.

“Yeah. We’ve got a long way to go but I have hope.” She paused, giving a long sigh. “It just saddens me that you and Rumpel never got the chance to fully reconcile and heal those wounds.”

Neal shrugged. “So am I. But we made a start. We were working on it, and I like to think that we would have been ok. You and your dad will be ok too.”

“I hope so.”

They fell into silence as they continued on towards the cemetery. It was peaceful in the evening half-light, and it seemed more fitting for them to come here now that there were no other mourners. Belle had been surprised by how many of the town had come to pay their respects to Rumpel, but after all, he had saved them and he more than deserved the turnout. She just hadn’t expected anyone to care. A small, cynical part of her wondered if everyone had come more for her and Neal’s sake than for Rumpel’s which was why she wanted to come back now, with no-one else around.

Except, as they approached the fresh grave, Belle saw that they were not alone. Two figures were standing at the headstone talking. Neal held out a hand to stop Belle moving any further towards the grave.

“Neal?” Whilst she would admit that she was surprised to see others by Rumpel’s grave, they didn’t
appear to have untoward intentions. “What’s up?”

Neal pressed a finger to his lips and rushed her off the path to hide by the nearest tombstone.

“Neal, tell me what’s going on!” Belle demanded in a whisper.

“That’s Walsh,” Neal hissed, pointing to the gentleman who was standing at Rumpel’s grave. “Emma’s boyfriend. I didn’t trust him when I met him the other day. I knew something wasn’t right. What’s he doing out here? And who’s that with him?”

Belle shook her head, peering over the stone at the woman. “I don’t recognise her. She wasn’t at the funeral.”

“Pretty strange place to meet a newcomer to the town,” Neal muttered. “Pretty strange place for a newcomer to the town to come in the first place.”

“What are they talking about?”

They stayed crouched behind their hiding place, watching the conversation for a moment. The two certainly didn’t appear to be strangers, for all Walsh had been in Storybrooke only a couple of days. Neal fished around in his pocket for his phone and began to record what was happening.

“What are you doing?” Belle asked frantically.

“Gathering evidence,” Neal replied. “Emma is never going to believe me if I tell her that her boyfriend’s not as he seems. I didn’t believe her when she told me my fiancée was evil so I’m getting proof.”

“Fair enough.”

They continued to watch the pair for a while as the conversation became more animated. Belle caught a couple of snatches: running out of time… ingredients… no-one will find him… She glanced over at Neal, startled, and he met her eyes equally worried.

“All right, I refuse to believe that they have benign intentions. Something’s going on.”

Belle pulled out her own phone. “I’m going to see if I can get closer and hear what they’re talking about.”

“All right, I refuse to believe that they have benign intentions. Something’s going on.”

Belle rolled his eyes as Belle crept along, close to the ground, moving quickly across the cemetery on light feet.

“If this works,” Walsh was saying.

“If this works then everything goes back to the way it was before, and no-one will be any the wiser.”

“What you’re changing will change everything. You don’t even know that it will work. You’re breaking one of the three fundamental rules of magic.”

“And what do you know about magic?” The woman paused. “You know, pet, I think we have an eavesdropper.”

Belle froze as the two figures turned towards her.

“The Dark One’s maid,” the woman said conversationally. “How incredibly fortuitous.”
Belle scrabbled to her feet, backing up towards Neal where he was still hiding behind the headstone, and the woman put her head on one side.

“And his son. Two for the price of one package deal. But it’s you that we’re really interested in, my dear. Such beauty, such bravery. I can well see why he fell for you.”

“Who are you?” Belle demanded. “What are you doing here, and what do you want with Rumpel? He’s dead, just let him rest in peace.”

The woman just laughed.

“The Dark One and I have unfinished business that goes back a long way, my dear. But like I said, you’re the one that I want.”

She waved her hand lazily and Walsh turned towards Belle. She watched in horror as his eyes glowed yellow and his face became an inhuman snarl, and she vaguely registered the click of her phone camera in the back of her mind. She only hoped that she was pointing it at their assailants and hadn’t just snapped the ground.

Walsh’s transformation looked as painful as it did morbidly fascinating, wings sprouting from his back and fur growing over his growling features. As soon as his monkey form was fully realised, he sprang at Belle, sailing through the air and barrelling into her chest, knocking the air out of her and sending her flat on her back. Her head hit the ground with a sickening thud and spots of light danced in front of her eyes, oblivion threatening the edges of her vision. Nevertheless, Belle was determined, and she elbowed the monkey in the face as it pulled at her hair, grabbing at the ribbon holding it back.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Neal had run over from his hiding place and was raining down blows on the monkey’s head and back; it was a messy, inelegant fight, barely more than a brawl, with Belle and Neal both wanting to inflict as much damage as possible as quickly as possible.

“Oh, please.” The woman, who had been observing the fight from Rumpelstiltskin’s grave with a bored expression, sent a pulse of magic towards Neal, pulling him off the monkey and preventing him from making contact again.

“You know, I have no use for you and I’d have let you go on your merry way if you hadn’t interfered,” the woman said conversationally. “As it is, you’ve forced my hand somewhat.”

Neal was frozen to the spot by her magic, grappling desperately against the invisible bonds that he was held in. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Belle slump beneath Walsh, her head lolling on one side as blood pooled on the damp grass beneath her.

“Belle! No!”

The monkey took a final yank at her hair and then flew off into the night, squawking violently, and the unknown woman watched him go.

“Yes, that’s it, my pet,” she cooed. “Fly away now, my pretty one. And as for you, the bravest little lion of them all, well, you can rest assured that you served your purpose beautifully.” She smiled again at Belle’s prone body before turning back to Neal. “You I can do without.”

She tossed him backwards towards the headstone and there was a horrible crunching sound as he made contract with the polished marble. The witch departed in a cloud of green smoke and Neal
winced, trying to ascertain the damage. Although he was aching all over from the impact, it didn’t feel like anything was broken and Neal realised with an inward groan that the crunch had been his phone smashing to pieces where it had landed between the stone and the full force of his body. As soon as his breath was back, Neal scrambled over to where Belle lay.

“Belle? Belle!” She wasn’t responding, but she was still breathing and she had a pulse. Her phone lay on the grass beside her, unharmed, and Neal dialled for an ambulance, doing his best to keep Belle warm and comfortable. The wound on her head was nasty, blood still oozing out of it, and Neal shook his head in despair.

“Please be ok, Belle, please.”

The good thing about Storybrooke being such a small town was that the emergency services would generally always arrive quickly, and sure enough the sirens and lights could be seen only a couple of minutes later. Neal waved the paramedics over.

“What happened?” one of them asked as the other set to work checking Belle over.

“Flying monkey attack.”

“Like the Hoods in the forest. Cripes, that’s the second one this week, we can’t keep this up.”

“Different monkey,” Neal said grimly.

“Good god, there’s more than one? Heaven help us.”

The paramedics got Belle into the ambulance and Neal climbed into the back to take the seat beside her.

“She’ll be all right,” the paramedic said. Neal didn’t take in his words, still mulling over the events in the cemetery. It was Belle they had wanted; he had simply been there in the wrong place at the wrong time.

What on earth did they need her for?

Oz – Past

Walsh was convinced of one thing, and that was that he definitely wasn’t dreaming any more. Dreams, even the deepest of dreams, didn’t last for years. He wondered for the umpteenth time what his family thought had happened to him. And to the balloon. He had managed to patch it up and it had been ready to go for months now, but he still had no idea where Oz was in relation to Kansas. Or anywhere in the world for that matter. It didn’t seem to recognise anywhere else in the world that Walsh knew of. It didn’t seem to be anywhere. It was entirely its own place. He had come to the conclusion that perhaps the tornado had brought him to a parallel universe, and he was just going with it. The inhabitants of Oz seemed happy enough to accept him as the man who fell from the sky and he had long since given up on correcting them when they called him a wizard. Of course, the problem had then come when they had wanted further demonstrations of his powers. Some smoke and mirrors had been necessary but thus far he’d managed to get by with his limited mechanical expertise, and the Ozians were still convinced of his mythical power.

Walsh would admit, if pressed, that there was something rather intoxicating about the powerful position that he had found himself in. Looked on as the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, well, it was only natural that a balloon man from Kansas would be inclined to go along with the charade for as long as possible. Why would he want to go back to his old life after the taste of this one that he had had? So the balloon was fixed and he could leave if he wished, but he couldn’t really muster any
enthusiasm to do so.

He was tinkering with the machinery when he heard pattering footsteps running towards him, calling out for help from the wizard. He quickly scrabbled to his feet and pulled the curtain across that hid all his mechanics and created the illusion of the great and powerful Oz.

“Mr Walsh! Mr Wizard!”

It was Brian. Brian had appointed himself as the Wizard’s official spokesperson after Walsh’s arrival, and had proved incredibly useful on several occasions when Walsh had wanted to deflect attention away from the fact that he couldn’t actually do magic.

“Mr Wizard!” Brian’s footsteps came to a skidding halt in front of the curtain and Walsh heard him gasping for breath. Whatever news he was bringing, it was obviously incredibly important.

“What’s going on, Brian?”

“It’s the Munchkins, sir, from the other end of the yellow brick road! They need your help, sir, they’ve sent a delegation and everything!”

Walsh was silent for a long time. He knew of the Munchkins, he’d heard the residents of the Emerald City talk about them often enough, but he’d never actually been called upon to interact with them. If they were in need of his powers, then that could prove somewhat problematic. With any luck, it was a political dispute that could be solved with common sense.

“All right, Brian, show them in.”

There was the sound of several more running footsteps, and some small silhouettes came into his view beyond the curtain.

“Oh great and powerful Oz,” someone began, and Walsh began to feel distinctly uncomfortable about the title. “We beg of your assistance!”

“What do you need my help with?” Walsh asked. Please let it be a dispute over land ownership…

“The Wicked Witch of the West!” someone else said, and Walsh groaned inwardly. The witches of Oz were the most powerful magicians there were and thus far they’d left him alone, although the rumours that one of them had turned green and was terrorising the local peasants was slightly worrying.

“Yes!” a third Munchkin exclaimed. “You know, she’s never been right since that incident with the flying house. And when she turned green, I think something snapped. I do wonder how it happened.”

One of the Munchkin silhouettes swatted another, presumably for getting off topic.

“The point is, she’s out of control and we Munchkins live in fear of our lives! You have to do something to stop her, you’re the most powerful wizard in all of Oz!”

“What about the other Cardinal Witches?” Walsh asked. “North, South, and East? Surely they can intervene.” He tried not to let his panic show and he determined that if he was ever returned to Kansas, then he would write several papers denouncing self-regulating governmental bodies as being far more trouble than they were worth, especially if magic was involved.

“They’ve vanished, your excellency!” one of the Munchkins said mournfully.
“It was after the incident with the flying house,” Brian added helpfully, but Walsh didn’t take in the words properly. An extremely powerful witch was on the warpath and it was up to him to stop her with his incredibly amazing and even more incredibly non-existent magic.

“Something’s got to be done! I know that if you came to Munchkinland to challenge her, she’d behave herself.”

The phrase seemed so quaint and benign, and Walsh snorted. If it came to a showdown, then knowing what he did of the Witch of the West, it would be less a dressing down and more a battle to the death. His death, to be precise.

“Will you help us?” the munchkins’ leader pleaded.

“Well…” Walsh was floundering helplessly, trying to think up a reasonable excuse to either refuse or to put off the decision.

He was prevented from doing this by the sound of screaming and a huge thunderclap from outside the castle.

“She’s there!” the Munchkins squealed. Walsh groaned, burying his head in his hands and wondering why he hadn’t just left Oz when he’d had the chance. With any luck, death would be quick.

With everyone’s attention focussed on the Emerald City’s newest visitor, Walsh risked a peep around the curtain and watched in wide-eyed horror as the Wicked Witch of the West swooped into the castle on her broomstick and alighted, stalking down the hall towards him. She was definitely green. If Walsh had taken that rumour with a pinch of salt before, then he certainly believed it now.

“I take it that I’m in the presence of the Great and Powerful Oz?” she asked politely as she reached the curtain. Walsh hastily ducked back behind it to make his shadow appear far more imposing.

“Well, I doubt it’s any of you pipsqueaks,” the witch added, addressing the gathered Munchkins. “So I’ll assume I’m talking to the coward quivering behind the curtain.”

Walsh couldn’t deny that he was shaking, but he had hoped that she hadn’t seen that.

“Are you sure I can’t get you to come out here and face me like a man? If you’re really so all-powerful, surely you’ve got nothing to fear from little old me.”

Walsh knew better than to reply and closed his eyes, praying that when he opened them, he would be back in Kansas. No such luck.

“Oh well. It would have been wonderful to meet the Great and Powerful Oz in the flesh. I see the Munchkins have sought you out in their resistance against me.” Through the curtain, Walsh could see the Munchkins huddled together in fear, much like he was. “So I thought that I would pre-empt you. I’ll leave them alone, for a day or so, if you meet me on the field of magical combat. Shall we say noon tomorrow? I think high noon is traditional where you’re from, isn’t it?”

What could Walsh say? In the end, he said nothing.

“I’ll take your silence as agreement then,” the witch said pleasantly, and he saw her silhouette mount her broom and take to the air again. “Of course, if the Great and Powerful Oz wishes to decline my challenge, I’m sure that we can discuss terms.”

For a long time after her departure, Walsh continued to sit behind the curtain, his head in his hands. He had a day to get out of this mess, and no idea how he was going to do it.
Back in her home in the west, Zelena sat leisurely, tapping the surface of her crystal ball and watching Walsh’s frantic preparations. She smiled.

“Turns out that the man behind the curtain really is just a man after all,” she said to herself, ruminating over the possibilities he presented to her. Having discovered that the mythical wizard who had protected the heart of Oz for so long was about as magical as an old sock, her power over the realm could be fully assured. Despatching the remaining Cardinal Witches had been easy, really, once that dratted girl Dorothy had been sent back whence she came.

She glanced again at Walsh. “You don’t remember me, do you? Why would you, in all your dreams of glory and the adoration of the ignorant masses. Still.” She smiled cruelly. “Your time will come, Wizard.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

The hospital was a flurry of activity as it always was whenever something remotely out of the ordinary happened. Emma thought privately that in a town full of magicians and displaced royalty, they really ought to be used to out of the ordinary by now and the arrival of an ambulance bearing a flying monkey victim shouldn’t have caused quite as much commotion as it was doing. She was pacing up and down the ER waiting room whilst David looked on; both of them had given up trying to get answers out of any of the medical staff and resolved to talk to Neal when they were allowed to see him.

“Emma, you’re going to wear a hole in the floor if you keep pacing like that,” David said sagely. Emma glanced over at him but did not stop walking.

“I need to feel like I’m doing something, even if it is just working off excess energy.” Between yesterday’s problems with the dwarfs and the monkey attack in the forest and all the fallout from that, she hadn’t been getting anywhere near as much sleep as she wanted and she was hopped up on coffee to the point of being jittery. “I just want to be doing something useful, but these monkey attacks have got everyone nervous and on edge. Especially the knowledge that the monkeys might turn out to be their friends and loved ones. How are we supposed to deal with that? We can’t exactly strike them down with arrows and swords and magical fireballs when they’re perfectly decent, innocent people on the inside, and at the same time it’s kind of hard to arrest a flying monkey when they seem hell bent on destroying everything that they see.”

“We’ll think of something,” David assured her. “Now, please sit down, I think you’re making the nurses worried.”

Emma flopped into the seat beside him with a groan.

“And I’m worried about Henry,” she continued. “I’m not sure how much longer I can keep up the pretence that I’m here for a bail bond job and short of locking him in the hotel room, which is not only illegal but horrifying to think of, I don’t know how I’m going to hide the news that the town is full of flying monkeys from him.”

“You know, him knowing the truth might not necessarily be a bad thing,” David pointed out. “It might help us in the long run.”

“It’s more complicated than that.” Emma gave a long sigh and the two of them lapsed into silence, neither willing to give voice to the tumultuous thoughts going through their heads. Why the cemetery? Why Neal and Belle? Was this monkey Little John or a different one?
“Sheriff?”

Emma looked up to see Dr Whale beckoning them over.

“How are they?” she asked.

“Neal is fine, he’s a bit bruised but there’s no reason for us to keep him in. You can see him now, I’m just going to sort out the paperwork to get him discharged and then he can leave.”

“What about Belle?”

Whale grimaced. “It was a nasty head wound, whatever these monkey things are, they’ve got vicious claws. She should make a full recovery; she hit her head pretty hard and might have delayed concussion but there are no signs of permanent damage to her brain or spine. We’re still stitching her up. When she came round in the ER she was very distressed and we had to give her a sedative to calm her down. She’ll be out of it for a while.”

“Well, given her past experiences with hospitals I can completely appreciate her panic,” Emma said sharply. “Let me know as soon as she wakes up.”

“Of course.” Whale led them down the corridor to the ward where Neal was. He was pacing up and down, which made Emma far more confident that he was unharmed than Whale’s words had done. He stopped when he saw them approaching.

“Is Belle ok?”

“She’s sedated but she’ll be fine,” Whale explained. “If you sign here, Neal, you can be on your way.”

Neal scrawled his signature and grabbed his jacket from the end of the bed, wasting no time in getting out of there.

“Are you ok?” Emma asked as they left the ward. “The ambulance call was patched through to the station. We went over to the cemetery but there was no sign of anyone there, whoever it was had long gone.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me.” Neal sighed. “Emma, there’s really no easy way to say this, but the monkey… It was Walsh.”

Emma stopped in her tracks. “What? That’s impossible!”

Neal shook his head. “When we got to the cemetery there were two people at Papa’s grave, a man and a woman. The man was Walsh, and he turned into a flying monkey and attacked us on the woman’s command. I’m not saying that he had any choice in the matter or that he wanted to do it, but it was definitely him.”

“Neal, really? Walsh? I know him, Neal, I’ve known him for months now, and he’s never shown any signs of being a monkey.”

“Well, you were in New York before, and now you’re in Storybrooke, and we have magic here.”

“Walsh was with me in New York for a year!” Emma exclaimed. “The flying monkeys came over with you from the Enchanted Forest a week ago! It’s just not possible!”

“Emma, you know last year you got a bad feeling about Tamara and I didn’t believe you and it
It turned out that you were right all along? Well, now I have a bad feeling about Walsh.”

“It’s not the same thing!”

“It’s exactly the same thing!”

“It’s just not possible!” It couldn’t be possible. It just couldn’t be. There was no way that Walsh could be a flying monkey. Surely she would have noticed by now, especially if he was sneaking off to assignations in graveyards with unknown women.

“It’s not that I think you’re lying, Neal, I just don’t see how it can be real. Maybe you just saw what you wanted to see.”

“This isn’t about jealousy, Emma, this is about making sure that you and Henry are safe!” Neal sighed. “I took video footage as proof, I knew you wouldn’t believe me, but my phone was smashed. I think Belle got some pictures too but I know better than to rifle through her stuff whilst she’s unconscious.”

“Neal…”

“Look, the identity of the flying monkey who attacked us aside, these creatures, whatever they are, are in a league with a woman who seems to be controlling them. Surely you can believe that.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, I can believe that. The Wicked Witch of the West. I’ve seen the Wizard of Oz enough times.” The ghost of a smile flickered over her face as a fond memory came to the forefront of her mind. “That was our first date.”

“Yeah, it was.”

They had reached the hospital entrance at that point and David stayed behind to tie up a few loose ends; Emma and Neal left the building.

“So, what did she look like?” Emma asked. “Maybe we can track her down in the town.”

“Unlikely,” Neal muttered. “She has the natural magician’s delaying tactic of being able to conveniently vanish in a puff of smoke. She wasn’t bright green, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Well, you’ve got to admit that would make the search a hell of a lot easier.”

“She just looked normal. It was dark, so that messes up colour perception a bit but she was all in black. Tall, white, gingery-auburn hair? I don’t know, no distinguishing features.”

Emma made a mental note, but the description wasn’t likely to help her all that much. Her mind kept coming back to Walsh. It couldn’t have been him. The more she thought about it, the more logic told her that Neal was right, it wasn’t like he had any ulterior motives as she knew him better than that. But at the same time, she thought she knew Walsh better than that too, and the more likely it seemed that he was the culprit, the more her brain screamed at her that he wasn’t, he couldn’t be. She guessed that only time – and hopefully Belle – would tell.

**Oz – Past**

There was nothing for it. As terrible as he felt to be leaving the Emerald City and the Munchkins in the grasp of the Wicked Witch of the West, there was no way that Walsh could remain in Oz any longer. It wasn’t that he really feared his lack of magic being exposed, it was more that he wanted to survive to see old age and going head to head with a powerful witch was really not the best way to
ensure that. He gathered up some provisions for his journey back to Kansas and dumped them into the balloon basket. He’d spent so long working out how to get around the face off with the witch that he now had very little time in which to make good his escape. The balloon had been kept in a shed in the castle’s inner courtyard ever since his crash landing and it now stood in pride of place in the centre. Walsh lit the burners, watching the balloon canopy fill with air and crossing his fingers that the patch job would hold up under pressure. Of course, he still had no idea how he was going to get back to Kansas without a magical tornado, but Walsh figured that he’d cross that bridge when he came to it, namely once he was up in the air and safely away from all the mayhem going on below.

“Your Ozness!”

Brian’s voice echoed through the castle and Walsh realised that there was really no place to hide. Brian burst out into the courtyard and stopped short on seeing the balloon half-inflated and Walsh inside the basket, flight goggles on and ready to leave.

“Mr Walsh?” Brian began, utterly perplexed and more than a little betrayed as realisation dawned. “What are you doing?”

“Leaving.” The word sounded hollow even as he said it, and Walsh cringed.

“You can’t!” Brian exclaimed. “The Wicked Witch is on her way, she’ll be here any minute and you have to face her! We won’t be safe unless you subdue her!”

Walsh shook his head. “Believe me, Brian, you’re better off without me. I told you all when I landed here, I’m not a wizard. The only vaguely magical thing I can do is keep this balloon in the sky, and even that’s not a given. Face it, I would never win in a match against the witch.”

“You can’t just leave us!” Brian pleaded. “We need you!”

“There’s nothing I can do, Brian,” Walsh said. The balloon canopy was at full capacity. “You could come with me, though, back to Kansas. No witches there, wicked or otherwise.”

Brian shook his head, taking a step back as the sheer magnitude of the occasion finally caught up with him, the cold feelings of dread and betrayal sending a chill through his veins. All this time, they had blindly accepted Walsh as their leader, and it had all been smoke and mirrors. And now, with the Wicked Witch on the warpath and her ire at its peak, he was abandoning them to their fate.

“You couldn’t fit all the residents of the Emerald City in your balloon,” Brian said sombrely. “And I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I were to leave any of my friends behind to endure the witch’s wrath.”

It pained Walsh to leave them all, especially Brian, but there was nothing else that he could do. He cut the lines holding the balloon down in the courtyard and it began to lift off the ground, Brian watching forlornly as it went. Walsh felt that freedom was just around the proverbial corner. All he had to do was get back to Kansas…

As he went to adjust the burners and alter his course over the Emerald City, there was the sound of earsplitting ripping, and the balloon lurched out of his control, blown along by the violent winds. Walsh cursed; he should have known that the patch job wouldn’t hold. Another rip, but this one sounded as if someone was on top of the balloon physically pulling off the patches. He glanced up and saw a swirl of green smoke before the balloon began to plummet to the ground once more, straight back into the courtyard where he had just started his journey from. A few feet above the ground, something suddenly stopped his momentum, the balloon holding steady above him. Looking at the courtyard below, Walsh could see the Brian and a few Munchkins cowering in the
alcoves, and before he could say anything and begin to explain himself, a figure on a broomstick descended into his line of sight.

The Wicked Witch of the West smiled benignly.

“I guess you forgot that witches could fly,” she said. She waved her hand and the balloon dropped the final few feet, landing with a thud, and the witch stepped gracefully off her broomstick beside him. “So here we are. The Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz, running away.” She turned to the gathered Ozians, her expression one of benevolence. “This is the leader that you worshipped for so long and chose as your champion in the battle against the Wicked Witch. You have been fooled, my friends. As you can see, a coward who runs at the first sign of danger from me can hardly be called a great and powerful wizard. This man you admired so much abandoned you all to your fates. He doesn’t care about you at all!”

The witch’s words had the desired effect and soon Walsh was being bombarded with questions and accusations from all sides.

“He’s a charlatan!” Zelena yelled above the angry crowd. “He’s a fraud and he manipulated you all!” She strode across the courtyard, her magic hauling him out of the basket and sending him sprawling on the ground. “And such people must be punished,” she finished, earning herself a cheer from the crowd.

Walsh screamed as the witch’s magic engulfed him, transforming him into an unnatural new shape.

Zelena surveyed the winged monkey cowering on the ground in front of her.

“Yes, pet,” she purred. “You’ll do very nicely for what I have in mind.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

The diner was fairly empty when Regina walked in, but despite the small number of patrons, there was still an inordinate amount of chatter going on. With the attack on Robin and the Merry Men just a couple of days ago, and now the attempt against Neal and Belle, people were starting to worry. Well, to worry more than they’d been doing already. Now that things had started to happen, it was clear that they had returned to Storybrooke for a reason, even if they didn’t know what that reason was yet. One good thing had come out of the monkey attacks though, although Regina wasn’t quite sure it was worth the damage that had been caused. The townsfolk were no longer viewing her with thinly veiled suspicion but a degree of admiration for her role in rescuing the Hoods.

Neal was sitting in a booth in one corner, glaring into his cup of coffee, and Regina went over to him.

“May I join you?”

He looked up, jolted out of his grim contemplation, and nodded, indicating the seat opposite.

“What’s the matter?” Regina asked. “I mean, apart from the fact that you and Belle were attacked by a flying monkey and an unknown woman?”

Neal snorted. “Yeah, apart from that everything’s peachy,” he grumbled, before giving a long sigh. “It’s Emma. I’m just not sure where I stand with her any more. I told her that I wasn’t trying to get back in her life but she just won’t believe me about Walsh. I’ve seen him before somewhere, I’m sure of it, I just don’t know where. I didn’t trust him from the moment I first met him, and now this has happened. You’d think that with Belle in the hospital she’d be slightly more inclined to believe me.”
Regina shrugged. “People don’t like finding out that their instincts are wrong. And I guess that for Emma, it’s even more galling because she’s spent the last year supposedly free from the influence of magic, and the Enchanted Forest and all the problems that brings with it. Finding out that the magic had been following her around all along, well, that’s going to be a blow.”

Neal nodded. “Yeah, I know. It does make you wonder though… What’s Walsh doing here? Emma said that Belle and I sent Ariel to warn her that we were in danger, but what if the message got garbled and it’s her who’s in danger – from Walsh?”

“Yes.” Regina was silent for a moment as she digested this theory. “And whilst I don’t blame Emma for the attacks at all, they did only start after she and Walsh arrived here.”

“Something’s going on, something much deeper than any of us can hope to work out without our memories. How was the first curse broken last time?”

“It was when Emma finally believed in magic and the curse,” Regina said. “True Love’s Kiss with Henry.”

Neal pondered for a long time.

“That won’t work again,” he said. “Emma already believes now that she’s got her memories back.”

“No, but Henry doesn’t.” An idea was forming in Regina’s mind, and although she had no clue how she was going to execute it. “Well, he doesn’t know what’s going on, so he can’t believe or disbelieve it.”

“We can’t just tell him ‘oh, by the way, Henry, this town was created by a magical curse cast by malefactors unknown and everyone in it is a character out of a fairy tale’. He’d think that we’d gone barmy.”

“Well, no, we couldn’t phrase it exactly like that, obviously,” Regina said. “But we could maybe plant the seed in his mind that something’s not right in the town.”

“What, like you dropping a few surreptitious fireballs when he’s in the vicinity?” Neal suggested sourly. Regina rolled her eyes.

“No, of course not, only an idiot would think that up. I was thinking more along the lines of his story book.”

Neal shrugged and nodded. “Well, it’s as good an idea as any. Where do we find it though?”

“Mary Margaret had it during the first curse. It just appeared for her one day. No-one knows where it came from originally or who wrote it.”

“Can we hope that it will just turn up in the back of a closet conveniently again?”

“We could ask Belle,” Regina said. “If anyone knows books then it’s her, and if the thing’s going to turn up anywhere other than in Mary Margaret’s possession then the pawn shop would be the first place I would look.”

“Hmm.” The two of them fell into silence for a long time, and Neal returned to his contemplation of his now-cold coffee.

“Have you seen Henry?” Regina asked, trying not to betray the desperate eagerness in her voice, yearning for any news of her son.
“Yeah. We went out for pizza the other night. I guess you haven’t seen him yet.”

“No. Only in passing, not to speak to. It’s different for you, because Emma knew you before and you’re his dad, but I’m his mom too and now I’m a stranger. And why would the mayor randomly take an interest in a newly-arrived kid who doesn’t even know if he’s going to be staying here for any length of time yet? I just want to tell him how proud I am of him and how much he’s grown and a whole bunch of other things that come naturally to a mother but just sound creepy coming from anyone else.”

“Well, here’s your chance to introduce yourself.” Neal nodded over Regina’s shoulder towards the diner door, where Henry had just come in. The boy caught Neal’s eye and nodded to him, and he ordered a hot chocolate before coming over.

“Hi Neal. Hello…” He trailed off, and the complete lack of recognition in his face cut Regina like a knife. She plastered on her brightest and most mayor-like smile and held out a hand.

“Regina Mills, I’m the mayor here. Welcome to Storybrooke.”

“Thanks.” Neal scooched up the seat so that Henry could sit down beside him.

“So what do you think of the place so far?” Regina asked.

“It’s ok, I guess. I haven’t really seen all that much of it. Mom’s been busy with this case she’s working on and Walsh keeps vanishing off somewhere. I don’t know what he’s doing because he can’t possibly be working on his proposal speech all the time.”

Neal and Regina exchanged a worried look, unnoticed by Henry. It wasn’t the fact that Walsh and Emma were on the verge of getting engaged that worried them so much as his prolonged absences in a town he’d never been to before and ostensibly didn’t know anyone in.

“There’s another weird thing.” Henry licked the cream off his hot chocolate with a puzzled expression. “I keep getting the feeling like I’ve been here before. And the waitress knew to put cinnamon on my chocolate without me having to ask.”

“Maybe you had a past life here,” Regina said.

“Yeah.” Henry didn’t sound too sure about that. “Anyway, with Mom doing stuff at the Sheriff’s station and Walsh awol again, I decided I’d have a bit of an exploring session.”

Regina smiled. For all Henry’s adventurous tendencies had caused her more than a couple of headaches in the past, she was glad that part of him was still there and had not been altered with his false memories.

“Is it true that you were attacked by a wild animal last night?” Henry asked Neal presently.

“Everyone is talking about it at the inn. Some kind of monkey I think? Someone said it was flying though, so I’m taking the reports with a pinch of salt.”

“Well, you could put it like that.” Neal’s phone began to ring. “Excuse me, it’s the hospital.”

Henry let him out of the booth and they watched the one-sided conversation for a moment. Neal hung up quickly.

“Belle’s awake and Emma’s going to talk to her. I’m going to go over and make sure she’s ok. Henry, you’ll be all right here? Regina’s very capable, you’re in good hands.”
“Sure, I’ll be ok.”

Neal raced off out of the diner, and the silence between Regina and Henry was awkward for a long while, until Regina took the plunge.

“So, Henry. Why don’t you tell me a little about yourself? How’s life in New York?”

Henry gave her an odd look, but nonetheless began telling her all the sights that he’d seen over the last year. It was the closest she had been to her son since he had returned to Storybrooke, but Regina still felt so very far away from him.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Despite the bandage around her head, Belle looked as strong and determined as ever, and she was packing things into her handbag as Neal and Emma entered her room. It took them a little while as she seemed to have barricaded herself in, and she had to move all the furniture that she had pushed in front of the door.

“Neal, get me out of here,” she said. It was a plain statement rather than a plea, one made with clenched teeth and a will of iron.

“Belle, they need to keep you under observation, it was a really nasty head injury and you might have concussion.”

“Yes, I know, which is why I have you and Leroy and the fairy-nuns and a whole lot of other friends and well-meaning acquaintances to help me out. Please, Neal, we both know what happened the last time that I was in the hospital and I have no desire to turn back into Lacey at a time when we all need to be at our most alert because of flying monkeys and wicked witches on the prowl.”

“Ok, I’ll go and speak to Whale and get you discharged.” Neal left the room, and Emma sank down into the chair as Belle started pulling her clothes on over her hospital gown.

“How’s your head?” she asked.

“Pounding,” Belle admitted. “They had to staple me back together again, it was a big gash. It’ll be an impressive scar but luckily my hair will hide it.”

Emma sighed, wishing that she could just get this all over with and get back to her bed.

“Belle, I need to know what happened last night and who you saw.”

Coat and boots on, Belle sat back down on the bed.

“Well, when we got there, there were two people standing by Rumpel’s grave, talking. I didn’t recognise either of them but Neal said that the man was Walsh, the guy you came to town with. I don’t know, I’ve never met him, but I don’t see why Neal would lie.” She rummaged in her bag for her phone and swiped it on. “I did get one picture before it all kicked off.” She passed over the phone and Emma looked at the image. Her heart sank, and her stomach turned to acid. The picture was poor quality, blurred and dark, but there was no mistaking Walsh’s face in it, even if his eyes were glowing an unnatural yellow and the expression etched into his features was a chillingly villainous one.

“I guess I owe Neal an apology,” she said. “And everyone else in the town, since I was the one to bring him here. I’m sorry this happened to you, Belle.”
Belle gave a self-deprecating snort. “Well, it does make a change to be hurt because my attacker wanted to hurt me rather than because they wanted to hurt Rumpel,” she said sourly. “But tell the truth I’m more concerned because they were by Rumpel’s grave and I don’t see any reason for that. Did either of them know him? I’ve certainly never seen the woman before.”

Emma looked again at the picture but the woman with Walsh was unknown to her too. She’d become familiar with most of Storybrooke’s residents through her role as sheriff during the first curse, so this must be someone who’d come through in the second. Perhaps the person to cast it, even?

Still, at least she had a lead now, even if it was only a grainy picture on a phone that wasn’t hers.

“Can you send that to the station please?” she asked, handing the phone back. Belle nodded and tapped the screen a couple of times.

“There you go.”

“So what happened after that?” Emma continued. “After Walsh and the woman saw you?”

“Well, that was when he turned into a flying monkey and made a huge hole in my scalp,” Belle said. “He was pulling on my hair, pulled the ribbon right out. Why he wanted it I don’t know.”

Emma shook her head. “Me neither. I’ve got no idea what’s going on at the moment. It’s like some great big game show where everyone knows one piece of the puzzle but no-one knows everything.”

“Well, if there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know,” Belle said. “Of course, I can’t do much stuck in the hospital, but anything to bring this witch down, I’m willing to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“She attacked me, that’s all the reason I need. Well, that and the fact I don’t want to see you all doomed to a life of simian servitude after Rumpel died to keep us all safe.” Belle broke off, looking down at her hands in her lap. “You know, I think there’s something up with Rumpel,” she said quietly.

“Belle…”

“No, I know, he’s dead and he’s not coming back. But they were at his grave and everyone knows that grave is empty. There was no body to bury. Something’s up.”

Emma nodded. “Ok, I can get that.”

There was a tap on the door and Neal entered with Dr Whale, who looked slightly taken aback at seeing Belle all packed up and ready to go.

“I managed to persuade him,” Neal said brightly.

“For the record, I think that this is a very bad idea, but if you want to discharge yourself against medical advice, then I can’t stop you.” Whale held out the appropriate discharge forms and Belle grabbed them, signing quickly and ticking all the boxes to confirm that she was of sound mind.

“I’ll take you home,” Emma said. “I think it’s the least I can do, all things considered.”

Belle handed over the papers and the three of them left the hospital room.

“I’m sorry, I should have believed you about Walsh,” Emma said.
“That’s ok. What’s your plan now?”

“Go and ask him what the hell he thinks he’s playing at.” Emma let out a long groan. “I can’t believe that even happened. I mean, I feel so stupid. I was seriously considering marrying him, for God’s sake, and all the time he was, well, he wasn’t want he seemed. He was using me for something and I don’t even know what it was.”

“Hey, it’s ok. It happens to the best of us. I almost married a minion of my evil grandfather Peter Pan who was using me in a long and complicated plot to rid the universe of magic and was actually my adopted great-great-great niece. I think. Maybe one too many greats in there.”

“At least Tamara was completely human. I don’t even know what species Walsh is supposed to be.”

“Ok, I am going to have to make a couple of jokes about you kissing a monkey now, you know.” It was good to see Neal smiling again, and Emma couldn’t help rising to the bait.

“Well, it’s not as if I don’t have experience. I kissed you, didn’t I?”

“I’m wounded, Emma!”

Their banter continued back and forth, to Belle’s increasing amusement, until they reached the bug parked up outside the hospital. The mood in the car as they drove back to the pink house was a sombre one though, as Emma felt to thinking about the ways in which she had been betrayed. Walsh had been so eager to come to Storybrooke with her and at the time she hadn’t questioned his motives; she had just been so ecstatic to find someone who was taking a genuine interest in her life and her family issues and who wanted to support her. And it had all been a lie.

With Belle and Neal safely back in their home, Emma swung the car around and headed back towards the inn. Their room was empty but their bags were still there, so Emma was not unduly worried yet. She went down to the diner. Henry was there, sitting at the end booth with Regina, but there was no sign of Walsh.

“Hi Mom.” Henry seemed happy at least. “Regina’s been telling me all about the town’s history, it’s fascinating.”

“Right…” Emma glanced over at Regina. She knew that Henry had no memories of the place, surely she wouldn’t be telling him about magic and curses?

“Don’t worry, nothing inappropriate,” Regina said pointedly, having caught her meaning. Emma nodded her thanks and turned back towards Henry.

“Henry, where’s Walsh?”

Her son shrugged. “No idea. He left early, just after you did. I haven’t seen him all day. Why?”

“I need to talk to him. Like, now. I’ve got to go. Regina, are you ok to keep an eye on Henry for a little while longer? I think it would be good for you two to get to know each other.”

Regina beamed. “I’d be delighted. Private tour of the town hall, Henry?”

Henry nodded a little unsurely. “Ok.”

Emma left them to it, knowing Henry would be safe as houses under Regina’s watch, and ran out of the diner, hitting Walsh’s speed dial on the way.
There was no response, and Emma cursed in her frustration.

**Storybrooke – Present**

The door was quick to open as Walsh alighted in front of it and transformed.

“Where have you been?” Zelena hissed. “I was expecting you hours ago! You’ve been gone all day!”

“I’ve been hiding,” Walsh snapped. “Maybe if you hadn’t been so quick to sic me on them then I wouldn’t have had to lie low because my cover had been spectacularly blown. Everyone in town is looking for me.” Walsh paused. “They’ll be looking for you too, soon. Belle’s smart, it won’t take her long to figure out who you are and where you are. People like her. They believe her.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I suppose you’ll just have to stay here until it all blows over.”

“I turned into a flying monkey and attacked a civilian, that’s not going to blow over any time soon.”

“Believe me, when they see what’s brewing here, they won’t worry about you, pet.” Zelena beckoned him to follow her through to the kitchen. Her magic stuff was out on the table, potions and lotions and vials, the entire contraption looking rather nefarious. “I trust that you have it? I doubt that you would have returned if you had lost it.” There was a warning tone in her voice, an unspoken *or else*. Walsh rolled his eyes and reached into his jacket pocket.

“Have I ever let you down?” He produced the blue ribbon that had adorned Belle’s hair in the graveyard. Zelena snatched it from his fingers, a satisfied smile on her face.

“Perfect, pet. Now we can start. Hopefully, we have our first ingredient.”

She sat down at the table and looked at the hair through a magnifying glass, using tweezers to extract a single hair that was attached to it. The ribbon was tossed aside, useless, and Zelena placed the hair into an empty vial, which she lodged into the apparatus on the table. It glowed purple briefly before fading, and Zelena clapped her hands together with undisguised glee. Walsh didn’t think that he’d ever seen her so enthusiastic about anything since he had begun working with her.

“Perfect,” she said, waving a hand to extinguish the low flame that was burning in the centre of the table and throwing a cloth over the whole thing. It wasn’t exactly well-hidden and Walsh raised an eyebrow.

“It’s not at all obvious,” he remarked.

“Well, no-one’s going to see it.”

“They will if you keep inviting the Charmings in for tea.”

“I highly doubt that they’ll be back. Just given them enough to lull them into a false sense of security and they’ll leave us be. These people couldn’t organise a cattle-show in a farmyard.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I’ve met them.”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on things.” Walsh could see Zelena’s crystal ball on a high shelf in the kitchen, its innards still swirling. “Still, one down and three to go. I think having you here might actually be advantageous.”
“You want to use me as bait.”

“And excellent bait you’ll make, my dear. Instead of us going out hunting them, they can come to us.”

“And what about him?” Walsh gestured towards the cellar door and their captive therein. Zelena’s expression darkened.

“Still no co-operating. He’s strong. Stronger than I gave him credit for. But still. Even the hardest of shells can be cracked. We just have to keep the pressure on. If you have any ideas then please feel free to try them out.” Zelena left the kitchen. “Tomorrow we wait for the saviour.”

“And the final piece of the puzzle?”

“Leave that one with me. Patience is a virtue, pet.”

Left alone in the darkened room, Walsh looked around furtively, making sure Zelena was truly gone before he grabbed the discarded ribbon and where it had been tossed to the floor, and he slipped down into the cellar.

“Rumpelstiltskin?” he hissed. “Rumpelstiltskin! I’ve got something for you.”

He did not come into the light, but Walsh’s sharp eyes picked up movement at the back of the cage.

“I know what you want from me,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled. “You won’t get it.”

“I’ve not come for that. I just want to give you this. It’s Belle’s. She misses you.”

“As far as she’s concerned, I’m dead. As far as I’m concerned, I’m dead. I doubt hell can be worse than this.”

Walsh didn’t really have a reply to that. He tied the blue ribbon through the bars of the cage.

“It’s here if you want it.”

Rumpelstiltskin did not move until Walsh was gone from the cellar and the place was dark once more. He’d grown used to the darkness and he moved around in it quickly, deftly untying the ribbon and bringing it to his face, inhaling the faint scent of Belle that still lingered. She was all right. She was alive and she was out there somewhere and she missed him. As long as Belle and Neal were kept safe then Rumpelstiltskin could take whatever the wicked witch threw his way. As long as he could call upon Belle’s incredible strength, he would survive, and Zelena and her schemes would not win. He kissed the ribbon before wrapping it around his wrist for comfort.

“I love you, Belle, and I will see you again.”
Once Upon A Different Time

Episode 315: “Cardinal Points”

Oz – Past

Four black shapes were flying steadily along the skies, getting closer and closer to the drab, grey stone manor that loomed over Oz’s brilliant green fields. A young lady, dressed in the same drab grey as the stone walls, scrabbled down from her perch looking out of the small window and ran the length of the dormitory, her flaming red hair providing the only colour in the room.

“Zelena!” she called excitedly. “Zelena, they’re nearly here!”

“Be quiet, Verdie!” Her sister caught her as she stumbled out of the dormitory and set her back on her feet. “And stop doing that, you’ll draw attention to yourself.”

Verdie looked down at her hands to see multicoloured sparks shooting off her fingertips and dying harmlessly in the air around her, and she hastily hid them behind her back.

“I can’t help it, Zelena,” she whined. “I’m so excited! The Cardinal Witches are coming to pick their successors and we get the chance to meet them.”

“Yes, it’s one of the most important events in Oz and I’m sure we’re all very lucky to be a part of it, but if you’re not careful with your own witchy weirdness, they’ll end up picking you!” Zelena hissed, steering her sister down towards the manor’s courtyard where the rest of the girls were gathering to welcome the Cardinal Witches.

“But wouldn’t it be amazing?” Verdie’s voice was dreamy. “Being a trainee witch would be so much more exciting than being apprenticed out to a dressmaker or whatever it is that you’re going to do next year.”

“There’s nothing wrong with dressmaking,” Zelena snapped. “It’s a perfectly respectable profession.”

“So is being a Cardinal Witch and one of Oz’s great protectors,” Verdie countered. Zelena heaved a long sigh as she pushed Verdie into the courtyard and they lined up.

“I know, Verdie. But I promised Mama that I would look after you and I can’t do that if you’re off gallivanting in the Crystal Castle learning to be a witch. Only witches can visit and I’m not one. So you’re going to stay here where I can make sure that you’re safe.”

“But Zelena!”

“No buts! You’re the only sister I’ve got and I am not going to lose you like we’ve lost everyone else!”

“Zelena! Verdie!”

The headmistress bustled along the line of grey-clad girls and split up the two sisters, sending Zelena to stand with the older girls at the other end of the line. Verdie gave her a little wave, saw that her fingers were still sparking, and quickly clasped them together behind her back again. The witches
were alighting their broomsticks and the headmistress went to let them in.

“Your excellencies, welcome,” she said. “It’s an honour that you have chosen the Greenfields School for Orphaned Young Ladies for your selection this time. These are, of course, the young ladies, and I should say that we do have some particularly talented young witchlets among their number.”

Verdie screwed her face up as she tried to stop the sparks of excitement and nervousness. As much as she wanted to become a witch, the idea of never seeing her older sister again was a terrible one. Verdie had only been small when their mother had died; Zelena was the only family she had ever really known.

The Cardinal Witches radiated power. It was in their black clothes and the way they carried themselves, magic permeating the very air around them. The girls, even Zelena, were awestruck as they walked up and down the line. The Witch of the South beckoned a girl forward.

“What’s your name, child?”

“Glinda, your grace.”

Of course, Glinda. She was easily the prettiest and most talented of all the girls, with blonde hair and perfect teeth. It was only her odd bursts of ‘witchy weirdness’ as Zelena put it that had prevented her swift adoption into Oz’s nobility.

“And you?” the Witch of the North asked another girl.

“Phoebe, your grace.” Phoebe was another easy choice, definitely gifted with magical arts. Zelena breathed a sigh of relief. Two down, two to go, two less chances of Verdie being chosen.

The witches were approaching and sparks were still rising and dying on Verdie’s fingertips. She closed her eyes.

“What’s your name, child?”

The Witch of the East was right in front of her. Verdie gulped.

“V-V-Verdie, your grace,” she squeaked.

“Show me your hands, Verdie.” The command was more curious than anything else, and Verdie, trembling, brought her still sparking fingers to the front.

“Oh my. So much raw power. Amelia, have you ever seen anything like it?”

The Witch of the West shook her head. “No. It’s unprecedented.” She looked over at Verdie. “She seems like the perfect choice for a new Witch of the East.”

“No!” The scream came from Zelena, who rushed out of the line, racing down to throw her arms around her little sister, pulling her in close to her chest. “No! You won’t take her away from me! She stays here with me!”

“Zelena, dear,” The headmistress rushed forward but Zelena turned burning eyes on her.

“DO NOT TAKE HER FROM ME!” she roared.

“Zelena, you’re scaring me!” Verdie whimpered.
But Zelena didn’t hear her. Her eyes flashed again and the wind picked up, swirling around in the courtyard and sending witches and girls alike running for cover as it became a vast tornado, spiralling out of control and crashing through the gates, off over the green fields where it wreaked havoc unchecked for several minutes. Two of the Cardinal Witches made to mount their brooms and go after it, but the force was too strong even for them.

“Zelena, make it stop!” Verdie pleaded. “Please, you’re going to hurt people!”

But Zelena couldn’t make it stop. She could only watch as wide-eyed as the rest of them as the tornado whipped up a storm over the yellow brick road and finally died out.

Everyone’s eyes turned to Zelena with astonishment.

“Good gracious,” said the headmistress, an extremely mild sentiment considering the circumstances. “Zelena, what on earth was that?”

“I don’t know,” Zelena whispered, more afraid than Verdie had been. She looked down at her hands, expecting to see sparks like her sister’s, but there was nothing.

“You’ve never shown any sign of magical intuition before?” the Witch of the West asked.

“No. I’m as magical as a turnip.” Zelena was completely perplexed, but the Witch of the West just smiled.

“Perhaps your talent may prove to be the most powerful of all. The bud that blooms last, blooms longest, after all.”

Zelena looked around in disbelief, and caught Verdie’s gaze. Her sister was looking at her with mingled astonishment and fear.

“Zelena,” she breathed, “you’re a witch like me.”

“I’m not, I swear, I have no idea where that came from.”

“Don’t fear, my child.” The Witch of the South beckoned the two girls forward. “You and your sister will not be separated. I think we have found our new Witch of the West.”

Even as Zelena climbed aboard the back of the Witch of the West’s broomstick, she still could not come to terms with the massive power that she had found somewhere within herself.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Walsh had done a bunk. Emma was starting to accept that. He’d been gone for over twenty-four hours in a town that he’d ostensibly never been to before and he wasn’t answering his phone; it was clear that he knew that she was onto him and was lying low with his paymaster, whoever she might be. The stinging sense of betrayal still bit at her thoughts every few minutes as she stared grimly at the photograph that Belle had emailed to the station, wishing that the answers would just will themselves out of the cosmos and into her brain. The steady thump of her ball of rubber bands bouncing against the filing cabinets provided heavy punctuation to her spiralling internal monologue of never trusting anyone ever again ever.
“Emma?”

There was a polite tap on her office door and Emma looked up from her brooding to see Mary Margaret holding up a couple of takeaway cups from the diner balanced on top of a large tin, and she waved her in.

“I was stress-baking again,” Mary Margaret said sheepishly as she settled herself in the chair beside Emma’s and opened the tin to reveal several snickerdoodle cookies inside. Emma took two. “I have memories of doing it during the first curse and now I can’t seem to stop. I don’t even like snickerdoodles all that much. I’m just so nervous about everything. The flying monkeys, the baby, you, that strange woman…”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “What strange woman?”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing.” Mary Margaret looked guilty as she took a sip of her coffee.

“Considering the situation that we’re in right now, nothing is ‘probably nothing’,,” Emma pointed out.

“Well, it was when David and I were scouting the new places in town the other day. One of the newcomers was a little bit… odd.”

“Right.” Emma pulled up the picture again and swung the monitor around to show Mary Margaret, who paled.

“Emma, that’s her.”

“Are you absolutely positive?”

The other woman nodded vigorously, almost spilling coffee down her front in the process.

“Yes. That’s her. She was far too interested in my baby and I just got a weird vibe from her.”

“Well, looks like we’ve found our wicked witch,” Emma said grimly, grabbing her jacket from the back of her chair. “Belle’s hair, your baby, Little John and the guys down in the woods… What’s going on? What does she want? Who does she want?”

“I don’t know.” Mary Margaret’s hand came to her bump with a shiver of fear.

“Well, hopefully we’ll soon find out. Where does she live?”

“The farmhouse standing alone on the hill, out on the edge of town,” Mary Margaret replied, and Emma groaned.

“Of course, because an old isolated farmhouse isn’t at all creepy and the perfect base of operations for evil deeds.”

“You’re not going alone, Emma, surely? It’s not safe, you don’t know what she might do. Or what Walsh might do for that matter.”

“I know, but despite everything that’s happened, there’s a part of me that still trusts Walsh not to hurt me. He’s had a year of opportunities to kill me and I’m still here, I think that has to account for something.”

“I know, but what if he was just waiting for the right moment?” Mary Margaret pleaded. “What if he was waiting until you got back to Storybrooke? If he’s working with the witch then he can’t be
trusted."

“I know, and everything in my head is telling me that I ought to leave it alone but I have to do this, I
can’t just sit around and wait for something else to happen when I know that something’s going on in
that house. I mean, from what we know of the other monkey transformations we’ve seen, they’re not
in their right minds. Maybe Zelena is manipulating him somehow.”

“I can understand that, but will you at least take David with you in case something bad happens?”

“I can handle myself,” Emma pressed. “I know what they’re capable of, believe me.”

“I know you can handle yourself, the point is that you don’t have to. You have a support network,
not just in your personal life but in your professional one as well. You don’t have to be the lone wolf
anymore when there’s backup just a phone call away.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. It would be good to have someone close by just in case it gets
hairy. But I’m going to go in alone. I think I might get more out of Walsh that way, if I don’t go in
with a huge show of force. I don’t want either of them to vanish like they did at the cemetery. I want
answers, not a fight. Well, not a fight just yet, but depending on how I’m feeling later, Walsh might
get an elbow to the face. I’ll grab David on the way over there. Will you be ok covering the phones
till we get back?”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Mary Margaret looked up to see Henry hovering awkwardly in the office doorway.
“I heard a voice and I thought Mom might be in here,” he said. “Have you see her? She said that she was coming over here to check out a lead on her case.”

“She left a few minutes ago, she was going towards the edge of town,” Mary Margaret said.

“Right.” Henry looked dejected and Mary Margaret patted the seat beside her that Emma had been sitting in.

“Want to talk about it, Henry?”

Henry’s brow furrowed. “How do you know my name?”

“Oh, your mom’s told me all about you.” Mary Margaret said hastily. She’d forgotten that Henry had no recollection of knowing her before. “She’s really proud of you. So, what’s eating you?”

Henry took a seat but didn’t speak for a long time.

“I don’t know if I should say anything,” he began eventually. “It’s family stuff, you know.”

“Well, in a town as small as this where everyone knows everyone else, we’re all practically family anyway,” Mary Margaret said airily. Henry laughed.

“That must make Thanksgiving interesting.”

“You have no idea. I’m dreading it this year. But if it’s any consolation, sometimes people find it easier to talk to a stranger who won’t judge them rather than someone they know.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I don’t know what’s up really. When I first came on this trip with Mom I was so excited, I thought that we would have an adventure together. But it’s been kind of boring so far. Mom’s always out working on something or other and Walsh has just vanished. I thought I could at least talk to him as we’d be strangers in the town together, but he kept disappearing off to places and now he’s just gone. I guess it wasn’t the most thrilling holiday for him either but he could have at least said goodbye before he split for New York.”

“I can see how that would be frustrating. Maybe your mom wants you to spend more time with your dad whilst you can; if you’re going back to New York when this job of hers is over then you won’t get as much time with him and I know he really wants to get to know you.”

Mary Margaret didn’t really want to think of the possibility of Emma and Henry returning to New York. In her ideal world, they’d defeat the Wicked Witch, break the current curse that they were all under, and Emma and Henry would remain in Storybrooke, both with their full memories. But whilst Emma’s previously transient lifestyle had allowed her to up sticks and move from Boston to Storybrooke at the drop of a hat, Mary Margaret knew that realistically it would not be so simple this time around, when she had both herself and Henry to think of.

Henry nodded. “Yeah, I guess it wouldn’t hurt.” He got up and called Neal.

“Hey Henry, how’s it going?”

“Ok, I guess. How’s Belle?”

“She’s ok. Huge headache though but she was determined to get back to work today. We’re doing inventory in my dad’s shop, want to come over and go through weird junk with us?”

“Sure.”
Mary Margaret waved him off with a smile. It was good that Neal and Henry were getting along so well. The mention of the pawn shop made her wonder if perhaps the unicorn mobile from Emma’s nursery was still there. That was where it had ended up during the first curse, and surely it couldn’t hurt to look. She’d waddle over later if her aching ankles allowed her, once she wasn’t on phone duty.

Regina came into the station as Henry was leaving, and although she responded to his greeting of ‘hi Regina!’ with a bright smile, her face fell as soon as his back was turned.

“I just keep expecting him to call me Mom,” she said, sitting down in his vacated chair with a sigh. “Every day I wake up hoping that he’s magically regained his memories overnight. Every time he meets someone new in town I hope it will trigger some kind of recollection.”

“Me too.”

The two women sat in silence for a while, each lamenting the plight that they had found themselves in.

“I had a call from David,” Regina said eventually. “He said that you’d identified the witch and Emma was taking him to investigate.”

“Yes, we found her by accident really. She wasn’t doing anything suspicious. Well, not outwardly. She seemed open and friendly, if a bit weird. You’d think that she would have wanted to hide away and pretend that there was no-one in the house.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Hiding in plain sight is a powerful tactic. Perhaps she was counting on us all being so suspicious of each other that we wouldn’t notice the happy, friendly, seemingly benign woman who keeps to herself in a farmhouse.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

They fell back into silence.

“Do you think I ought to go after them?” Regina asked. “If they’re going after the Wicked Witch then they might need magic.”

“Emma has magic,” Mary Margaret pointed out.

“I know, but it’s so untested and she’s had what, three days of training with Rumpelstiltskin whilst we were all in Neverland? I’m worried about her.”

“I am too. But I’m having to learn again that she can take care of herself. And I trust her to ask for help if she needs it. She’d got a lot better at realising that she doesn’t have to do everything alone before we all went back to the Enchanted Forest. I just hope that still rings true.”

They were quiet for a long time, both of them worrying about Emma’s latest mission.

Henry crossed the road and entered the pawn shop quietly. Well, he’d hoped to enter quietly. The bell above the door betrayed him and Neal looked up from where he was standing behind the counter with a couple of sheets of paper covered in densely packed, spidery writing.

“Hey Henry,” he said brightly. “We were just about to stop for a tea break, want to join us?”
“Yeah, ok.” He looked around the shop in awe at all the stuff that was crammed into it, from the ordinary (the pictures on the walls) to the extraordinary (the large cabinet filled with brightly coloured glass vials) to the downright creepy (the wooden puppets whose shocked faces seemed to track him around the room). He shook off the feeling of déjà vu and followed Neal through into the back room.

“Henry, this is Belle, my sort of stepmom. Belle, Henry.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Belle cleared a space in the sea of junk on the table – the back room was even more cluttered than the front – and Henry sat down beside her.

“You too. Is your head ok? Neal said you’d been attacked.”

“Yes, I was. In the cemetery.”

“Do they know who did it?”

“Not exactly.” Belle looked shifty and Henry didn’t think that she was telling the whole truth. “The sheriff’s station is looking into it though. It’s tied in with what your mom’s investigating.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I trust her entirely on that,” Henry said. “She said we were coming here on a job, but I don’t think we’re chasing someone who’s skipped bail.”

Neal shrugged. “Well, I don’t know the ins and outs of it but I know that your mom’s a good person, so I don’t think you ought to worry too much.”

Not completely mollified, Henry nevertheless decided that it was best not to push the subject, and he took a peep over Belle’s shoulder at the sheets of paper she was holding.

“Your dad had a lot of stuff in here,” he observed as Neal brought the tea over.

“He spent a lot of time collecting it,” Neal said. “I don’t think even he knew what half of it was. Listen to this.” He plucked a dusty index card out of a box. “One urn, origin unknown, very old. No, wait, that says cold. Very cold.” He raised an eyebrow and put the card back.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if this was all computerised?” Henry asked.

“Well, yes,” Neal admitted. “But your grandfather was notoriously technophobic. Mind you, he was about three hundred years old, so it’s probably not all that surprising.”

“Three hundred’s pushing it,” Henry said.

“Hey, I’ll have you know that the men of our family are incredibly long lived. I myself am two hundred and sixty-eight. Give or take.”

Henry just raised an eyebrow and Neal sighed.

“Well, it was worth a shot. We probably should get it all on the computer, but this is what we’re working on at the moment.”

Henry indicated the display of what looked to be pens that stood in the centre of the table. “What are these?”

Belle riffled through her papers. “Apparently these are ‘fossilised fairy wands’, brackets various.”

“Ok, I never met him but my grandpa sounds kind of strange.”
“Oh, he was,” Belle said wistfully. “But in the best possible way.” She ran her fingers over the wood, feeling one wand warmer than the others, and she recognised it immediately. Tinker Bell’s old wand. The fairy had not had time to reclaim it from the shop before they were all taken back to the Enchanted Forest, and now it was back here again. Belle plucked it out of the stand. She had no idea how to use it, or if it would even work for her, but she suspected that it would recognise her as Tinker Bell’s daughter. The wand was made from the stem of the flower that the fairy had been born in. Did that make it her grandmother? The thought made her smile.

“You’re keeping that?” Henry asked incredulously. “It’s just a piece of dead wood.”

“You never know when it might come in handy,” Belle said. Whether it worked or not, she felt a lot safer with it as potential protection from another attack.

**Oz – Past**

Zelena flung down the book that she had been studying with a grunt of frustration. The only thing that was achieved was a small breeze flickering her candle flame violently.

“Zelena?”

Verdie’s head popped around Zelena’s door, the picture of concern. Life in the Crystal Castle as a Cardinal Witch in training, and now the fully-fledged Witch of the East, had been good to Verdie. She had grown into a beautiful and accomplished young woman, easily the most powerful witch of their group. Zelena, on the other hand, had spent the last few years in a difficult state of not quite belonging, but belonging enough not to fit anywhere else either.

“What’s the matter?” Verdie came over and sat on the end of her bed, tucking her feet under her as she’d done ever since they were children at the orphanage together. Zelena sighed.

“You know what the matter is. It’s me, and my non-existent magic. I can’t do this, Verdie, I’ll never be able to. I can just about manage the potions but the spells are beyond me. Let’s face it, the only thing I can do is create tornados, and I can only do that when I’m so out of control I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

“You’re getting much better at controlling those though,” Verdie said brightly. “Just give it more time. Maybe because your magic was suppressed for so long, it’s taking longer to manifest.” She clicked her fingers and a tea tray appeared on the bedcovers, the pot pouring two cups of its own accord. Zelena took a cup gratefully and stared into the depths. One of her few surviving memories of her grandmother was watching her read the tea leaves, but this was magical tea and it left no such residue. Perhaps if she could find some kind of portent in the porcelain she’d have some idea of whether she should keep trying and failing to hone her magical technique or whether she would be better served to give up now and return to Greenfields to take a late dressmaker’s apprenticeship and look after her fellow orphans.

“You know, Glinda’s thought of something that might help you.”

Zelena raised an eyebrow. She and Glinda had never seen completely eye to eye even when they’d been at the orphanage together, and she was naturally somewhat dubious of any offer of help from the new Witch of the South. Verdie rolled her eyes.
“I know that you two don’t get along but she’s not trying to sabotage you or anything. She just said that you ought to try wishing on a star.”

“Right. Because obviously, believing in fairy stories is going to help me.”

“You never know,” Verdie said. “What have you got to lose? If there really is a fairy in the Wishing Star, then maybe she can help you. And if there isn’t, then you haven’t lost anything.”

“I haven’t gained anything either,” Zelena pointed out. Verdie shook her head, vanishing the tea things with a sweep of her hand and getting off the bed.

“When are you going to learn to the look on the bright side?”

“Unlike you, that was never a luxury that I could afford.”

“But things are different now, Zelena,” Verdie said patiently. “We’re not poor little orphans anymore. We’re witches, powerful ones. You need to believe that.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Verdie sighed. “Good night, Zelena.”

“Night, Verdie.”

After her sister had left the room, Zelena glanced over to the window where she had not pulled the curtains across fully, and the stars were visible. The Wishing Star. The brightest star in any sky. She went over to the window, leaning heavily on the sill, and she closed her eyes.

“I wish that I was a real witch, with proper power. A witch that Verdie can be proud of.”

“Your sister is already proud of you.”

Zelena’s eyes sprang open and she gave a squawk of alarm on hearing the soft, silvery voice, and she gave another on seeing the tiny woman sitting on her windowsill.

“The Wishing Fairy?” she hedged.

“I go by many different names in many different realms. You can call me the Wishing Fairy if you’d like. But as I said, your sister is already proud of you, simply for being a sister to her. She’s always looked up to you, magic or no magic. And I think that you know that. So what is it that you really want to wish for?”

Zelena thought about it hard.

“Power,” she said eventually. “Ability. Just so that I don’t feel like an imposter.”

“Power is a dangerous thing to wish for,” the fairy said sternly. “With great power comes great responsibility, and it’s not something that I can just give to you. It needs to be worked for, and earned.”

“I am working for it,” Zelena said, indicating the many study books stacked around her room. “I just can’t get the hang of it. Maybe not power then, maybe just a different way of learning. I’ve got the power already but no-one here in Oz can teach me how to wield it properly.”

The fairy smiled. “Now here is where I may be able to help you. Oz is a magical realm, but very few have that ability and its magic is not as potent as in some other places.”
“Could you take me to those other places?” Zelena asked eagerly.

“I can give you the means to go.” The fairy handed over a small pouch, it grew to an ordinary human size as Zelena took it. “This bag contains magic beans. Each can only be used once – one to take you to the Enchanted Forest, and one to bring you home. So use them wisely, for once you return here, you will not be able to leave this realm again.”

Zelena nodded enthusiastically. “I understand. I’ll learn so much!”

“Just make sure that you learn it from the right people,” the fairy said, a warning tone in her voice. With that final, foreboding phrase, she fluttered out through the open window and off towards the night sky, until she was nothing more than a speck of light against the clouds again. Zelena blinked.

“Well, that was helpful,” she said. “Who are the right people?”

There was no answer to be had from the fairy, and Zelena looked down at the beans in her hand. So innocent-looking, and yet the key to her destiny. No time like the present.

She grabbed her cloak and boots and was about to leave the room when she remembered Verdie, and hastily scribbled her sister a note.

*Off to learn more magic in the Enchanted Forest. Take care of yourself, love Z. PS, thank Glinda for me.*

She left the castle, picking her way through the surrounding woods in search of the perfect place to cast the portal that would take her to the Enchanted Forest. She found a good, wide clearing, and she was about to toss the bean down onto the ground when she heard a noise coming from between the trees. On closer inspection, it seemed that the noise was coming from the actual tree itself, and she jumped back when a door appeared in the trunk. Unnerved by this, she dived behind another tree, and watched cautiously as the door handle turned and a man stepped through it, looking around at the trees and giving a heavy sigh.

“That’s the trouble with Oz,” he said to himself. “Everything is so incredibly green. I keep thinking that the next time I come here, even its inhabitants will have turned green.”

The man was a portal jumper, that much was clear from his speech. Zelena knew that they existed but she’d never had cause to see one up close before. She looked again at the beans. Maybe she could have more than one trip to the Enchanted Forest after all.

“Hello there.” The man had noticed her hiding and was watching her with curiosity. “It’s all right,” he added when Zelena shrunk back. “I only bite on request.”

Boldly, Zelena stepped out from behind her tree.

“You’re a portal jumper, aren’t you?”

The man bowed low. “Jefferson’s the name, realm jumping is the game. And yourself, dear lady?”

“Zelena. Do you know the Enchanted Forest?”

“Know it? It’s my base of operations. I’ve just come from there.”

“Could you take me, please?”

“I could indeed. Not right now though, the portal won’t let me. One goes through, one comes back.
But give me a couple of hours, I’ll be back with a proxy and I’ll take you with me on the return trip. How does that sound?” He paused. “First though, may I ask why you want to go to the Enchanted Forest?”

“I’m looking for a magician.”

“Any one in particular?”

“No. Any magician. A good one.”

“By good you mean…”

“Powerful. Good at what they do.”

“Excellent, I was hoping you’d say that. I know just the chap. Why are you looking for a magician?”

“I want to learn magic,” Zelena said, her voice as matter of fact as she could make it. So far everything was working in her favour and she really did not want the tables to turn.

“Surely you can learn it here, from your Cardinal Witches.” It felt like Jefferson was teasing her, and Zelena scowled.

“I am a Cardinal Witch.”

“Ah. I can see your predicament. Still, the gentleman I know should be able to help you with that. He’s the oldest and most knowledgeable magician in the realm.”

Zelena smiled. “He sounds perfect.”

“Well, in that case, don’t go away. I’ll be back before you can say Jack Robinson.”

“Who’s Jack Robinson?”

“No idea. Adieu!”

He rushed back through the door without a backwards glance and the tree returned to normal. Zelena immediately began to second guess herself. He wasn’t going to come back and she was going to spend all night sitting out here in wait for a man who’d come out of a tree for God’s sake. She was beginning to think that she’d imagined the whole thing when the door reappeared and opened again and Jefferson poked his head around.

“Excellent, you’re still here. I’ve squared it with Rumpelstiltskin. Shall we go?”

X

Portal jumping was not an experience that Zelena would get used to in a hurry. From the room full of doors, Jefferson took her hand and jumped up – and they carried on rising through the swirling magic of the space between realms until they were standing in the entrance hall of a large castle not too dissimilar to the Crystal Castle back home, but on a much grander scale. Zelena looked around her surroundings in awe.

“Is this the Enchanted Forest?”

“This is the Dark Castle which is in the Enchanted Forest, yes. Now, I hate to draw your attention away from the admittedly spectacular scenery, but you’re standing in my hat.”
Zelena looked down and apologised profusely on finding one foot stuck in a black silk top hat. Jefferson picked it up and perched it on his head with a flourish.

“And now, for the main event. I give you… Rumpelstiltskin! The most powerful sorcerer in all the realms!”

Nothing happened, until Zelena heard a high, strange voice from behind them.

“Wrong direction, dearie, but I do appreciate the advertising.”

Zelena turned and found herself face to face with Rumpelstiltskin for the first time. She had to take a step back on seeing his shimmering skin and claw-like fingernails. But despite his alarming appearance, Zelena could tell that he was powerful. She’d spent years around the most powerful witches in her realm, and she could feel magic as well as any of them. To meet someone so incredibly powerful and incredibly dangerous, well, it was intoxicating.

“And you must be Zelena,” he said. “What a lovely name. Jefferson here tells me that you want to learn magic from the best.”

“I just want to be as powerful as my sisters.”

Or more powerful, Zelena thought to herself, if Rumpelstiltskin would teach her all that he knew.

“Well, as luck would have it, I’m in the market for a new apprentice. I trust you’re prepared to work hard and practise what I teach you?”

“Of course.”

“And you won’t touch anything off limits, especially the books?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, I think only one question remains. How far are you prepared to go in your pursuit of the power that you seek?”

Zelena thought about it long and hard. Rumpelstiltskin’s power was unprecedented, but it was dark and dangerous. She thought of the Wishing Fairy’s words. *With great power comes great responsibility.* But she was responsible. She’d taken care of Verdie for all those years after all. She could handle great power.

“As far as it takes,” she told Rumpelstiltskin confidently.

He grinned, an expression that in the wrong situation would be absolutely terrifying.

“Now we’re talking, dearie. Let’s get started.”

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**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“So, what’s the big announcement?” Regina strode into the main room of the winter palace, one that had been designated as their makeshift war room. It was the scene of many a lament and many the
start of a plot against Snow White in its time, and she felt somewhat uncomfortable now sharing the space with the woman who had been the object of so much hatred. The party had decamped to Regina’s old home after their negotiations with Zelena had failed, and now the once lonely palace was a constant crossroads of coming and going, messengers and scouts from all over the kingdom arriving to give news or leaving to go and find some more. For Regina, who was used to only her father and the mirror for company, it was incredibly overwhelming and she stayed out of the way as much as possible. Today, though, Charming and Snow had requested her presence at their latest planning meeting and along with a few choice allies including Robin and Aurora, they were all seated around the imposing round table with battle plans sprawled across its surface.

“We have some good news,” Snow said brightly. “We want to share it with everyone. But first and most importantly, we have a new plan for infiltrating Zelena’s lair and reclaiming the castle.”

“I’m all ears.” So far all of their plans had been rejected by one member of the party or another as unworkable and fresh ideas were thin on the ground.

“We could use the old tunnels,” Charming continued. “They haven’t been used in years and it’s likely that Zelena doesn’t know about them. She may not have thought to seal them off.”

“What old tunnels?” Regina asked. “I can’t believe I used to live in that castle and I never knew about the existence of secret tunnels.”

“My great-grandfather discovered them,” Snow explained. “Legend has it that he used to smuggle his paramours in and out through them, but the claims have never been substantiated.”

“I can perhaps see why.” Regina snorted. Snow White’s family tree had been as pure and good as her name would suggest for as long as anyone could remember. “But do go on. Secret tunnels.”

“The entrance is at the edge of the forest, by the far side of the lake.” Snow unrolled a map of the kingdom onto the table and pinpointed the spot. “The tunnels continue under the lake and come up in the old wine cellars. The only problem that we can foresee – the witch aside – is that being under the lake, the tunnels are prone to flooding and quite dangerous.”

“I’m happy to volunteer for the trip,” Robin said. “If there’s one thing I know about, it’s sneaking into places.”

Regina considered the plan. It was doomed to fail as far as she could see, but as she didn’t have a better idea, she simply nodded. “I’m in. You’ll need some kind of magical back-up once you’re inside, if you get that far. It’s all very well sneaking about but you have to remember that you’re sneaking about under the nose of a magician – you’re going to need another magician.”

“It’s agreed then,” Charming said. “You, me, and Robin. We don’t want to risk taking too many people through the tunnels.”

The plan was simple in that there wasn’t really a plan – get in, see what was happening, search for weak spots and get out – avoiding any confrontation with the witch or her monkeys if at all possible. Regina didn’t have all that much confidence in it, but she knew that sticking with the royals was the best chance she had of being reunited with Henry at the end of it all.

“Well, after that somewhat bleak session I could use some good news,” Aurora said. “What have you got to tell us, Snow?”

Snow’s smile broadened until she was positively beaming.

“We wanted to tell you all before we made the official announcement. I’m pregnant.”
The news was met with a few moments of stunned silence before polite congratulations were exchanged, but Regina still couldn’t bring herself to get her head around the frank statement. Aurora was looking similarly disturbed.

“Regina?” Snow hedged.

She plastered a smile on her face. “Congratulations, both of you. You’re very lucky.”

“You don’t sound too convinced,” Snow said.

“I guess that with everything else happening, I forgot that life goes on.”

“Well, we didn’t exactly plan it.” Snow looked embarrassed, pink spots rising in her cheeks. “And the timing could probably be better, but here we are. It’s a second chance.”

Regina said nothing more, for she was the entire reason Snow wanted and needed a second chance at raising a child in the first place. Regina might not have a second chance after losing Henry, but at least she’d had that first chance, and after everything that they had been through together, Regina certainly couldn’t deny Snow’s motherhood and fierce maternal instincts.

“I’m happy for you, but please be careful,” Aurora implored. Her own pregnancy was advancing now and her baby bump was undeniable. “I know that when we were travelling it felt like I was being watched and targeted the most, and I could just tell it was because of the baby. Don’t let the witch get her hands on yours. You’ve been through too much to lose another child.”

It was a chilling fact and a sobering one, bringing the jubilatory atmosphere to an abrupt standstill, but Aurora’s words rang true and could not be ignored. It was a dangerous world that they were bringing their children into, but in a way the news gave Regina a little hope. As a mother herself, she knew how protective these two women would be of their babies, and it gave the entire party a much stronger incentive to take down the witch once and for all. They had just a few short months in which to do it.

“So,” she began. “When do we set out for these tunnels?”

Oz – Past

“Zelena! Zelena, wait!”

It was the middle of the night and Zelena had not expected anyone else to be around, and she froze on hearing Verdie’s voice. Her sister’s light, pattering footsteps came around the corner.

“Verdie, I have to meet Jefferson, I’m going to be late.”

“I know, I know, but I had to give you this before you left.” She held out a loosely wrapped brown paper parcel with a wide smile. Zelena raised an eyebrow as she took the package.

“Ok, what’s the occasion?”

“Your accession to Witch of the West, of course!” Verdie exclaimed. “You have come so far in the last few months and I really don’t think you need to go back to Rumpelstil- shil- whatever his name is.”
“Oh, but I do. There’s so much more to learn.”

“Zelena, you’re already the most powerful of the Cardinal Witches. You could wipe the floor with me, Glinda and Phoebe combined.” Verdie’s smile faded. “You don’t need any more.”

“I...”

“Or maybe…” Verdie’s smile returned. “Maybe you’re a little bit in love with him.”

“Verdie don’t be ridiculous,” Zelena snapped, but all the same she could feel the heat rising in her cheeks.

“Hey, it’s ok. When you spend that much time in close quarters with someone, feelings are bound to develop. Look at Glinda and Phoebe. Ok, ok, I’ll leave it alone.” She giggled at her sister’s expression and indicated the packet. “Go on, open it. Since you’re determined to go, you might as well go in style. And this way, I’ll know that you can always come home.”

Zelena unwrapped the parcel. “Silver slippers?”

“Made by yours truly. They’ll always bring you home, wherever you might be.”

Zelena threw her arms around her sister.

“Thank you, Verdie.”

“You’re welcome. Now go on, you’ll be late!”

Zelena changed her shoes with a wave of her hand, and rushed out of the castle, feeling like she was walking on air.

X

“Well hello there.” Rumpelstiltskin raised his eyebrows as Zelena entered the laboratory. “I have to say that I didn’t expect to see you again.”

Zelena faltered. “You didn’t?”

“Given that you’re now officially the Witch of the West, I wouldn’t have thought that you’d have time for any more of my teachings. Don’t you have munchkins to look out for?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“Great power and great responsibility, that’s what you were told, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but… But there’s so much more,” Zelena said quickly before Rumpelstiltskin could say anything else.

“The pursuit of power is a dangerous business, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin said. There was something hard in his voice, a cruelty that she had heard there before, but never directed at her like this. “I’m living proof. My complexion was as clear and rosy as yours once.”

“So why do you keep pursuing it?” Zelena asked, coming a little closer.

“Because unlike you, my dear, I have not yet achieved my aim. Be careful, Zelena, because you’re getting greedy.”
“So that’s it?” Zelena asked. “This is it, this is the end. You think I’ve learned enough so you’re just casting me aside?”

“No, I’m letting you go off and follow your own path and do the job you’re supposed to be doing instead of spending all your time with me.”

“But maybe I want to spend all my time with you.” Now or never. Zelena wasn’t even sure of her own feelings, but she knew that she had to stay, that there was more to learn in the Enchanted Forest, more power to be gleaned from Rumpelstiltskin. She leaned in and tried to kiss him, but Rumpelstiltskin held up a hand to stop her.

“No,” he said gently. “I don’t want that, and I think, deep down, you don’t either.”

“You don’t know what I want!”

“I know you want too much and I’m not prepared to teach it to you.”

“You can’t do this to me!” Zelena pleaded. “I’ve worked so hard and come so far. You said yourself that my progress was outstanding!”

“And it is, but this is where it ends. When Jefferson returns from his current errand, he can take you home, but I won’t teach you any more magic.”

It felt like a slap in the face, because although his arguments made sense, Zelena still couldn’t bring herself to accept them. The thrill of the newfound power in her veins – power that she’d always had but could now control and use for great ends in ways she could never do before – was addictive, and Zelena wanted more of it.

“Very well then,” she said, steely determination colouring her words as Rumpelstiltskin turned back to the potion he was brewing, effectively dismissing her. “If you won’t teach me, I’ll teach myself.”

She waved a hand lazily, selecting a particular volume from a high bookshelf and drawing it through the air towards her before leaving the lab quietly and making her way down to the small bedroom she used when she had been staying in the Dark Castle for her lessons. The book, entitled the Mytheocopia, was one of Rumpelstiltskin’s most potent spell books and one of the ones that she had been categorically forbidden from touching when she had begun her training with him. She opened the book, running her fingers over the old lettering, in a language she could not even hope to understand.

“Still, no matter. Anyone with magic knows that the best way is straight up,” she muttered to herself, doing her best impression of Rumpelstiltskin’s voice. She could feel the unbridled raw magic in the book calling to her, almost lifting off the page in anticipation of her bending it to her will. Zelena closed her eyes and took a deep breath, inhaling the magic from the ancient paper and feeling it fill her veins.

The change was immediate and terrifying, and Zelena knew at once that she’d taken too much and Rumpelstiltskin’s rules had been in place for a good reason. The magic burned her lungs and throat, bringing tears to her eyes as she coughed helplessly, gasping for her breath.

“What the hell have you done?”

Rumpelstiltskin appeared in a swirl of inky smoke in front of her, the very picture of fury.

“I didn’t, I just…” Zelena spluttered.
“No, you didn’t just anything, you knew exactly what you were doing when you took that book and took that magic,” Rumpelstiltskin growled. “You disobeyed the rules and you betrayed my trust.”

“But what about me?” Zelena snapped back, fighting against the powerful onslaught of new magic in her veins making her woozy and nauseous.

“What about you?”

“You said you would teach me and now you’re just getting rid of me!”

“You said you wanted to be as powerful as your sisters and the last time I checked, you were the most accomplished witch of your little coven so I think my end of the deal is fulfilled.” He looked her up and down and snorted. “I did warn you, dearie. Never say that I didn’t give you plenty of warning.”

He grabbed the book where it had fallen from Zelena’s hands and vanished it back to his workroom with a snap of his fingers.

“Time for you to go, dearie. You can wait in the hall for Jefferson to fetch you. No more magic lessons.”

“If you’re that keen to get rid of me I’ll leave now,” Zelena spat, and she clicked the heels of the silver slippers together, feeling the influence of Verdie’s strong, pure light magic surrounding them. Rumpelstiltskin’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“By all means. Just don’t come back.”

Two more clicks, and Zelena was on her way home to Oz, dark magic and rage bubbling unchecked in her veins.

Storybrooke – Present

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yep. Sometimes you just have to trust your gut, and although my gut is telling me that Walsh is not to be trusted, it’s also telling me that if I confront him straight away, he’ll tell me what’s going on.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” David gave Emma a small smile. “I trust your judgement.”

“You do? I barely trust it myself.”

“You’ve survived this long, so I don’t think you can be too bad.”

They were sitting in the yellow bug on the road leading up towards the farmhouse where the witch lived, parked up just out of line of sight from the house. Emma got out of the driver’s seat but left her keys in the ignition, just in case.

“I’ll call you if I need back up. Or, you know, if you see fireballs in the house that’s probably a sign that something’s up.”

“Be careful, Emma,” David pleaded.
She began the trek up the house’s long, winding driveway, mentally rehearsing all her opening
gambits depending on who opened the door. The house really didn’t look too promising. The
windows were all shut and the curtains closed. As she approached, she thought she saw one of the
upstairs nets twitch, and she steeled herself for confrontation when she knocked on the door. There
was no response to her first or second knock, but she could hear footsteps so she knew that someone
had to be inside. She didn’t really want to announce her presence in an official capacity, but at the
same time, she didn’t want to leave completely empty-handed.

Just as she was raising her hand to knock again, the door opened a crack, and Emma made out
Walsh’s eyes in the dark gap.

“Emma, thank God it’s you. Are you alone?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes. She’s gone out. She needed potion ingredients. And, to, erm, check on the other monkeys.”

The door opened a little wider and Walsh peered around the surroundings furtively before taking a
step back and waving her inside.

“I take it you can guess why I’m here,” Emma said once Walsh had closed the door behind her.

“Walsh, what the hell is going on? Have you been working with the Wicked Witch the entire time?”

Walsh gave a slow nod. “Yes. I have. She sent me to New York to keep an eye on you.”

“Right. Did keeping an eye on me extend to almost proposing?”

“Well, she didn’t really give me any brief after she sent me. I just knew I had to keep you close.”

Emma folded her arms, pacing to and fro in the cramped hallway.

“I’m sorry, Emma. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“No, I think we’ve gone way past sorry,” Emma snapped. “Why is it that every time I think I’ve met
a nice normal guy, they all turn out to have fantastical fairy tale connections?” She threw her hands
up in the air. “Enough. I’m not even here to talk about us and what you did to me. I’m here because
of the witch and what you’re planning with her and why you attacked Belle in the cemetery and why
are you even working with her when she’s quite clearly a lunatic?”

“I have no choice,” Walsh said. “You have to believe me, Emma. I didn’t choose this, I would never
want this voluntarily. But I have to obey her, I have no choice. It’s a magical compulsion, the power
she has over all the monkeys.”

“You’re not a monkey now.”

“If I run, she’ll just force me to turn and pull me back in. Emma, she’ll kill me.”

Although she still didn’t entirely trust him, Emma could tell that Walsh’s fear of the woman he was
an unwilling accomplice to was genuine.

“Where are the other monkeys?” she asked.

“Zelena has them patrolling the town line so that no-one can leave.”
“Doesn’t the curse stop that?”

“I don’t know, I guess not or she wouldn’t need to do it.”

“All right.” Emma stopped her angry pacing. “What does she want here in Storybrooke?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t believe you,” Emma growled.

“All right, all right! Man, I’m going to be in so much trouble for this. She needs ingredients.”

“Ingredients for what?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Walsh! If I’m going to help you break free from this woman’s clutches then I need something to go on!”

“No, I literally can’t tell you. She’s got a spell on me to stop me blabbing; it’s called a Snitch, you can ask Regina about it.” There was a long pause and then his face brightened. “But I can show you. There’s nothing in the rules that says I can’t show you, as long as I don’t tell you.”

He led the way through the dark house towards the kitchen and yanked a cloth off the weirdest apparatus Emma had ever seen.

“What the hell is that?”

“I have no idea.”

“That looks like Belle’s hair.” Emma reached out to touch the vial, but the metal gimble surrounding it was sharp and sliced her finger. “Ouch!”

“Here, let me.”

Walsh approached with a tea towel to mop up the blood, and Emma snatched it from him. “Don’t touch me.”

She checked the wound; it was oozing steadily and she squeezed her throbbing finger tightly.

“So that was the reason you went after Belle.” One handed, she grappled with her phone and took a snap of the apparatus. “Maybe Regina can work out what this is used for.” Emma thought back to Belle and Neal’s testimonies from the night of the cemetery attack. They’d said that Zelena and Walsh had been talking about breaking the laws of magic. Emma didn’t even want to know what the laws of magic were.

Suddenly Walsh stiffened. “She’s coming back, we don’t have much time.”

“How can you tell?”

Walsh tapped his ear. “Call it monkey senses, if you will. I can hear her.” He tried to steer her towards the cellar door.

“Oh no, I’m leaving.”

“No, please. There’s something else you need to see and if she finds you here then you won’t be able
to come back.”

Simultaneously, Emma’s phone began to ring, it was David.

“*Emma, Zelena’s heading towards the house from the woods.*”

“I know, I’m coming. Give me ten minutes. If you don’t hear from me by then, go get Regina or someone with magical firepower.”

“*Ok.*” David sounded unconvinced but Emma hoped that she could count on him not to do anything rash.

“Ok,” she said to Walsh. “What do I need to see?”

“Down here.” Walsh opened the cellar door. “It’s a storm cellar, there’s an exit at the other end, for in case the house collapses.” Emma gave him a completely disbelieving look and Walsh threw his hands up in defence. “Hey, I just heard you telling David to go get Regina to come and fireball me if he doesn’t hear from you, do you really think I’m going to risk that?”

Emma had no idea.

“All right, so what is that I’m supposed to be looking for in here?” she asked.

“Oh, believe me, you’ll know it when you see it,” Walsh said. “And I hope you’ll know what to do with it when you find it.”

Armed only with a pistol, a taser and the knowledge that if the worst came to the worst then she could throw a pretty mean fireball herself, Emma stepped into the cellar. Walsh shut and bolted the door behind her, plunging her into darkness.

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“Well, here we are.” It had taken the expedition party the best part of two days to reach the entrance to the tunnels and Regina had to raise an eyebrow when Charming pulled back the dried vines that marked the spot and revealed an ornately carved wooden door in a tree trunk.

“What is it with you people and doors in trees?” she muttered. “First the wardrobe and now this.”

“You’re quite welcome to remain outside if you want,” Charming said mildly.

“I never said I had anything against doors in trees, I was merely remarking on the frequency of their appearance whenever you’re around.”

“Of course.” Charming let go of the vines and turned to his companions. “Is everyone ready?”

Regina nodded. “As I’ll ever be. I know we’re not intending for any confrontation today but if we see that green bitch I’m not going to hesitate to flambé her.”

“Good to know.”

The trio set off through the tree, down a long, steep staircase into the darkness beneath the earth. Regain could hear the water dripping in the tunnel in front of them as Charming handed out torches,
and Regina lit them with magic, ensuring that they would remain burning no matter how damp they got. It was an eerie place, wet and clammy on all sides, and Regina could well see why it had fallen out of use over the years. The smell of stagnant water was repulsive, and the noises of the intermittent dripping had everyone on edge, waiting for something to creep up behind them in the gloom. The lake was large and the ground underfoot was difficult to traverse, so it took them a while to reach the staircase up towards the castle’s wine cellars. The trapdoor at the top was locked, and Charming worked at it with a small dagger from his belt.

“What’s the betting that she’s waiting for us as soon as we pop up?” Robin asked grimly.

“I wouldn’t like to guess,” Charming said. “But I hope that she’s enjoying the wine down here if she is. There’s some really excellent stuff.”

“You’re a farmer by birth, how on earth do you know about wine vintages?” Regina asked.

“Nothing, but I can still tell if it tastes nice. Rumpelstiltskin gave me a ten-minute crash course in being a nobleman before he handed me over to King George. I learned a lot.”

“Such as?”

“That man talks very fast.”

There was a pause for a moment, then Charming took the plunge, lifting the trap door up and inch or so and peering out. There was no immediate danger, so he came up into the room, still wary, the dagger held out at arm’s length. The cellar was empty apart from the wine bottles and he waved for Regina and Robin to follow him out.

“So where do we start?” Robin asked.

“We’ll take the back stairs up as far as we can, and get the lay of the land. Any monkeys that you see, knock them out with this.” He gave his companions each a pouch of fairy dust. “Nova and Sugar Plum gave it to us. It’ll put them to sleep but it won’t hurt them. We don’t know who might be under the fur.”

They followed Charming out of the cellar and up the narrow staircase towards the castle proper, coming out into the kitchens. A large cauldron stood empty on one side of the room, and a strange apparatus was set up on the main table. Charming raised an eyebrow when he saw it.

“Well, that’s new. Any ideas, Regina?”

“Not a clue. I’ve seen something similar in Rumpelstiltskin’s workroom, but I never saw him use it. It’s for magic, but that’s all I can tell you. This one looks much more ornate than his.” She touched the apparatus lightly and the top part spun slowly around on an axel. “I really don’t know.”

“Looks like our witch is planning some practical magic,” Robin said. “It would be nice if we knew what.”

There wasn’t anything else of note in the kitchen, and the trio continued on into the next room, having to double take at the sight that met them.

It was an old storage room, but all the boxes had been stacked at the sides to make room for the glass coffin now residing in pride of place in the centre. The ornate casket was lit ethereally from below by magic, so its occupant could clearly be seen, a young woman in a deathlike sleep, a serene half-smile on her face, flame-like hair spread out over the satin pillow beneath her.
“Relative of yours?” Regina asked Charming.

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

Regina shook her head. “No, this is nothing to do with me.”

“Looking at her, I’d say she was a relative of Zelena’s,” Charming remarked, nodding towards her hair. “What’s she doing here, like this?”

“Well, she wouldn’t be the first to preserve a loved one like this.” Regina’s brow furrowed and she reached out to touch the glass. “That’s strange. She’s not dead.”

“A sleeping curse like Snow’s?” Charming suggested.

“No… It’s the casket that’s keeping her alive. She’s in suspended animation, frozen in the moment between heartbeats. She’s being kept alive, but for what purpose?”

Robin shivered. “I’m inclined to believe that it’s not a pleasant one. Shall we get a move on?”

“It would be wise.” Zelena materialised in the doorway, a nasty smile on her face. “I see you managed to weasel your way in where you’re not wanted. I’m impressed. I didn’t think you’d have the brains.”

Charming’s hand went to the hilt of his sword but he did not draw it, knowing what had happened the last time he’d unsuccessfully used a blade against the witch. Regina had no such qualms, launching an offensive spell at their enemy’s head. The razor wind cut her cheek but a wave of her hand healed the wound.

“Is that the best you can do?”

“Oh, you want more?” Regina taunted. “I can give you more.” She raised her hand, flames licking the tips of her fingers, and she caught Charming’s eye, flickering her gaze towards the door. He gave a slight nod, sign enough of his understanding, and waited for Regina’s cue. He and Robin ducked as the fire snaked out sharply with a crack like a lasso and slashed at Zelena’s face, distracting her for long enough to allow them to make a break for it.

“What about Regina?” Robin asked as they hared back down the corridors towards the trapdoor.

“She’ll catch us up. Believe me, she can take care of herself.”

They were almost there when they found the way blocked by two flying monkeys. Charming didn’t even slow down.

“All right, time for bed,” he said, grabbing his pouch of fairy dust and tossing a handful at their assailants. The two monkeys froze mid-flight and crashed to the ground, snoring gently, and Robin grimaced as Charming flung himself down the trapdoor, glancing over his shoulder at the monkeys.

“They are definitely going to have sore heads in the morning.”

“Come on!” Charming called. “When Zelena finds out that we got in this way she’s not going to waste any time in blocking it off!”

Robin followed the prince readily; they had made it a few yards under the lake when there was a loud shimmer of magic in front of them, and Robin readied his bow. Thankfully it was Regina; she appeared and kept running along, yelling back to them.
“Hurry up, she’s going to flood the tunnel!”

An ear-splitting crack rent the tunnel’s ceiling above them and lake water began pouring in. There was no way that they would be able to outrun it. Regina grabbed Robin and Charming and once they were all huddled together, she threw up a magical shield, praying that it would hold against the oncoming water. The tunnel was collapsing around them and for a few terrifying moments, Regina was reminded of Neverland when it began collapsing in on itself. After a while though, just as her concentration and power were beginning to wane, the torrent stopped. The tunnel had flooded fully, and the open lake was visible above them.

“I hope you can both swim,” she muttered, before dropping the shield and paddling up towards the surface.

They were exhausted and sodden when they reached the far bank, but they were unharmed, and as they began to make their way back to their camp, only one thought was in their collective minds. Who was the girl being kept alive in the glass casket, and why?

**Oz – Past**

Zelena landed heavily and immediately staggered onto her knees, retching violently. She couldn’t tell whether that was a side effect of the slippers or whether it was a delayed reaction to the magic she’d inhaled, but either way, she felt absolutely ghastly.

“Zelena?” It was Verdie’s voice, she must have been drawn by the magic of the shoes making their debut trip. Zelena looked around her surroundings; she was back in the clearing where Jefferson’s portal door had appeared in the old oak tree.

“Are you all right? I guess the magic’s still a bit rocky and untested.”

Verdie’s hands came down on her back, rubbing gently just as Zelena had done when her little sister had been sick back at the orphanage all those years ago.

“You’re back quickly, what happened?”

“Rumpelstiltskin,” Zelena spat. “He said he wouldn’t teach me anymore and that I wanted too much. So I stole one of his spell books and…” She broke off on seeing Verdie’s horrified face. “Well, I didn’t really steal it, I just borrowed it, for a dose of the magic, you know.”

She could feel the wind blowing her hair about violently; the tornadoes were the only part of her magic that she had never been able to fully master no matter what she tried, and it was clear that they were heading for another one now. Verdie shook her head.

“It’s not the book Zelena, it’s you. You’re green.”

“Yes, well, that’s your shoes, they need another practice run.”

“No, Zelena, really green. Emerald City green. Greenfields green.”

Zelena felt the blood drain from her face. *Straight up spells. Tough on the system. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.*
“Rumpelstiltskin,” she growled, conjuring a mirror and taking a look at herself. Verdie was right, her skin was turning a hideous green colour; it was mottling over her face from her nose outwards, working its way over her cheeks and down her neck. She swore and dropped the glass as she saw it spread over her hands.

“I’m going to kill him!” she screamed. “I guess he just wanted to compound the humiliation!”

“Zelena, don’t do anything stupid,” Verdie warned as the high winds continued to whip up around them. “Calm down or we’ll have another whirlwind; you almost flattened the Crystal Castle last time.”

“Oh, screw the Crystal Castle!” Zelena shouted. “I never learned anything there! It was all right for you, you had your natural talent and so much power that it sparked off your fingers, but me? I had none of that! The only time I ever had as much power as you was after Rumpelstiltskin taught me and this is how he repays my hard work and dedication, by turning me into some kind of freak!”

“Zelena, calm down,” Verdie said firmly, but the younger woman had never really been able to stand up to her sister. “Calm down and think about this rationally. If this is a cosmetic change then there must be some way to reverse it.”

It was too late for mollification. The tornado was out in full force, and it was out of Zelena’s control. It was by far the largest twister she’d ever created, and the extra power from the Mytheocopia was creating an ever more violent wind, almost with a life of its own.

“Zelena!” Verdie squeaked. “Zelena, stop it, please, you’re scaring me!”

“I can’t!” Zelena exclaimed. “You know I can’t!”

“Please Zelena! Please stop it! Please!”

They flung themselves down onto the ground as the tornado began to uproot the trees around them, the dust and swirling clouds of magic blocking out the light of the moon and stars. Through the gaps in the mist, Zelena could see glimpses of another world; unlike both Oz and the Enchanted Forest. She ducked her head down again as a bicycle soared through the twister towards them.

“Zelena! Do something! Zelena! Please!”

Verdie was screaming, and it seemed like the very air was screaming with her. A huge dark shape was visible spiralling through the tornado, the wind was roaring and Zelena could see black spots dancing at the edge of her vision. Oblivion came as the noise became deafening, and she collapsed under the strain of creating such a destructive force of nature.

Zelena didn’t know how long she’d been out when she finally came around, picking herself up and checking herself for any injuries. She ached all over but nothing was broken, so she set about surveying the devastation she’d caused. Most of the woods had been flattened, trees broken and uprooted all around. The Crystal Castle was still standing, although all the windows had been blown out, and the roof was hanging precariously from one corner.

There was also a house in the clearing with them. Wrecked and splintered but nonetheless a house, and Zelena didn’t want to think about how it got there.

“Verdie?” Zelena called. “Verdie, are you all right? Where are you?”

There was no response, and Zelena could taste bile in the back of her throat.
“Verdie?”

She saw them then. A pair of skinny legs wearing Verdie’s trademark striped stockings. Stockings that Zelena had knitted herself. They were bent awkwardly, sticking out from under the house.

“Verdie! No! No no no…”

Without another thought, Zelena pushed out with both hands and all her magic, and the house lurched backwards a couple of feet, revealing Verdie’s broken, birdlike body beneath it.

“Verdie!”

Zelena raced over to her sister, gathering her up in her arms.

“Zelena?”

“Her voice was little more than a whisper on the breeze. God, she wasn’t dead. She was all right. “Verdie! It’s ok, I’m here, we can fix you, you’ll be all right.”

“No… I won’t… Zel… Don’t do… anything… stupid…”

She didn’t draw another breath, and Zelena howled.

“No, Verdie, stay with me, please, there’s got to be something I can do, please!”

One spell came to mind, the only one she could think of that would help. Zelena passed her hand over Verdie’s chest, freezing her in time, a constant. The moment time began for her again, she would die, but for now, she would live. Zelena finally allowed the tears for her sister to come. One overarching thought permeated her grief. If she hadn’t been angry, this would never have happened. And it was Rumpelstiltskin who had made her angry.

Rumpelstiltskin was responsible for her sister’s death, and Zelena was going to make him pay.

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**Storybrooke – Present**

The cellar door swung shut and Walsh locked it behind Emma as Zelena entered the house. She raised an eyebrow when she saw him looking sheepish and standing there so conspicuously.

“What are you up to?” she asked.

“Just… checking in on our guest, you know.” Walsh knew how incredibly unconvincing he must sound, and Zelena definitely didn’t look like she was buying it, but to his surprise, she didn’t question it.

“I thought I told you not to make friends with him,” she said. “We need him to serve a purpose and your compassion won’t help.”

“It might,” Walsh protested. “Maybe breaking him down with your methods isn’t working and we need a different approach. Time’s ticking away and we need to be ready for that moment. It wouldn’t do if you were missing one of your key ingredients.”
“I’ve got a plan. Something even he won’t be able to resist. But enough of him. Whilst we’re on the subject of ingredients, did our little trap work?”

“Yes, it did. Emma was here.”

“Where is she now, though?”

“Not here. She left. Important sheriff-y business to attend to. She’s probably looking for you.”

“How unfortunate. Still, I trust you were able to get what we need from her?”

Walsh grabbed the tea towel that Emma had used to staunch her wound earlier, and passed it over, and Zelena have a satisfied smile as she brushed her fingers over the blood stain, lifting the rust-coloured particles from the cloth and sweeping them into a vial where they reformed as a dark, thick liquid. She slotted the vial into the contraption set up on the kitchen table, at the opposite pole to the vial containing Belle’s hair, and they both glowed purple for a moment, a little branch of magic connecting them briefly before they returned to looking innocuous.

“Perfect,” she said with a smile. “Two down, two to go. We’re on the right track. You’ve done well, pet, and soon it will all pay off and you’ll be back in your rightful home.”

“I keep telling you, I’d be perfectly happy to go back to Kansas.”

“Yes, well, we can’t have everything that we want.” Zelena covered the apparatus again. “Now, we have work to do, pet. I need something to give the lovely Snow White to make her fall in line with our plans. Something with a bit of kick.”

Walsh nodded and sprung into action gathering ingredients; anything to keep Zelena’s attention away from the cellar door and give Emma chance to escape.

X

For a long moment, Emma thought she had been duped and she kicked herself for being so trusting, but then her eyes became more accustomed to the gloom and she saw a thin sliver of light coming in through the ceiling at the other end of the long room. Walsh had not been lying.

“It would help if you’d given me some light to find the thing I’ll know what it is when I see it,” she muttered sourly. “It would help if I could actually see it.”

She fumbled on the wall for a light switch but found none, so turned her phone flashlight on instead, picking her way down the concrete steps as quietly as she could. Suddenly a sound made her freeze and turn out the light. There was someone, or something, else down here; she could hear them moving around.

“Hello?” she whispered. “Is someone there?”

There was silence for a long moment, then –

“Hello, dearie.”
Storybrooke – Present

“Hello, dearie.”

Emma couldn’t believe her ears, and for a long time she wondered if coming down into the cellar had activated some kind of spell that induced aural hallucinations. Then she remembered that Walsh had been desperate for her to see something down here and had said that she’d know it when she saw it, and since Storybrooke was a place so steeped in magic, it sort of made sense. She switched her phone flashlight on again and advanced a couple of steps forward, stopping short when she came to a wire mesh cage. She caught the hint of movement and turned the light towards it.

Rumpelstiltskin brought a hand up to shield his eyes from the sudden brightness, but it was undeniably him. He was looking very much the worse for wear, his once impeccable suit torn and dirty, hair limp around his face and a few days’ beard growth, but he was alive, which was more than could be said for the last time she’d seen him by the well in the forest, his own dagger through his chest as he defeated Pan.

“How am I not dead? Your guess is as good as mine, but since I’m only a couple of steps from full on hell, I’m not entirely convinced that I’m alive yet.” He fingered the blue ribbon around his wrist, the one that Walsh had stolen from Belle’s hair perhaps?

Still, there was no time to waste, not when she could hear voices upstairs above them and she knew that the witch had returned and could find her down here at any moment. She flashed her phone around the cage, looking for a door.

“Well, not sure whether it’s good or bad news but you’re definitely alive,” she said, and she waved him over on finding the opening. “Here, hold that.”

Rumpelstiltskin dutifully took the phone from her, angling the light so that she could see what she was doing, and he sounded somewhat mystified as he spoke again.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Getting you out of this two steps from full on hell hole, what does it look like?” Emma still carried picks with her as a matter of course from bounty hunting, and now she put them to good use, carefully working the tumblers on the padlock that held the cage closed. “I’m guessing that you can’t
just poof yourself out of here or you’d have done it already.”

Rumpelstiltskin snorted. “Well observed.” He seemed to come to himself then, and a sudden panic set in. “Emma, I can’t leave, it’s too dangerous.”

Emma stopped and looked up at him. “What?”

“My magic’s bound to the witch’s will, I have no control, she’s got the dagger. If she has my power then I’m dangerous.”

“Hey, hey, it’s ok,” Emma said, reaching up through the mesh and making to pat his hand where he was still holding her phone, but she couldn’t reach. “I mean, I guessed that something was up with your magic but I’m not leaving you here, power or no power. No one should be kept in a cage. Ever. So we’re getting you out of here and we’ll cross any other bridges when we come to them, ok?”

He looked around frantically, as if expecting Zelena to pop up out of nowhere in the shadows, and nodded.

“Ok.”

“Neal and Belle and me, we’ll take care of you, ok? It’ll be all right.” It was such a strange role reversal, the most powerful magician in the town so scared and helpless, but Emma didn’t think on it too much, and continued to pick the padlock.

“It’s all about the tumblers,” she said as she worked. For some reason, she felt that she really ought to keep talking to him, to keep him calm, and she glanced up at him with a slightly awkward smile. “Neal taught me that, you know. He taught me a lot of things.”

“Not all of them legal, I notice.” There was the faintest trace of humour in Rumpelstiltskin’s voice and Emma took that as a good sign.

“You know, I’m not sure any of it was legal now that I come to think of it, but it’s certainly proved useful over the years.”

“Is Neal all right?” Rumpelstiltskin asked. “And Belle? Walsh said that they were but I wouldn’t trust that overgrown furball as far as I could throw him.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” Emma said. “At least you didn’t almost marry him. But Neal and Belle are all right. They both miss you. They’re not going to believe their eyes when they see you.”

“Yes.” Rumpelstiltskin picked at the frayed cuffs of his shirt. “And probably not in a good way.”

“Hey, you’re alive. That’s a hundred per cent better than they currently think you are, no matter what state you’re in. There.” The lock finally sprung and Emma opened the door a little way.

Rumpelstiltskin handed the cell phone back but he did not move out of the cage, looking around the dingy cellar fearfully.

“Come on, Rumpelstiltskin, let’s go. I have one minute and forty-five seconds in which to call David or else he and Regina will storm in here all guns and magical fireballs blazing thinking that Zelena’s turned me into a monkey.” She reached out a hand towards him and he flinched away instinctively; despite the tightness of time Emma had to feel a pang of sympathy and wonder just what he’d endured here in the witch’s lair. “It’ll be ok,” she said, although she had no way of knowing that. Even so, Rumpelstiltskin seemed to accept her judgement and he left the cage, and the two of them made their way quickly down to the other end of the cellar where the light was creeping in. The cell phone flashlight showed that this trap door was simply bolted shut and Emma wasted no time in
opening it, peering out to check if the coast was clear. Thankfully the storm cellar entrance was well
away from the house and out of line of sight from any of the windows, so she heaved herself out.
Rumpelstiltskin followed suit with difficulty, but Emma had learned from experience that sticking a
hand into his personal space probably wouldn’t help. He was limping heavily as they made their way
towards the safety of the tree line and Emma guessed that it was his magic that usually soothed his
ankle in the absence of his cane. As she dialled David, she looked around for a sturdy branch to use
as a walking stick. Her father picked up on the first ring.

“Emma? Where are you? Are you all right? I was about to call in the cavalry.”

“I’m not sure that Regina would really appreciate being called the cavalry, but I’m fine. I’m out of
the house in the woods heading north. Can you come and meet me by the toll bridge?”

“Of course, but why aren’t you coming back to the car?”

“Long story but I really don’t want to go anywhere near the house. I’ll see you in a few minutes,
bye.” It was an abrupt end to the call, but Emma didn’t want to get into discussing Rumpelstiltskin’s
continued state of existence when the man himself’s wellbeing was her top priority. She found him a
suitable stick and they set off through the forest towards the toll bridge. The progress was slow, but
they ought to be able to make it before David, travelling on winding roads as he was. It was clear
that Rumpelstiltskin was in pain, and Emma glanced over at him.

“If you want me to help you then I will,” she said. Rumpelstiltskin considered it for a moment and
nodded gratefully, leaning on her as they picked their way through the undergrowth.

“Not too far now, then you can rest in the car,” Emma said, trying to encourage him although
optimism had never been the best colour on her. Still, Rumpelstiltskin just nodded and gritted his
teeth, stumbling a few times but saying nothing, glad to sag against a tree when they finally reached
their destination. Emma could see the yellow bug creeping through the trees towards them, and she
stepped out into the road to flag David down, beckoning for him to get out of the car and come to
her.

“Emma, what’s going on?” David asked. “You sounded so cagey on the phone that I thought
something must have happened.”

“Something did happen,” Emma said, and she led the way over to where Rumpelstiltskin was
waiting. David stopped in his tracks.

“Woah.”

“Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too,” Emma said.

“How?” David spluttered.

“Don’t ask me.”

“Don’t ask me, either,” Rumpelstiltskin added dryly. “I never thought I’d be this pleased to see you.”

“Likewise,” David said, and he turned back to Emma, lost for words. “How?” he repeated faintly.

“Zelena had him captive in her cellar. Now, we might not have much time before she realises he’s
missing, so if we could get back to town and relative safety as soon as possible, that would be great.”

“Say no more.” David handed over the keys and Emma got into the bug and revved the engine.
David dived into the back to allow Rumpelstiltskin to stretch his leg out in the passenger seat.
“This is dangerous,” he warned as Emma executed a screeching three-point turn in the road and took off back towards town at a speed not entirely appropriate for a sheriff without blues and twos on the car.

“I know,” Emma said. “I’ll arrest myself for careless driving later. Right now getting you away from that witch is kind of taking precedence.”

“It’s not your driving I’m worried about, it’s you two. Once she finds out you sprang me then it’s not going to be pretty.”

“Yeah, well, these things never are. But that’s a risk I’m willing to take to get you back to Belle and Neal.”

“I’m putting them in danger, too.”

“Believe me, if you think that they’ll care about that and think that they’ll leave you alone to face this witch, then you really don’t know them at all. They’re fierce and they love you and they’ll weather any storm for you because that’s what family does.”

They were approaching the town and Emma pulled up at the outskirts to allow David out.

“Get a few people together and let them know what’s happened. Mary Margaret, Regina, Granny, the usual, but not Leroy, we don’t want it all over the town just yet. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

David nodded his understanding and sprinted off into the town, and Emma headed around the block towards the pink house on the hill.

“Come on, let’s get you inside. Neal told me where the spare key is.”

Once inside the house, with the kettle boiling and Rumpelstiltskin safe in his own kitchen, Emma dialled Neal.

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**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“I think I’ve found something.”

Neal looked up. Belle didn’t sound too sure of herself and her brow was furrowed as she pored over the texts surrounding her, but anything was better than nothing, which was what their search had turned up so far. They were sitting on the floor on opposite sides of the library in the Dark Castle, each buried in a pile of books that all had varying degrees of relevancy to their quest. Trying to ascertain Rumpelstiltskin’s state of life or death and whether it was possible to bring him back to the former was proving to be a time-consuming and rather thankless pursuit, but it was not one that Neal was prepared to give up. He was sure, just as Belle was, that his father was not truly dead, and the thought of him spending any time in an uncomfortable limbo was not a pleasant one.

He got to his feet, staggering a little where his legs had gone to sleep under him, and half walked, half hopped over to Belle, easing himself down onto the chaise longue that she was concealed behind.
“Here,” she said, pointing out a passage in an unknown language. “This was the book Mulan gave back to me. It talks a lot about the netherworld, a kind of space between life and death. It’s where lost souls end up if they’re separated from their bodies ahead of time; where they rescued Philip from.”

“Go on,” Neal said. He wasn’t sure if Rumpelstiltskin counted as a lost soul, but he was certainly intrigued.

“Well, it mentions life-bound entities, things that cannot die. When they die, they just float about in the netherworld for a while, until they can be restored. And I was thinking, what if the Dark One is such a life-bound entity? Whilst someone is hosting the Dark One they don’t age, and they’re fairly invulnerable.”

“Yes. Carry on, I can see where you’re going with this.”

Belle grinned. “Good. As I was saying, the Dark One never dies a natural death so far as we know. When they die an unnatural death, then the murderer becomes the new host for the curse. The curse doesn’t die. The curse can be broken, I’m sure of it. But that doesn’t kill it, it makes it cease to exist.”

“And when Papa, killed himself with the dagger, it created a paradox, because the host had died but there was no new host,” Neal continued.

“Exactly. So the life-bound entity, that is, the Dark One, is still alive. And I bet that means that somehow, somewhere, Rumpelstiltskin is still alive too.”

Neal nodded. “That’s a sound theory. So do we have to go to this netherworld to get him out?”

Belle shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, it’s easy enough to get to really; just a sleeping curse and I’m sure that there are plenty of those here in the Dark Castle. But when Mulan and Aurora fetched Philip’s soul back, they had a physical body for it to return to. I think if we just tried to go after the bit of it that’s in the netherworld, the curse would simply latch on to either one of us as a new host, and then Rumpel will be stuck in limbo forever. We know that his body has to be somewhere, because it vanished in Storybrooke.”

“True.” The two of them fell into silence for a while, contemplating their next move. “Normally you can summon the Dark One by calling his given name three times or summoning him once with the dagger.”

“I’ve already tried calling him by name,” Belle said. She sounded a bit sheepish, as if she was embarrassed to admit that she had hoped it would be that simple. “But the dagger vanished with him. Wherever he is, it is.”

“Find the dagger and we find the Dark One,” Neal agreed. “Find the dagger and we find Papa. The only problem is, where do we even begin to look?”

“That was another thing I was thinking about,” Belle said. “I think we might be looking for answers in the wrong room of the castle.”

“Ok,” Neal raised an eyebrow. “Where would you look other than the large room full of old books?”

“Rumpel’s workroom.” Belle sprung to her feet with an energy that completely belied the fact that she had been sitting cross-legged for the past couple of hours, and she set off towards the tower, Neal hot on her heels.

“Rumpel never let anyone in here without his supervision,” Belle explained as they went. “Not even
me. If he had any information about the Dark Curse and how it works, then he would keep it in the safest room, where nobody could find it and take advantage of the knowledge to gain an upper hand. I mean, everyone knows how to summon the Dark One and how to take his powers, but if there was anything else of interest, then he would want to keep it to himself.”

“You’re right.”

They entered the workroom and looked around for any kind of clues. It was just as cluttered and messy as it had been the last time Belle had seen it, and she wondered not for the first time how Rumpelstiltskin had managed to find anything in there. It was then that her gaze was drawn to the books on the top shelf. These were Rumpel’s most potent spell books; she could practically feel the power radiating from them even from this distance. If she was going to find anything then it would be in one of those. She pulled out a chair and stood on it somewhat precariously, reaching down one of the heavy, leather-bound tomes, but before she could open it, something caught her attention. One of the books was not like the others.

“Neal,” she said, voice full of curiosity, “pass me the book from Mulan, would you please?”

Neal dutifully handed it up to her, swapping it for the huge book in her hand, and she returned to the page about life-bound entities.

“I mistranslated,” she said.

“Oh.” Neal sounded dejected. “I take it we’re back to square one, then?”

“Oh no.” Belle seemed increasingly confident. “Far from it. It uses the word locked. That was what I missed. The life-bound entities are locked into the netherworld and they need a key to unlock them and bring them to the corporeal plane.”

“A key? Like, an actual physical door lock key?”

“Possibly, or it could be a combination lock. Or both. But either way, I think I know how to find it.”

“Really?” Neal couldn’t conceal his excitement as he took the book back from Belle and laid it on the workbench. She nodded.

“This book is fake,” she said tapping a green cloth-bound spine. “I think that if I do this…”

She tilted the book at an angle and the top shelf of bookcase swung back into the wall, revealing a little cubbyhole in the stone. Inside was a small package, wrapped in old, worn cloth. Fearing a trap, Belle reached inside and grabbed it, snatching it out before anything could happen to her hand. The shelf swung back into place, closing the hidden alcove, and Belle jumped down from her perch.

“Is that it?”

“I think so.” Belle unfastened the strings holding the package together and spread it out on the bench. Inside was a heavy, beautifully ornate brass key, engraved with the same patterns as Rumpelstiltskin’s dagger.

“Wow.” The two of them looked at the key for a long time, now quite able to believe that they had really found it, and they were one step closer to being reunited with Rumpelstiltskin.

“I guess what we have to figure out now is what this key fits,” Neal said.

“Yes. Unfortunately the book isn’t quite as helpful on that score. But look.”
Belle pointed to the cloth that the key had been wrapped up in. Writing was beginning to appear on it, lines in a spidery writing that Belle recognised as Rumpelstiltskin’s.

“Instructions?” Neal suggested. “Mind you, he’s being as cryptic as ever.”

“Can you blame him? Whoever resurrects him probably ends up in possession of the dagger. He would want to make sure it didn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

“Good point.” Neal shivered at the thought. “So, can we decipher it?”

“It’s a riddle.” Belle ran her fingers over the dark ink. “If we solve it I think it should give us the location of the lock that this key fits. Look here, it’s in verses.

*You’ll find me safe below the ground*

*Where deathless trees fall all around*

*You hold the key to waken me*

*From death-like slumber, deep and sound*

So wherever he is, he’s underground.”

“Where deathless trees fall?”

“Evergreens, I imagine,” Belle said. “Their leaves don’t die in winter.”

“A pine forest,” Neal suggested. “We’re constantly cutting them down for timber – fall all around. What’s next.”

“But your intent it must be true

There is a test awaiting you

Unlock my power upon the hour

When the moon shines bright and blue.

We have to do this on a blue moon. That’s helpful. Once in a blue moon.” Belle shook her head. “I thought that was just a figure of speech.”

“No, no.” Neal was getting excited now. “If a full moon falls twice in a month then the second full moon is called a blue moon. It’s rare, hence the expression, but it’s not impossible. We’ll just have to wait a little.”

“How do you know all this?” Belle asked, impressed. Neal shrugged.

“Two hundred and fifty years, give or take, you pick up some stuff here and there. What’s the next part?

*Blood or love are not too late*

*Just as upon my castle gate*

*Find my vault with heat or salt*

*A single drop restores my fate.”*
Neal’s brow furrowed and he looked at Belle. “It’s got to be you or me,” he said warily. “Blood or love, castle gate. The Dark Castle is blood-locked when Papa’s not here – I’m able to get in because it recognises me as kin, I learned that when I was here with Mulan and Philip. He must have extended it to recognise you too. A single drop – a single drop of blood from one of us will bring him back. Heat or salt, though?”

“Snow or ice,” Belle said. “We’ll need to melt it with heat or salt to get to the vault – which must be what the key unlocks.”

“Arendelle,” Neal said suddenly.

“Arendelle? As in the Frozen North? It’s abandoned, no-one’s been there for years.”

“Except for the loggers and iceworkers, right? Perfect place to hide a dark power. Pine trees all around, and lots of snow and ice. What’s the last part?”

“I will not yield to unknown vice
To those who seek too high a price
In you I trust and so you must
Trust me in turn, read the advice.”

“What advice? That’s where it ends.”

“Maybe there’s more when we get there,” Belle said. “But that ties in with the bit about love or blood and true intent. You can’t resurrect him for evil purposes. I guess it’s a kind of safeguard.”

“Papa’s never been controlled by the dagger in all the time he’s been tethered to it,” Neal pointed out. “He’d want to make sure that he could trust the person he relinquished it to.”

“Just us two.” It made Belle sad in a way, that there were so few people whom Rumpelstiltskin trusted. “And if we can’t do it, then the Dark One remains dormant forever.”

“His sacrifice takes on a whole new dimension,” Neal murmured. The two of them were silent for a while, taking this information in.

“There’s a PS,” Belle said suddenly, looking at the riddle again. “Maybe it’s the advice.”

“PS, bring my red coat.” Neal raised an eyebrow. “Not quite sure what that’s got to do with anything, but sure, we can do that. I guess all we need to do now is get to Arendelle in time for the next blue moon.”

“I may be able to help with that.” Belle went over to a shelf and started moving items off it. “Rumpel always used to keep a lunar diary as some spells could only be performed at certain times. Here.”

There was a chart on the wall behind the books, slowly moving along as time passed, showing the phases of the moon.

“We’re in luck.” Belle pointed to the full moon that was approaching. “The next blue moon is in eleven days’ time.”
Belle and Neal were still chatting with Henry in the back room of the pawn shop when Neal’s phone rang and he stepped through into the main shop to take the call.

“Hello?”

“Neal, it’s Emma. How quickly can you and Belle get home?”

“Erm, the drive takes about ten minutes.”

“I’m not going to arrest you for speeding, can you get here as fast as you can?”

“Sure, Emma, what’s up?”

“Too complicated to explain on the phone, you need to see it for yourself.”

“Emma, has something happened, are you ok?”

“I’m fine. Everything’s all right but please just get here as soon as you can, I don’t know how much time we have and we need to make a plan.”

“Ok, we’re on our way. Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Yes, Neal, I’m fine, now please just get going!”

“Ok, I’ll see you soon.”

Neal hung up, more confused and worried than he had been before, and Emma’s words had done nothing to pacify him. He rushed back through to the back room and Belle looked up, alarmed by his urgency.

“We need to go home, now,” Neal said. “Something’s happened and it can’t wait.”

“Neal, what’s going on?” Belle asked as she grabbed her coat.

“I don’t know, Em said it was too complicated to explain on the phone.”

“Well, at least we know that the house hasn’t burned down. That’s not too hard to explain.”

“Can I come?” Henry asked. “I mean, if Mom’s there, then…”

Belle and Neal exchanged a worried glance and Belle shook her head; Neal had to agree. Whatever it was that was too complicated to explain was probably magical in nature.

“No Henry, not this time. We’ve got no idea what’s going on and I don’t want to put you in danger. Why don’t you go back to the diner and wait for your mom there?”

Henry shrugged. “Ok.”

They all left the shop together and Neal locked up as Henry left them in the direction of the station and Belle got in the Cadillac.

“He’s going to work out that something’s not as it seems sooner or later,” Belle observed.

“Yeah, we’ll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, there’s a mysterious emergency at our house and I don’t think it’s your dad breaking in again.”
“I hope not,” Belle said dryly. “We’re just beginning to get along again.”

Neal pressed down heard on the gas and the Cadillac sped along the street towards the pink house, its passengers sitting in a tense silence as they made their way home.

Emma shoved her phone back into her jacket pocket and returned to the kitchen as the kettle boiled.

“Belle and Neal are on their way,” she told Rumpelstiltskin, who just gave a slow nod of understanding without looking up. Emma set about making tea, and sat down at the table with him.

“Do you remember anything?” she asked presently. “Anything at all?”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head.

“No. Not really. I remember dying. It hurt, but not as much as I thought it was going to. I guess I was ready for it.” Finally he looked up, but he didn’t look at Emma; his gaze went straight through her, staring off into the middle distance. “I remember it being dark. And there was water, but it wasn’t wet. I could hear it lapping, but I couldn’t feel it.”

“It sounds peaceful,” Emma said. “I’m sorry you were dragged out of it.”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “It felt like a great weight had been lifted off me. I felt free. But it didn’t feel right. It was like I knew that I ought to be somewhere else.” He looked around the room. “I’m just not sure if this is that somewhere else.” At last his gaze focussed on her. “Then I woke up in a cage in a cellar with Zelena taunting me. Oh, how the mighty fall.”

“Do you know her?” Emma asked.

“Yes. I knew her a while ago. She was an apprentice of mine, years ago. Before Regina. Our parting was somewhat less than amicable. I have not seen her since, though. She went home to Oz and that was the end of it. Until now. I don’t know what she’s doing. I don’t know what she wants. Only that she has my dagger, she has my power, and she needs something from me. Something that she won’t get.”

“What does she need?”

Rumpelstiltskin gave a grim smile over the edge of his mug. “My tears.”

Emma thought about the horrible cage in the cellar, the notion of having no free will, and she shuddered at the thought.

“Don’t worry, I’m stronger than I look,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “I have no intention of giving her what she wants.”

“Well, with any luck, you won’t be in that position. Neal and Belle are coming and we’ll work out a plan to keep you safe.”

“If the witch has my dagger, Emma, then no-one is safe, least of all me.” His voice was hard and sharp but his tired eyes and drooped shoulders lent an air of defeat to his statement. “But I do appreciate your efforts for me.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve been in a cell myself here in America and I was briefly in your cell in the Enchanted Forest and as much as you got on my nerves, I really don’t want that for you.”
Rumpelstiltskin gave a snort of laughter. “We’re far more alike than you’d like to think, Emma.”

“Yes, I know, that’s what’s worrying me.”

There was a crunch of asphalt as the Cadillac pulled into the drive, and Rumpelstiltskin and Emma looked at each other.

“They’re here.”

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

The sun was beginning to set as Belle and Neal pushed their way through the dense Arendelle pine forests towards the top of the hill. The place was eerily quiet, their footsteps crunching in the thick snow the only sound. The woodcutters had gone home for the day and there was no-one else around to disturb them. All the same, Belle had that uneasy feeling of being watched that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and made her keep looking over her shoulder. Neal was similarly wary, but they pressed on, determined in their goal.

“According to the map, this should be the best place to view the moon,” Belle said as they emerged into the clearing. Her breath was curling into misty tendrils in the air and she had half a mind to put Rumpelstiltskin’s red coat on herself for extra warmth.

The circle of trees certainly looked like it was the scene of some kind of ritual. Whilst many of the Arendelle pines had been cut down, the ones at the edge of this clearing remained untouched. Belle thought again of Rumpelstiltskin’s riddle. They definitely seemed to be in the right place. It was a clear, cold night, and when the moon rose it would shine straight down into the centre of the clearing.

Neal dumped the bag of salt that he had been carrying with him and they set about making a fire by the clearing’s edge.

“You know, I’m not sure how much of this show we’re supposed to clear, but I get the feeling we might be here a long time,” he said.

“Are you having second thoughts?” Belle asked.

“No, more like second guessing. Having gone to all this trouble it would be a huge shame if we turned out to have got it wrong.”

“Well, we can only try.”

The moon came into view then almost on cue, and its light reflecting off the snow gave everything an eerie blue tinge. Belle looked up to the sky and then down at the snow, grabbing Neal’s arm as something began to manifest itself, a dark shape under the surface that became more and more distinct.

“This is it, it must be!” She moved over towards the shape and crouched beside it. It was a circle; it looked metallic, like the key, and it would probably fit a person through it. The entrance to the vault, perhaps? She swept away some of the loose snow on top of it; it couldn’t have been more than an inch or so below the ice and it shouldn’t take them too long to melt through it. She looked up at Neal.

“Ready?”

He nodded and went to fetch a burning stick from the fire whilst Belle grabbed the bag of salt. She thought she could make out a shape moving in the trees out of the corner of her eye, and that awful
icy feeling of dread crept up her spine again, but when she turned to look in that direction, there was nothing to see. It must have been a trick of her imagination.

“Come on, let’s get on with this,” she muttered, returning to the vault with the salt. “I don’t like this place, it gives me that creepy feeling.”

“I know what you mean. The sooner we get papa and get out of here, the better.”

It took a few minutes for them to melt through the ice, but then the vault was in full view, and Neal unearthed the key from his pocket.

“Well, it certainly looks like a match,” he said, and he slipped the key into the keyhole in the centre of the door in the ground. “And it fits the lock.”

“Wait.” Belle ran her fingers over the ornately decorated surface. “There’s writing here, verse like the riddle back at the castle.”

“Maybe this is the advice that he was talking about.”

“Maybe.” Belle read aloud.

“Darkness is best left undisturbed
Lest the light become perturbed
If will is strong, I will belong
Once more in life with power uncurbed.”

She glanced at Neal. “It’s a warning, to leave well alone and leave the darkness where it is,” she said. “But Rumpel didn’t write this; it must have been here for centuries before his time.”

“Well, we’ve followed his instructions so far and we’re here with blood and love and good intent. I know intent is meaningless most of the time but I think it counts for something here. His original message just says that we have to read the advice, not that we have to take it. A bit like agreeing to the terms and conditions. We need to know what we’re letting ourselves in for.”

Belle nodded. “I think we know. Ready?”

“Ready.”

Belle closed her hand over Neal’s and there was an ominous thunk beneath them as they turned the key together. Belle sprang back as the key was forced back out of the lock, and the metal door began to ripple, as if it was being superheated from below. Before Belle and Neal’s eyes it melted away, leaving just a hole in the snow leading to darkness beyond.

“Well, that’s not ominous at all,” Neal said grimly. He peered into the vault, it felt a bit ridiculous to be calling to his father in there, but that was what he did.

“Papa? Are you in there?”

There was no response; he hadn’t expected one, but as his eyes became accustomed to the subterranean gloom, he saw the moonlight catch off something metallic. He squinted until it revealed itself for what it was, and he jerked his head up out of the hole.

“Belle, the dagger’s in there.”
“Find the dagger and we find Rumpel.” A wide smile began to spread over Belle’s face as the prospect of reuniting with her love came ever closer. “Can you reach it?”

“I think so.” Neal stuck an arm down into the vault, his fingertips just able to reach the dagger and scrabble for purchase on it, finally getting a grip and pulling it up. They examined it closely; to all intents and purposes it was the same dagger that had vanished with Rumpelstiltskin’s body when he had defeated Pan back in Storybrooke. Nothing seemed different about it. Neal readjusted his grip on the handle.

“A single drop, right?”

Belle nodded. “That’s what it says.”

Carefully and not without a little trepidation, Neal pressed the sharp point of the dagger against the pad of his thumb until a dark bead of blood welled at the tip. It ran down the dagger blade and dripped onto the snow. For a moment, nothing happened. Neal sucked on his wound to close it and the red spot on the snow remained just that. Then everything happened at once. The spot of blood began to smoke, sinking into the snow and turning black, spreading out over the white surface with a rapidity that made Belle and Neal shrink back from it. At the same time, the vault door re-materialised, locking itself with a fearsome clang and then fading back into the ice as if it had never been there.

The tendrils of black were rising out of the snow now, swirling and eddying in the air and meshing together to form something solid, a human shape. Gradually the limbs became distinct, the face developed features, and suddenly, this shape of darkness was recognisably and undeniably Rumpelstiltskin. His eyes blinked open and the black tendrils slithered back down his body and melted away into the snow without a trace.

He didn’t look at them at first, looking at his hands in wonder and disbelief, as if he couldn’t quite fathom what had happened to him. Finally he glanced over and saw them, and he smiled.

“Belle?” he whispered. “Bae?”

Belle nodded, getting to her feet.

“We found the key,” she said. “And we followed your instructions. And well, here we are.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Belle could no longer resist the impulse and she scrabbled over the snow towards him, skidding to a halt before she could careen into him and send him flying, and she threw her arms around him, burying her face in his collar as she tried to fight back her tears of happiness. He still felt like Rumpel, he still smelled like Rumpel. It was more than she could ever have wished for, although she had never given up hope. She felt another set of arms come around her and she realised that Neal had joined in the group hug as well. At length, once Belle was on the verge of running out of air, they broke apart, and Belle wiped her eyes.

“I just can’t believe that it worked and we get a second chance,” she sniffed.

“Well, I’m very glad that it did, for all our sakes. Now, as pretty as this forest is, we should probably go home before we all catch our deaths.”

Belle giggled, yes, his impish personality was back as well. Everything was as it should be.

“That’s a point, Papa. Why did the instructions say to bring your red coat?” Neal asked, holding up
the garment in question.

“Just preparing for all eventualities,” Rumpelstiltskin said airily. “I had no idea what state of dress or undress I might be in when I returned and I doubt it’s escaped your notice that it’s rather chilly here. I’d rather not have frozen my unmentionables off as soon as I returned. As it is, the magic appears to be weather appropriate.”

Neal just rolled his eyes in good-natured despair and shoved the coat back in his pack before holding the dagger out to Rumpelstiltskin.

“Here. This is yours. I’ve already said that I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“I…” But whatever Rumpelstiltskin was going to say, it was cut off by an unholy screech from the trees, and Belle screamed as a flying monkey barrelled out of the pines and bowled Neal over, the dagger dropping from his hand as the monkey’s powerful claws dug into his shoulders, lifting him high off the ground.

A fireball flew past Belle as Rumpelstiltskin went all out in his defence of his son; the flame singed the monkey’s tail and it loosened its hold on Neal, dropping him only to grab him upside down in one flexible foot.

Belle knew that something had been following them and she cursed herself for not investigating properly. If a monkey was here then the witch wouldn’t be too far behind. Her eyes went to the dagger lying innocently in the snow, and she launched herself forwards towards it; Rumpelstiltskin was too busy trying to save Neal to pay it any mind, and if it ended up in the witch’s clutches, well, that didn’t bear thinking about. She never made it to the dagger, as another monkey swooped in low, its claws catching around her neck and choking her as it dragged her away from the unguarded blade. Belle could see spots of light dancing in front of her eyes, the pressure in her skull almost unbearable as the monkey continued to squeeze her neck.

“Oh no you don’t!” Rumpelstiltskin growled, and the magic of another spell was shimmering on his fingertips when a cold voice spoke a single word.

“Stop.”

The effect was immediate. Rumpelstiltskin froze, the spell dying on his hand, and even with her vision blurring over, Belle could see the look of fear on his face. The very thing that she had been trying to prevent had happened. The witch had the Dark One’s dagger, and she was more than prepared to use it.

“Excellent.” She moved into view, turning the dagger over and over in her hands, examining it with fascination. “You know, I always did wonder why you would never tell me the source of all your power. As it is, your little besotted maid led me straight to it and your devoted son brought you straight into my hands.”

“Zelena,” Rumpelstiltskin said warily, “whatever quarrel you have with me is with me alone. Let Belle and Bae go, they have nothing to do with this.”

“As much as I would love for them to join my menagerie, you’re right. It would be unfair on them considering the great service that they’ve done for me, in bringing you back to the realm of the living and all. All right. You may go.”

The monkeys duly let go and Belle fell down onto the compacted snow, coughing and gasping for breath. Neal fell from a greater height and hit the ground with a loud thud; he didn’t move.
“Neal!” Belle scrambled over to him; he was still conscious but it was clear that he was in terrible pain. Rumpelstiltskin tried to move too, but he was still rooted to the spot with the witch’s command.

“Oh dear.” Zelena’s voice was full of fake concern. “I think you’d best get that seen to. Looks nasty.”

Belle, helping Neal to his feet, looked over at Rumpelstiltskin. She couldn’t bear to leave him alone under the witch’s power, but at the same time Neal needed medical attention as a matter of urgency and Belle knew that anything she might do to help Rumpelstiltskin would only end up with her in the same state.

“Go,” Rumpelstiltskin pleaded. “Save him, please.”

Belle nodded, and she and Neal made their limping way back towards where they had left their horses. Neal was in no state to ride and Belle managed to get him onto her own horse before mounting herself. She wiped her eyes, willing herself not to cry anymore. There was too much at stake now, and the time for sadness would come later.

Back in the clearing, Rumpelstiltskin let out a long breath of relief as he watched Belle and Neal ride away out of sight. At least he had got them to safety. Now, he could focus on himself. To try and get the dagger back now would be impossible; it would have to be some kind of sneak attack that Zelena wasn’t expecting. Lull her into a false sense of security. That would take time and planning, neither of which he had right now. For now, all he could do was try to resist the dagger’s influence as much as he possibly could. It was hard; the magic that usually hummed in his veins was now a jarring, dissonant screech, painful when he tried to push back against it.

“Oh Rumpel.” Zelena came over, a cruel smile on her face. “All that power that you refused to teach me, and here it is in the palm of my hand. No need for you to teach me when you can just do it for me.”

“Zelena, please. Think of your sister. She wouldn’t want this for you.”

“My sister’s dead, no thanks to you,” Zelena snapped. “So you don’t get to tell me what she would or wouldn’t want. It seems that we’ve got a lot of catching up to do, you and I.”

She smiled as an idea struck her. “Now, where were we before you brushed me aside and turned me this horrific colour?”

“I warned you against the strong stuff, dearie;” Rumpelstiltskin snarled. “Not my fault if you can’t heed a warning.”

“Details, details.” Zelena waved the dagger lazily. “Oh yes, I remember where we were.”

She pressed her mouth hard against his, a kiss with no desire or tenderness in it, just a desperate hunger for complete domination. Rumpelstiltskin sank his teeth down into her lower lip until he could taste blood. Zelena pulled back with a shout of rage, and the stinging backhand around the face was worth it to see her furious expression.

“You wretch!” she hissed, dabbing at her lip. “You’ll pay for that.”

“No means no, dearie. I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I know.” Zelena’s smile was vicious. “But you forget, dear Rumpel, that now I can make you say yes.”
The light glinted off the dagger, and for the first time since becoming the Dark One, Rumpelstiltskin felt utter terror.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle and Neal entered the house cautiously, completely unsure of what they might find but hoping against hope that Emma knew what she was doing and that they weren’t walking straight into a trap.

“Emma?” Neal called out warily, and he gave a breath of relief as she appeared in the kitchen doorway and beckoned to them rapidly. “Emma, what’s going on that you couldn’t explain on the phone?”

“It’s complicated,” Emma said apologetically. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to worry you but it’s urgent.”

“What’s going on?” Neal pressed, but then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye behind Emma in the kitchen. “Em, is there someone in there?”

Emma nodded. “I don’t know how, and neither does he, but…”

“RUMPEL!”

Belle burst past Neal and Emma in a flurry of speed and Neal had just enough time to see his dishevelled but very much alive father standing in the kitchen before Belle threw herself into his arms. He staggered under the force of her weight landing against him and leaned heavily against the table as he held her close, burying his face in her hair. They were both shaking and it was clear that they were both crying, and Neal hung back in the doorway with Emma to let them have their moment.

“How…”

“I said, I don’t know,” Emma repeated. “And neither does he. That last thing that he remembers is dying, and then waking up here alive at the same time you all came back from the Enchanted Forest.”

“Do you think he came back with us?”

Emma nodded. “Considering where I found him, it’s pretty likely.”

“Where did you find him?”

“That’s why I wanted to get you over here quickly. The witch had him in a cage in her cellar.”

The colour drained out of Neal’s face. “Emma, please don’t say she has the dagger.”

Emma nodded sadly.

“Oh boy.”

“Bae?”

Belle had released Rumpelstiltskin and he was looking over at Neal. He looked old, Neal thought, and so very broken and unsure, and he pushed all thoughts of the dagger and various complications
out of his head, going over and hugging his father. True, their relationship was still a somewhat strained one, but he was incredibly glad of this second chance he’d been given.

“Sheesh, Papa, when was the last time you took a shower?” Neal was horribly aware of how wobbly his voice sounded and how terrible the joke was, but Rumpelstiltskin just gave a weak laugh.

“Well, according to my memory, about a year ago.”

“Come on,” Belle said. “Let’s get you cleaned up and then we’ll discuss what the hell happens next.”

There’s no time, Belle.” Rumpelstiltskin shook his head sadly. “The witch will work out I’ve escaped sooner or later, and I wouldn’t want to be around me when that happens.”

“Nonsense.” Belle’s voice was firm and brokered no arguments. “I’m not going anywhere. We’ve only just got you back. We’ll figure something out, I promise.”

She slipped her arm through his and led him gently out of the kitchen, and Emma and Neal sat down at the table. Neal sighed, running his hands through his hair.

“I know it’s dangerous and I shouldn’t have brought him here and put you and Belle in harm’s way, but I couldn’t just leave him where he was,” Emma said.

“No, you did the right thing. We have to protect him somehow, but I don’t know how. The dagger’s magic doesn’t work outside Storybrooke. If we can leave town, we should be able to stop the witch summoning him back.”

“The monkeys are stopping everyone leaving town,” Emma pointed out.

“Hmm. Tranquiliser guns from the animal shelter?” Neal suggested. “I’m deadly serious, Emma. I know the witch probably likes to play with her food, at least that’s the impression I got from the cemetery, but ultimately all she needs to do to get him back is call him with the dagger and he’ll come to her like that.” He snapped his fingers. “If we can get out of town, then the magic is rendered void.”

“She’ll follow you,” Emma said. “She’s not just keeping him for his power, she needs something from him personally. And I think she’s on a revenge mission, from what I gather.”

Neal raised his eyebrows. “Well, she wouldn’t be the first. And even if she does follow us, her own magic won’t work outside of Storybrooke either so we’re on a level playing field.”

Emma nodded. “Ok, it’s a plan. If we get Rumpelstiltskin out of town then we weaken the witch and possibly can use him as bait to lure her away.” She sighed. “It all seems kind of drastic but right now, I think desperate times and desperate measures spring to mind. We don’t even know why she’s here or what she’s doing, let alone how she brought your father back from the dead.”

Neal shook his head. “Not dead unless you see the body,” he said. “Classic TV trope.”

“Now you’re going to tell me that we’re going to wake up and find Bobby Ewing in the shower.”

“Well.” Neal indicated the ceiling above them as the pipes creaked. “We’re halfway there.”

“I should get back to the station,” Emma said. “David was rounding up all the people who need to know about this development and we’ll probably need as much help as we can get to pull this off.”
“You can say that again. Thank you, Emma. For getting out and getting him back to us.”

“You’re welcome. If anyone deserves a reunion then it’s you three.” Emma got up to leave and took a glance around outside the house from the kitchen window to check that the coast was clear. “Call me if anything happens.”

“You know magic, Em. If she comes here then there won’t be enough time to call you. It’ll all be over by the time I hit your speed dial.”

“Yeah, well, call me anyway.”

“I will. I promise.”

Belle was sitting on the stairs as Emma came through the house to leave via the front door. She was curled up tight on herself, her face pensive.

“Belle? You ok?”

Belle nodded. “Yes, I’m fine. But if I meet that witch again I’m going to pull her throat out for what she’s done to him. He’s not in a good way. I don’t know what she’s done, but I can tell she’s done something, and heaven help her if I get my hands on the woman.”

Emma thought about his flinching reactions to her in the cellar. Belle hadn’t given him time to flinch when she had hugged him before, and he’d initiated the contact with Neal. Emma could tell exactly what Belle was talking about and it made her stomach turn to think of it.

“I’ll see you later,” she said. “Time’s against us.”

Belle nodded. “Thank you, Emma.”

Emma left the pink house, driving back into the town as quickly as she dared, pulling up outside the station and rushing inside. David was there with Snow, Granny and Regina.

“Is it true? Rumpelstiltskin’s alive and you found him in a cellar?”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, it’s true. And we don’t have that much time before Zelena notices that he’s missing so we need a plan. Well, we have a plan. Not necessarily a good plan, but a plan. Here’s what we’re going to do.”

X

“Belle?”

Belle twisted on the stairs and smiled as Rumpel reappeared, clean shaven and in fresh clothes, damp hair curling at his collar.

“You can’t tell me that doesn’t feel better,” she said. “I know that when I was locked up, I would have given anything to feel clean.”

“Yes, this is better. Thank you.”

Together they made their way back to the kitchen where Neal was waiting.

“Hey Papa. We’ve got a plan which we think is going to work. We’re going to leave town.”

“She’ll follow us,” Rumpelstiltskin said plainly. “She needs me and she’s not going to stop until she
gets what she wants.

“I know. But out of town there’s no magic. We’ll be a hell of a lot safer, all of us.”

“Neal, I can’t leave town,” Belle said quietly. “You met Lacey. She was what happened the last time I went over that line.”

“I know, but Emma thinks that it’s different now, otherwise the monkeys wouldn’t be guarding the line.”

“I won’t have you take the risk,” Rumpelstiltskin said firmly. “Either of you,” he added. “If I’m going, then I’m going alone. It’s me that she wants, not either of you. If you come, you’ll only get hurt. She’s a vicious woman and she won’t hesitate to use you as pawns.”

Belle shook her head. “No. You’ve been through enough on your own. Now you have us. I’ll go with you forever, remember? I might not be able to cross the town line, but I’ll go with you as far as I can. We’re in this together. And really, Rumpel, do you think she won’t be able to use us if we aren’t there with you?” Her hand went to the back of her head and the stitches hidden beneath her hair.

“You’re stuck with us, Papa.” In spite of the dire situation, Neal grinned and Rumpelstiltskin managed a small smile

“All right. I guess anything’s worth a try.”

Belle sprang to her feet. “I’ll get packing.” She dashed out of the kitchen, leaving Rumpelstiltskin and Neal sitting together. The silence wasn’t awkward, but it wasn’t completely relaxed either.

“Bae… Neal…” Rumpelstiltskin began, but he wasn’t sure where to go from there. Neal just smiled.

“It’s ok. I know.”

“You do? I wish I did. It’s just… When I was… Well… Before I woke up back here, after everything went dark and calm, you and Belle were all I thought about. I just wanted to see you both one last time. And now I have, and I’m so grateful for this second chance, but at the same time, I’m worried that it’s all going to go wrong again.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.” Neal ran a hand through his hair again in agitation. “I can’t promise you that nothing’s going to go wrong, Papa.”

“I’m not expecting you to. I just want you to be prepared. Even if we do make it out of Storybrooke, Zelena’s still going to follow us. And even though there’s no magic out there, we’ll be on our own against her; there won’t be the back-up from the rest of the town.”

“I don’t know. Emma can come and go as she pleases and she’s pretty handy in all respects. I’m sure she’d be up for breaking a witch’s nose.”

He reached across the table for Rumpelstiltskin’s hand but his father flinched away, and Neal had to wonder with the metallic taste of fear in the back of his throat just what Zelena had done to him. He tapped his fingers against the kitchen table instead and got up suddenly.

“We should help Belle, there’s not much time. Hang on a sec.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded his agreement and go to his feet slowly as Neal left the room and returned ad moment later with his cane. Rumpelstiltskin raised an eyebrow.
“I lost this in Neverland.”

“Well, the curse obviously saw fit to give you a new one.”

Rumpelstiltskin took the cane and tested the weight. “All right,” he said eventually. “Let’s get out of here.”

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

Grumpy, stationed at the top of the tallest tower of Regina’s castle with several telescopes of varying degrees of strength and magic, furrowed his brow as something very strange caught his eye through one of the lenses. He quickly refocussed the enchanted telescope that was providing as close a view of the occupied summer palace as possible, and he blinked. The protective barrier had vanished. The green dome was suddenly gone, as if the witch had just decided to move out suddenly. With the barrier gone, he could get a closer view, and he swooped in as close as he dared, past where the barrier had been and right up to the windows of the palace itself. The place was deserted, no sign of any monkeys anywhere, nor of the witch herself.

Grumpy sat back. He had lived through enough skirmishes, sneak attacks and full on battles during Snow and Charming’s reclamation of the kingdom to be wary whenever something like this happened, but all the same, he had to let the royals know what he had seen, as it certainly warranted very careful investigation.

“Hey. Sleepy. Wake up, this is important.” Grumpy kicked his brother’s foot where it was in the way of the trap door down into the castle but all this served to do was make the other dwarf mumble in his sleep. Grumpy sighed and hefted the leg out of the way, opening the trap door.

“Good grief, you’re useless,” he muttered, before calling down into the tower. “Hey! Sneezy! I need you to take watch!”

Sneezy hurried up the steps and as the two dwarfs looked out over the plains they saw a horse galloping hell for leather towards the castle, two figures on its back. One of them was in a bad way, barely holding on, and Grumpy grabbed one of the telescopes from Sneezy, refocussing it on the horse.

“It’s Belle and Neal!”

He thrust the telescope back at his brother and took the stairs down into the castle two at a time, meeting Belle on the horse as she came into the courtyard.

“Help!” Belle called out. “We need a doctor right now!”

Charming and Regina, who had also seen Belle’s approach and rushed out to investigate, came over to help, Regina lifting Neal’s semi-conscious body off the horse with magic and conjuring a stretcher for him as Grumpy raced back into the castle to fetch Doc.

“Belle, what happened?” Charming asked. Belle didn’t reply for a long time, bent double to catch her breath from the furious ride, her shoulders shaking with the sobs that she could only now afford to give in to. Charming guided her into the castle, past Doc as he ran out, and the main war room where their other allies were waiting for them.
“Charming, Grumpy was just telling us that the witch has left the summer palace…” Snow began, but stopped short on seeing Belle.

Belle, for her part, nodded.

“Yes,” she said quietly, wiping her eyes. “Yes, she’s moved her base of operations to the Dark Castle instead. She was waiting for us there, biding her time. She needed…” She broke off, shaking her head with a sigh. “The witch has Rumpelstiltskin. She has his dagger and she can control his power.”

“But I thought…” Grumpy protested.

“He died, yes, but the Dark One can’t be without a host, so he didn’t truly die. Neal and I were able to bring him back to life, but the witch ambushed us and now Neal’s hurt and Rumpel’s under her control and I feel like it’s all my fault for wanting to go after him in the first place.”

“Belle, it’s no-one’s fault but Zelena’s. We can get him back,” Charming said. “We have to.”

“Charming, we can’t it was dangerous enough trying to break into the summer palace when Zelena was in residence there, but now that she has Rumpelstiltskin’s power at her beck and call?” Snow shook her head warily.

“That’s all the more reason to attempt to rescue him,” Charming said firmly. “That kind of power can’t fall into the wrong hands. If we stand any chance of winning the battle against the witch we want the Dark One on our side.”

“No,” Belle said, her voice quiet but strong in the large room, and the rest of the war council turned to her. “No, the only hands that Rumpel’s power should be in are his own. I want your help to rescue him, I want all the help I can get, but if you’re only doing it to so that you gain control over him for your own ends, then you’re no better than Zelena and I’d rather go it alone.”

The room was silent after this grim declaration, and Belle turned to leave just as Doc skidded into the room.

“Neal’s going to be all right,” he said breathlessly. “You brought him here in the nick of time. He’ll need total rest for several days but he should make a full recovery.”

“Thank you so much.” With a final meaningful look over her shoulder, Belle left with the dwarf to go and see Neal, and the rest of the council looked at each other. Grumpy headed towards the door.

“I’m with her,” he said simply, leaving the others in profound and contemplative silence.

**Storybrooke – Present**

They were putting the bags into the Cadillac’s trunk when Neal’s phone rang.

“Hey Emma.”

“Hey. Are you ready to go? We’re all set here. Regina’s set up some of her magical telescopes on Zelena’s house and she’s not reporting anything strange. David’s got hold of tranquiliser darts from the animal shelter and he’s gone to get Robin’s help in the forest. If we can pull this off then you
“Well, as far as magic’s concerned,” Neal said. “We’ll still have a very angry witch on our tail but hopefully losing magic will take the bite out of her bark.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see. How’s your dad doing?”

“He’s holding up ok. He’s going to need a lot of sessions with Dr Hopper, that’s for sure. The sooner all this is all over, the better. We’ve been trying to figure out what it could possibly be that she needs him for, but well, packing for a quick getaway took precedence.”

“Rumpelstiltskin’s tears, Belle’s hair… If this was a sci-fi movie I’d say some kind of freakish cloning experiment.”

“Let’s hope not. Listen, Emma, if this goes to plan then I won’t see you or Henry again till I get back. Will you tell him why I left so suddenly? I don’t want him to think that I just abandoned him a couple of days after meeting him and telling him I wanted to be his dad.”

“Sure. I think he’s starting to suspect that something’s not right anyway. You can always call, you know.”

“I was going to ask if I could.”

“Of course you can. You’re his Dad and I want you to be a part of his life just as much as he does.”

Neal smiled. “Ok then. I guess we’ll speak to you once we get to the other side.”

“Good luck. Take the back roads. If something does happen then we want to avoid collateral damage.”

“Of course. See you soon.”

“See you soon, Neal.”

They hung up and Belle looked over at Neal from the Cadillac.

“Ready?” she asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

He came over and got into the driver’s seat with Rumpelstiltskin beside him and Belle tucked in the back.

“Let’s go.”

Their drive down the twisting lanes that led out onto the main road out of town was a slow one, trying not to draw attention to themselves despite knowing that it wouldn’t make the blindest bit of difference to the rest of the town how fast they drove. Neal noticed the shivering flinch that his father gave and stepped on the gas a little harder.

“Pull over,” Rumpelstiltskin said suddenly, his face pale and anguished and his voice hissing through gritted teeth.

“Rumpel?”

“Pull over before she makes me flip the car!” he yelled. Neal slammed down on the brakes and the
car came to a screeching halt.

“Get out. Both of you.”

“Rumpel, we’re not leaving you now!” Belle said, but nonetheless she got out of the car, Neal following suit, with Rumpelstiltskin finally following them too.

“Well, this brings back happy memories.” Zelena’s cold voice cut through the air as the woman herself materialised in the road in front of them. “Of course, none of you remember the last time we had a little soiree like this, which is a shame. You in particular would have loved to see how it ended.” She pointed the dagger at Belle as she spoke, a cruel smile spreading over her face.

“Oh, I can well guess,” Belle snapped. Zelena just laughed. It was an icy sound and Belle couldn’t help but shiver. For a brief moment, she remembered snow and pine trees all around, but then it was gone.

“So, you thought that you could sneak away, like rats leaving the sinking ship,” Zelena said. “It would almost be heart-warming if it wasn’t so pathetic. No-one leaves this town without my leave. I’ve got some big plans and I really can’t have you wandering off before I’ve had chance to enact them. Timing is crucial.” She paused. “I think you know what comes next, Rumpel. Come quietly like a good boy and I might just let them live.”

Neal and Belle did not move, and Zelena rolled her eyes.

“Is this going to be one of those ‘if you want to get to him you’ll have to go through us first’ type scenarios?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” Neal growled. It was too late to call Emma for back-up, they were on their own.

“It’s a touching gesture, it really is, but ultimately it’s pointless. One little wave of this and I can have him gut you with his bare hands. May if I do that he’ll finally give me what I want.”

“No.” Rumpelstiltskin’s voice was quiet but firm, and he brushed off Belle’s touch on his arm as he made his way around the Cadillac to stand as a barrier between Zelena and Belle and Neal.

“No, Zelena,” he repeated. “I’ll come with you quietly. I’ll even come willingly. I won’t fight. Your business is with me, not them.”

“Yes, but they just make such lovely chess pieces in this game of wits that we’ve been playing for too long, Rumpel. I’m certain that I could use them to my advantage. You’ve held out for so long and it’s starting to get wearing. I think you might need some persuasion.” Zelena turned the dagger this way and that. “I wonder what it would be like to strangle your own son after all these years spent desperately trying to get back to him and protect him.”

“Zelena, please. I’ll go with you, I’ll give you what you want. Just don’t hurt them.”

“Why not? You hurt someone I loved. You hurt her so badly she died.”

“What are you talking about?” The panic in Rumpelstiltskin’s voice was rising, but the confusion in his face at Zelena’s words was genuine. “I haven’t touched anyone you love. I’ve never met them.”

“That’s not the point. The point is that I’m not nearly done with making you pay, and even if you do give me what I want after so much resistance, don’t think that we’ll be finished.”

“Run,” Rumpelstiltskin hissed to Belle and Neal. “This is going to be ugly and it’s not your fight.”
Belle looked at him fearfully; his face was chalk-white with terror now but his stood his ground, and Neal pulled Belle away.

“We can’t leave him!”

“We can’t help him if we’re dead, Belle, now run!”

They went all of a few yards before an invisible wall stopped them in their tracks.

“Not so fast. I want you to see this. Because you can’t help him even if you’re alive, my dear. He’s mine now. My little pet.”

Rumpelstiltskin craned away from her touch, eyes closed and breath on the point of hyperventilation, but he didn’t move. He couldn’t move. The moment he resisted, she’d just raise the dagger and he could wave goodbye to any hope of protecting Belle and Neal. Her tongue felt hot and slimy in his mouth and he could hear Belle’s little sob, not for her own sake but for his.

“Well, you two run along now,” Zelena said once she finally released him, and in a whirl of smoke, Belle and Neal found themselves back in the kitchen of the pink house, the Cadillac parked up outside with its doors still open. Belle broke down into tears, yanking the kitchen door open and running outside, running until Neal could no longer see her. He sighed, wiped his own eyes, and dialled Emma.

“Neal? Is everything all right?”

“No. It’s not. You can call off the cavalry. She’s got him.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle ran, tears misting her vision as she stumbled along the narrow, uneven path towards the cemetery. The only thing she could hear was the sound of her own snuffling sobs. Neal had not followed her, and she did not want him to. The day’s events had been just as devastating for him and his own emotions must have been just as much of a rollercoaster as hers, but Belle could not stay in the house a moment longer. She needed the space, the air, something fresh and cool against the anger and sheer, unadulterated misery that was burning her up from the inside.

Finally she reached her destination, collapsing onto her knees at Rumpel’s graveside, his headstone solid and unyielding under her shaking hands, and she howled with the pain and injustice of it all, snotty tears streaming down her face.

“Why?” she screamed to the sky. “Why would you do this to us? Hasn’t he suffered enough? Haven’t we all suffered enough? Is this some kind of fairy tale karma, that the villains can never have peace? And what about those of us that love him, do we deserve this heartbreak? He died! He died for all of us and you couldn’t even let him have that!”

She didn’t even know who she was yelling at, perhaps the mystical author who’d written all their stories in the first place, not that he seemed to have much sway now. Of course, the person she really wanted to yell at was Zelena, but that wasn’t an option, so rage at their seemingly hopeless situation would have to suffice. She screamed until she was hoarse and all her anger and adrenaline had died.
down, leaving her a weeping ball of sadness, her head pillowed on her arms as she leaned heavily on the marble slab that seemed so meaningless now.

“Belle?”

The single word was soft and tentative, but Belle would recognise her father’s voice anywhere, and she lifted her gaze an inch to see him crouching beside her, a basket containing gardening gloves and dead-headed roses abandoned nearby. He’d evidently been tidying up the graveyard.

Moe did not come closer, and it took him by complete surprise when Belle let go of the headstone and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder as she burst into a fresh flood of tears.

“Belle, what’s happened?” Moe asked, cuddling her close like he’d done when she’d still been a young girl, after her mother had died.

“He’s alive,” Belle croaked. “Rumpel’s alive.”

“These aren’t happy tears, Belle. What’s wrong.”

Belle shook her head.

“The witch has him. She has the dagger his magic is bound to. She can control him and he’s her prisoner. There’s nothing we can do. Oh Papa, it’s just not fair! I was so happy when I saw him there, I couldn’t believe my eyes and I couldn’t believe that we’d been so lucky as to get a second chance after death, of all things. We were together again but then we were ripped apart.”

“Oh Belle.” Moe just stroked her back. He might not approve of her relationship with Rumpelstiltskin but she did not deserve this pain, the pain of losing him twice, and in such a horrific way. “There’s got to be something that we can do.”

“What can we do? He’s the most powerful magician there is and if the witch has control of him then she has access to all his power. Face it, it’s useless.”

“You must never give up hope, Belle,” Moe said. “Remember what your mother always used to say. As long as we still have hope, not all is lost.”

“I’m all out of hope right now, Papa. All I’ve got left is sadness.”

“Then you be sad. I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

At length, Belle’s sobs subsided into snuffles and she lightly shook off Moe’s arms around her so that she could blow her nose, and she looked over at the headstone.

“In a way, this is worse than him being dead,” she said quietly. “When someone’s dead you can grieve them and remember them but you know that their hardships are over. Now I don’t even have that comfort to fall back on. I know he’s alive, but is this fate worse than death? I’d accepted that I was never going to see him again; that we would never be together. But now I have seen him again, and we still might never be together. So close, and yet so far apart.”

“Something will happen,” Moe said firmly. “I know you, Belle, and I know you never stop fighting for those you love when they’re worth fighting for. Keep fighting for him, you have to. Someone has to, whilst he can’t fight for himself.”

Belle nodded. “I know. The circumstances are just so bleak but I know I can’t give up on him. I have
“Just remember that you don’t have to be strong all the time.” He reached out and wiped away the tear tracks on her cheeks. “It’s all right to cry. We’re right here for you. True love is worth fighting for. Take it from someone who never learned that lesson.”

Belle managed a watery smile.

“Thank you, Papa.”

They did not move for a long time, looking at the lettering on Rumpelstiltskin’s headstone until the sun began to set.
Robin peered nervously out of the hidden shelter built into the roots of a clump of entwined trees. The shelter offered a good lookout point onto the main road, and Allan had designed it with natural arrow slits. His fingers brushed over the fletches in his quiver, ready to notch an arrow and strike at a moment’s notice. There were footsteps getting closer, hurried footsteps, and he did not yet know if they were friend or foe. He adjusted his grip on his bow.

Suddenly, the footsteps stopped and a distinctive whistle sounded. Robin gave a sigh of relief and lowered his bow as the shelter’s flap opened up and Marian slid down inside.

“You always leave it so late to signal,” Robin groused as she came over and kissed his cheek. “One of these days I’m going to shoot you by accident.”

Marian just laughed. “You’re paranoid, did you know that?”

“Well, is it any surprise?” They both glanced over to where Roland lay, wrapped up tightly in blankets, sleeping as soundly as if he were in a feather bed in a palace, rather than in a hole in the ground in the forest.

“The others have already gone, I take it?” Marian glanced around their deserted camp.

“Yes, they’re on their way to the new place now. As useful as this has been as a base, we’ve nearly been caught here too many times lately. It’s time to move on.”

“It’s such a shame. I really didn’t want to uproot him so soon. He’s only just settled here.” Marian picked up her baby son and held him close as he stirred, nuzzling the top of his downy head. She sighed. “You’d better take him and get going after the others.”

“What about you?” Robin asked, alarmed.

“I’ll catch up, I won’t be too long after you. There’s a carriage coming up towards the traps on the western road and it looks like it’ll be a good haul. It would be a shame to waste it when it could provide us with necessary supplies.”

“In that case, I’ll go,” Robin said, trying to hand Roland back to Marian. She shook her head.

“Robin, we both know that I’m the only one light enough to spring those traps from the trees. That’s the way they were designed. If you try you’ll only end up with arrows flying everywhere, and then where would we be? You take Roland. You’re better placed to protect him if you come across any unpleasantness on the roads.”

Robin conceded that point, slipping his quiver off his shoulder to allow Marian to tie Roland to his chest in a snug papoose. She leaned in to kiss his forehead.

“Stay good for your papa, my brave little archer,” she cooed. “Mama will see you again very soon.”

“I’m holding you to that,” Robin said. “If you’re not at the new camp by dawn I’m leaving Allan to look after Roland and coming back for you.”

“As any chivalrous husband would.” Marian smiled and kissed him. “I’ll see you very soon, I
Robin left the camp, looking back over his shoulder towards her as he made his way down the road, and Marian waved. As much as she hated to leave Roland behind, she knew that this was the only practical and least dangerous way, and whatever Robin might say, they badly needed the supplies and valuables for trade or sale that the carriage heist would bring them. Casting a final glance around the shelter to check that there was nothing incriminating left behind, she grabbed her pack and left her temporary home for the last time, making her way to the western road. She climbed easily up a tree and checked the trap lines before settling down to wait for the carriage. The worn, old spyglass that Robin had carried with him since time immemorial proved very useful in situations like these, and she sat watching the progression for a while. It was obviously a minor noble’s carriage, not important enough to have a large retinue of guards, just a single outrider who would be easily taken care of by the traps. The most important thing was the luggage piled up on the back running board. That was going to be the prize. On second thoughts, maybe Robin should have come with her; that was going to be a lot of baggage to carry to the new camp on her own, unless she commandeered the outrider’s horse or the carriage itself. The horse would be a better bet, that could be released once she was finished with it, but a carriage was a lot harder to hide in the woods.

Marian took the spyglass away from her eye as she heard a rustling in the branches not too far from her. It was too loud to be a bird and too clumsy to be a creature used to climbing, which mean that it had to be a person. Silent and catlike, Marian crept along her sturdy branch to check out the intruder. All she could see was a dark cloak huddled in the branches a few yards away, wobbling on the tree limbs. Marian muttered a curse. Of all the times for an amateur to be invading their patch, it had to be now, when she was about to make her final catch.

Presently the cloak looked up, revealing a pale face and dark hair, and Marian gasped as she recognised the interloper.

Storybrooke – Present

“We’ve got to do something. We know she’s planning something and we know she has no qualms about hurting innocents in order to do it. I say we go in now and cut her off before we find out what it is she’s up to.”

It was the most like the Enchanted Forest that Storybrooke had ever been. In the aftermath of discovering that Rumpelstiltskin was alive and their failed attempt to get him out of town and out of Zelena’s sphere of magic, a crisis meeting had been called. Regina was hosting the impromptu gathering, as the owner of the largest dining table, and all those present who had lived through wars and campaigns before could well see the grim similarities to a council of war. There was a distinct sense of déjà vu among the participants, and Regina especially found herself wondering just what had happened during the year they could not remember, and how far they had come in their interactions with Zelena then. She could not help thinking that they were somehow retreading old ground, and if they had not been able to stop Zelena casting the Dark Curse and bringing them all back to Storybrooke before, then did they have any real hope of preventing her nefarious plans now? On the other hand, perhaps the curse casting was a mark of desperation on Zelena’s part, and having forced her hand before, they were more likely to back her into a corner now. Regina had no way of knowing, and what was even more frustrating was that all the variations of the memory potions that she had tried did not work. It was clear that this amnesia was tied to the current curse just as it had been last time, when she had cast it herself. They would just have to wait for the curse to be broken.

“I agree with Leroy,” she said eventually, as strange as it felt to be siding with someone who was
one of her staunchest opponents and who would have been quite happy for her to take the blame for their current predicament. Even Leroy himself looked rather shocked by her support. “She’s already proved herself to be more than capable of causing chaos and we can’t just let her get away with it. She needs to be neutralised before she can do any more damage.”

“In principle, I agree,” David said. “But we’re at a disadvantage, and launching a full-scale assault from the back foot isn’t something we want to be doing.”

“We’ve got the advantage of numbers,” Leroy pressed. “Sure, she’s incredibly powerful, but there’s only one of her.”

“No,” Belle said. “David’s right. There may only be one Zelena, unless she knows some kind of duplication spell, which I really don’t want to think about, but she’s got a whole army of flying monkeys at her beck and call, and she has the most powerful sorcerer in all the realms under her control. And whilst she won’t care about a little collateral damage, those people are her victims just as much as we are. They’re our friends and loved ones and we cannot fight back against them, no matter what they might do. Believe me, I want the witch dead as badly as the rest of you, but as long as she has the monkeys and Rumpel, she has power over us.”

It was a chilling but unavoidable truth. They couldn’t afford to risk harming any of the monkeys when they had no idea who might be under the fur. With so many citizens, personal friends, still unaccounted for, it was too high a price to pay.

“We need to get the dagger back,” Neal said. “Once Rumpelstiltskin has free will again, that’s one huge hurdle solved.”

He looked around the table for support, but with the exception of Belle, the rest of the co-conspirators didn’t seem too enamoured by the idea.

“It’s too dangerous, Neal,” Mary Margaret said plainly. “I know you want to rescue him and I can completely sympathise, but you know what happened the last time.” It was only the previous day, it was still painfully fresh in Neal’s memory and he didn’t need reminding of their failure, but something inside him would not let the matter rest. That was his father inside that witch’s lair, and for all they hadn’t seen eye to eye for the last few hundred years, Neal wouldn’t wish his father’s fate on his worst enemy. He chose not to argue Mary Margaret’s point and instead sat back to see if anyone else came up with a better idea.

Robin had been called in out of the woods to take part in the conference, as one of only a few to have come through for the first time, and thus far he had remained silent, a thoughtful expression on his face. Presently he leaned forward.

“Maybe if we could take out the brute force of her little army, we’d stand more chance against her, either in a rescue attempt or a complete assault,” he said. “If it’s just Zelena and Rumpelstiltskin that you have to worry about then the confrontation becomes more evenly matched, especially since, from what I hear, Rumpelstiltskin will be expending as much energy fighting against her as he is doing her bidding.”

“Take out the monkeys and stop her physical fighting force,” Granny agreed. “But how do we go about that in a humane way?” she gripped her crossbow a little tighter, obviously itching to use it.

“The monkeys are garrisoned, for want of a better word, in the woods, patrolling the town’s boundaries,” Robin continued. “It should be easy to pick them off individually, I’ve learned these woods well and tactics in trees don’t vary much from place to place. We’ve got magic on our side.” He nodded respectfully to Emma and Regina. “If we can find a way to de-monkey the monkeys and
bring them out from under Zelena’s control, then my men and I would be able to administer the antidote unobtrusively, without Zelena getting too suspicious.”

The rest of the war council looked at each other. It was the only plan they had, and it was a good one, even if more time-consuming than an all-out assault on Zelena’s farmhouse would be.

“Sounds good to me,” Emma said with a shrug. “Of course, I don’t have the faintest idea how to de-monkey a monkey, but I’m sure there is a way.” She turned to Regina, a little helplessly.

“Yes,” Regina said firmly. “I’m sure that there is an antidote to whatever spell Zelena has them under, but I’d need to be able to get close enough to one for long enough to study the enchantments so as to be able to break them.”

“Papa could capture a monkey.” Roland had, naturally, come with his father and was sitting unnoticed at Robin’s feet, playing with some of Henry’s old toys that Regina had found in the attic. She had almost forgotten that he was there. “Papa’s good at hunting.”

“The problem would be keeping it contained once we’d subdued it,” Robin said. “And subduing it in the first place. They’re persistent creatures, I’ll give you that one for nothing.”

“Ruby’s cloak,” Granny said. “You could use the cloak to return them to their human form for a while. Take it off and they’ll transform right back. As long as she gets it back in time for the next full moon, you can keep it for as long as you need.”

“No offence, Granny, but isn’t that a wolf thing?” David asked.

“Mainly wolves, yes,” Granny explained. “But it will work for any creature which was originally human and which can’t fully control itself when shifted.”

“Are you sure?” Regina was almost embarrassed by the very obvious hope in her voice. Granny nodded.

“I don’t trust Rumpelstiltskin as far as I can throw him, but he uses his words wisely. He said that it would work for any feral creature that was once human, and I believe that. I’m sure that the monkeys come under that category.”

“Wait, Rumpelstiltskin made Ruby’s cloak? How did we not know that?” David spluttered.

“It never seemed like a particularly necessary thing to impart,” Granny said simply. “So, are we all agreed on the plan? Robin will capture a monkey and restrain it with Ruby’s cloak, and Regina will work out a humane counter measure.”

Her brisk, no-nonsense tone pulled everyone back into the present and made the plan seem so simple that there was no point in going against it. The other all voiced their agreement and got up to leave, and Roland brought the little wooden cars that he’d been playing with back to Regina.

“Oh no, sweetie, you can keep those.”

The boy beamed and ran off after his father, who gave her a smile. Regina smiled back, but inside, her heart, yearning for Henry and missing him so much, was breaking.

**Enchanted Forest – Past**

Marian didn’t really have time to register the fact that Princess Snow was staring up at her with wide, frightened eyes, as the carriage was almost underneath them and she had a matter of moments in
which to spring her trap.

“Don’t move!” she hissed to the princess, who nodded mutely as Marian dashed back to her position and untied the ropes that loaded the traps, yanking down hard as the carriage approached. A large clump of tree branches swung down over the road, startling the carriage horses and knocking the outrider out of his saddle. A second tug had the leaf cover of a large trench fall away in front of the horses, making them rear and back the carriage up a little, placing it in prime position for the final part of the plan. Marian unhooked the final rope and used it to swing across the road and hook up several bags from the back of the carriage as she went. They fell into the waiting nets strung up among the treetops on the other side of the road, and Marian got ready for another pass. The carriage driver and outrider were too busy trying to calm the horses to pay much attention to what was going on behind them, and the lord in the carriage wasn’t able to do much other than shout as Marian hooked up more of his belongings. None of them were armed with bows, only blades, and she was too far away and moving too fast for those to be effective. The lord tried to grab one of the bags as it swung past him, but ultimately he couldn’t maintain his grip and he fell down into the mud churned up by the horses’ hooves.

“Get them!” he bawled to the driver and outrider, gesturing frantically into the trees, but it wasn’t going to be any use; they’d never get up into the tree canopy and Marian had already netted the bags. She glanced down at Snow, who was watching mutely.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Let’s get out of here; I’ll come back for the loot. Follow me.”

Marian was a good climber, as at home in the trees as she was on the ground, and she cut a clear path through the canopy away from the ground, pausing now and then to make sure that Snow was still following her. Once they were at a safe distance but still able to keep an eye on the nets, Marian stopped and sat down on a thick branch. Snow flopped down beside her.

“I take it that you’re relatively new to forest banditry,” Marian said. Of course she was, it wasn’t all that long ago that she had been a beloved princess living in a palace. A lot had happened in the last few weeks, and living in a forest meant that Marian wasn’t always up to speed with the latest royal gossip.

Snow nodded mournfully. “I saw the traps set up and I thought I might be able to use them. Maybe I should have picked a smaller target for my first time.”

“It’s not good form to use someone else’s traps,” Marian pointed out.

“Oh. Yes. Sorry.”

“It’s all right, you’ll know for next time.” She held out her hand. “I’m Marian.”

“Mary.”

It was clearly a false name, they both knew who the princess was and Marian could guess at why she was in the forest. With such a well-known face and lineage, it was probably the safest place she could hide in, both for her own sake and that of any villagers who might face dire repercussions for hiding her. At least, being a bandit, Marian knew that there was already a price on her own head and she wouldn’t be in any worse a state for helping the fallen princess.

“Well, Mary, the first thing to remember is not to be scared of the trees. If you’re going to make your home and your living in the forest for whatever reason, then you have to understand the trees. They aren’t out to get you, they aren’t going to throw you out of their branches. They’re just going to stand here like they’ve always done. What you do with them and how you use them is up to you, but as
long as you trust them, they’ll never let you down.”

“You sound like you’ve been at this for a long time,” Snow said, a touch of awe in her voice. Marian shrugged.

“Times are getting harder under Queen Regina’s rule,” she said. “They were never brilliant before, but we all do what we have to in order to survive. If banditry is what it takes, then so be it.”

“I had no idea it was so bad,” the princess said mournfully. “I never really knew enough about the kingdom until…” She tailed off, forgetting herself for a moment and having to force herself back into the Mary persona. “Until I had to come out to the woods.”

“Well, you’ll always have friends here,” Marian said, and she hoped that Snow could see through her words to what she really meant. “There are many of us who would welcome a change in the current ruler.”

Snow smiled. “Thank you.”

Marian just nodded and changed the subject. “Once you get over your fear of falling out of trees, you’ll find that you can walk through them as easily as you can walk across the ground. The trick is to forget that you’re up in the air. The moment you look down, you’re lost.”

“Yes.” Snow was staring down at the ground several feet below. “Yes, I think that might be where I have a problem.”

“Invest in some good strong rope and nets, and then you can rig up some traps and keep things in the treetops. Only the truly determined or truly desperate will follow you up into the trees to reclaim stolen goods. As long as you know how to tie really good knots, you’ll be fine. Speaking of stolen goods, though, I should really be getting back to my nets. I have to meet the rest of my group. Good luck, Mary.”

“Thank you. Wait!” Snow called as Marian got up and made to clamber her way back across to her catch. “Will I be able to find you again in the forest?”

“I imagine so.” Marian smiled. “Just look for the traps. One of us is usually nearby.”

She had barely got back to the nets when she realised that something wasn’t right. The carriage and outrider had gone, giving up the retrieval of their goods as a bad job, but she could still hear the stamping of hooves. Several horses were coming down the road, and it sounded like a military formation. Marian’s first instinct was to draw back into the safety of the trees; they had long since worked on a principle of avoiding confrontation when it came to travellers with obvious martial leanings as there was no sense in asking for trouble. She peered through the leaves and her heart sank. More than just soldiers, they were Black Guard, Regina’s elite unit. There was no doubt in Marian’s mind that they were there for the princess. She looked up at her nets and down along the road. She really shouldn’t get involved. She didn’t owe Snow White anything and she’d already helped the girl out of one scrape. The rest of the group were waiting for her. Robin and Roland were waiting for her. At the same time, though, she knew that her conscience wouldn’t let her leave the princess to whatever fate awaited her at the hands of the guards. Heaving a sigh and knowing that she was probably going to regret it, she made her way back through the trees to where she had left Snow. The younger woman was just testing her climbing ability, gaining confidence on the higher branches.

“Watch out!” Marian hissed as the guards passed along the road under them. They were moving slowly now, fanning out into the trees on foot to look for their quarry. It would be no good trying to
take them on, even if there was only one of them. They were too highly trained, and it would be suicide. Their only option was to hide.

“Come with me, I know somewhere you can lie low.”

It was a good job they’d just vacated their old camp. Marian dropped down from the trees and gestured for Snow to follow her; soon they were back at the old camp and Marian bundled the princess down into the tree roots before scrambling back up into the trees to keep watch. Just as long as Snow didn’t make a sound, they would be all right. Marian could feel her heart beating painfully in her chest as the guards came ever closer. Just a few minutes more and they would be in the clear. A prison wagon trundled along the road; they definitely meant business, and Marian winged up a prayer. Not long, not long now…

Fate was not on their side. One of the soldiers was almost on the hideout, and it was clear that he could tell something wasn’t right. He began poking about at the roots, discovering the entrance flap. Marian couldn’t watch, pressing her hands over her face as they dragged Snow out of the once-safe haven. To give her due, she was fighting tooth and nail against them, but it was never going to be any use. She was too young and too inexperienced in the life of an outlaw, and soon enough she had been tossed unceremoniously into the prison wagon. Marian did not let out the breath she had been holding until after the guards and wagon had gone from view. What was she to do now? She couldn’t leave the princess to her fate, she had already made the decision to get involved. Logically she knew that this was something that would need the rest of the group, and they were probably already wondering where she was. But when it came to prisoners, Regina wasn’t in the habit of hanging around with the ones she wanted gone, and every minute’s delay spent gathering the troops for a rescue mission brought Snow closer to the scaffold. By the time she caught up with the rest of the group, persuaded them to help her, and they’d set out to Regina’s castle, it would likely be too late. Marian accepted that she was going to be on her own for this one. She sighed, hoping that Robin and the others would forgive her for taking such a big risk in the name of the greater good, and she clambered down from her perch. The outlaws had hidden caches of weapons throughout the forest, and she made her way to the nearest one, grabbing a bow, quiver, and several coils of rope along with some extra daggers. With any luck, she wouldn’t need them. She wasn’t anticipating a fight, just a quick and clean extraction.

Determination etched into her features, Marian set off at a run through the forest. She knew all the shortcuts, and with any luck she could make it to the castle before dark.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Objectively, Regina knew that she shouldn’t be seeking Henry out, and that in their current relationship of mayor and visitor, and nothing closer than that, it would definitely seem creepy to the outside observer. The only outside observer in this case was Henry himself; everyone else in the town knew who she really was and why she was doing it, even if they didn’t agree with it. At the same time, she really couldn’t help it. She missed him so much that it was physically painful, like a hole had been torn in her guts. She was reminded of Rumpelstiltskin’s words of warning when she had cast the first curse, about a gaping hole in her heart that she would never be able to fill. Perhaps that was coming back to bite her now.

She stood outside the diner for a long time, wondering whether to go in. She had a lot of other things she needed to do, and ought to be doing, but she couldn’t bring herself to move. Henry was sitting inside at the counter, chatting happily to Ruby, and Regina steeled herself before walking inside. She needed to talk to Ruby anyway, she kept telling herself. This was definitely not just an excuse to
speak to Henry.

She slipped onto the stool beside him and declined when Ruby came over with the coffee pot.

“No thanks, I’m not staying long. I just needed to talk to you. Did Granny tell you about the plan?”

“Yeah, I’ll go and get the cloak now. Be careful with it; I’ve been quite sure how effective it is when it’s damaged.”

“Ruby.” Regina’s tone was a warning one, and she gestured quickly to Henry, who seemed for the time being to be oblivious to the strange exchange.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, I keep forgetting. I’ll go get it.”

Ruby disappeared into the back of the diner and Regina sat twiddling her thumbs nervously, wondering how to start the conversation with Henry. She was saved the trouble when he spoke to her.

“So, is it like an invisibility cloak or something?” he asked, a little smirk spreading over his face.

“Ruby made it sound like it’s got some kind of magic powers.”

“Maybe it has. You never know. Magic can be found in the strangest of places.” A little seed of hope burst into fruitful life in Regina’s mind. Maybe if she could get Henry believing in the existence of magic, then they could be one step closer to breaking the curse and restoring his memories.

Henry looked curious. “I’ll admit, there is something about this place that doesn’t quite add up,” he said. “I still can’t shake the feeling that I’ve been here before, and I keep having these strange dreams that are more like memories.”

“You never know,” Regina repeated. The more doubt that she could sow in him now…

“Are you a witch?”

The question came completely out of the left field and Regina was thrown for a loop, unable to respond for a long time.

“Pardon?” she squeaked eventually, her voice choked. She hadn’t expected her gentle suggestion to be quite that effective that quickly.

“A witch,” Henry replied. “You know, like a Wiccan white witch. I’ve overheard a lot of the town talking about magic and spells and curses and potions, and it just made me wonder if there was something deeper behind it.”

The notion of being a white witch steeped in light magic was so far from Regina’s usual modus operandi that it made her laugh. Henry looked somewhat sheepish and embarrassed.

“Yeah, I know, it’s a stupid idea,” he muttered.

“No, no, you’re right in a way. I guess a lot of the townsfolk would call me a witch, although probably not one of the good white ones.”

“You’ve always been nice to me,” Henry said plainly.

“Of course I am, you’re…” She tailed off. She couldn’t exactly tell him that he was her son, but she’d made the commitment to the sentence now, and Henry was looking at her expectantly.
“I’m…” he prompted.

“You’re a very special kid, Henry,” she finished. “There aren’t all that many children in Storybrooke and it’s always nice to get some young people here.”

Well, that didn’t sound weird or creepy at all, and Regina could tell that Henry was nowhere near convinced by her words. Still, he didn’t push the point and Regina wasn’t going to offer up any alternative explanation either. Presently Ruby returned with her cloak.

“There we are. I trust you know when you need to return it by. We’ve already got enough trouble going on in the woods, let’s not add any more.”

Regina nodded; she’d consulted the lunar calendar before coming out and there were a good two weeks before full moon. With any luck, the antidote to the monkeys’ curse would be ready by then and they wouldn’t need to worry, and they would be one step closer to getting the better of Zelena once and for all.

“Trouble in the woods?” Henry asked. He had always known more about what was going on than Regina gave him credit for, and as awkward as it made things now, she was glad to see that he hadn’t lost that trait along with his memories.

“Wild animals,” Ruby said quickly. “Wolves, bears and the like. They’ve been getting closer to the town, attacking people. Like Neal and Belle.”

“Yeah.” Henry shuddered at the memory.

“Probably best if you don’t go near the forest,” Ruby added.

“Don’t worry, after what happened to my dad and Belle, I don’t plan on it.”

There really wasn’t any way to spin the conversation with Henry out any longer, although it was something of a bleak note that they were ending on.

“Well, I’d best get going. Thank you for this.” She folded Ruby’s cloak over her arm and slipped off her stool. “Take care, Henry.”

“I will. Bye, Regina.”

She left the diner, looking back over her shoulder, but Henry wasn’t looking in her direction any more. Regina sighed, hugging herself tightly. She seemed to have given him a push in the right direction at least, but waiting for the spell to break of its own accord was agonising. A thought occurred to her briefly. Henry’s new memories were not the result of the same curse that the rest of them were under. She had used magic to alter Henry’s memories herself, and that meant that she knew the exact way to reverse the effects. A standard memory potion would work, the only trouble was getting him to accept it. Not to mention the profound ramifications of spiking a minor. And there was Emma to think of as well; she had not shown any interest in restoring Henry’s memories, and she probably wouldn’t appreciate Regina doing it without her knowledge.

A small, shrill part of her became increasingly vocal, reasoning that all else aside, Henry was still her son and she still had the right to be his mother, but since all that had been arranged in a somewhat furtive manner thirteen years ago, and all she’d done in the process was sign on the dotted line, perhaps legalese wouldn’t be her best recourse here.

She continued to make her way down the street, stopping outside the pawn shop. It seemed that everywhere was giving her memories of her time with Henry today. This was the place where she
had first laid eyes on him, and the place where he had been named. It was a favourite memory of hers, but now there was a tinge of sadness to it as well.

Still, she needed to check out Rumpelstiltskin’s stocks for things that she needed for the monkeys’ antidote, so Regina pushed the memories to one side and strode in purposefully.

Belle was alone behind the counter, sorting through the boxes of index cards as she attempted to make an inventory of everything in the shop. With Rumpelstiltskin’s continued existence revealed, Regina wasn’t sure why she was still doing it, unless she had no hope of him ever returning from his enslavement. Still, Regina supposed that it gave her something to take her mind off their gloomy situation, and if she found anything that could help free him, then so much the better.

Belle looked up as the shop bell rang, and Regina saw the moment she went into a defensive stance, backing up a few steps towards the back room.

“Regina,” she said, her voice measured.

“Belle. I think you can guess why I’m here. What have you got?”

“Well, that depends entirely on what you want.” Belle’s tone was icy and Regina didn’t think she’d ever heard her sound so… unlike herself. Belle was warm, she was gentle and forgiving and she got on with everyone. Rumpelstiltskin’s plight must have hit her harder than Regina realised.

“I need…” Regina began, but Belle cut her off.

“How about three years locked in a tower knowing that the only reason you’re still alive is because someone might need to use you as a bargaining chip in the future?”

Regina’s blood ran cold.

“Belle, I…”

“Don’t fancy that? Maybe you’d prefer twenty-eight years in a padded cell with no memories at all, being drugged up so much you don’t know whether you’re awake or not and you can’t even remember your own name!”

“Belle, I’m sorry…”

“What about a set of false memories that bring out the very worst in your character and send you into the arms of a man who, once upon a time, tried to buy you like livestock?”

Belle’s voice was rising with every sentence, the anger rolling off her in waves.

“Belle, I’m sorry,” Regina said.

Belle snorted. “You know the worst part of all that? You didn’t even hurt me because you wanted to hurt me. I was so unimportant that you hurt me solely to hurt Rumpel. You do all that and now you expect me to just turn around and help you out like nothing happened?”

“Belle, this is for Rumpelstiltskin,” Regina pleaded. “I need these ingredients if we’re going to get anywhere near to freeing him.”

“I know,” Belle said sharply. “But I am my own person, I am not just an extension of Rumpel, a plaything that you can use to hurt him. What I have here is self-respect, and I am not going to sit back and let you pretend, in the name of the Greater Good, that you haven’t treated me absolutely
horrifically in the past. I can live with a lot, Regina, but even I have a limit.”

She was shaking now, and Regina’s stomach was churning.

“Belle, I’m sorry for what I did.”

“Are you really sorry, or are you just sorry because you need my help?”

“I am really sorry, Belle. I had no idea…”

“No idea of what?”

“No idea that it had affected you so badly. You’ve always been so…” Regina struggled for a suitable word that wouldn’t dig her even further into a hole.

“Remarkably well-adjusted considering everything you’ve put me through? Well, that’s because up until now, I’ve had to be. We’ve always been in a big group discussing bigger issues and I’m pragmatic enough to hold my tongue. But now it’s just you and me, and frankly, Regina, after everything you’ve done, I don’t feel safe being alone with you.”

Regina felt like she’d had a bucket of ice water upturned over her head. In their current predicament, it was all too easy to pin all the menace on Zelena, to point out that she should be the one that everyone should be scared of and blaming for all the ills in their lives, but it couldn’t be denied that the accusations Belle had levelled against her were true.

“Belle, I’m sorry for all the horrible things I did to you. I truly am.”


“Belle…”

“I can accept your apology, but that doesn’t mean I have to forgive you or suddenly start trusting you.”

She had a point, and Regina decided to retreat gracefully. She’d come back later, when Neal was around, and maybe bring Robin as a friendly face that Belle trusted. She left the shop, still shaken from the brutal truths that she’d been forced to face up to, and she thought back to her plans from before the missing year, before Pan had turned up in Storybrooke and everything had been set in motion again. She had been going to return all the hearts she’d taken to their owners, the beginning of her atonement. The confrontation with Belle reminded her that she still had a long way to go. It wasn’t her fault that her plans kept getting derailed by other, bigger threats on the horizon, but making amends wasn’t something that could be put off indefinitely.

“Hey, Regina.”

It was Emma, no doubt heading towards the diner to collect Henry.

“I see you’ve got the cloak. Any update on the grand de-monkeyfying plan?”

“No, not at the moment. I’m still missing some ingredients. I’d better get this to Robin so that he can start rigging a trap.”

“Yeah, the sooner we get to the bottom of this, the better.” Emma paused, her brow furrowed. “Are you all right? You look kind of down.”

“Yes. I just received a rather forcible reminder of the person that I used to be. A person I’m trying to
“Well, you can’t just ignore your past,” Emma said. “Believe me, I know from experience. I’ve got more regrets than I can count and running away from them never really works too well. I’ve tried. I guess you’ve just got to face these things and make peace with them.”

“That’s very philosophical of you. Who are you, and what have you done with Emma?”

Emma just laughed. “I think the last year has put things in perspective a little bit.”

“I wish I could remember the last year,” Regina muttered. “I’ll be kicking myself if it turns out that this is the second time I’m having all these uncomfortable conversations.”

“Well, at least you know that whatever it is you’re talking about will have been very thoroughly discussed.”

In spite of everything, Regina had to laugh. “And probably come to exactly the same conclusions.” She paused. This was the perfect opportunity to talk about Henry. “Speaking of memories though…”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been thinking about Henry. As he’s not bound under the same magic as the rest of the town, I could probably make a memory potion that would work on him.” She couldn’t help the hopefulness in her voice as she spoke, and she tried not to look too disappointed when Emma sighed, her face grim.

“I don’t know, Regina. I appreciate the offer and I appreciate how much you miss him and want him to remember you, but I just don’t know if it’s a good idea. Our lives are still in New York, and he has friends there.”

“Are you really going to come all this way and help save us all and then go back to New York as if nothing happened?” Regina asked incredulously.

“I don’t know!” Emma exclaimed. “I don’t know anything anymore. I have no idea where I belong or where my life’s supposed to be, and I don’t want Henry to feel the same way.” She sighed, leaning against the wall. “And I guess a selfish part of me doesn’t want him to remember that I actually gave him up,” she admitted quietly.

For all Regina wanted to be outraged, she couldn’t find the anger within herself. Emma sounded so defeated and disgusted with herself, and after the conversation she’d just been through, Regina knew exactly how she felt. She thought about what Emma had said about running away from the past, and leaned on the wall next to her.

“Thank you,” Emma said eventually. “The memories that you gave me, those years with Henry that I never had before, they were wonderful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I figured that after everything, you two deserved a happy ending.”

“When I realised that it wasn’t real… I don’t know. I guess I keep thinking that I can go back to that life. But I know I can’t. I’d be living a lie. And even if by some miracle, I was able to keep Henry oblivious, I would know that he’d be living a lie too.”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Regina said. “Maybe his memories will return of their own accord. Things do seem to be bleeding through, and he’s already got the impression that there’s some kind of magic at work in the town.”
“Hmmm” Emma’s brow was furrowed, her expression perturbed. “The more I think about it, the
more I wonder. We’ve been trying to use Henry’s lack of memories to keep him safe, but if he’s the
only one in town who doesn’t know what’s going on, then it could prove dangerous. From what I’ve
seen of Zelena and her methods, she wouldn’t hold back against Henry just because he’s clueless in
terms of magic.”

It was a chilling thought and not one that Regina particularly wanted to dwell on.

“I mean, the entire town’s keeping an eye on him at the moment and there’s safety in numbers,”
Emma continued, “but if Zelena manages to get him on his own… That contraption that I saw in
Zelena’s place had four points on the gimble. Belle’s hair, Rumpelstiltskin’s tears, my blood, what if
the fourth thing she needs comes from Henry? He’s the truest believer after all, and it wouldn’t be the
first time that someone’s tried to capitalise on that.”

As much as it pained her to think about it, much less say it, Regina knew what had to be done.

“We shouldn’t wake him up prematurely,” she said. “Without his true memories, he has no reason to
believe in magic, so he can’t be the truest believer. If Zelena wants him, she’ll have to wait until he
believes. If we do nothing and he comes to that realisation in his own time, we have more time to
stop her plan in its tracks.”

Emma nodded. “Although wouldn’t it be better to try and stop him believing for as long as possible,
in that case?”

“No. You and I both know what Henry’s like. If we try to keep it from him then he’ll get suspicious
and take matters into his own hands. That’s how you ended up coming to town in the first place. I’d
spent so much tome telling him that what was true wasn’t that he set out to seek the truth himself.”

“We don’t want to do that to him again.”

“No. Definitely not.” Regina paused. “Maybe he is better off without his memories of that time.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Emma said. “For now though, we agree that the best
course is to just keep going on as we have been. Not actively hiding the truth from him, but not
encouraging it either.”

“Yes, I think that’s the best way. And once this is over and we have breathing space, then we can
see what happens then.”

Emma snorted. “As long as we haven’t all been turned into flying monkeys by then.”

“On that note, I’d best get on. The sooner the better.” Regina held up the cloak.

“Good luck,” Emma said.

“Thanks.” Regina knew that they were likely going to need it.

**Enchanted Forest - Past**

It was dusk by the time Marian made it to the castle gates, the kind of grey twilight that made
visibility poor. Perhaps not the best weather for delicate jailbreak operations, but with her grey
clothing, she should be able to get in relatively unnoticed. The outer walls were not well guarded as
the stone face was practically sheer, just a garrison by the main gates and soldiers patrolling the top
of the walls.
Marian crept around to the side of the castle, timing the intervals between the guards passing along between the watchtowers. It was going to be tight, but she thought that she could make it. There was a gibbet bracket affixed near the top of the wall, and Marian tied a line to the end of an arrow. Robin was the one with all the archery tricks, but Marian had learned a few things during her time with him. She fired the line through the gibbet hook and ran to grab the arrow, untying the line and testing the strength of the rope and bracket. It seemed to hold her weight. Now to pull herself up before the guards came back past and realised that there was something amiss.

It was slow going; this really wasn’t Marian’s favourite method of climbing, and she had to stop and dangle precariously a few times whilst the guards came past. At last she was at the top, and she waited a few moments to make sure that the coast was clear before getting up on top of the wall and checking her way down. There was a guardhouse below, and she could jump it. She landed heavily, making more noise than she would have liked, and she quickly slipped off the roof as she heard the guards inside startle and make for the door. Years of surviving in the forest had given her a feel for the darkness, although she yearned for the safety of tree cover here in the exposed main courtyard. The guards did not notice her slip past towards the castle itself, and she avoided the main door, climbing cat-like up the wall to dive in through an open window.

She landed in the kitchens, causing a few startled exclamations from the maids, but she didn’t hang around, moving quickly through the room and out into the corridors before anyone could raise the alarm. She had never been inside the castle before, but she knew that dungeons were always underground, so as long as she kept going down, she’d get there in the end. She could hear commotion behind her, as one of the kitchen staff had no doubt told someone about the strange woman who had nearly landed in the soup, and Marian kept running, following a straight line that she could find her way back on. She stopped short before dashing across the main hall; there were two guards in there standing at the top of some steps downwards, into what had to be the dungeons. She just needed to distract them.

Slipping back into the shadows, she notched an arrow and fired out of the gloom, hitting the wall above their heads. It took them a few moments to realise what had happened, and then they rushed towards her. Marian stepped back into an alcove to let them pass, pressing herself up flat against the wall. This was her chance, and she made a break for it, crossing the room in a matter of seconds and stealing down the steps. The guards within the dungeons were all in their room, a few playing dice or drinking. Marian slipped past easily, prowling along the rows of cells until she found Snow. The princess was picking desperately at the lock with her fingernails, and her hands were bloody from her efforts.

“Let me.” Marian pulled out a knife and began working the lock. It was a trick they’d had to learn after people had begun putting extra security measures on their money chests.

“Marian?” Snow was unable to believe what she was seeing. “What are you doing here?”

“Breaking you out, what does it look like?”

“But why? We’ve only just met.”

“Well, Mary, I get the feeling that you’re destined for better things than a cell. Besides, you’re never going to get any better at climbing if you’re stuck in here.”

“I don’t know, I have tried climbing the walls.”

The lock finally sprung with a scrape of metal on metal and Marian swung the door open.

“Thank you.”
“Thank me when we actually get out of here,” Marian muttered, leading the way back down the rows of cells and shoving Snow in behind the open door to the guards’ room as one of the came out and passed them. “He’ll raise the alarm that you’ve escaped, run!”

There was no time for secrecy any more, speed was of the essence. They careened back up the stairs to the main hall just as the guards from the stair well returned and noticed them, giving chase. Snow grabbed Marian’s hand and pulled her off down a different corridor.

“Trust me, I grew up here, I know my way around. How did you get in?”

“There’s a line set up on the west wall, by the guardhouse. You know it?”

Snow nodded. “Yes, I can get us up to the wall.”

Marian followed her blindly through the labyrinthine castle, but the guards were gaining on them. They were halfway up a spiral staircase, almost at the door out onto the wall, but they weren’t going to make it. Marian pulled Snow to a stop.

“Swap cloaks, it’s you they’re looking for.” She pulled off her grey hood and handed it to Snow. “You can blend in better with that. Get out and get down the rope. I’ll distract them from following and see you down there; I’ll get up to the roof and come down the outside.”

Snow threw her green cloak over Marian, who drew her knives, took a deep breath, and charged back down the stairs a little way, just until the guards could see her. Throwing a knife at them, she ducked back up the stairs, just in time to see Snow vanish over the wall as another troop of guards came straight towards her. There were thundering footsteps from above; getting out onto the roof of the tower per her original escape plan was out of the question now. She’d certainly caused a distraction, but now her exit routes were blocked and she couldn’t go up, down, or out. She was helplessly outnumbered.

A hand grabbed the back of her borrowed cloak and Marian was sent sprawling, hitting her head hard as she went down, her other dagger skittering across the floor. Blackness touched her vision as pain radiated out from her forehead, making her woozy. Then a hood was shoved over her head and the darkness became complete.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Determining not to go back to the pawn shop until Belle had had time to calm down and Neal was back with her, Regina drove through town towards the woods, parking up as close as she could then making her way through to Robin’s camp on foot. He was waiting for her, sharpening arrowheads with a flint.

“I’m hoping that we won’t have to use them,” he said. “We still have the tranquiliser darts that David took from the animal shelter, but if the worst comes to the worst then I want to be prepared. Is that it?”

Regina held up Ruby’s cloak. “The answer to all our prayers,” she said. “We hope, at least. As long as everything else works. We can’t exactly get Rumpelstiltskin to run us up a couple of dozen to try and neutralise every monkey in the forest.”

“Well, the trap is set,” Robin stuck the arrows back into his quiver and stood up. “It just has to be baited whenever you’re ready.”
“What’s the bait?”

Robin gave a grim smile. “Allan. Don’t worry, he volunteered. With Tuck still in the hospital and everyone else currently wearing wings or awol, there wasn’t a lot of choice, and I’m the better shot. Do you want to get started now?”

Regina nodded and Robin called to Roland, who left his new toys and trotted along after them quite happily. Not for the first time, Regina wondered what had happened to Roland’s mother and why she was no longer in the picture, but it didn’t feel prudent to ask right now. Given the life that the outlaws had led before coming to Storybrooke, it was likely that her story was not a happy one. She kept her thoughts to herself as she followed Robin through the trees, closer and closer to the edge of town. There was a distinct chill in the air the closer they got to the boundary, and Regina couldn’t tell if it was just the Maine air, or if it was some kind of deterrent on Zelena’s part, or if she was just imagining it. Nevertheless, she pressed on, finding Allan in a clearing just a few yards from the boundary.

“We’ve worked out that this is as far as we can come before the monkeys get active,” Robin explained. “Further than this line and they’ll start to swoop.”

Regina looked up into the treetops, searching for tell-tale eerie yellow eyes, but she couldn’t see any. She handed over the cloak, which Robin strung up between two trees, attaching it to ropes with clothes pegs. It was the strangest mish mash of whatever items they could get their hands on, but if Robin was confident that it would work, then Regina had faith in him.

“You’d better get out of the way,” Robin warned, indicating a thick clump of bushes a safe distance away from the trap. “Take Roland with you.”

Regina grabbed Roland’s little hand and ushered him to safety, pulling him in close as she crouched in the bushes, watching through the tiny gaps in the densely packed greenery. Robin slung his quiver and bow over his shoulder and climbed up a tree, steadying his balance in the topmost branches and notching an arrow, aiming it into the tree canopy. Regina hoped that it would be a last resort too; they’d already said that they were trying to be as humane as possible, and with at least two, if not more, of Robin’s original group now resigned to their unfortunate furry fate, she’d hate for him to have to drop one.

“Ready?” Allan called up to Robin, who nodded. “You’d better be, this is my neck on the line here.”

He set off at a determined march through the trees, crashing through the undergrowth and making no attempt whatsoever to be furtive. Regina could still hear him long after he vanished from view, but she could not hear any signs of the monkeys. Perhaps they had more intelligence than she gave them credit for and they had realised from Allan’s very obvious noise and movement that they would be flying into a trap. Up in his tree, Robin checked the tranquiliser gun. It was an agonising waiting game, and Regina wasn’t sure how much more of it her nerves could stand.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, there was an unholy screech of winged terror and the flap of powerful leathery wings, along with a scream that could only have come from Allan. Alarmed, Roland jumped up, but Regina pulled him back down out of sight, cuddling him in close to her chest so that he couldn’t see what would happen in the clearing.

“ROBIN!” Allan screamed through the trees. “I HOPE YOU’RE READY!”

Allan burst into the clearing, running hell for leather, and he grabbed hold of a rope that Robin unfurled from his tree with a well-placed kick. The monkey was only seconds behind, flapping and snapping and snarling as it bore down on Allan.
“ROBIN, DO SOMETHING!” Allan yelled, clinging to the rope and fending off the monkey with his feet and elbows. “NOW!”

Robin’s arrow soared through the trees and hit its mark, and a huge counterweight fell down out of the canopy, pulling Allan up off the ground. The monkey followed him up, but then a red-tipped dart was whizzing out of the trees and lodged in the beast’s wing. It didn’t drop it immediately, but it slowed it down as it scrambled to pull the dart out. It obviously wasn’t as effective as a hit in the body would have been, but it was no longer pursuing Allan, and it came back down to earth with an ungrainly thump. Regina could just make out Allan moving in the treetops, and a moment later she heard the swing of detached ropes and Ruby’s cloak was catapulted across the clearing, landing on the monkey who, for good measure, was then bundled up in a net and left dangling.

There was silence for a long time and Roland looked up at Regina.

“Is it safe?” he asked quietly. She peered up over the top of the bush; Robin and Allan were shimmerying out of their respective trees and moving across to the writhing lump in the net.

“I think so,” she said eventually. “But stay close.”

Roland nodded, clinging to her hand like a little limpet as they came out of their hiding place. The bundle in the net had stopped wriggling, and as Robin approached it, an undeniably human voice called from the depths of the cloak.

“Help!”

“John?” Robin asked in disbelief, not quite willing to accept that their plan had actually worked. “Is that you?”

“Yes!”

“Hold on, we’ll cut you down. Stay under the cloak.”

Allan cut the ropes securing the net in place and John landed heavily on the ground. The others set about untangling him, and then they were helping him to his feet, a large man only just fully enveloped in Ruby’s cloak, but a human man nonetheless.

“It worked!” Allan threw his arms around the slightly confused John.

“Yes, but that was only stage one,” Robin said. “There’s still more to do.”

“Could someone tell me what’s going on, please?” John asked mournfully. “One minute I’m a monkey and the next I’m not and I don’t know whether I’m coming or going.”

“We’re rescuing you,” Roland piped up happily. “Papa and Allan caught you and Regina’s going to make you better.”

John looked over at Regina with a mixture of disbelief and gratitude.

“Can you really do that?”

“Well, I’m damn well going to try. It’s a complicated process, I have no idea what kind of enchantment you might be under.”

John shrugged. “Sorry, I can’t help you there.”

“That’s all right, I can work it out, but it might be painful. And we should probably go somewhere a
little safer." Regina looked around; there was no sign of any disturbance but being out in the open was making her uneasy. “The other monkeys and Zelena might not have noticed your absence yet but I wouldn’t want to stick around here too long if they do. We’d be better off going back to town, to the mayor’s office. I’ve got my potion laboratory set up there, and no-one will disturb us.”

“I’ll take Roland back to camp,” Allan volunteered.

“Can’t I come with you?” Roland pleaded to his father.

“No, Roland, it’s too dangerous. John’s still under a powerful curse. But Regina’s right, town might be safer for a little while, for all we’ve always felt safer in the trees. Just until we’ve got this sorted out. You and Allan can go and get ice-cream at Granny’s.”

The prospect of ice-cream cheered Roland up and the five of them made their way out of the forest towards Regina’s car. The first stage of their plan had been successful, and now it was all up to her.

**Enchanted Forest - Past**

Regina watched from her balcony as the guards dragged Snow White over to the scaffold. She’d wanted to wait until dawn and make an event of it, but the girl’s earlier escape attempt had forced her to move her plans forward. In hindsight, perhaps a quick execution was a better idea. Although the people could be kept in line with fear alone, they did still love their fallen princess no matter how much Regina might try to turn them against her, and a spectacle might be the spark that started the revolution. She could really do without the revolution when she was trying to strengthen alliances outside of the kingdom. She couldn’t be seen to be a weak leader. As such, dissidents would be dealt with swiftly and without mercy.

Snow was looking a little dopey, as if she’d been hit hard on the head under the hood. Good. Then she wouldn’t try to resist. She and her accomplice had already caused enough trouble for one night.

She was silent as she was tied to the post; Regina was a little disappointed. She’d hoped for at least some begging for mercy, but the girl was obviously more stoic than she’d realised. The guards looked up to the balcony, waiting for her go ahead, perhaps wondering if she’d had a last-minute change of heart. Regina smiled. Victory was hers at last.

“Fire at will.”

The guards moved out of the way and a spray of arrows flew cross the courtyard, hitting their mark exactly. The hooded head dropped down against the chest like a mannequin, and Regina wondered why she didn’t feel satisfied. Maybe it was the fact that it had been done so quickly and bloodlessly, but unlike certain other monarchs of her acquaintance, she found beheading to be far too crude a solution.

“Leave her there,” she called to the guards. “I’m coming down.”

She looked very small and limp, Regina thought as she approached, and it really struck home that she was barely more than a girl.

Something caught her eye, and her brow furrowed as she went to investigate. Snow was wearing a band on her wedding finger, an intricately woven design of pale wood. There was no reason for Snow to have such an adornment, and Regina realised in a rush of indignation what had happened. She yanked off the hood, and sure enough, the pale dead face beneath was unknown to her.

“Idiots!” she screeched, turning on the guards. “You didn’t think to check you had the right prisoner?”
Cheated of her triumph, Regina stalked back into the castle, fuming with anger at her guards’ incompetence. Snow White would be well away by now, and another opportunity to get rid of her forever had slipped through Regina’s fingers.

**Storybrooke – Present**

John and Regina were alone in the mayor’s office, Regina checking the potion equipment and John sitting on a chair as far away from the delicate apparatus as possible, eyeing the rope on the desk with caution. Robin had been sent to the pawn shop with a shopping list of items that Rumpelstiltskin hopefully had in his stores.

“Run that past me again,” John was saying. “I lost you after the Wicked Witch keeping Rumpelstiltskin in her cellar.”

“Long story short, none of us can remember what happened in the Enchanted Forest during the last year and now Zelena – the Wicked Witch – is attempting some kind of four-point spell. She’s got Rumpelstiltskin, the most powerful sorcerer we know, in thrall, and he’s locked in her cellar, and she’s kidnapping people like you and turning them into an army of monkeys.”

“Right. And you’re using me as a test for breaking the monkeys’ spell?”

“Yes.” There was no other way around it, so Regina didn’t both to sugar coat the news.

“Right.” John seemed understanding of his fate, and they fell into silence for a while, waiting for Robin. It was an awkward time, knowing so little about each other, and most of what John knew about Regina came from hearsay and rumour regarding the Evil Queen.

“John,” Regina began presently, “you’ve known Robin a long time, haven’t you?”

“Yes, most of our lives. My crew and his joined forces after his outlawing.”

“Can I ask you something?”

John’s eyes narrowed. “That depends on what it is.”

“What happened to Roland’s mother? Is she just missing, like the other people ostensibly turned into monkeys, or has she been absent for longer than that? It’s just that I’ve never heard Robin or Roland talk about her.”

John gave a long, pained sigh.

“We don’t know what happened to her,” he said eventually. “We’ve never really known. We can guess, but there’s no proof either way. It wasn’t long after Roland was born. We were camping out in the forest as we’ve always done and we needed to move our base camp. Marian stayed behind after all the rest of us had left, she wanted to spring one final trap because we needed the supplies that the ambush would bring. She was supposed to catch us up the next day, but she never came. Robin and I went back to traps but there was no sign of her. The traps had been sprung and the supplies were there waiting for us, but Marian was nowhere to be seen. We think she was possibly captured, but it’s common practice for captured bandits to be named before their sentencing as a warning for others. There was no announcement, and we never found a body. So, we’ve never really known. She just vanished. She knew it was a risk that she was taking in staying behind, but it shouldn’t have been that big a one. It was a trap she’d sprung hundreds of times before without incident. She just… vanished.” He was cut off by Robin’s return, and it was clear that the subject
wasn’t going to be discussed any further in his presence.

“Did you get everything?” Regina asked. Robin nodded, unpacking bottles and jars from the paper bag he was carrying.

“Yes. Leroy was in there too and he gave me some fairy dust for good measure.”

“That man will never cease to amaze me,” Regina muttered. “Still, there’s no time to lose. Let’s get to it.”

They worked in silence broken only by Regina giving Robin instructions for measuring out ingredients, and soon the apparatus was bubbling away. Now came the difficult part. The base of the potion was ready, but the rest of the ingredients and their quantities could only be found out by analysing the curse itself and to do that, Regina needed the monkey. Ruby’s cloak was suppressing the magical signature and she needed to feel it fully.

Robin gave John an apologetic smile as he approached with the rope from the desk.

“It’s for your own safety as much as ours,” he explained. “The monkeys do tend to have a certain rage factor and we wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself in such a confined space on a rampage.”

John looked forlorn, but nonetheless consented to being tied to the chair. For good measure, Robin tied it to the wall as well.

“You were always very good at knots,” John grumbled, pulling at the bonds to make sure that they would hold. “Too good, sometimes.”

“In our line of work, you have to be,” Robin said. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Robin pulled the cloak off him and quickly stepped back. For a moment nothing happened, and Regina wondered if they needed something else to trigger the transformation into simian form. Just as she was about to give it up as a bad job, John’s eyes flickered yellow, and a howl of pain rang out as he began to transform. Regina was horrified by the grotesque, but Robin just looked resigned.

“It doesn’t get any easier to see,” he murmured, but he did not turn away out of solidarity for his friend. After a few minutes the transformation was complete, and the monkey was snarling and hissing at them, wings and tail lashing out and trying to pull the chair away from the wall. It managed to lift a few inches off the floor before crashing back down, and its wildly flailing tail sent Regina’s bowl of apples flying all over the floor.

Regina ignored the chaos that was going on around her and reached out a hand, reaching out with her magic as well. A faint shimmer appeared around the monkey’s form, a magical silhouette – Zelena’s magical signature. It was sickly green, unusual for a dark magician, but at least in keeping with the Wicked Witch of the West theme. Regina gasped as she felt the intensity of the magic against her fingertips.

“Regina?” She heard Robin’s voice beside her ear. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, it’s just this magic. It’s very raw, very powerful. It shouldn’t be this powerful, not for someone of Regina’s age and training. According to Belle and Neal, Rumpelstiltskin trained her like he did me. She shouldn’t be so powerful. Unless.”

“Straight up spells, dearie, tough on the system,” Rumpelstiltskin said in her memory after the first
curse had broken.

“I don’t care if they turn me green,” she had replied.

“Regina!”

“I’m all right, I’m all right.” It was hard to concentrate on the curse, but she gathered all the green threads and felt the essence of the magic. She knew what she needed, and she pulled away, letting her hand drop back to her side and her shoulders droop. Robin flung the cloak back over John and stayed with him as he transformed back into a human, but his eyes were on Regina.

“Did you find what you needed?” he asked.

“Yes. I also realised where the green connection comes from. She’s casting with borrowed magic, it makes her spells more powerful.”

“You can still break it, right?”

John poked his head out from under the cloak. “Did it work?”

“Yes,” Regina said firmly. “Yes, it worked and yes, I can break it. It’s just going to take a bit more punch than I’d originally thought.”

Robin made to untie John again but the other man shook his head.

“No, I think I ought to stay like this, just in case,” he said. “I can still feel the beast in the back of my mind.” He looked around at the strewn apples. “Sorry about that.”

“They’re just apples.” Regina set the potion brewing again and began to add extra ingredients. “This had better work first time,” she muttered to herself. With the amounts that she was using, she really didn’t have all that much room for trial and error if she wanted to make enough to transform all of the monkeys. The potion was bubbling violently, usually a good sign; she just had to catch it at the right time before it got above itself and exploded. Robin was looking rather worried at the amount of steam that was pouring out of the flasks, and John appeared to be rethinking his decision to stay tied into his chair.

With a deft flick of her wrist, Regina unhooked the vial containing the finished potion from the apparatus, and the threat of a conflagration immediately lessened, much to everyone’s visible relief.

“This should be it,” she said, bringing the potion over to John and Robin. “I warn you, with the combination of ingredients in it, it’s not going to taste pleasant.”

Robin unbound one of John’s arms so that he could take the potion, and he eyed the murky green concoction warily before knocking it back. Immediately he gagged at the foul taste, but manfully swallowed it with a grimace.

“Not pleasant is an understatement,” he muttered. “I hope this works, because I’m not taking another one of those.”

“How long do we have to wait?” Robin asked.

“It should move pretty quickly,” Regina said. “Provided that I got the quantities right.” In the chair, John wriggled.

“It feels like I’ve got worms under my skin,” he complained. “Is it supposed to?”
“Probably fleas,” Robin teased.

Regina raised an eyebrow. “I will not have anyone depositing fleas in my office, thank you very much.”

“Well, you can’t deny that John’s spent a lot of time covered in fur recently.” Robin shrugged. “I imagine that it’s an occupational hazard.”

Regina rolled her eyes, but it did feel good to be able to joke about things in spite of their bleak situation. The fact that Robin felt relaxed enough to launch into these jokes around her was important to her, and she had to wonder. There had been a camaraderie between them ever since she had first encountered them in the woods just after their return to Storybrooke, and she wondered if perhaps there was the prospect of something more than that. It seemed so stupid to be thinking about something like that in the midst of all their current upheaval, but it had been so long since she had felt anything like this that the newness and potential was exciting. Of course, there was still Marian to consider… Regina pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind and focussed on John, who was still muttering about worms.

“It’s probably the effects of the potion burning through the magic that’s already binding you,” she said. “Once the feeling fades, then the antidote should have done its work.”

“It is getting better,” John admitted. “It’s concentrated here now.” He indicated his chest, around his heart where the grip of Zelena’s control on him would be the tightest. “And the monkey in the back of my mind has gone quiet.”

“That’s encouraging.” Could they really have hit upon a solution? Regina could scarcely bring herself to believe it after all the things that had happened and all their attempts against Zelena that had gone wrong, both remembered and suppressed.

“Yes, it feels like it’s gone,” John affirmed, and he looked to Robin. “Can we risk it?”

“We don’t really have another choice.” Robin pulled Ruby’s cloak off his friend once more, and they waited with bated breath. Nothing happened, even after the time it had taken for him to start to transform the previous time. Tentatively, Regina reached out with her magic again, but this time she did not encounter any resistance from Zelena’s trademark green glow. She could feel the last tendrils of her own dark blue magic still affecting him, but Zelena’s influence had been purged.

“It worked.” The idea was so miraculous that she had to laugh with glee at it. “It really worked!”

Robin and John both shouted in triumph, and Robin set about untying John as Regina looked over her remaining ingredients. She didn’t want to risk losing the efficacy by diluting the potion, but there probably wasn’t enough to help all the monkeys. Still, any dent that they could make in the force was a good one.

“I’m starving,” John said plaintively, and the frank statement, so out of place in the middle of the momentous occasion taking place, made them all laugh.

“Well, Allan and Roland have gone to Granny’s for ice cream,” Robin said. “I’m sure that we can catch them up and spread the good news.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t spread it too far yet.” Regina was as keen to share their success story as Robin and John were, but she knew all too well the dangers of celebrating too early. “If the news gets back to Zelena, she might change her tactic. Or worse, start killing off minions who are no longer useful.”

Robin shuddered at the thought. “You’re right, we want to avoid her retaliation as much as possible.
Still, a quiet toast to a plan well-executed is in order, I think.”

“I agree. Let’s go.” Regina made sure that her potions apparatus was safe and in no danger of blowing up her office, and followed the two men out of the room.

If she hadn’t dropped her keys then she would never have noticed it, but she was in such a hurry to get out and let Mary Margaret or David or someone (but not Leroy, or else it would be all over the town in a matter of seconds) know that they’d managed to pull it off against the odds, and she was not her usual precise self. The keyring fell from her fingers, and Robin bent to pick it up.

“Here, let me.”

Reinga had not had all that much opportunity or inclination to study Robin’s hands up close before, but now that he was holding out the keys to her, his wedding ring was obvious. It was a distinctive style, and as Regina now saw, not made of silver but pale carved wood instead. Her blood turned to ice in her veins as she recognised that ring, or rather its twin, from a past she had long since tried to bury.

“Regina? Is everything all right?”

“Yes, yes.” She took the keys quickly. “It’s nothing, just a bit of a headache. Probably the fumes. You go on ahead, I’ll see you there.”

Robin nodded, perturbed, and he and John left the town hall in the direction of the diner. Regina could only stare at her shaking hands in disbelief. Of all the cruel irony in the world, she’d had to develop feelings for a man whose wife she had executed under false pretences.
Oz – Past

The Crystal Castle, traditional home of the four Cardinal Witches, was a large place, even after Zelena’s tornado had rendered large parts of it uninhabitable. There were plenty of spare rooms in the cellars that had not been opened up since the time of the first Cardinal Witches all those centuries ago, and as such, they were perfect for Zelena to use as a base of operations. She moved through the castle furtively, not wanting to alert Glinda and Phoebe to her presence. After Verdie’s death, well, as good as death, Zelena had ostensibly left the castle to take out her grief and ire on the munchkins in the western lands that were her domain. The magic she had taken from Rumpelstiltskin’s Mytheocopia was night on unstoppable, and neither of the remaining witches had the fortitude to take her on. She enjoyed the free rein that it gave her, but whilst terrorising munchkins was fun and passed the time, it was not actually achieving her goal. For that, she needed the inherent magic that the Crystal Castle was steeped in, remnants of so many generations of Cardinal Witches coming and going.

Reaching her destination, the cellar room that she had chosen as her sanctuary, Zelena slipped inside and lit the candles with a wave of her hand. In the centre of the room, suspended in the glass coffin that would keep her fixed in the moment between heartbeats forever, Verdie looks as calm and peaceful as if she were sleeping. For the briefest of moments, Zelena considered leaving her like that. It seemed a shame to bring her back out of such a peaceful state into a world so full of hatred and turmoil, but at the same time, Zelena had made a promise. She would protect her sister to the last, and she would stop at nothing to achieve that end. No, not even death would come between them. She and Verdie had always been inseparable, and they’d stay that way, no matter what it took. And once Verdie was restored to her, they could use Zelena’s vast powers to get whatever they wanted. They could live their dream life, the one they’d always talked about back at the orphanage. Firstly though, Zelena would enlist Verdie’s help in destroying Rumpelstiltskin for what he set in motion. The vendetta was burning bright in her heart, twisted into something hideous by her refusal to see where the blame for Verdie’s fate really lay.

“Soon, sweet sister,” Zelena whispered, gently pressing her fingertips against the glass that separated her from Verdie. “Soon you’ll be free of this trap, and then all of Oz will be ours for the taking. Just you and me, the way it always was. In fact…” She went into the pocket of her dress, taking out the two magic beans that the Blue Fairy had given her all those months ago. Thanks to Jefferson’s timely arrival and Verdie’s silver slippers, she had never needed to use them. “Why stop at Oz? We can rule the entire world if we’ve a mind to, Verdie.”

There was no response from inside the casket. Of course there wasn’t. Verdie was as good as dead and not even the formidable power of true love could change that. It was the first thing that she had been taught when she had begun her training as a witch. Magic can’t bring back the dead. One of the three fundamental rules of magic.

That wasn’t going to stop Zelena from trying, though. The rules were more like guidelines really, and if there was one thing that Zelena had learned from Rumpelstiltskin during her time with him, it was the importance of exact words and knowing how to bend the rules. There had to be a loophole somewhere, and Zelena was ready to exploit the hell out of it. She’d gained more than enough notes from her studies in the Dark Castle to be able to piece something together.

Reluctantly she moved away from Verdie’s coffin and began her work, lighting the flame under her potions laboratory with a finger snap. The entire apparatus began to glow and steam, giving the
atmosphere in the cellar a greeny-blue tinge. This was pure magic that she was distilling here, into a syringe that would hopefully work to revive Verdie, awakening her at the moment her body died and cheating the finality of death itself.

“Zelena, what are you doing?”

It was Glinda’s voice, and Zelena’s blood ran cold for a moment. She turned slowly towards the door. Glinda and Phoebe were both there, looking around at the results of Zelena’s experimentation with awe and horror, the most horror of all reserved for Verdie’s preserved body in the middle of the room.

“How did you find me?” Zelena asked.

“We know you’ve been coming back here,” Phoebe said. “Often enough for us to work out that you really didn’t want us to know that you were here.”

“It’s none of your business,” Zelena snapped. “I’m a Cardinal Witch just like you two, I have every right to be here.”

“That’s what we thought, until all our most dangerous ingredients and apparatus started going missing in the middle of the night.” Phoebe’s tone was cool and brokered no nonsense. She had always been the most level-headed of their group. “We could appreciate you coming back here, as this was the place you were closest to Verdie. But now it’s clear that you have another agenda in mind.”

“Zelena, you’re trying to break one of the laws of magic!” Glinda’s voice was full of quiet, but high-pitched and barely suppressed, panic. “These things are forbidden to us for a reason! Who knows what you might do if you go through with this!”

“She is my sister!” Zelena snarled. “You mean to say that if it were Phoebe in Verdie’s place, you wouldn’t try to bring her back? The love of your life?”

Glinda shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t. Dead is dead, Zelena. It hurts and it’s awful but we cannot change it, not even for the one we love most.”

“You’ve got to let go,” Phoebe pleaded. “Think of Verdie, what would she want?”

“She would want to be alive!” Zelena screamed.

“Zelena, it’s impossible, you know that. You can’t raise the dead, no-one can.”

“I can!” Zelena snapped. “You just say that we can’t because you don’t have the same power as I do and you want to stop me from using it.”

“Because we have no idea what the consequences might be,” Glinda retorted. “You could rip a hole in the fabric of time and magic itself if you do this. Phoebe’s right, you need to let go. We’re here for you, Zelena, we’ve always been here for you. We can help you, see you through this grief. You’re not alone, no matter how much you might see yourself that way.”

Zelena shook her head. “No. I can’t do that. Verdie trusted me to protect her. I was all she had. I’m doing this and you can’t stop me.”

Phoebe raised her hand, flames beginning to flicker over her fingertips.

“Then you leave us no choice, Zelena. This can’t continue, we can’t let you take these kinds of risks.
You're right, you're more powerful than we could ever hope to be, but Verdie would want you to use that power for good, to protect Oz like she did.”

“You don’t get to tell me what my own sister would want!”

Zelena lashed out with her magic, her spell casting a sharp crack across the room, sending Phoebe flying as it connected with her face, drawing blood. Glinda immediately jumped in to her lover’s defence, hurling a spell of her own back at Zelena.

She was so preoccupied with fending off Glinda’s attack that she didn’t notice Phoebe wipe the blood from her cheek and reignite the fireball in her palm, throwing it out towards Zelena’s potions apparatus.

“No!” It was too late. The equipment went up in a gout of flame, and there was nothing Zelena could do to stop her last years’ work from burning to irretrievable ashes. As she turned back towards the other witches, the cold burning hatred in her eyes made Glinda shiver. Nonetheless, she stood tall in the face of Zelena’s anger.

“Zelena, it had to be done,” she said. “You know that as well as I do. You can’t bring back the dead. You can’t help Verdie, so please, just let her go and let us help you!”

Zelena shook her head. “No. No. You’re going to pay for that. Both of you. Let’s see how you like being trapped and unable to save your loved ones.”

The spell was complex and required a lot of will to make it work, but it was one of her own design and Phoebe and Glinda would not be able to counter it quickly enough. Phoebe threw up a magical shield, but it was too little, too late, and Zelena’s spell ripped through the shimmering magic as if it were paper. The witches of north and south clung to each other in fear as the swirling green mist of Zelena’s magic enveloped them, ear-splitting screams of pain tearing through the night as they transformed. Zelena just smiled at their agony. A fitting payback for the anguish that they had caused to her, she felt, and now she had two more monkeys to add to her collection. As the mist cleared and she looked down in disdain at the two cowering figures, she wondered. Given their inherent magical potential, maybe it would be better to keep them locked up somewhere that they couldn’t cause any mischief. She waved her hand and two cages appeared in the corner of the room; another snap of her fingers had the two newly-forged monkeys flung into the boxes and the doors locked and chained shut. Zelena waved benignly to the two snarling simians.

“Now try and stop me,” she said darkly, before going back over to Verdie, unharmed and undisturbed for all the violence that had gone on around her. Immediately, Zelena’s expression melted as she gazed on the sister she adored so much.

“It’s all right, little sister,” she said softly. “I always have a back-up plan.”

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**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“If you keep pacing like that, you’re going to wear a hole in the rug, tire yourself out and complain of backache all night.”

Snow stopped her trudge up and down their chamber to glare daggers at her husband. Charming just threw his hands up in self-defence. “I’m just pointing it out because that’s what happened the last time you started pacing. Well, except for the hole in the rug, that hasn’t happened yet. You said
Snow sat down on the end of the bed with a heartfelt sigh, resting her hands on her stomach where the baby bump was just becoming visible. It was clear that she was worried – they were all worried about their very precarious position with Zelena in control of Rumpelstiltskin and practically on the doorstep – but this nervous state of agitation was new. Charming sat down beside her on the bed, taking one of her hands in both of his.

“What’s the matter, love? Aside from the obvious. There’s something that’s eating you, so come on, you can confide in me. A problem shared and all that.”

“It’s nothing really.” Snow shook her head, trying to avoid thinking about what was causing her extra worry. “I’m being silly.”

“It’s obviously not nothing if it’s affected you so badly,” Charming said. “And I’m sure you’re not being silly.”

Finally Snow turned to look at him.

“What if we end up being terrible parents?” she asked him plainly. “This is our second child and I’m having all the same worries now as I did when I was expecting Emma. I have no idea how to be a mother. You have no idea how to be a father. My mother died when I was young, far before the notion of me having my own children was ever on the table. You barely knew your father and King George wasn’t exactly a great model during the few months that you were his son. What if we can’t do this? I know that the instinct is there, I can feel it in just the same way as I feel it with Emma, but it’s very different parenting an adult who already has a child of her own to parenting a baby. I don’t have any experience of this kind of thing.”

Charming put an arm around his wife, pulling her in close.

“We’re going to be fine,” he said. “Both of us. So this is our second child, and we never got to raise our first. We’re just the same as any other first-time parents. It’s not your fault that you weren’t able to raise Emma.”

“What if something happens to this one, too?” Snow sounded so small and broken, a far cry from her usual self. “I can’t lose another child for twenty-eight years, my heart wouldn’t be able to take it.”

“We’re not losing this one,” Charming said firmly.

“You can’t possibly be able to predict that,” Snow mumbled. “You know what Aurora said, that the monkeys were interested in her pregnancy. What if they latch onto mine instead? What if the Wicked Witch needs my baby for something and the only way to protect him is to send him to a different realm, like we did with Emma?”

“It’s not going to happen,” Charming said. His free hand curled into a fist.

“You…” Snow began, but he cut her off.

“I don’t care who I have to go up against. I’ll fight the Wicked Witch with my bare hands if I have to. Whatever it takes, I will do it. I am not losing him.” He paused. “Do you know it’s a him? Did Doc tell you?”

Snow shook her head. “No. I asked him when he was last giving me a check-up but he said that it’s too early for him to tell, the baby’s too small for him to get a proper feel for it yet. But I think it’s a him. Things feel different to how they felt with Emma, so I think this time, it’s a boy.”
Charming couldn’t stop the grin from spreading over his face. “I can’t wait to find out if you’re right.”

Despite her melancholy, Snow found that her husband’s smile was infectious, and she returned it.

“Me neither.”

“And don’t worry about being a bad parent,” Charming continued. “We might not be able to learn from our own relatives, but we have so many more friends and family who can help us. Regina, Granny, Robin, they all have experience and none of them will think any the less of you for needing help or advice.”

“I suppose it’s just the pressure to be perfect,” Snow said. “We’ve overcome so much since we first met that you’d have thought something as natural as being a mother should be second nature. If I can take back my own kingdom, survive for years in the forest, go to Neverland and take on all the things in between, then parenting should be a doddle, but it’s the thing that scares me the most. Sometimes I think that maybe we were irresponsible, bringing a child into a climate of such instability.”

“Well, these things happen.” Charming smiled at the fond memories of those first few nights back under a roof in Regina’s castle after their return to the Enchanted Forest. “So it wasn’t exactly planned, but we’ll pull through, and we’ll do our best for this child. We might not be the best at parenting, but we can do our best, and that’s as much as anyone can ask for. And the Wicked Witch can do and jump off a cliff as far as I’m concerned.”

“Oh, if only we could arrange that.” Snow giggled, then gently cupped Charming’s face, pulling him in for a tender kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Now, get some rest, and try not to worry. We’re all here to protect this baby. Nothing is going to happen to our son.”

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**Storybrooke – Present**

“Thanks for coming.”

“Don’t worry about it. So, what did you want to see me about?”

Emma leaned on the kitchen table in Gold’s house. Neal had asked her to come over whilst Belle was out at the pawn shop, and he was currently pacing the kitchen with a determination that had Emma fearing that he would wear a hole in the floor.

“I’ve got a plan, but it’s incredibly dangerous and foolhardy and I’m going to need your help to pull it off,” he said without breaking stride. Emma raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, well I’m glad we got the dangerous and foolhardy part out on the table to start with,” she said. “But go on, I’m all ears. Apart from Robin’s plan to gradually diminish the monkey army, no-one else has come up with anything remotely workable.”

“I want to try and rescue Dad,” Neal said. He stopped pacing and threw his hands up in defence on seeing Emma’s unimpressed expression. “I know, I know, everyone said it was too dangerous and I know what happened last time. I know that getting him out of Storybrooke is out of the question, So
I want to try and get his dagger back off Zelena.”

“Neal, you’re mad,” Emma said plainly.

“I know. I already said it was dangerous and foolhardy. But that’s why I came to you and didn’t take it to a general meeting. Everyone else would shout me down, but will you at least hear me out please?”

Emma nodded. “Ok, make your pitch.”

“Well, Walsh still seems to be under house arrest at Zelena’s place. And from what I can tell, if Zelena’s not there then he has a certain amount of free will and willingness to go against his captor. So I’m hoping that he would be able to help us. We would wait until Zelena was out, then sneak into the house via the storm cellar that you got out of. Walsh could tell us where the dagger was hidden and once we have it, we can come out the way we came in and collect my father on the way.”

Emma considered the plan for a while.

“I think you’re placing too much trust in Walsh’s loyalties,” she said eventually. “I know he helped me out when I was in the house before, but I know that Zelena has various spells and compulsions on him and I don’t want to think about what might happen if we ended up on the wrong side of one of those. We would need to make sure that Walsh was out of the picture too. It would mean that our subterfuge would be discovered and undeniable, but by that point we would have found the dagger and given it back to Rumpelstiltskin, so it shouldn’t matter.”

Neal nodded. “Ok, that makes sense. So how do we go about getting rid of Walsh?”

“Leave that to me. I can distract him and hopefully get him outside, or at least get him away from the cellar. I know my magic’s hit and miss at the best of times and I know it’s your least favourite problem-solving method, but it might prove useful for unlocking and unbolting things that stand in your way if you want to slip in and find the dagger.”

“You know, it might just be easier to knock him out,” Neal said. “If we’re not going to make any attempt at subtlety or subterfuge then it would quicker and easier to get him out of the way completely and then both of us are free to search for the dagger so we can get in and out quicker.”

Emma considered the plan and nodded.

“Yes. All right. We’ll catch him by surprise and do it as quickly as we can. So when do we start?”

“To be honest. I didn’t think we’d get this far in the planning stages, so I don’t know,” Neal admitted. “I figured I’d try to get you on board first then work out the finer details.”

“Well, I’m board, let’s figure out those details.”

“If we can get our hands on one of Regina’s magic scopes then we’ll be able to tell when Zelena next leaves the farmhouse and strike then.”

“Excellent. I’ll go and get one. They’re set up in the sheriff’s station for monitoring, I don’t think they’ll miss one. I’ll see you back here in an hour?”

Neal nodded. “It’s a deal.”

X
It was early evening and Neal and Emma were staking out Zelena’s house, sitting low in the front seats of Gold’s Cadillac which they’d borrowed for the occasion, the yellow bug having been deemed too bright to hide effectively in the twilight.

“There goes the pattern,” Emma said. “If she keeps to the patterns that the dwarfs have been recording, then she should be leaving to check on the monkeys any minute now,”she said. They were both looking through the glass of the magic scope, its image tightly focussed on the farmhouse. Sure enough, just a few moments later, Zelena left the house. They waited until they were certain she wasn’t going to double back and wouldn’t see them running up the hill, then made a break for it towards the storm cellar doors.

“We should have a couple of hours,” Emma said. “If we don’t find it by then and we’re still here when she gets back then I don’t fancy our chances.”

“We’ll just have to make every second count then, won’t we?” Neal succeeded in getting the cellar doors open and they dropped down into the darkness beyond. Emma could just about make out Rumpelstiltskin’s horrible cage in the gloom and switched on the flashlight on her phone, swinging the thin beam around the cellar as she picked her way across the rubbish-strewn floor.

“Papa?” Neal whispered. “Papa, are you in here?”

There was movement in the cage, and then Rumpelstiltskin’s face appeared, squinting against the flashlight. Emma lowered the beam.

“Neal? Emma?” He sounded disbelieving, as if he thought his mind was playing tricks on him, and Emma could quite understand his disorientation.

“You came back.”

The fact that he had not expected another rescue attempt was clear in his voice, and it made Emma’s heart break.

“Well, you know what Belle says. When you find something worth fighting for, you never give up.” Neal reached out a hand towards his father and Rumpelstiltskin took it, the simple human touch enough to soothe him for a moment.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he said, although there was no admonition in his voice. “It’s too dangerous, for both of you. You have to protect each other.”

“We will,” Neal said firmly. “But we have to protect you too. We’ve come for the dagger. Do you know where she keeps it?”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “No, but it’s still in the house somewhere. I can feel when it’s near, compelling me to follow its commands. It’s still here somewhere.”

“Well, we’re going to find it and we’re going to get you out of here.” Neal made to away from the cage; there wasn’t a moment to lose and Emma had already got the internal cellar door open. “We’ll come back for you, I promise.”

Rumpelstiltskin let go of his son’s hand with a nod, and vanished back into the darkness. Neal headed up the steps with Emma and they peered out into the unlit kitchen before determining that the coast was clear.

“Now where’s Walsh?” Neal muttered. “He’s got to be in here somewhere, we would have seen if he’d left. Maybe Zelena left him in guard dog mode and he’s going to jump out of a cupboard and attack us.”
Emma gave him a look, but then conceded that anything was possible and shrugged. “Well, I guess we ought to search all the cupboards in any way. It’s not like she’d leave something that powerful in plain sight.”

They moved around the kitchen investigating all the cupboards and drawers but turned up nothing and no hidden Walsh. Emma’s eyes caught the gimble on the table.

“I wonder what the fourth thing is,” she said to herself as they left the kitchen. “Hair, blood, tears, and something else.”

“Sweat?” Neal suggested, only half in jest. “Hold up.”

He put a hand out to stop Emma going any further and nodded at the door to the cupboard under the stairs and the muffled noises coming from it. As Neal moved forward to investigate, the door swung open violently and Walsh charged out. Luckily Neal had been anticipating the ambush and stepped out of the way neatly, grabbing Walsh’s arms.

“So, you’re on guard duty now?” Emma asked as Walsh struggled against Neal. He gave a forlorn nod and stopped fighting.

“Yes. Ever since I let Rumpelstiltskin escape last time.”

“Well, I’m sorry about this, Walsh, I really am, but it’s got to be done.”

Emma held up her taser and Walsh shook his head.

“No, please, I won’t tell her, I swear.”

“Sorry, Walsh.” Neal let go of him and Emma darted forward to jab the prongs into his neck, delivering enough voltage to stun him for a while.

“You’ll thank us later when Zelena comes home and doesn’t find any evidence that you colluded in Rumpelstiltskin’s escape this time,” Neal added, then he turned to Emma. “Let’s split up, we’ll cover more ground that way.”

Emma agreed bolted up the stairs, turning out every cupboard, drawer, box, anything that looked the slightest bit magical, but it was to no avail. After a few minutes, Neal joined her.

“I couldn’t find anything downstairs,” he said. “I think she must be hiding it with magic. I don’t suppose you could… you know.”

Emma sat down on an ottoman. “I can try, but I’ve got no idea what I’m doing and I’ve never done it before.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

Emma closed her eyes. She was going to have to go entirely on instinct.

Regina had said that all magic left traces, a signature of sorts, and that Zelena’s was green. There were traces of green everywhere; Emma could feel them with some kind of inherent sixth sense that seemed to be a mixture of all her senses at once. It was incredibly disorientating, and she was overwhelmed by the feeling of intense magic all around.

“Anything?” she heard Neal say, but his voice sounded very far away. She shook her head.

“No, nothing yet. I’m getting mixed signals. Don’t rush me.”
“I’m not trying to, but we are on quite a tight schedule here.”

“I know, that’s what worries me.” The longer it took to locate the dagger, the closer they came to a confrontation with Zelena, one that Emma was not at all prepared for.

Suddenly, a bright point cut through the green haze, and Emma gasped.

“I think I’ve got it.”

“Great! Where is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of hard to pinpoint.” She focussed all her energy on that bright spot, tracing it through the house, harder than it seemed when she had no clue as to the house’s layout. It seemed to be moving, and Emma realised too late what that meant.

“Neal,” she began in warning, opening her eyes, but it was too late. Zelena appeared in the room in a shimmer of sickly green smoke, the dagger in her hand and an awful smile on her face.

“Looking for this, by any chance?”

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**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

Belle was worried. Bundled up in jackets and cloaks atop the palace’s tallest tower, she and Grumpy were keeping a watch on the Wicked Witch’s movements, and so far, things were looking grim. Ever since she had moved her base of operations to the Dark Castle, things had picked up a gear; the monkeys coming and going all the time and the witch herself frequently flitting off on her broomstick in search of who-knew-what. She adjusted the scope that she was looking through, but Regina’s magic couldn’t stretch that far and the hazy green field of protection that Zelena had built up around the place was difficult to see through at the best of times. She sighed, wishing that she could see Rumpelstiltskin inside. She knew that she would know in her heart if he were dead, and the witch obviously wanted him resurrected for some purpose, but she needed to know that he was all right.

“Hey.” Grumpy left his own scopes and came over, giving her shoulder a friendly squeeze. “It’ll be all right. You’ll see him again. If there’s one thing that you’ve taught me, it’s that you never stop fighting for the one you love.”

“I know that.” Belle sighed. “Right now though it doesn’t feel like I’m fighting for him. It feels like I’m just so powerless. Everything is falling down around our ears and we’re stuck here in this castle, with no idea what the witch wants or why she’s here.” Belle gestured around her at the books stacked up beside her lookout post, some of them open at various points and weighted down with rocks. “I have so many theories but they’re all disjointed, missing something. It’s like she’s trying to do three things at once but she’s half-assing all of them.”

In the absence of the library in the Dark Castle and the vast amounts of magical tomes in Rumpelstiltskin’s workroom, Belle had combined the resources from Snow and Regina’s palaces, but they simply didn’t boast the kind of knowledge that she’d had access to before Rumpel was taken, and trying to put all the evidence together from bits and pieces was exhausting and time-consuming.
“See here,” Belle said, grabbing a rough sketch. “Regina, Charming and Robin said that they found one of these in the kitchens, which Zelena was obviously using as a makeshift potion laboratory. Now, I know that this is a gimble for a four-point spell, a very powerful spell comprised of four essential pure ingredients. I never saw Rumpelstiltskin use his, he said that the spells were too difficult and the ingredients always too difficult to procure; they weren’t worth the price of the magic. If Zelena is trying to create a four-point spell then she’s attempting some very serious magic, something that stretches the boundaries of what magic is even capable of.”

Grumpy nodded, his brow furrowed with thought. “Go on.”

“There are three fundamental rules of magic,” Belle continued. “Firstly, you can’t resurrect someone who has died completely – that’s why we were able to resurrect Rumpel, as the Dark One’s curse kept a part of him alive. Secondly, you can’t change what’s past. Thirdly, you can’t make someone fall in love. If Zelena’s attempting to break one of those rules, then the results could be catastrophic.”

“You think she’s going after one of the big three, don’t you?”

Belle nodded. “The girl in the glass coffin that they found in the cellars when they went looking for Zelena. I think she’s the key.” She threw her hands up in defeat, looking at the books. “But nothing here does into any detail about resurrection, because you’re not supposed to do it. Nothing tells us what four ingredients she needs. And the things that the monkeys have been going after make no sense. Rumpel I can sort of understand; if anyone’s going to know how to do whatever it is that she wants to do, then it’s him. But the monkeys going after me and Aurora? We thought that they wanted Aurora’s unborn child, but I’m definitely not pregnant, so why go after me with the same viciousness? What links me and Aurora?”

“You have fairy blood,” Grumpy pointed out. “Maybe Aurora does too. If she can’t get her hands on one true fairy, she’ll settle for two halves.”

Belle gave a snort of laughter. “Way to make me feel better, Grumpy. Besides, wouldn’t Nova know if another fairy besides Tinker Bell had lost her wings for having a child? Aurora’s not that much younger than I am.”

“That’s true.” The fairies had mostly kept to themselves since the return to the Enchanted Forest, as eager to find a cause and solution to the Zelena problem as those on the ground were, but every report from Nova when she visited was the same – the fairies were making about as much progress as Belle was. She wondered if the Blue Fairy was stalling things, for whatever Greater Good she was acting in aid of now. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time she’d acted in her own interests first and foremost, and even when the rest of the sisterhood wanted to help, her own loyalty seemed sketchy at best. Perhaps she’d mention something to Nova the next time that she appeared. The pink fairy had certainly been willing enough to go against her superior before, events whilst Rumpelstiltskin had been in Neverland proved that.

“Wait, she’s coming back.” Grumpy scrambled to his feet and raced off to his scopes, and Belle followed suit, training the telescope in on the fast-moving black shape zooming along the treetops. She could see a host of arrows fly up from where Robin and his gang were hiding out in the woods, but they all missed their mark. She could almost hear Zelena cackling with glee as she sped on towards the Dark Castle.

“What’s she carrying?” Belle asked. “I can’t see that clearly. It looks like a basket.”

Grumpy adjusted the scope he was looking into.

“Looks like a basket with hair in it.” He sounded faintly disgusted at the prospect. Belle felt a chill
run through her veins.

“Let me see.”

Leroy passed his viewfinder across to her. He was right, it was hair.

“A lock of hair from those with the darkest souls. She’s been collecting ingredients. Oh no…”

“Belle? What’s the matter?”

Belle looked fearful as she turned to him.

“I think Zelena’s trying to cast the Dark Curse again.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Belle shook her head. “I promise you, I’m not. Rumpel created the original Dark Curse, but the caveat was that he couldn’t cast it himself, which was how it ended up in Regina’s hands. If Zelena has Rumpel then she was all his knowledge of how the Dark Curse works and how to cast it. A lock of hair from those with the darkest souls is one of the ingredients. All she’ll need now is the heart of the thing that she loves the most.”

“We’ve got to tell the others.” Grumpy jumped up, abandoning the scopes, and Belle followed him down into the castle. “How do you know all this anyway?” he asked.

“The storybook. Henry’s mystery Once Upon A Time book that no-one knows where it came from. I read it. I suggest everyone does if they get the chance. It gives you a much better knowledge of the things that were happening in the Enchanted Forest that you weren’t present for.”

The two of them rushed into the council chamber, where Snow, Charming and Regina were gathered.

“We think that Zelena’s trying to cast the Dark Curse and take us back to Storybrooke,” Grumpy said without any preamble.

There was silence in the chamber, the royals looking at each other and then back at Belle and Grumpy.

“It can’t be possible,” Charming said flatly.

“You’d be surprised.” Regina didn’t seem to be as wrong-footed as the rest of them. “Once a curse has been performed, it can be repeated. Pan was going to attempt it, after all. And Zelena’s got the expert on hand to give her inside tips.”

“Are you sure?” Snow was practically pleading, and Belle could well sympathise. She’d lost her first child to the Dark Curse and now it seemed that her second was doomed to the same fate.

“That’s what it looks like from the ingredients that she’s been gathering,” Belle said apologetically. “I know it makes no sense and it’s terrible to think of, especially as we’ve only just got back here, but I think we need to be prepared for the possibility.”

“It just doesn’t add up.” Charming shook his head. “Taking people to turn into monkeys, sending the monkeys after Belle and Aurora, why do these things if the goal is the Dark Curse?” He turned to Regina expectantly.

“I don’t know what you’re all looking at me for,” she said. “When I cast the first curse it was out of a
desire for revenge. It was meant to be a punishment and it was never supposed to be broken, let alone completely undone. None of us have ever encountered Zelena before, and she's only recently arrived in this land anyway; why would she land here and then take us off to another realm entirely so soon?”

Belle spread her hands. “I don’t claim to know her motives. I just know what I see, and what I see is preparation for the Dark Curse. However unlikely it is, however much it doesn’t fit in with the rest of her plans, it would be foolish not to prepare for it when the time comes.”

“I can appreciate what you’re saying, Belle, but how can we possibly prepare? We couldn’t prepare last time and we knew who we were up against then,” Charming said. Regina shifted awkwardly and didn’t say anything.

“I don’t think that there is anything we can do. Not unless we can somehow get a message across the realms to Emma and Henry, but even then, it would be almost pointless as she doesn’t remember Storybrooke. If the Dark Curse is coming, then it’s coming.”

The mood in the room was sombre; the idea that even on the second go around they wouldn’t be able to defeat the curse was a dark one.

“Well, we can at least set up a warning system like we did last time,” Grumpy said, and he began to make his way back towards the tower and the magical telescopes. Belle followed him, back to her stacks of books and the hope of finding something, anything, that could help them.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Before Emma could give in to the only magical instinct she had and lob a fireball in Zelena’s general direction, both she and Neal found themselves swept up in a whirl of green smoke and transported out of the house. Emma knew that it was too much to hope that Zelena would just leave it at that, and sure enough, the witch appeared seconds later, still holding the dagger.

“How stupid do you think I am? Rumpelstiltskin’s far too valuable an asset for me to give up now. Although your arrival could prove most advantageous. Rumpel’s been so stubborn during these last few days and I’ve tried all kinds of things to break him. I’m beginning to think that I’ve been using the wrong tactic.”

Instinct took over and Emma shot out a ball of fire, which Zelena deflected effortlessly with a lazy wave of her hand.

“Really, is that all you’ve got? For the so-called saviour, you don’t have all that much going for you. Your spells are shoddy and your signature’s so bright white that all every dark magician in a three mile radius can see is a big beacon saying ‘here I am, I’m a sitting duck!’”

“I’m sure I don’t need magic to punch you in the face,” Emma muttered.

“I’ll be fighting talk.” Zelena scoffed. “But punching me in the face is going to have to wait. I’ve got bigger plans for you.”

Emma’s fingers twitched, itching to go to the gun on her hip, and Zelena shook her head.

“Don’t even try it, princess. I don’t want this to get any uglier than it already is.”
Emma felt the weight of the gun vanish and she cursed inwardly. Why hadn’t they told anyone where they were coming and got back up who could swoop in and save them at the last moment? Because everyone who could help them would have told them what a terrible idea it was and refused to help and they would have been right. It was too late to rue their decision now, they just had to focus on getting out of there.

“Now, we’re ready for the main event.” Zelena said. “But we’re missing someone. Rumpelstiltskin!”

A moment later, he appeared, hands curled into fists and a look of the purest, most unadulterated hatred directed towards Zelena.

“Look who came on a fool’s errand to get you out, Rumpel!” the witch said brightly. “But then again, you already knew that they were here. How does it feel to know that you won’t be able to save the person that you love most in the world?”

Rumpelstiltskin looked over at Neal, his eyes wide and sorrowful.

“It’s no use telling them to run and save themselves, as noble as it might be. You know I’ll only bring them straight back here. No one leaves until I’ve got what I want. It’s a shame that Belle didn’t come with you, or we could have taken care of two birds with one stone.”

The noise that Rumpelstiltskin made was nothing short of a growl. “Don’t you ever mention her name again. You don’t get to talk about her, ever.”

“Who, Belle?” Zelena asked innocently. Rumpelstiltskin snarled. “So besotted, it’s quite pathetic. Still, I can deal with her later. I’m sure that there are all sorts of fun things that we can do with her in the name of true love. For now though, I need to step things up a level, and you’re going to feel the same pain you caused me when you made me drop a house on my sister.”

“That was all you, Zelena,” Rumpelstiltskin snapped. “If you hadn’t lost your temper, you wouldn’t have lost control, and if you hadn’t stolen my magic, you would never have had enough power to drop a house in the first place.”

“Enough!” Zelena yelled. It was the first time they had seen the witch look truly rattled and Emma made a mental note that if they got out of here alive, Zelena’s mysterious sister was a definite weak spot. “We’re wasting time. You know what you have to do, so do it.”

Rumpelstiltskin defiance crumbled. “No. Please, no, anything but that. Please, I’ll do anything!”

“Not so snarky now, are you, my little pet?” Zelena said, her voice dripping with malice. Rumpelstiltskin had fallen onto his knees, pleading with his captor. “There’s no use in begging, although I really do like watching you beg.” She raised the dagger. “Dark One, I command you to drown him!”

“No!” Emma grabbed hold of Neal as Rumpelstiltskin let out a howl of anguish, but there was nothing to be done. He couldn’t fight the compulsion, and Emma wasn’t physically strong enough to fight off his much more seasoned magic. Neal was wrenched from her grip and flew across the grass, landing in the water trough attached to the house. Emma bolted across, jumping into the water with him and using all her might to try and pull his thrashing body out, but the magic keeping his head under was stronger than she was, and her own magic was nowhere near refined enough to try and match wits with the Dark One in thrall. That didn’t stop her trying though, pulling at Neal’s body with no thought of giving up until he stopped fighting, his body going limp as the surface of the water gradually stilled around him.
Rumpelstiltskin was powerless, and the feeling of dread terror running through his veins only increased when he saw Emma sag and stop fighting. Neal had drowned, at his own hand, and there was nothing that he could do about it. The tears were falling freely from his eyes now, and he knew that Zelena had won. He had held strong throughout the tortures and abuses that she had piled on him in his cage, he had refused to give her the tears that she so desperately needed, and now he had failed and his son was dying, so soon after their reunion. It was all his fault.

“All right, I think the point’s been made.” The compulsion released and Rumpelstiltskin collapsed forward onto all fours with the force of his grief. At the water trough, Emma finally succeeded in pulling Neal out and she laid him on the ground, getting to work on CPR right away.

“Save him!” Rumpelstiltskin called to her, his voice choked with emotion. “Please, save him!”

“That’s enough of that,” Zelena said. There was cold satisfaction in her words. “Now, as lovely as you look down there, I have no desire to stoop to your level. Get up.”

The command sang in his veins, dissonant and jarring, and Rumpelstiltskin staggered to his feet, shaking all over. Zelena gave him a look of mock concern, coming over and dabbing at his cheeks with a handkerchief, capturing his precious tears for use later.

“Perfect,” she said. “Now, back in your cage, my little pet. We’ll talk again later. We’ve got lots to discuss, after all.”

Emma saw Rumpelstiltskin vanish out of the corner of her eye, but she had other concerns. Neal wasn’t breathing, she was too exhausted and stressed to try and find a pulse, and the CPR was making her even more exhausted. Bringing someone back to life was nowhere near as easy as the TV claimed it was, and this was one thing she knew she couldn’t use magic for. To make matters worse, Zelena was sauntering over to them, and Emma couldn’t defend herself and save Neal’s life at the same time. She focussed on Neal; she couldn’t and wouldn’t give up on him.

“It’s no use,” Zelena said conversationally. “You know I’ve won. You might as well give up now since I’m going to kill you both anyway. Rumpel needs more company in his cage and I’m sure your corpses will give him something to talk to so that he doesn’t go loopy.”

Emma blocked her mocking voice out of her head and began chest compressions again, counting off as she pummelled Neal’s sternum. She could hear the crackle of something magical above her, but the final blow never came. She felt the heat of a fireball fly past them, and then, of all things, Regina’s voice was cutting through the air, goading Zelena into a fight. How she’d traced them there and turned up in the nick of time was anyone’s guess, but Emma had never been more grateful for her presence.

Suddenly smoke engulfed her again, but this time it was a dark indigo colour, one that she associated with Regina and Rumpelstiltskin. When it cleared, they were on the ground behind the hidden Cadillac; Regina’s car was parked up beside it.

Neal spluttered, coughing up a fountain of water into Emma’s face, and he opened bleary eyes.

“Am I dead?” he mumbled. Emma shook her head, throwing her arms around him. Behind her she could hear Regina on the phone calling an ambulance, and she turned, catching the other woman’s eye and mouthing her thanks.

Regina just nodded, but it was clear that she wasn’t going to let the incident go.
**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

Regina was pacing back and forth in the war council room when Snow came in, and since it was unusual to see the former queen looking so agitated and full of nervous energy, she knew immediately that something was wrong.

“Regina? What’s going on?”

Regina startled on hearing Snow’s voice and stopped her pacing, her shoulders sagging a little.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said simply.

Snow gave a grimace of sympathy, moving over to sit at the table. She was getting to the stage of her pregnancy where standing for too long was uncomfortable. Although her bump was not huge yet, she could still feel the weight of her growing child dragging on her spine. She’d felt exactly the same way when she’d been carrying Emma, and it was the one part of the pregnancy that she could do without, as it exhausted her all the time.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “It’s hard to feel so powerless. I just wish I knew what we were really up against. I know Belle has her theories, of another Dark Curse, but I’m not convinced. That’s not the whole story. There are so many missing links that can’t be explained away by the Dark Curse and I don’t want to think about the possibility of spending another twenty-eight years separated from our loved ones, or that a suicidal attack on Zelena’s fortress will be the only way to stop the curse. I think that there’s something else that we haven’t thought of.”

“It’s not that.” Regina came over and joined Snow at the table. “Well, it’s not just that. I wish I knew what we’re really up against as much as the next person, because my usual defence is offence.”

“I’m well aware.” Snow was reminded of the months of military campaign she had waged against Regina, some of it planned out from this very war table, and she wondered how they could have managed to come this far, with Regina not only on the same side as them but a trusted confidante.

“But there’s something else.” Regina sighed. “I’ve found a way of touching the Land Without Magic.”

“Regina…”

“Not enough to do anything. Not enough to influence anything and certainly not enough to open a portal back there. Just a way to see it. To watch over things and…” She tailed off, her eyes far away and her expression full of longing. “Just to see how they’re getting on,” she finished lamely.

“Wouldn’t that just make things worse?” Snow asked gently. “If you’re always on the outside looking in, won’t it be even harder to tear yourself away, knowing that you can’t be part of that world anymore? Surely it’s better not to flirt with temptation. First you’ll look, but you won’t be satisfied with just a look. You’ll want more.”

“I just miss him so much,” Regina said mournfully. “It’s all right for you, you’ve got your Prince Charming and your new bundle of joy on the way, you have a new life outside of the ones we made in Storybrooke.”

Snow’s eyes flashed cold and dangerous. “Don’t you dare say that this child is a replacement for Emma,” she said coolly. “She’s my daughter, my first born, and I love her so much it hurts.” Her expression softened a little. “That’s why I’m sure that checking up on them, however you do it, is a
bad idea, Regina. I know because I feel the same way about Emma and I would give anything to know that she was safe and happy, and I know that if I could just get a glimpse of her, then it would never be enough for me. I’d want more and more until I was back there with her.”

Regina nodded her acknowledgement. Perhaps it was because Emma was the same age as her parents that she hadn’t ever really thought of her as their child, but she guessed that a part of Snow would always see Emma as the newborn she had held for all of five minutes before the curse pulled them apart. Regina hastily pulled her train of thought away from the casting of the first Dark Curse, and the two mothers sat in silence for a long time.

“So, hypothetically speaking, if you were to check in on the Land Without Magic, how would you do it?” Snow asked eventually. Her resolve was slowly breaking, but Regina made no mention of it, just waving her hand. An object appeared on the table in a swirl of inky smoke, and Snow recognised it.

“That’s my mother’s crystal ball,” she said.

“Did she ever use it?”

“No. At least, not in my memory. It was a gift from her fairy godmother when I was born. She said that it meant my mother would always be able to find me if magic ever pulled us apart, but since we were never apart, she never needed it. How does it work?”

“If you concentrate hard enough, it can show you the people that you want or need to see,” Regina said. “Rumpelstiltskin had one, but it was broken – it never showed a clear image and then it packed in all together. He said it was due to it spending too much time in Wonderland, as vision gets distorted there. I guess he was using it to try and find Neal. He would have given anything for a genuine fairy-made one like this.”

It was so tempting, to reach across and touch the cold glass sphere, pour all her heart and soul into finding Emma and seeing her again, if only for a brief moment. Snow resisted the urge. What if the image wasn’t one that she wanted to see? What if Emma wasn’t living the happy and blissfully oblivious life that they’d all hoped she’d have? To see that and know that there was nothing she could do to fix it was worse than seeing a good life and knowing that she couldn’t be a part of it. It was like tempting fate, and not to be recommended.

Unless…

“Could we use it to send a message to Emma?” she asked. Regina looked ponderous for a long time, then shrugged.

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s ever been attempted. That’s true of a lot of things I guess. We never just how much things are capable of because we never push them to their limits. It can’t hurt to try.”

Snow wondered if she was really just looking for an excuse to use the crystal ball to see how Emma was doing, or if she had all of their best interests at heart.

“Maybe we ought to talk to the others before we do any experimenting,” she suggested. “I mean, I know that David would want to check in on Emma too if he had the opportunity, and Neal will want to see Henry. It doesn’t seem fair to leave them out, and it’s one of those things that I don’t think ought to be too often or you’ll lose yourself in it.”


Snow just gave a huff of soft laughter and levered herself out of her chair. “I’ll go and get the
The decision that ultimately, they were going to use the ball and been mutual and unspoken, and although Regina’s fingers itched with the nearness of it, she sat on her hands until Snow returned with Charming and Neal. He had almost recovered from his injuries at the hands of the flying monkeys, and he’d been going stir crazy on bedrest, so getting out and about even for a short while would garner enthusiasm. Belle had opted to stay in the lookout tower with the dwarfs, trying to find some way of outsmarting Zelena and thwarting the curse without resorting to violence.

“So, how do we go about this?” Charming asked taking a seat beside Snow.

“Well, the more of us there are, the more powerful it will be,” Regina said. “If we all touch the crystal and focus on finding Emma and Henry, the magic should locate them and show us where they are and what they’re doing.”

They all touched the crystal a little tentatively, perhaps worried that nothing was going to happen and they’d all be left looking like idiots. Snow could feel it unusually warm beneath her fingers and she cracked one eye open.

“You know, this feels worryingly like a séance,” Neal said conversationally.

“Shh!” Snow scolded. “I think it’s working!” The misty centre of the ball was swirling violently, with the occasional flash of colour sparking in its depths. Everyone was watching it now, mesmerised, until the image finally solidified. Henry and Emma were sitting at a kitchen table, smiling and laughing, but the ball didn’t transmit sound, so whatever funny story had been told was lost. They looked happy, carefree, and Snow felt her eyes well with tears of gratitude.

“They’re ok,” she whispered.

“Where are they?” Charming asked. Neal peered in closer, looking at the skyline visible through the apartment window.

“New York,” he said. “Not far from where I used to live.”

There was someone else at the table; they were only half in the image as it was focussed on Emma and Henry, but it was clear that the person was male and they got on well with Emma. Snow glanced over at Neal, but he didn’t seem too put out by the fact Emma seemed to have moved on. As long as Henry was ok. Presently, Neal’s brow furrowed.

“Hold on. Back up. Rewind.”

“Not possible on this, I’m afraid. It’s not a DVD recorder,” Regina said.

“Ok, but can we take a look at that guy’s face? Something’s off, I’m sure of it.”

It took concentration, but the image gradually expanded to show the man in the room with Emma and Henry. Snow raised an eyebrow.

“He doesn’t look familiar to me. Someone you know from when you were in New York?”

Neal shook his head. “No, I’ve never seen him before in my life, but there’s something wrong about him, something in his eyes. There!”

Snow saw it too. For a brief moment, the man’s eyes had glowed yellow.
“Who else do we know with yellow eyes?” Neal asked grimly.

Charming sighed. “The monkeys. Zelena’s somehow sent one of her monkeys to New York to
Emma.”

“Emma?” Regina said. “Emma, can you hear us?”

She showed no signs of doing so, and Regina closed her eyes.

_Emma, you’re not safe. He’s dangerous. You have to go back to Storybrooke. Find us!_

She had no idea if it would work or not. She opened her eyes and looked around the rest of the
group.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

“We’ve got to get over there,” Neal said. “And I don’t mean with the Dark Curse. We need to get a
message to her somehow that’s not via a crystal ball.”

Charming nodded. “I agree.”

Snow couldn’t speak. Her mind was falling over itself with how quickly her happiness had turned to
fear. She’d prepared herself for seeing Emma both happy and sad; she was not prepared to see her in
danger. A danger that was supposed to be here, not there.

Aurora. Belle. Emma. What linked them? Why did Zelena and her monkeys want them in particular,
to the extent of crossing realms for one of them?

“I think we know why Zelena would want to cast the Dark Curse,” Charming said. Neal was already
on his way out to try and find some way of getting through to Emma. Snow could only sit and
wonder what on earth was going to happen to them.

X

Emma woke with a start, panting as if she’d had a nightmare, but there was no memory of what just
happened. Just a sentence in a voice that she vaguely remembered.

_You have to go back to Storybrooke. Find us!_

It made no sense, and she turned over and went back to sleep, but the words stayed at the back of her
mind.

**Storybrooke – Present**

“Emma, if you don’t stand still for more than a minute, I am going to hurt you. For the love of
something sacred, sit down. You’re tiring me out just watching you.”

Emma stopped her pacing and collapsed into the chair beside Regina. They were sitting in the
emergency room waiting room, whilst Neal was checked out after his drowning.

“What possessed the two of you to go in there alone?” Regina asked. “It was a suicide mission!”
“Yeah, well, we had to try something to get him out, and we knew that if we took it to committee then we’d just get shouted down with everyone telling us it was a stupid idea, so we cut out the middle man.”

“It was a stupid idea!”

“I know that now!” Emma exclaimed. “I knew it before, but I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing!” To Emma’s surprise, Regina didn’t retort in any way; she just nodded.

“Yeah. I know how it feels to feel helpless,” she said. “And for the record, I would have told you it was a stupid idea, but I would have come with you.”

Emma raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe it’s time to throw caution to the wind a little,” Regina continued. “If Zelena knows that we mean business and we’ll stick up for each other, then there’s no possibility of divide and conquer. I have no idea what she’s planning, but if we don’t present a united front against her, then whatever it is, it’s going to be ten times worse.”

“Whatever it is, she’s three quarters of the way there already,” Emma said gloomily. “My blood, Belle’s hair, Rumpelstiltskin’s tears. Just one more thing and her spell is complete. We’re still no closer to figuring out what she’s doing.”

“We’ll get there,” Regina said. “We just have to have a bit of faith.”

“I’m all out.” Emma sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Why did I even come back here, Regina? I got a message telling me to come back here to save you all, but so far it seems like all I’ve done is end up making things worse.”

“You saved Neal’s life,” Regina pointed out. “And don’t say that it’s your fault that it needed saving in the first place because I know this was his idea. We haven’t exactly been on the ball when it comes to trying to rescue his father. I guess we’ve been hiding behind the excuses of it being too dangerous.”

“It is too dangerous.”

“But you tried anyway. No matter what we think of the man, no-one deserves to go through what Rumpelstiltskin’s going through, and I think we’ve all been ignoring the uncomfortable truth in the hope that it will all work itself out.”

They fell into silence for a while.

“You saved us,” Emma said presently. “I may have saved Neal’s life with CPR, but we’d both be dead if it wasn’t for you. How did you find us, anyway?”

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They fell into silence for a while.
Emma sighed and leaned back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling. “Fantastic. I knew I should have stayed in New York.”

“So why didn’t you?” Regina asked, and Emma realised that she didn’t have a ready answer. When she had learned that her family was in danger again, she had literally dropped everything to come and save them.

“I guess it was the sense of belonging,” she said eventually. “When I got my memories of Storybrooke back, I remembered the sense of belonging that I had here. I’ve never had that anywhere else. This is the only place where I’ve ever put down roots, made friends, felt like I’m actually part of a family and a community. And weird as it may sound coming from someone who’s always prided herself on her independence and being a lone wolf, I missed that and I wanted to feel it again. Except now, I’m back, and I’m not feeling it. Maybe it’s because Henry’s still got no memories and he was always my first link to Storybrooke, or maybe it’s something else, but I feel like an outsider again. Not unwelcome, not at all, but there’s something about the fact that you all continued your lives without me for a year that makes me feel left out, like I’m missing something vital, even if you can’t remember that year yourselves.”

“It’s the baby, isn’t it?” Regina said quietly, and Emma looked away, embarrassed that after all her rambling, Regina could have hit the nail on the head so concisely and accurately. She nodded.

“I never thought I’d be jealous of an unborn child, but here I am. I know it’s ridiculous because it’s not the baby’s fault, but a part of me just resents the fact that this kid’s going to have everything that I never had. All the love, the happy childhood growing up with two adoring parents. And I know that Snow and David would have given me all that if they could, but I can’t help this horrible, gnawing feeling of envy that’s practically eating me from the inside out.”

“You’re only human,” Regina said. “You shouldn’t beat yourself up for feeling things.”

Emma raised an eyebrow again. “Have you been taking lessons from Archie?”

“No, I don’t think so. Although anything could have happened in the last year and with everything that’s been going on since, I daresay we could probably all use some therapy.”

Emma laughed. “Archie’s going to make an absolute mint after this,” she said.

“The world’s richest cricket,” Regina agreed.

“Emma!”

Emma looked over to the entrance to the emergency department on hearing her name and saw David and Mary Margaret rushing in, as quickly as Mary Margaret’s baby bump would allow. She must have been almost at full term, Emma thought, and she knew from being pregnant herself that when the baby was ready to drop, racing about like that was the last thing she wanted to be doing, but she was still here, still so concerned about Emma’s own well-being. She accepted her mother’s arms around her, a little stunned that after everything she had just said to Regina, she could now be presented with such irrefutable proof that her parents loved her fiercely and equally to their new baby.

“Are you all right?” Mary Margaret asked frantically. “Regina said she’d seen something magical going on and just vanished off to investigate, and then we heard the ambulance and we feared the worst.”

Emma nodded. “I’m ok, Mom.” It still felt a little weird to say it, but in these circumstances it felt
right. “Neal’s been through the wringer a bit though but we think he’s going to be all right.”

“Miss Swan?”

A nurse had appeared at the door to the ward. Thankfully her expression seemed to be a happy one, and Emma went over.

“Is he ok?” she asked.

“Yes, he’s fine for now, but in all cases like this it’s policy to keep the patient in for twenty-four hours’ observation in case of secondary drowning.” Emma looked blank and the nurse continued. “It’s where fluid will spontaneously build up in the lungs and it’s a rare side effect of breathing in liquid. We can’t hear any traces of water in his chest though and his breathing isn’t laboured, so his prospects are looking really good.”

“Can I see him?”

“Of course.” The nurse led the way through the ward to wear Neal was sitting up in bed. He looked pale and drawn, but otherwise his usual self.

“You know, this is getting to be a worryingly familiar sight,” he muttered, gesturing around the ward. “That’s twice in less than a fortnight.”

Emma laughed. “At least you’re ok,” she said. “I’m sorry that we couldn’t help your dad.”

Neal shook his head. “I knew it was a long shot, but I had to try it. I’m sorry for dragging you along and putting you in danger.”

“It’s ok.”

“Thank you for saving me,” Neal continued.

“It’s Regina you want to thank for that,” Emma said. “If she hadn’t turned up when she did then we’d both be toast.”

“Ok, I’ll rephrase that. Thank you for not giving up on me.”

“I couldn’t just let you drown, Neal. Besides, I know you would have done the same for me. You don’t give up either.”

Neal nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I suppose that’s what makes the whole situation with my father even more frustrating. I can’t just give up, but at the same time, what else is there for us to do?”

“We’ll think of something,” Emma said. “Maybe bring Belle in on your plans next time. She’s probably got something at the shop that can help, and she’s canny enough to hold her own. For now, though, you just concentrating on not drowning again until they let you out. And don’t drown again after they let you out either, or we might as well buy shares in the emergency room.”

Neal laughed. “I’ll do my best not to get into any more trouble.”

Emma snorted in response. “Like hell you will. You’re a trouble magnet, you always have been. We both are.”

For a moment, Emma was reminded of the relationship they’d had before, two carefree teens living under the radar, living on the very edge, but happy in spite of it all. Something inside her would have
given everything to have that back right now.

“Take care of yourself, Neal.”

“You too, Emma.”

Oz – Past

“I still don’t see why we need to cross realms to do this,” Walsh said. Zelena had needed an extra pair of human hands to assist her spell work and had retransformed her favourite pet for the occasion.

“Because this spell is a four-point spell,” Zelena replied, waving an arm in the vague direction of the gimble on the work table beside Verdie’s casket, not taking her eyes off her crystal ball. “And the very specific four points that we need are not in Oz at the moment. Nor are they very likely to be here in the future.”

“What are these four points anyway?” Walsh asked. Zelena rolled her eyes, finally tearing herself away from the ball to address Walsh directly.

“Tears from the grief of the wisest craftsman. Blood from the heart of the truest love. Hair from the mane of the bravest lion. Breath from the depths of the newest soul.”

Walsh let her words sink in for a moment and then his eyes widened.

“You’re not seriously doing what I think you’re doing, are you? I’ve heard you talk about it often enough. You couldn’t break one law of magic so you’re just going to break another one?”

“Why not?” Zelena’s voice was flippant and she waved him over to the crystal ball. It was tuned to the land without magic, and Walsh could see a woman with brown hair defiantly standing up for herself in the face of a group of people who looked like they ought to be nuns.

“Fairies,” Zelena explained, pointing to the one in the middle. “She’s the one who started this whole venture, actually.”

Walsh raised an eyebrow. “Call me stupid as you so often do, but I’m still not seeing the significance.”

The view turned back to the young woman and Zelena smiled.

“There’s nothing that says the lion has to be an actual lion,” she said. “It’s all metaphorical.”

“Right. And the other elements of your grand master plan?” Walsh didn’t bother to hide the bitter sarcasm in his voice, and Zelena narrowed her eyes.

“You could turn back into a monkey for the remainder of our time in Oz,” she reminded him coolly, before waving a hand over the ball. The scene changed to Neverland, two people sitting by a campfire – a blonde woman and a man who, from Zelena’s description of her old tutor, could only be Rumpelstiltskin.
“The daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming, the embodiment of true love if ever there was one. And whilst debate is open as to quite how wise he is, Rumpelstiltskin is certainly the oldest of dark craftsmen. Love, wisdom, bravery. That’s what we need, and that’s what we’re going to get. We just need to bide our time, pet, and then everything will fall into place just as it ought to.”

“So where are we going?” Walsh asked. “Your ingredients are somewhat spread out.”

“We’re going to the Enchanted Forest. Curses are fickle things, and broken or undone more often than we like to think. Neverland is already unstable. It doesn’t take a genius or skills of prophecy to realise that everything’s going to fall apart sooner rather than later. Come on, we need to get moving. I want to make sure I have an established foothold before anything happens.” Zelena’s smile was positively evil. “That’s another good reason for going to the Enchanted Forest. There’s practically no-one left to guard it at the moment. Bring the apparatus.”

Walsh dutifully lifted it from the table and followed Zelena into the centre of the room. She levitated Verdie’s coffin over to join them, then glanced over at the caged monkeys who had once been her sisters in arms.

“Sorry girls, you’ll have to stay here. Can’t have you interfering now.”

She grabbed hold of Walsh with one hand and let the magic bean drop from the other, taking a deep breath as the portal to the Enchanted Forest opened up beneath them.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Zelena waved a hand over the handkerchief, plucking the droplets of Rumpelstiltskin’s tears out of the fabric and sweeping them into the waiting vial on the gimble.

“There we are,” she said triumphantly. “Three down and one to go. I knew that I’d get you to break eventually, my dear Rumpel.”

“I’m not your dear anything.” Rumpelstiltskin snarled. Zelena had got him up out of his cage and he was standing in the cellar doorway with the darkest expression that Zelena had ever seen on his face. If it wasn’t for the fact that she’d compelled him to stay where he was and he could barely move without a cane or magical assistance, Zelena was sure that he’d be across the room and throttling her in a matter of seconds. She enjoyed seeing him so powerless. It was like seeing a bear in a cage, knowing how deadly he was but also knowing that no matter how much she provoked him, he couldn’t do anything to retaliate.

“You’ve got what you want from me,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “Why not let me go?”

Zelena raised an eyebrow. “I don’t just want your tears, Rumpel. So you really think that’s the only reason I’ve been keeping you here? No, you see, you’re far too dangerous to my plans to have you on the loose. I need you right here, where I can keep an eye on you and you can rest safe in the knowledge that no matter what you do, you can’t save your friends and family. That’s a point, I wonder how Neal’s doing? Do you think that Emma managed to save him, or did you send him to a watery grave? You know they say that drowning is one of the most painful ways to go. Gasping for breath and choking on water as your lungs fill with fire and your brain starts switching off until the only thing you can feel is how much excruciating pain you’re in. And to think, you did that to him. Even if he lives, do you really think that he’ll forgive you for what you made him suffer?”
“He knows that I’m not responsible.”

Zelena just chuckled. “It won’t matter anyway,” she said. “By the time I’ve finished, none of it will matter because everything will have been undone. You’ll never have found him in the first place, let alone been separated from him again, because you’ll have been dead for far long before you even reach the land without magic. No you, no curse, no Storybrooke. Seems like a nice little idyllic world. I’m sure everyone will thank me for making everyone’s lives so much better in the long run. Oh, apart from Neal, of course, he’ll still be stuck here with no friends or family and he won’t even have an Emma to be a bright point in his life. And Belle, of course, she’ll have been killed by the ogres that flattened her village because you weren’t there to save them.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s face blanched. “You can’t really be doing this,” he said faintly. “You’re breaking one of the fundamental laws of magic. You can’t change what’s past.”

“Oh, but Rumpel, I can. And I’m going to. I’m going back in time, I’m saving my sister’s life, and then we’re going to kill you and make everyone’s lives so much happier.”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “I know you’ve always blamed me, however erroneously, for your sister’s death, but if you go back in time to save her life, then surely all that is negated.”

“Well, you’d think so, but I’d still have all the extra memories of Verdie actually dying, and that’s really not something I can let you get away with.”

She spun the gimble and it creaked on its axis. “You know, I’m surprised you didn’t work out that I was trying to open a time portal sooner,” she said conversationally. “The blood from the heart of the truest love. The hair from the mane of the bravest lion. The tears from the grief of the wisest craftsman. It’s all there now. And you know what the final ingredient is.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded, his eyes downcast. “I know.”

“Say it.”

“Breath from the depths of the newest soul. Snow White’s baby.”

Zelena smiled evilly. “Now can you see why I’m keeping you around? I can’t be doing with an infant’s blood on my hands.”

“Please, no, don’t make me do this…”

“You know, originally I’d hoped you’d managed to get Belle knocked up during your little post-Neverland love fest, but it seems you’ve been firing blanks. That would have been one hell of a double, don’t you agree? Still, we can’t have everything.” Zelena licked her lips. “Now, pet, all we need to do it wait.”

Rumpelstiltskin had never felt so powerless, not only unable to protect his family, but completely unable to warn them of what was to come.
There was something very wrong about Storybrooke. Henry had long since come to the conclusion that the town was strange, but at first he had put that down to it being a small place in the middle of nowhere in rural Maine. Small town, small minds, and all that. They probably didn’t have all that many visitors. Now though, it was getting to the stage of being slightly creepy. Emma had asked him to stay in the inn or the diner or the sheriff’s station and not go wandering off, but she was still being cagey about what she was trying to protect him from. She was spending a lot of time with Neal, which Henry was pretty happy about. A small part of him had always entertained fantastical and romantic notions of his parents eventually getting back together, but at the same time, Neal was also being cagey about exactly was going on in the town.

For a while, Henry had entertained the idea that the town was one of those seemingly quaint little places out of horror films, the ones that looked totally benign on the outside but were hiding dark secrets, like death cults or ritualistic mass murder and cannibalism of outsiders. Some of the whispers he’d heard about wicked witches and flying monkeys and the like certainly reinforced that impression, and the fact that Walsh had seemingly vanished without trace added weight to the idea that he’d been kidnapped and was about to be used as a sacrifice – especially as he had overheard Emma and Neal talking about him as if he was still in town.

Henry’s overactive imagination was working double time, and he was now wondering if the so-called flying monkeys that had attacked Neal and Belle at the cemetery were strange forest beasts that demanded offerings of human blood in return for not attacking the town. As much as it would have made an excellent thriller to rival the likes of Stephen King, he dismissed the idea. He knew that however creepy the town might be, he should be safe. Emma seemed to know everyone here and was working with them, and his mom would never do anything that would place him in danger. So he accepted that whatever the townsfolk were doing, they were probably the good guys.

That didn’t change the slightly unnerving fact that not only did Emma seem to know everyone in town, everyone in town seemed to know Henry and was obviously trying to hide that they knew. Henry himself definitely had the feeling of having been to Storybrooke before, and not only that but having spent significant amounts of time here. But that made no sense, because Henry couldn’t remember ever having lived anywhere except New York, with anyone except Emma. And yet Regina, the very helpful mayor whom Emma seemed to trust with Henry’s safety implicitly, seemed to be very familiar.

Enough was enough, and Henry was determined to get to the bottom of what was happening in the town. He had snuck out of the inn whilst Granny’s back was turned – not that he really thought that she’d detain him if she saw him out and about without supervision, but that was definitely a crossbow under the check-in desk and he really didn’t want to end up on the wrong end of it due to a misunderstanding.

Now he was making his way along the main street, trying to exude the confident air of having every right to be there, which he thought he did, sort of. He wasn’t exactly sure where he was going and he retained enough fear and common sense in the face of horror film scenarios to know not to go into dark and creepy places alone. What he really needed was someone who or something that could tell him about the town. Henry glanced up at the clocktower above the library, boarded up with all but a couple of the windows papered over. He thought back to his previous dismissal of dark and creepy places, but before he could go over and peer in through one of the windows to case the place,
someone called his name.

“Henry?”

He turned. The blonde girl who had hailed him looked to be his own age, and something in the back of his mind, that almost ever-present feeling of déjà vu, told him that he had once known who she was. She was smiling, pleased to see him even though he didn’t immediately recognise her, but her expression fell as she realised that his blank look of incomprehension wasn’t going to fade. Still, another smile replaced it and she held out a hand.

“I’m Grace,” she said. “Welcome to the town.”

Henry shook the offered hand. “Henry. But then you already know that. How did you know that?”

Grace shrugged. “We’re a small town and we never get visitors. News travels fast. I guess you’re a bit like a new attraction at the zoo.”

“Erm, thanks. I think.”

It was a smooth lie, but it was still a lie that she’d had to spin on the spot. Emma had always been amazing at telling when people were lying, which was useful in her line of work, and she’d passed on some of her tricks to Henry recently. Grace’s lie was probably well-intentioned, and Henry decided not to call her out on it.

“So where are you headed?” Grace asked. Henry pointed over his shoulder towards the library.

“I was trying to find out a bit more about the town,” he said. “Regina’s told me a lot about it, but I get the impression it’s more of an edited highlights package and there’s more to it than that. So I came here but…” He looked up at the clocktower again, its hands stuck at eight-fifteen. “I’m worried that if I go in I might not come back out again.”

Grace laughed. “Don’t worry, the dragon in the basement was slain a couple of years ago.”

For a hot second, Henry thought that she was being genuine, but then he just gave a nervous laugh and put the comment to the back of his mind.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Grace continued. “It might not look very open, but there’s movement in there.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t seem ominous at all,” Henry muttered. He went over and peered inside; the lights were on but there didn’t seem to be anyone at home.

“So, are you staying here long?” Grace asked. She sounded hopeful.

“I don’t know,” Henry admitted. “I came up here with my mom, it was only supposed to be a road trip for a job of hers. It should just be a vacation really. But then Mom got involved in all the stuff that’s happening here, and Walsh vanished, so I think we’re probably going to stay longer.”

“Well, it’ll be nice if you do,” Grace said. “It’s always good when…” She tailed off then, turning away and Henry decided not to push the point, just chalking it up as another strange quirk of the town. Still, Grace did have a point. If he was going to stay here for any length of time, then he wanted to make some friends his own age. Provided Emma started letting him out on his own more often. Well, he’d just have to keep sneaking out. Henry thought about the friends that he’d left behind in New York, and it struck him that he didn’t really miss them as much as he thought he might. The more he thought about them, the more he realised that there was a fog around his memories of them. Most of his friends had been made during the last year, after he and Emma had
moved house. But New York, although a big city, was one with good transport links and a vibrant social life. Surely he would have kept in touch with all his old friends? Try as he might, he couldn’t remember any of them.

“Henry?”

Grace’s voice pulled him back into the present, and Henry shook off the fog.

“Sorry. Miles away. My life’s kind of been turned upside down a bit. Not a lot is making sense.”

Grace nodded. “Yeah, I can understand that. Things have been a bit shaken up for me and my dad lately too.” She paused. “You said you wanted to find out more about the town.”

Henry nodded.

“Well, it’s a lot younger than you’d think. It hasn’t been here very long. Most of its history is pretty modern.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t come up on any maps. The Internet seems to think it doesn’t exist.”

“Nothing thinks that it exists,” Grace said. “It’s like a black hole.”

That really didn’t do anything to reassure Henry.

“Have you ever left town?” he asked. “It’s kind of sounding like one of those ghost towns where the inhabitants never leave and they still think it’s the eighteen hundreds. Except this is obviously the twenty-first century.”

Grace shook her head. “No. No-one ever leaves. Only people who’ve come in from outside.”

As terrifying as that sounded, it did at least give Henry heart to know that being an outsider, he’d be able to get out again.

“Grace!” A man on the corner was waving to her frantically.

“Oops. That’s my dad, I have to go. Still, it was nice to meet you, Henry.”

“It was nice to meet you too.”

Grace ran off across the road to her father, and Henry turned back to the library, taking a deep breath and turning the door handle.

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**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

“Are you sure that this is the right place?”

“No, but it’s the nearest lead that we’ve got.”

Neal looked around the dense forest and accepted that he was completely lost and it would be up to Belle to get them back to the castle.

“He’s a portal jumper, he could be anywhere,” Neal pointed out. Belle shook her head.
“No, he’ll have stayed in one place with Grace. Jefferson’s always been incredibly unpredictable, except when it comes to his daughter. There, look.”

A small cottage had become visible through the trees, tucked in and well-concealed. Belle probably wouldn’t have seen it if she hadn’t been looking for it. It didn’t look to be occupied, and Belle and Neal exchanged a look.

“We have to try,” Neal said. “I don’t know any other way of crossing realms quickly.”

“He might not even have the hat anymore,” Belle said.

“Well, maybe we don’t have to cross the realm fully, just enough to send a message to Emma that we know she’ll receive.”

Belle nodded. “All right. Anything’s better than nothing. I’ve said so before.”

They approached the cottage, making no effort to hide their steps. Jefferson probably wouldn’t take too kindly to being snuck up on.

“Jefferson?” Belle called as they came up to the door. “Are you in there?”

Someone was obviously in there, as there was a clang of pots and pans being knocked to the floor and frantic movement.

“Jefferson, it’s Belle, we just want to talk,” she continued. Evidently, Jefferson didn’t want to talk to them, as a moment later two figures could be seen racing through the woods where they’d climbed out of the kitchen window.

“Was he always like this?” Neal asked.

Belle shook her head with a sigh. “Not whilst I knew him at the Dark Castle, but considering everything else that’s happened, I can’t really say I’m surprised.”

She took off around the back of the house at a jog and Neal followed her. They’d been trying to find a way to get a message across the realms to Emma for a couple of weeks now, but most of the options open to them were no longer valid. The Dark Castle doves were off limits, and even if they could get to them, they were both back together so there was nothing in the Land Without Magic for them to fly to. The crystal ball might or might not have helped, and no-one wanted to keep wasting effort on something that could not guarantee tangible results. The only vague hope they had of delivering a message was to see if Jefferson had any tricks up his sleeve, and at that moment, he didn’t seem all that willing to share them with anybody.

Neal glanced up into the trees as he ran, seeing a young girl crouched in the canopy watching him. That must be Grace. He carried on after Belle, who was still calling after Jefferson.

“Go that way!” she yelled back to Neal. “We’ll cut him off eventually!”

Neal peeled off and ran in the direction that Belle had pointed. He was getting winded now, and he thought that perhaps all this running about having only been allowed out of bed a few weeks ago probably wasn’t a good idea. He stopped to catch his breath, picking up a piece of fallen tree trunk off the ground and swinging it experimentally along the forest floor. He could hear running footsteps and Belle’s voice, and he just hope that he wasn’t going to send the wrong person sprawling. Belle was scary when she was angry.

Crouching down in the tree roots, he swung the branch as the footsteps came past, and Jefferson
landed flat on his back with a soft groan. Belle ran up a couple of seconds later, bending double to catch her breath.

“You don’t make life easy for visitors, do you, Jefferson?” she panted.

“Yes, well, visitors have a habit of not making life easy for me, either,” he grumbled, thrusting a hand up at Neal for help getting to his feet. “The last time I had visitors, I ended up stuck in Wonderland for a year.”

“We don’t want to go to Wonderland,” Belle assured him. “We don’t really want to go anywhere.”

Jefferson raised an eyebrow as he brushed himself down. His appearance was a lot more patched and dishevelled than Belle remembered from his visits to the Dark Castle, but he still retained his unique sense of style. The only thing missing was his hat.

“Considering my main and some would say only talent is going to places, I’d say that you’d come to the wrong place.” He looked Belle and Neal up and down. “I might be something of a hermit now, but I know what’s going on in the outside world and if you think that I’m portalling into the Dark Castle to rescue Rumpelstiltskin, then you’ve got another think coming. He’s always been a good friend to me and Grace, but I am not risking monkeyfication and Zelena’s wrath. I knew her before she got powerful and she was scary enough then. I have no desire to see what she’s like now, since I daresay I’m included by proxy in her grudge against Rumpel.”

“How?” Neal asked, baffled.

“I’m the one who introduced them in the first place.” Jefferson gave a mournful sigh. “Well, there’s nothing to be gained from standing out here in the middle of the forest discussing these things. We might as well be inside out of the weather and drinking tea whilst I tell you that whatever you want to do is likely impossible.”

He set off back through the forest towards the cottage and Belle and Neal followed. Neal was beginning to have a few doubts as to how successful this trip was going to be, but he knew that he wouldn’t be satisfied until they had explored every avenue, and there was still a slim chance that they could persuade Jefferson to help.

“It’s all right, Grace,” Jefferson called up to the girl in the tree as they passed her. “They’re friends.”

The girl scrambled down with a squirrel’s nimbleness.

“I did tell you that they looked harmless,” she said, completely matter of fact.

“Yes, but when as much has happened to us as it has, you can never be too careful.”

They entered the house and Grace started picking up all the debris that had been strewn during their hasty exit. Jefferson retrieved the kettle from where it had been flung through the window in his panic and began making tea. No-one made any comment as to the extremity of Jefferson’s reaction to unexpected guests.

“So, what is it that you want to do?” he asked.

“We need to get a message to the Land Without Magic,” Belle said, but Jefferson was already shaking his head before she finished the sentence.

“Even if my hat hadn’t been destroyed, it would be impossible. If it was possible, Rumpelstiltskin and I would have popped over and picked up Neal years ago. The hat absorbs magic from its
surroundings, it needs to charge before each jump, so to speak. It won’t portal to a land with no magic as it won’t be able to absorb any magic there to power the journey back. It only worked in Storybrooke after magic was brought to town, and before when Regina used her residual magic to charge it.”

“We don’t necessarily want to travel there, just send a message,” Belle explained. “Emma’s in danger and we need to warn her.”

Jefferson pondered for a long moment.

“That might be possible,” he said. “But like I said, my hat was destroyed and I can’t portal without it. It’s the hat that’s magic really; I just know how to manipulate it better than anyone else.”

“Is it the hat that’s magic?” Grace asked. “I always thought that it was what it was made of.”

Jefferson nodded. “Yes, it’s the silk that’s magic. Other portal jumpers use different objects but hats are the most common as they’re inconspicuous. I once knew someone who used an umbrella.”

“If you found some silk, presumably you could make a new hat,” Neal said. Jefferson scoffed.

“You have no idea how much silk it takes and how hard it is to find.”

“Not a hat then. Just an object that we can use to touch the Land Without Magic and send Emma a message,” Belle pressed.

Jefferson sighed, but Neal could tell that his resolve was crumbling in the face of his daughter siding with the visitors.

“Come on Papa,” she said. “This is your chance to do something good. And you made the first hat, so you should be able to make another.”

Eventually Jefferson nodded.

“You know, you’re just as bad as your mother for persuading me to do things,” he muttered. Grace just smiled benignly and gathered up the teacups.

Jefferson stood up and readjusted his coat.

“Well, it looks like we’re searching for silkworms,” he said. “Come with me. I’m going to need all the eyes I can get.”

Storybrooke - Present

The library door wasn’t locked, and Henry wasn’t sure if he was reassured or further uneased by that fact. He pushed it open and stepped inside. As he had seen from his peering through the unboarded windows, the lights were on, but there certainly didn’t seem to be anybody at home. The shelves seemed dusty and long-neglected, and it showed no signs of being open to welcome patrons in to browse its stacks. The only part of it that showed any evidence of occupation was the issue desk, which was piled high with very old books that, despite their age, showed no signs of dust or decay. They had been placed there recently and with purpose. He’d always thought that he’d make a good private detective if the plans to be an author didn’t work out, and he might as well start plying his
possible future trade now if he wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery that he was certain
everoped the strange town.

“Hello?” he called out. “Is anyone there?” Almost immediately he regretted it. If he really was a
detective then he’d just given away any advantage of secrecy that he might have, and that was
always how the cheap horror films started after all. Some unsuspecting teenager creeping into an
abandoned building and loudly announcing their presence, only to be killed in a suitably gruesome
slasher style just moments later.

There was a frantic scuffle behind the issue desk and for a brief moment, Henry was so convinced
that he was about to see a masked figure with a machete that he was very surprised when Belle
scrambled up into view.

“Hi Henry,” she said with a slightly too obvious brightness. “What can I do for you?”

“Are you the librarian, then?” Henry asked. He looked at Belle, then back at the door behind him,
then back to Belle. “I thought you worked in my grandfather’s shop.”

“No, not really,” Belle said. “The library is my true place; I was just helping out Neal with all the
cataloguing after Rumpel- your grandfather died. But today I had to come here. I needed to look a
few things up.”

Still a little cautious, although he knew that Belle was as harmless as they came, Henry approached
the issue desk and peered over it. The precarious piles of books from the desk continued down onto
the floor, where it was clear that Belle was set in for the duration.

“I ran out of room on the desk,” she said by way of explanation, sounding slightly sheepish about it.

Henry glanced down at the titles of some of the books. They were all in fancy embossed curlicues
and they all had titles along the lines of magic and curses and potions, things that probably shouldn’t
have been available for loan in a public library. A new theory presented itself in his mind, that maybe
the town was under a spell or the protection of some kind of white witch magic. It was an idea that
he still entertained in the back of his mind about Regina, after their encounter in the diner with
Ruby’s cloak that time. He put the thought to the back of his mind; he was here to get answers to
some of his existing questions, not to think up even more new ones.

“So what brings you to the library?” Belle asked. She seemed distracted, eager to help him but at the
same time eager to get back to her own research. He noticed the way that she surreptitiously flipped
the nearest book closed, deftly turning it over so that he couldn’t see the title. The next work
appeared to be in Chinese, so he wasn’t likely to get much from that.

“I was interested in looking up the town’s history,” he said eventually, deciding to give up trying to
work out what on earth his sort of step-grandmother was doing as a bad job. “It’s a pretty unique
place, and I wanted to find out more about it.”

“Well, if it’s records you want, then you’re better off asking Regina at the town hall,” Belle said.
Henry shook his head. For all Regina was helpful and seemed genuinely thrilled to be spending time
with him, he could tell that she was hiding something.

“No, I want to do my own research,” he said. “I’ve bothered Regina enough this week already.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be a bother. She’s really taken quite a shine to you, you know. But still, the
history section is down that way.” She pointed down one of the stacks. “Local history is towards the
end of the shelf, near the bottom.”
Henry took off in the direction of further knowledge, feeling moderately pleased with himself and seriously considering the detective career. Looking back over his shoulder, he could see that Belle was standing at the issue desk, not having returned to her cocoon of books on the floor, but she was absorbed in the Chinese work and not paying him any attention.

As Belle and Grace had both warned, the local history section was very sparse, just a few books about Maine’s geography and political history, and several boxes of back copies of the Mirror. Even those, however, were something of a curiosity. There were back issues dating back thirty odd years, probably to the time when the local paper was founded and started printing, but last year’s copies were suspiciously absent. There wasn’t even a space on the shelf where they ought to have been, either. It was as if the last year simply didn’t exist in the town’s records.

Still, anything was better than nothing, and he pulled out the first box of papers, detailing the most recent events up to the mysterious absence.

The box wouldn’t budge. Something was wedging it in place. Carefully, Henry peered around all the sides as best he could, and found the source of the obstruction. There was a large, heavy book tucked in behind the periodicals box. It must have slipped down from one of the upper shelves and got stuck.

Bracing himself carefully, he managed to lever the box out of the shelf enough to allow the book to spring free, which it did suddenly, practically jumping off the shelf at him and sending him sprawling on his back in a cloud of newspaper pages and dust.

“Are you all right?” Belle called from the desk at the front. Henry coughed the dust out of his lungs.

“Yeah,” he croaked. “I’m fine.”

The book that had landed on his chest was surprisingly dense, and as he picked it up and studied it, he thought that it was probably more suited to Belle’s stacks on the issue desk – the same heavy, embossed leather cover and thick pages. Turning it over, he looked at the title. *Once Upon A Time.*

Henry raised an eyebrow. A bit of a whimsical title for a history book, perhaps, but he opened it nonetheless, quickly finding out that it was not a history book at all, and that its title was indeed apt. What was an anthology of fairy tales doing in the history section?

“Belle?” he called.

“Yes?”

“Where’s the children’s section?”

“Far right corner.” She looked up. “Why?”

Henry held up the book so that she could see the title. “I think someone misfiled this.”

Belle’s brow furrowed. “That shouldn’t be here,” she muttered.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that it ought to be in local history,” Henry said as she approached. He handed the book over to her and she flicked through the pages with an expression akin to wonder.

“No, no, I mean it shouldn’t be in the library at all. It’s not meant to be in circulation.”

“Oh. Well. Maybe someone brought it back to the library by accident,” Henry suggested. “We should probably give it back to its owner. It’s a beautiful book, even if it did nearly flatten me.”
Belle nodded, still looking a little bit like she was in a trance.

“I guess you’re right.” She snapped out of whatever had held her mesmerised then, and handed the book back to him with a smile. “You might as well hang onto it for safekeeping until its actual owner turns up,” she said.

Henry shook his head. “Thanks, but I’m a bit too old for fairy tales and bedtime stories.”

“No-one’s ever too old for fairy tales,” Belle said sagely. “They can often tell us more than we can ever begin to understand. And it’s important to have hope. They give us that more than anything.”

With those cryptic words, she pressed the book firmly into Henry’s hands and walked away, back to her piles of research on the issue desk.

Slightly perturbed by the strange interaction, Henry nonetheless opened the book and began to read, his quest to uncover the truth about the town from its newspaper archives momentarily forgotten.

At first glance, it was a perfectly ordinary fairy tale book, beginning with the tale of Snow White and the huntsman. But as he read on, Henry began to see that there was something different about this book. All the fairy tales seemed to blend into one larger narrative, with all the characters existing in the same space and time, rather than in their own self-contained stories. After the huntsman let her go, Snow White met not the dwarfs, but Little Red Riding Hood. The dwarfs didn’t come into the story until much later, when Snow had already met her Prince Charming. And brained him with a rock. Henry had a brand new admiration for the Disney princess that he had always considered to be the blandest.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, engrossed in the book, but he was a decent chunk of the way through it when the sound of conversation reached him and he realised that he and Belle were no longer alone in the half-open library. He looked up and was surprised to see that Grace and her father had come in. Grace caught his eye and came over towards him. For a moment, Henry panicked. He really didn’t want his new almost-friend thinking that he was a weirdo for still being into fairy tales at his age.

“Hey Henry.” It was too late, she was coming towards him. “How’s the research going?”

“Erm…” Henry faltered. “Well, it’s kind of ground to a halt before it started, really,” he admitted. “I got sidetracked.”

He reasoned that he should probably pick up all the back copies of the Mirror that were now scattered on the floor around him, and he started gathering them all together, acutely aware of his embarrassment. Grace didn’t say anything; she just got down on her hands and knees alongside him and started putting the papers into date order.

“So, what distracted you?” Grace asked. “Did you find some juicy stories about mad axe murderers running loose in the town?”

Henry shook his head. “No, it seems that flying monkeys in the town are more the order of the day from the whispers I’ve heard.”

“Yeah, well.” Grace gave a little scoff of laughter. “Stranger things have happened.” Her eyes fell on the fairy tale book, which was open at the tale of how the Mad Hatter ended up in Wonderland, going mad. “Where did you find this?”

“It was in with all the local history stuff,” Henry said. “I’ve no idea why.”
“Maybe it is local history,” Grace suggested. Henry raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a fairy tale book.”

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t happen somewhere.”

Henry took a long, hard look at the book. Its preface said that it was the story of how the fairy tale characters had come to our world. He glanced at the illustration of the Hatter’s story. Now that he thought about it and could see them side by side, the Hatter did bear an uncanny resemblance to Grace’s dad. And the Hatter’s daughter, in the story, was named Grace…

Enchanted Forest – Missing Year

“What exactly are we looking for again?” Belle asked. Jefferson had led them to a part of the forest not too far from his cottage, but the tree canopy hanging overhead was dense and left the ground wet and musty, with very little light reaching them. It gave the place a desolate and oppressive air, and Belle shivered.

“Traces to show where the silkworms are hiding,” Jefferson said. “Silk doesn’t just grow on trees. If I’m going to make anything out of it then I need to find a nest with enough worms to provide a decent amount of silk. Something like this.”

At first Belle couldn’t see what he was holding up between his thumb and forefinger, but then she saw it buffeting lightly in the breeze, a single strand of fine, white gossamer-like silk, as delicate as a spider’s web.

“This one feels fairly fresh,” he said, rolling the strand between his fingers. “We might be in luck.”

Neal and Belle redoubled their efforts, but it was going to be hard going, finding something practically invisible in such poor light.

Presently, Jefferson stopped in his tracks, dropping into a defensive crouch, his eyes darting around the clearing nervously.

“Jefferson?”

“Shh!” he hissed. “There’s someone else here!”

Belle and Neal stopped what they were doing and looked around for any signs of the newcomer.

“I thought you said that no-one else knew about this place,” Neal whispered.

“They don’t,” Jefferson said sourly. “That’s why I’m worried.”

Belle’s hand went to the dagger in her belt ready as she heard a footstep.

“Monkeys?” Neal suggested.

“No, I don’t think so. They don’t usually move so furtively.”
Neal drew his own dagger. He’d never been able to get used to wearing a full-length sword, but Charming refused to let him out of the castle unarmed. Together they advanced towards the source of the sound, and jumped back when a figure burst into the clearing, sword drawn. Almost immediately though, the weapon was lowered.

“Belle? Neal?”

The newcomer removed their helmet and cloak, and Belle let out a sigh of relief as Mulan’s identity was revealed.

“Mulan? What are you doing here? Not that it’s not good to see you alive and well after so long, but we thought that you and Aurora would be halfway to her kingdom by now.” Belle stuck her dagger back in her belt and everyone else followed her lead in putting away their weapons. Jefferson just looked on with a confused expression.

“Does everybody know everybody?” he asked, but neither Belle nor Neal answered him, too concerned with finding out what had brought Mulan back to this part of the Enchanted Forest.

“We were headed back to Aurora’s home,” Mulan explained. “But the monkeys kept following us and we know that we wouldn’t be able to outrun them, not with Aurora in the condition that she was in, so we’ve been lying low in a village not too far from here. The monkeys have overlooked us for a while, but now circumstances have changed and they’re circling again.” She paused. “Aurora has had her baby.”

Although such news would ordinarily be joyous, Belle could well see why it was causing Mulan such unease.

“Congratulations, although I’m not sure that’s right in the current state of affairs,” Neal said. “How are they both?”

“They’re doing well. The baby is a boy, we named him Philip after his father. Just in case the worst happened and the three of us, well four of us now, are never reunited.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” Belle said, but Mulan shook her head.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here. I’m looking for a way for us to leave this realm. The monkeys want the child, that much is clear, but they’re biding their time for whatever reason. Perhaps the witch isn’t ready yet, I don’t know. All I know is that when they do strike, I don’t want us to be here. So I was searching for a route to the Land Without Magic. Even if the monkeys were able to follow us, they couldn’t stay as monkeys in a land with no magic to sustain the curse.”

“Sorry.” Jefferson came over to the group. “Magic hats and the like don’t transport to non-magical realms as it creates a paradox. You can’t get back, so it doesn’t take you there in the first place.”

“There are other ways to cross back,” Mulan said. “What we want is to leave, we can work out the rest once we’re away. The priority is getting Aurora and the baby somewhere they’ll be safe until the witch is defeated. Besides, I’m not looking for a magic hat.”

“What are you looking for then?” Jefferson asked. “No offence, but people don’t usually come to this murky neck of the woods unless they’re looking for silk.”


She rummaged in her pack and pulled out a small book, not dissimilar to the one she had given back to Belle that had led her to the yaoguai, and flicked through the rough, dog-eared pages until she
found what she was looking for, presenting the book to Belle.

“So what else can the silk be used for?” Jefferson asked.

“It’s not the silk, it’s the silkworms themselves,” Belle explained, skimming the text. “Whilst they’re creating the silk, they share its power. It seems like you can use them a little bit like magic beans.”

Neal and Belle looked at each other. If they could find a silkworm that could open a portal, then Neal could go to the Land Without Magic and warn Emma; make sure that she was safe and get her to Storybrooke to reconvene with the rest of them when the time came.

“I thought you two just wanted to send a message,” Jefferson accused, seeing their look and knowing what it meant.

“We did, but if I’ve got the opportunity to deliver it in person then I can make sure it actually gets across,” Neal said.

“You’ve still got the problem of it being a one-way trip,” Jefferson pointed out.

“Yes, well, that might not be as much of a problem as you might think,” Neal murmured. He didn’t want to panic Jefferson or Mulan with the news that it looked likely that a second Dark Curse would soon be descending.

“Besides, if we find more than one, then they can have one in reserve,” Belle said.

“You’ve got no idea if they’ll survive the trip or if they’ll even be active in the Land Without Magic. Still, as long as you don’t expect me to come with you, I can’t stop you taking yourselves off wherever you want to go.” Jefferson shrugged. “I guess we’d better get back to searching then. If the flying monkeys are closing in then we don’t have any time to lose.”

The four of them spread out. Mulan’s book included an illustration, so at least Belle and Neal knew what they were looking for now, even if the chances of finding it seemed very slim. What little light there had been in the grove was fading fast, although the small patches of rising moonlight did make the fronds of silk shine silver when the light caught them. There was no pattern to the lacy strands, no kind of directionality that might show where the silkworms that had created them would be. Jefferson was gathering up all the individual strands and rolling them together into a ball; whether he actually intended to make them into a portal jumping item or whether he was just gathering so that they didn’t fall into the wrong hands was unclear.

Belle was just about to suggest that they called it a night, or at least went and got some torches before they were totally lost and bumping into each other, when Mulan gave an exclamation of triumph.

“I think I’ve got something!”

The others all congregated around her. Mulan was on her hands and knees at the foot of a tree, her face pressed up against the bark.

“Here.” She waved Belle over and encouraged her to look through the small knothole in the trunk. Sure enough, deep inside the wood were three silkworms, glowing with a faint blue phosphorescence. The spun silk lining their little hole made it look like it had snowed inside the tree.

“Ok,” Neal said. “How do we get them out? I don’t fancy chopping down an incredibly tall and heavy tree at this time of night.”

“We don’t need to chop it down, just dig them out.” Belle stuck the point of her dagger into the
knothole, scraping around until it was wide enough to work with and carefully using the very tip of it to flick the worms out into Mulan’s waiting hand.

The four searchers exchanged an excited look. They’d actually done it. After so many near misses, the fact that a victory was within reach was remarkable.

“Well, time is of the essence,” Jefferson said. “Let’s go to Aurora and send you all off wherever you need to go.”

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**Storybrooke – Present**

Emma hadn’t really intended to call a family conference; it was just coincidence that Regina, David and Mary Margaret all happened to be in the diner at the same time as she had arranged to meet Neal there, but in a way she thought that it would help. The more brains that she could throw at the conundrum, the better. Maybe they’d be able to make sense of her jumbled thoughts a lot better than she could.

“So what’s the problem?” Neal asked once they were all packed into a booth in the far corner with food on the table. It could have been a perfectly ordinary family lunch if it wasn’t for Henry’s absence, but as much as Emma felt guilty for leaving him out, she knew that having him there would just engender more explanations than she could give at that point. She sighed, dunking a handful of fries in ketchup but not actually putting them anywhere near her mouth.

“I know it’s stupid to be thinking about the future when the present is so fraught with danger and, you know, the future could consist of us all becoming monkeys for the rest of time. But I don’t know what to do about Henry. Our lives are in New York, even if they’ve only been there for a year and not his entire life like he thinks. At the same time, I know we don’t belong there and we only ended up there thanks to magic. But Henry belongs there, his education and his friends are there. I can’t take those away from him, but at the same time, you two are here.”

She looked over to Neal and Regina, and she remembered the last time they’d had a conversation like this, on the morning after their return from Neverland. That time, nothing had come of it as they’d all been flung to different realms just a few hours later.

“I’m not fixed,” Neal said. “I can travel, that’s not a problem, but depending on what happens, I’ll need to stay here to help Belle and my dad. I think we need to wait and see if Henry remembers before we start making plans about what happens next. It could be that he would want to stay here once he has his memories again.”

“I know.” Emma finally ate the now cold fries, the grease cloying on her tongue. “I know, and it’s stupid because I’ve never been one for planning ahead. I just wish that I knew where home was. Henry might think of Storybrooke as his home because he’s spent almost all his life here, and perhaps before we went to New York, I would have thought of Storybrooke as my home too. This was where my roots were, but then they got ripped up and put down somewhere else, and I don’t know whether I’m coming or going and I have to think of Henry as well.”

If it was just her, then she’d know what to do. Emma had never had anything that she could really call home so she’d just continue her usual rootless lifestyle. It wouldn’t matter where she went, or if she ever settled. But Henry needed to be settled. He needed stability, something that she’d given him for a year but now felt unsure of her ability to provide.
“Whatever happens, you have to decide what’s best for Henry,” Regina said. “Of course I’m biased and of course I want to keep him in Storybrooke with me, but if the best thing is for him to get away from all this, then that’s what you’ll have to do.” She paused and looked over at Mary Margaret, who was wearing a grimace. “Are you ok?”

Mary Margaret nodded. “Yeah. Just heartburn I think. This one’s making me hungry all the time and I think I ate too quickly.” She leaned back against the hard bench seating in the booth, rubbing her belly. “Just carry on without me for a while.”

Regina didn’t seem entirely convinced of Mary Margaret’s words and quirked an eyebrow, but nonetheless turned her attention back to Emma.

“Henry needs stability,” she said. “He’s a teenager and growing up fast. He needs a home and I think that ultimately, he’s the only one who can decide where that home is.”

Neal nodded his agreement. “You can make a new home, Emma,” he said. “I think it’s the people that make a home really, not a place.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah. You’ve said that before.” She remembered the date, long ago now, before Henry was ever even a thought. Two young adults trying to make their way in the world, never really knowing where their home was but not caring as long as they had each other. Dreaming of Tallahassee and the permanence that they both scoffed at and craved at the same time.

“Excuse me.” Mary Margaret shifted uncomfortably and David moved up to allow her to get out of the booth.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, I just need the bathroom, like I do every ten minutes these days.” She made her way down the corridor towards the restrooms, one hand on her back. The others watched her go and exchanged a look.

“Do you think she’s in labour?” Neal asked.

“I think she’s in denial,” Emma said. The conversation petered out as they waited for Mary Margaret’s return, everyone slightly uneasy about the situation. Women gave birth every day without any problems, but the circumstances of Emma’s birth made her sibling’s seem all the more fraught with danger.

“I hope Aurora and Mulan are ok,” Neal said out of the blue, and Emma looked at him, raising an eyebrow. “Aurora was pregnant when I left the Enchanted Forest to come to you in Neverland. Robin said that prior to us getting back there and their memories being wiped, Mulan and Aurora had been travelling with them. Philip had been turned into a monkey. If everything went well, then Aurora should have had the baby by now, but there’s no sign of them here in Storybrooke.”

“Maybe they got monkeyed too,” David said, although it wasn’t exactly reassuring, and Neal’s incredulous look told him so without the need for words. Emma’s brow furrowed.

“Hold on,” she said. “I think I remember something from New York.”

Regina, who had only been paying half her attention to Neal, was still looking over her shoulder towards the restrooms.

“I think someone should go and see if she’s ok,” she said.
David nodded. “I’ll go.”

In the restroom, Mary Margaret rested her forehead against the edge of the sink as she waited for the pain of the contraction to subside. There was no use in trying to kid herself that this was just indigestion or anything other than labour beginning. The pain ebbed away and she shook her head. This was what she had been afraid of, ever since she had woken up to find herself back in Storybrooke with a year of amnesia and suddenly nine months pregnant, ready to drop. She’d woken David up with her screaming in terror and had spent the rest of the day crying. Couldn’t this baby at least wait until they’d regained their memories and she had some idea of how her pregnancy had progressed? Sure, she had her memories of expecting Emma, but that really wasn’t the same. She wasn’t prepared for this at all; she wasn’t ready to give birth again. All she could feel was fear.

The minutes began to pass, and she could almost kid herself that it was over, it was just false labour brought on by stress and she’d be fine in a minute.

There was a tap on the door.

“Snow?” David’s voice said softly. “Are you ok in there?”

She wanted to say that she was fine, and she hoped that if she said it enough times then it would be true. But she could feel another contraction building, clenching her abdomen like a vice and squeezing tight.

“Snow?” David persisted. “Snow, please talk to me.”

“No,” she sobbed as the pain kept coming. “No, I’m not all right.”

“Hold on, you’ll be ok, I promise.”

But how could he promise that when the last time she’d been in this situation, she’d not seen her baby for twenty-eight years?

The pain stopped again and Mary Margaret realised that she’d forgotten to count the minutes between contractions. Given everything, she thought that she could be forgiven that lapse. She rested her forehead against the sink again and began to count.

The waitress unlocked the ladies’ restroom door from the outside and David slipped inside, putting his arms around his wife.

“It’s coming,” she whispered. “David, I’m scared.”

“It’ll be all right. Come on. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

Mary Margaret let him help her to her feet. She could only hope that he was right.

**Enchanted Forest – Missing Year**

It took them the better part of the night to get back to the village where Aurora and Mulan were hiding out – Jefferson had gone home to fetch Grace, not wanting to leave her alone in the cottage at night and not wanting to be separated from her in the event of something terrible happening when they tried to use the silkworms. She seemed pretty happy with the status quo for the most part and
walked alongside her father without complaint.

As they neared the village, Belle could hear the tell-tale rustlings of the flying monkeys in the treetops, and she was forcibly reminded that Aurora’s baby was not the only one in whom the monkeys were taking an active interest. She glanced over at Jefferson and Grace. If Belle’s presence in their little adventuring party out father and daughter in danger, then she would never forgive herself.

Luckily, the monkeys made no move to attack, just biding their time and watching the group’s progression from the cover of the uppermost branches. At the edge of the village, Belle saw that the perimeter was outlined with small bonfires, just as the outlaws’ camp had been when they first arrived back in the Enchanted Forest. A bright torch was also burning outside each of the small cottages, and as they came towards the clustered dwellings, a pair of villagers armed with pitchforks and small torches blocked their way.

“Who goes there?” one of them challenged.

“It’s all right, they’re with me.” Mulan showed her face to the villager; he nodded and waved them through.

“Ever since the monkeys started hanging around, the villagers have formed a night watch,” Mulan explained. “So far there haven’t been any casualties, but it’s another reason for wanting to leave the realm. These are good, hard-working people who took us in, and I don’t want anything to happen to them because of the trouble that we brought with us.”

They continued on through the village until they reached the last house on the main street. Belle could see a pair of eyes peeping out from behind the shutters on the upper window, and as Mulan ushered them inside, Aurora was descending the steps, a tightly swaddled bundle of blankets nestled carefully in her arms.

“You were gone longer than you said you would be, I was starting to get worried,” she scolded Mulan, rushing over to her lover as fast as she dared with her delicate burden.

“I know, I’m sorry.” Mulan kissed her gently. “But I was successful.” She took out the small pouch that she had put the silkworms into and showed Aurora their treasure. The princess beamed, and turned her attention to their visitors.

“Belle, Neal, it’s good to see you again. You’re both all right.”

“As well as can be expected, all things considered,” Neal said. “Aurora, this is Jefferson and his daughter Grace, he’s a portal jumper who’s helping us to get to the Land Without Magic. Jefferson, Aurora. And I guess this must be Philip.”

They took a moment to admire the baby, and Belle felt the spark of hope reignite inside her. If a child, so small and helpless against the world, could survive against the odds, then there was still hope for the rest of them to make it too.

“Are you all coming with us?” Aurora asked.

Neal shook his head. “No, just me. I have to find Emma and tell her about everything that’s going on here. Hopefully she’ll be able to help us. And you might need a guide to the Land Without Magic since you’ve never been there before.”

“That would be very kind, thank you. You’re not coming, Belle?”
“No. I have to work out what the witch is doing, and I need to be here for that. Besides, I want to stay close to Rumpel.”

She realised that Mulan and Aurora didn’t have the full story of Rumpelstiltskin’s resurrection, but they knew that she and Neal had left the main group in order to try and locate him, and they did not press for further details.

“Shall we get this show on the road?” Jefferson asked. “I really don’t like the look of those monkeys beyond the village limits.”

As nice as it was to catch up with old friends, Jefferson had a point, and the three travellers gathered together in the centre of the room.

“All right, so, like with any portal, you have to focus on where you want to end up,” Jefferson said. “If the silkworms have any kind of logic to them, then you should be able to guide them to your intended destination like I can do with the hat. Other than that, just drop the thing like a bean and pray.”

Belle, Jefferson and Grace stepped back out of the portal’s radius potential, and Mulan shook one of the silkworms out into Neal’s hand.

“You know where you’re going,” she said. “I trust you to navigate us.”

Neal closed his eyes, focussing his mind on the familiar places of New York, his old apartment. He let the silkworm drop to the ground, expecting the rush of a portal in his ears, but nothing happened. He opened his eyes, but they had definitely not gone anywhere, and the worm was wriggling forlornly on the floorboards.

“Well, that’s not how it’s supposed to work,” Jefferson said. “Maybe they aren’t as similar to beans as we thought.”

Mulan took out her book again and Belle studied the pages for a while.

“One use only,” Belle read. “Individual use only.”

“That would imply that each silkworm can only transport one person,” Mulan said. Belle nodded her agreement.

“It would make sense, considering the numeric rules of the hat,” Jefferson said. “One goes in, one comes back. This is working on the same principle.”

“Ok. Well, there’s three of us and we’ve got three silkworms,” Aurora said. “I know it would be useful to keep one for the journey back, but that might never happen. I say that we just go for it.”

Mulan and Neal agreed, and Mulan emptied out the rest of the silkworms.

“Hold on to each other,” Neal said, taking Mulan’s hand. “We need to make sure that we all end up in the same place. On my count. One. Two. Three.”

All three silkworms hit the floorboards but again, nothing happened.

Mulan scooped them up, her brow furrowed. “I hope they aren’t hurt,” she said. “It must be a pretty big impact for something so tiny. Why didn’t that work?”

Neal sighed. “I know why.” He nodded to baby Philip. “One silkworm, one person. Even a babe in
arms counts as a separate person.”

Reluctantly, Neal stepped out of the portal radius. “You take all three,” he said. “It’s more important that Aurora and the baby are safe, and Mulan, you’re better placed to protect them if you need to.”

The two women had to stick together, they were all each other had.

“What about your message?” Mulan asked.

“I’ll need you to deliver it,” Neal said. “Focus on getting to New York. Once you’re there, go to my old apartment. The terms of the lease mean that it should be empty.” He scribbled down the address on the title page of Mulan’s book. “Stay there, and try to find Emma if you can. Give her this message; tell her that she and her family are in danger and she needs to get to Storybrooke. Tell her not to trust the man that she’s seeing.”

Mulan nodded. “We’ll do what we can. What about you, though?”

Neal gave a tight smile. “As much as I want to find Emma and warn her myself, I need to stay here and help Belle, and hopefully help release my father. I know I can trust you.” He paused. “Stay in New York, keep a low profile.”

“Won’t we look a bit conspicuous?” Aurora asked.

Neal laughed. “Believe me, if there’s one place where you can get away with wearing the strangest of outfits, it’s New York. When everything’s fixed, I’ll send you a postcard.”

“What’s a postcard?”

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

The two ladies nodded their understanding, and goodbyes and hugs were exchanged. Finally, with one arm around Aurora, Mulan dropped the three silkworms whilst the others watched from a safe distance. This time, the portal took hold, and the swirling vortex opened up beneath them. Clinging to each other, Mulan and Aurora were swept up in the magic, and then they were gone.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Grace and Henry seemed to be completely absorbed in their conversation at the other end of the history stack, and after a while of watching them, Belle turned her attention back to Jefferson. He gave her a sympathetic smile.

“I heard about Rumpel. I’m so sorry. How are you holding up?”

Belle shrugged. “I don’t think I am, to be honest,” she said frankly. “I just want to burst into tears and scream about how unfair it is all the time, but I know that’s not going to help him and it’s not going to make me feel any better in the long run.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Jefferson asked. “He’s my friend and I want to help if I can, even if I have been somewhat reticent in more recent years. I know what it’s liked to be trapped somewhere against your will, away from your loved ones, and I’d certainly never wish it on Rumpel.”

Belle shook her head and gave a long sigh that did not quite mask the wobble in her voice.
“I don’t think that there’s anything that you can do,” she said. “Neal and Emma and I have tried what we can, but we’re at the end of our abilities now. Everything that we do just seems to make matters worse, and I don’t want to cause him any more pain than he’s already going through. It looks like our only option is to face up to the Wicked Witch, but even then, we don’t have any idea of what we’re really up against. That’s what I’m trying to do now. Identify what on earth her spell could be. All we know is that it’s a powerful four-pointer, and she’s already got three of her ingredients. We need to stop her before she gets her hands on the fourth.”

“I guess that’s why half of the Dark Castle’s library is spread out on the issue desk,” Jefferson said, picking up the nearest book, entitled Fantastic Curses and How to Break Them. Belle nodded.

“This isn’t even half of it,” she said. “This was just what I could find here in the library and in Rumpel’s house. The curse didn’t see fit to bring everything we needed in on convenient place.”

Jefferson surveyed the mess of open books all over the issue desk and thought better of moving any of them to give himself a place to perch, settling instead for leaning nonchalantly on the desk. Belle gave him a look but made no comment.

“Is there anything that I can do to help your research?” he asked.

“Well, a second pair of eyes is always useful. And your knowledge from other lands might prove invaluable too. You’ve been to Oz, haven’t you? Perhaps it’s a spell from Zelena’s native land. It just seems like such a random collection of ingredients. I don’t know how they’re related.”

“I’m no magician,” Jefferson said. “But I’ll do what I can. I’ve been to Oz several times before, it was where I met Zelena in the first place. I guess in a way that this is all partially my fault. If I hadn’t met her and had never introduced her to Rumpelstiltskin in the first place then perhaps there’s a chance that all this could have been avoided.”

“I don’t know, she seems pretty determined, whatever she’s doing. I wouldn’t blame yourself.”

“The power of four.” Jefferson peered at the nearest book. “You don’t come across that too often. Most things tend to talk about the power of three.”

“Not all the time,” Belle said. “The four elements, the four humours. The things she’s taken so far have all been organics – blood, hair, tears.”

“Well, blood is usually associated with fire, and tears would be water.”

“Hair, though?”

Jefferson shrugged. “My guess would be earth. That would leave us with something representing air.”

“Yes.” It was a tenuous link but it was the only one they had. “This is ridiculous. Normally you look up a spell to find its ingredients, not the other way around. I’ve known Rumpel work backwards from a spell’s effects before, but never this level of reverse engineering. It’s like trying to find a needle in a haystack.”

Jefferson was silent for a long time, his brow furrowed.

“I’ve thought of something else with four,” he said. “The four Cardinal Witches of Oz. Zelena’s West, we know that. But what about North, East and South? Where did they go? Were they in on it all, or are they three of our unfortunate flying monkeys? And where are Zelena’s slippers? She had silver slippers, her sister had given them to her so that she could always get back to Oz if she needed.
You know, the more I think about it, the more I think that Oz might be the key.”

It was a chilling thought. As far as any of them could remember, Jefferson was the only person in the town who had ever been to Oz, and his knowledge was severely limited.

“Or maybe it’s something in the ingredients themselves,” Jefferson continued. “What’s so special about Emma’s blood, your hair, Rumpelstiltskin’s tears? Couldn’t she have got them all from the same person? Why not Neal’s hair, he was there when you were attacked in the cemetery.”

“Well, Rumpel is the most powerful magician that we know of, but she already has the dagger so she has all of his power at her fingertips. Emma’s very powerful as well, but she can’t control her powers properly yet.” Belle paused. “Light and dark. Opposite poles.”

“You don’t have any magic though,” Jefferson pointed out.

“No, but I’m part fairy. I can’t use the magic, but it protects me.”

“You would think that it would be your blood that Zelena would want then, if she was going for the fairy angle. And if Emma and Rumpel are at opposite ends of the magic spectrum, then what’s opposite to a fairy?”

“We’re missing something,” Belle agreed.

“Four companions,” Jefferson suggested. “Dorothy, the tin man, the lion, the scarecrow. If we’re playing into Oz, then we might as well look at every possibility.”

Belle nodded slowly.

“Henry?” she called. “Does that book have anything about the Wizard of Oz in it?”

If Henry was perturbed by the question then he didn’t show it, and he flicked through the unread pages.

“Doesn’t look like it,” he replied. “There’s a bit about the wizard himself and how he came to Oz, and the flying monkeys, but nothing about Dorothy.” He peered closely at the book. “The wizard looks like Walsh.”

Jefferson and Belle looked at each other and decided that it would be best not to make any comment.

“Well, nothing there,” Belle said. “It does make you wonder, when we have to resort to reading books about our own lives to try and work out what on earth is going on.” She paused for a long time, surveying her mountain of books. “We’ve been missing something vital all along,” she said suddenly, scrabbling around for the correct text. “It can’t be linked to Oz, or we’d all be in Oz. Zelena came from Oz to the Enchanted Forest and then presumably from the Enchanted Forest to here, if we assume that she’s the one who cast the curse. She’s casting this new four-point spell from here. I would guess that whatever she’s doing, it doesn’t matter what realm she’s in. It’s so powerful that it transcends realms.”

“I thought that true love was the only magic that could transcend realms,” Jefferson said.

“In and of itself, yes, but there are a few spells that can do it too. Think about the laws of magic, Jefferson. One of them is that you can’t make someone fall in love with you, and love is something that transcends realms, so a spell to create love would have to transcend realms too.”

“You think she’s trying to make Rumpelstiltskin return her feelings?” Jefferson asked.
“No.” Belle’s voice was bitter. “No, I think she enjoys tormenting him too much to do that. It won’t be any fun if he’s willingly consenting to whatever she’s doing to him. No, I think she’s trying to break another law of magic.”

She worked in silence for a while, methodically going through all the books and discarding the ones that were no longer useful to her. Now that she had a clearer idea of what she was looking for, it was easier to know where to find it.

“The ingredients are key,” Belle continued as Jefferson looked on in perplexity. “We already know that she needed me, Emma and Rumpel specifically, she even crossed realms in order to get to us. It had to be us and something that we represent.”

Finally she found what she was looking for and gave an exclamation of triumph, closely followed by a gasp of horror.

“What is it?” Jefferson asked. “Have you found it?”

“Yes. You were right about the four elements, I think. Listen to this. Blood from the heart of the truest love. That’s Emma all right, all of her power comes from the fact that she was born of true love. Tears from the grief of the wisest craftsman. No-one knows the craft better than Rumpel. Hair from the mane of the bravest lion.”

“That’s you,” Jefferson said plainly. “What’s the fourth thing?”

“Breath from the depths of the newest soul,” Belle replied. “Something representing air, like you said.”

“And what do all those elements do?” Jefferson asked.

“Time travel.” Belle looked up at him, fearful. “Zelena is trying to change the past.”

“Breaking the second law of magic. But why?”

“Only she knows that.” Belle shook her head. “I have to warn the others. Depending on what she wants to change, this could have devastating consequences. There’s a reason why it’s forbidden!”

“What about the final ingredient?” Jefferson asked as Belle pulled her coat on and gathered up the heavy book. She faltered, and they both looked at each other in horror as the realisation dawned.

“Mary Margaret’s baby.”

“We’ve got to stop her before she gets her hands on that child,” Belle said. “Who knows what she’ll do to get it?”

“You go,” Jefferson urged. “I’ll stay here and man the fort and the phones.”

Belle nodded her thanks and sped off out of the library, hoping that she wouldn’t be too late.
Mulan was just about getting used to the Land Without Magic. She had known enough about it from what Neal had told her during his time with them before that she knew what to look out for and what to avoid, although that had not stopped her and Aurora flinching with fear every time they left the safety of Neal’s apartment to be confronted with the wider, and so it seemed, extremely dangerous, world outside. With so many threats lurking around every corner, she really felt uneasy going around the city without her sword, but since no-one else carried one as a matter of course and it was the weapon that had caused a lot of turned heads the last time she’d gone out with it, she’d accepted that she was going to have to leave it at home. Now that they were safely established with a roof over their heads and they were getting used to the complexities of this new realm, it was time to start on the second part of their mission – finding Emma and delivering Neal’s message.

In a city as large and crowded as New York, this wasn’t going to be the easiest of tasks, but it wasn’t as if Mulan had anything else to fill her days with. She was going to have to get a job soon so that they could keep living in Neal’s apartment without suspicion, but since she had no documents in this world, that was also going to be easier said than done. Still, Neal had managed on wits alone when he had first come to the Land Without Magic, so there was no reason why she and Aurora couldn’t too. Aurora had adapted far quicker than Mulan had been expecting her to; she was so tired from looking after the baby all the time that she just took everything unusual in her stride, sleeping right through the lights and sirens and raised voices that kept Mulan up at night, wondering if tonight would be the night that they were ousted as imposters and somehow sent back to the Enchanted Forest, where wicked witches and flying monkeys awaited them.

“You know, I think your mind’s just overworked,” Aurora said one evening as they curled up on the couch together. “You’re a warrior and you’re sworn to protect, but now there are so many new threats that you’ve never dealt with before, and you don’t know how best to handle them. At least back in the Enchanted Forest, you knew what you were up against and how to beat it.”

“Yeah.” Mulan ran a hand through her hair and stared up at a patch of mould on the ceiling. It looked like a very fat cat. “It’s all so new. At least when the Dark Curse brought all the others here, they had false memories of how all this stuff works.”

The sound of the phone ringing made them both jump, but then they relaxed and ignored the shrill tone. No-one was supposed to be living here, after all. All the same, the phone gave Mulan an idea. After it fell silent again, she went over to it, grabbing the directory that they’d shoved on top of it in an effort to stop it ringing.

“What are you doing?”

“Finding Emma. This has all the names and addresses of everyone in the city, so we should be able to use it to find Emma.”

Aurora nodded unsurely. “I guess. Are you sure she’ll be in there?”

“No, but we’ve got to try.”

They hefted the phone book onto the sofa and Mulan began pawing through it, finding the section for Swan.

“Here’s hoping that she’s still using her real name,” Aurora muttered.

There were twenty-two E Swans in the book, and Aurora and Mulan looked at each other. Mulan gave a bright smile that she knew looked painfully false.
“Well, it’ll keep us busy for a while, if nothing else.”

X

They’d visited ten E Swans without success and were on their way back to Neal’s apartment. Aurora was exhausted from carrying Philip around all day, and she dozed on Mulan’s shoulder as they rode the subway back across town. Mulan hadn’t wanted her to come, but Aurora had shrewdly pointed out that one had to adapt to changing times and changing realms, and she’d watched enough TV over the past couple of weeks to realise that the presence of a white woman with a young baby would be less likely to result in any unpleasantness if one of their E Swans didn’t take too kindly to being disturbed. So far nothing had happened, although a few people had mistaken them for members of a religious group on a recruitment drive.

The subway stopped to let more people on and off, and that was when Mulan saw her. Emma and a teenage boy who could only be Henry got on with a tall, gangly man. That must be the one that Neal needed to warn Emma about. Mulan couldn’t exactly pass on the message whilst he was sitting with them, so she just kept her eyes on the group, willing Emma to look over in her direction. Eventually she did, and Mulan’s heart sank as she looked straight through her. She did not have a clue who they were, that was clear.

“Can I help you?” Emma asked, noticing her staring.

Mulan shook her head. “No. You just looked familiar. Sorry.”

Emma just turned back to Henry. New York was full of weirdos, after all.

“We need to get a message across somehow,” Aurora mumbled from Mulan’s shoulder.

“I know that, but how?”

They didn’t have long to figure it out; theirs was the next stop. Mulan pulled out the page of E Swans that she had torn from the phone book and scribbled a note on it in pencil.

*You’re in danger. Your family needs you. Get to Storybrooke.*

The train came to a stop and Mulan and Aurora got off with the rest of the crowd, including Emma and Henry. Mulan slipped the note into Emma’s pocket as they passed her, and did not see Walsh surreptitiously remove it just a few seconds later.

*Storybrooke – Present*

In hindsight, Jefferson realised that it probably would have been better if he’d run out to find people on foot and Belle had been the one to stay behind frantically ringing people up, because Belle was far more likely to have everybody’s phone numbers. As it was, he had resorted to the local phone directory. Considering that the town had only materialised into existence a few days ago, it was a very comprehensive directory, but it didn’t help him when nobody was picking up their landline phone.

“Come on, come on, come on!” He drummed his fingers against the issue desk as he listened to the interminable ringing of the phone in the Blanchard-Nolan loft. Next time they were all unceremoniously dumped in another land, the first thing that they were going to do was hold a town
hall and exchange all phone numbers so that everyone could get hold of everyone in a time of crisis. Impending infant kidnap definitely constituted a crisis in Jefferson’s book. With a huff of frustration, he rang off and dialled another number, this time for the bed and breakfast where Emma was staying.

“Hello, Granny’s Bed and Breakfast, how can I help?”

“Granny, it’s Jefferson. I need to find Emma, is she there?”

“Sorry Jeff, she left a while ago. I don’t know where she went. She mentioned meeting Neal.”

“Ok, thank you.”

“Is there a problem, Jefferson?”

Jefferson sighed. “Belle’s worked out what the witch is doing. Mary Margaret’s in danger.”

He could already picture Granny going for her crossbow as she spoke.

“I’ll see if I can track them down. Thanks for the warning.”

They hung up and Jefferson flicked back a page to get Rumpelstiltskin’s home number and dial.

“Come on, come on! This is probably a matter of life and death, why is no-one at home!”

Realising he’d spoken rather loudly, he glanced down the stacks towards Henry and Grace, who had stopped talking to each other and were watching him with curiosity and nervousness. He had no time for platitudes though, hanging up on the answerphone and dialling Regina’s home number as the library doors opened to admit the last person in the world that he wanted to see.

“Zelena.” He dropped the phone back into its cradle and held her gaze steadily as she swept over to the issue desk.

“Jefferson. Really, it’s been too long. Are you still jetting off here, there and everywhere? I heard you had a little accident with your hat and ended up stuck in Wonderland of all places. I can imagine how that was. The mere thought of it is enough to send you mad.”

“Why are you here, Zelena?” Jefferson asked through gritted teeth.

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Zelena said. “This is a public library. I want to borrow something. Do I have to fill in a form or can I just take it?”

“You know, I get the feeling you’re not talking about books,” Jefferson growled, and he stepped out from behind the desk. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Henry and Grace backing up further into the depths of the library. They might not fully understand what was going on, but they could tell that whatever it was definitely wasn’t good.

“Ah ah.” Zelena raised a hand as Jefferson came towards her, flames licking over her fingertips. “You know how protective Belle is of her books, I’d really hate for them to be damaged in the struggle.”

“I’m sure I’ll be forgiven in the long run,” Jefferson snarled, looking around for something that he could use as a weapon, anything that could buy the kids more time to escape. He caught Grace’s eye.

“Go!” he mouthed, and she nodded her understanding, grabbing Henry by the arm.

“Come on, we have to go!” she whispered.
“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but that woman is dangerous. Papa’s trying to buy us time, we have to get out of here before she notices.”

Whether or not Henry believed her, he obviously believed the urgency in her voice and he nodded his acquiescence. Crouching low, they made their way to the end of the shelves as silently as possible. There weren’t really a lot of places to go; the entrance door was the only way in or out apart from the clanky old elevator, which would not only trap them in the basement but also draw Zelena’s attention straight to them. The door it was. They’d just have to pray.

Grace pressed herself flat against the bookshelves and started inching towards the doors. At this angle she was still out of Zelena’s sight line if she turned around, and just a few metres away there was a reshelving trolley that they could use for cover. Even before the second curse had hit and erased a year of her life, Grace could still remember playing hide and seek in the forest with her father, and how he had impressed upon her the importance of good concealment. She’d just never anticipated having to use those skills in a library whilst escaping from a witch.

Henry followed her and they crouched behind the trolley, peering around the edge. Jefferson was doing his best to keep the witch’s attention focussed away from them, but he was unarmed against her magic and it was only a matter of time.

“Is that fire?” Henry whispered, staring at Zelena’s hand where she had a fireball ready to throw.

“Yes. I told you that she was dangerous. Let’s move!”

They rolled the trolley along quietly towards the doors, and they were almost there when one of the wheels hit an uneven floor tile and made a scraping noise that was far too loud in the quiet library.

For a moment, everything was frozen. Grace closed her eyes, hoping that by some miracle, Zelena hadn’t heard. It was not to be. The fireball in the witch’s hand extinguished itself with a finger snap and she turned around, looking straight at the trolley.

“Well, you weren’t there when I came in,” she said in a benign, sing-song voice. “Who’s hiding behind here then?”

She only went one step before Jefferson launched himself at her back with a ferocious roar, crash-tackling her to the ground and smashing her face into the floor. Henry and Grace saw their chance and ran towards the doors, but there was the sound of locks snapping into place and the doors wouldn’t budge. They were trapped. Grace heaved at the doors with all her might, but it was no use. By the issue desk, there was a powerful blast of magic and Jefferson went flying across the room, landing with an ominous thud against the opposite wall and slumping down onto the floor.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you that it’s bad manners to hit a woman?” she quipped, and then she turned towards Grace and Henry.

“And now to get what I came for,” she said sweetly. “Don’t worry, I only need you for a few hours, just long enough for me to get my hands on your aunt or uncle. Of course, you don’t know anything about that, you poor oblivious soul. I really thought that they would have told you the truth by now, but no, apparently protecting their secret is more important.”

She hurled the trolley out of the way and grabbed Henry, vanishing in a cloud of green smoke before either of the kids could do anything to react. Grace was rooted in place for a moment after Zelena disappeared, but a groan from Jefferson galvanised her back into action.
“Papa? Papa, are you all right?”

“I feel like I got run over by a bus,” Jefferson grumbled. “But I don’t think anything’s broken. What happened?”

“Zelena’s got Henry.”

“Why does she…” Jefferson groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face. “She’s going to use him as a distraction to get the baby. Help me up, we need to warn the others.”

Grace shook her head.

“Papa, we’re locked in.”

Jefferson looked at the doors grimly.

“In that case, we’ll just have to break out.”

To be continued!
Zelena glanced over her shoulder at Rumpelstiltskin. He was watching her from his cage, his eyes dark and malevolent and an almost palpable wave of hatred rolling off him. It made her smile. Clawed fingers curled around the bars as he stared at the bubbling cauldron.

“You know, Rumpel, I really don’t think you’re in a position to be offering me advice.” She turned to him fully and leaned back against the cauldron. “Why are you offering me advice? You’ve made no secret of your utter loathing for me. Why this sudden concern?”

“Oh, believe me, the concern is not for you,” Rumpelstiltskin spat. “But if you really think that your plan is going to work then you’re even more deluded than I thought.”

“Of course it’s going to work, Rumpel. This is your curse, after all. I’m following your recipe to the letter. Just one more ingredient to go. The heart of the thing you love most.”

“Is that why you’ve kept me around so long?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, the sarcasm dripping.

Zelena raised an eyebrow. “Don’t flatter yourself, darling. There’s something far more precious. And like I said – it’s your curse. Surely you have faith in your own work?”

“I do,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“So where precisely is my big mistake?” Zelena sounded amused.

“What you do now sets you on dangerous path,” Rumpelstiltskin continued. “Don’t forget that I can see the future.”

“The future will be obsolete once I change the past.” Zelena stirred the bubbling cauldron.

“It’s forbidden for a reason, dearie.”

“But despite that, it’s still possible. Curious, that.”

“You should know that everything’s possible. Just not everything that can be done, should be done. You’re doomed to fail.”

“I’m on my way to collect my ingredients, no-one here will remember anything of the past few months of conflict and I’ll be free to come and go as I please and organise everything to my liking. You’ll still be locked up safe and obeying my every command, and our dear saviour of Storybrooke will be blissfully oblivious and unable to jump in to the rescue. But speaking of memories, there are some matters that require my attention.”

Zelena swept towards the door and stopped at the frame, turning back to Rumpelstiltskin.

“I won’t fail, Rumpel. When I set my mind to what I want, I go through with it, as you well know. I’ve planned everything.”

The door closed behind her, and Rumpelstiltskin gave a grim smile.
“Not quite everything dearie.”

He needed to get a message to Belle and Neal. The curse would be cast any moment now, and if they stood any chance of getting Emma back to Storybrooke to help them on her own terms, then they had to work quickly.

The Dark Castle’s windows were open to let the steam from the bubbling cauldron escape, and with the warmth from the open windows, birds were attracted in. Rumpelstiltskin grabbed the breadcrusts from the meagre meals that Zelena had been feeding him and crumbled them up, spreading the crumbs in as wide an arc as he could outside his cage, crouching down on his haunches to wait. It was a long shot, but it was the only one he had and if he didn’t try it then he’d never be able to live with himself. He’d never trusted birds as messengers before unless they were carrying something written, but without access to pen and paper, he was going to have a little faith.

It took a while, and he was constantly looking back over his shoulder towards the door in case Zelena came back. The crumbs she probably wouldn’t notice, but the birds she would. There was a bluebird sitting in the windowsill, looking at him shrewdly.

“Come in here,” Rumpel said through gritted teeth. “For the love of anything, fly inside. I’m not going to eat you.”

He was hungry enough to devour the thing whole, but there wasn’t all that much meat on it and there were more pressing things at hand than his own growling stomach. A warning message wouldn’t be enough, but he knew what Zelena was planning and he knew how to get what he needed to Emma, although he would need Belle and Neal’s help to pull it off. He felt guilty; he was putting them in harm’s way with his request, but he couldn’t do it any other way. He couldn’t go to them, so they would have to come to him.

The bird fluttered in off the windowsill and Rumpelstiltskin leaned forward eagerly, causing the bird to take a hop back in alarm. Rumpelstiltskin sat back with a sigh, running a hand through his hair. Some people just naturally attracted birds. If Snow White were here there would be no doubt of success, indeed, he’d probably be overrun with an entire flock of the damned things.

“Come on,” he wheedled, keeping as still as possible as the bird hopped a little closer to the scattered breadcrumbs. “Please help me out here, you’re my only hope.”

The bird turned its little head on one side and hopped up to the crumbs, still giving him an altogether suspicious look as it started to peck at them. It was still too far away, and Rumpelstiltskin cursed, resting his forehead against the bars of the cage.

“Just a little further, please. Come on, you don’t want me to have to tell the entire rest of bird-kind that the Enchanted Forest came to ruin because of you, do you? You’d be over here in an instant if I was young and pretty and female and had a good singing voice, wouldn’t you?” He paused. “I’m talking to a bluebird. I’ve definitely cracked.”

To his surprised, the bird hopped a little closer.

“So admitting my own insanity is what it takes? I’ve been going mad for months; you could have been a bit quicker off the mark.”

The bird was almost within reach, but Rumpelstiltskin couldn’t and wouldn’t chance it yet. All that would happen would be him startling the bird and then he’d have no chance. Time was tight as it was. He couldn’t afford to start from scratch again.
He closed his eyes, trying to take deep breaths and calm himself. Not for the first time, it felt like the walls of the cage were closing in on him. He wondered if Zelena was periodically making it smaller in order to break his spirit. He was already broken, but he wasn’t about to let her know that. He’d stay defiant to the last. He knew what she needed from him, and he wasn’t going to let her have it. If he could slow her down, then he’d buy everyone else more time to foil her plan. He could not fail.

Rumpelstiltskin opened his eyes again. The bird had come right up to the bars of his cage where the largest crumbs were, and it was watching him with undisguised curiosity. Rumpelstiltskin smiled. It was now or never. He reached out and snatched up the little bird, much to its alarm. It started twittering and squawking, struggling feebly against his grip.

“Will you be quiet?” Rumpelstiltskin hissed. “You’ll get both of us caught!”

The bluebird showed no signs of understanding and Rumpelstiltskin rolled his eyes, clamping the bird’s beak shut between finger and thumb.

“That’s better.” The bird just glared at him for his trouble, but at least it seemed to be listening now. “I need you to take a message to Belle and Neal in Snow White’s castle,” Rumpelstiltskin said slowly. It wasn’t that he doubted the bird’s intelligence, but this was of the utmost importance and if it garbled the message or delivered it to the wrong person, then all hope of them getting out of Zelena’s plans alive would go up in smoke.

“Do you understand?”

The bird was still glaring at him, but it nodded and Rumpelstiltskin released its beak.

“Start message from Rumpelstiltskin. ‘Come to Dark Castle if you can, have plan to get Emma to Storybrooke to help with memory potion, curse cast imminent within next few hours.’ End message.”

He gave the bird a suspicious look. “Did you get all that?”

He got the distinct impression that the bird was rolling its eyes.

“He gave the bird a suspicious look. “Did you get all that?”

He got the distinct impression that the bird was rolling its eyes.

“Repeat the message back.

“Message from Rumpelstiltskin,” the bird said in a high, tweeting voice. “Come to Dark Castle if you can, have plan to get Emma to Storybrooke to help with memory potion, curse cast imminent within next few hours. End message.” It turned its head on one side, as if to ask if it was free to go.

Rumpelstiltskin nodded. “Yes. Very good. I’m sure Snow White can put in a good word for you when you get there.”

He went back to the bars of the cage and threw the bird out into the air. It caught its wings immediately and fluttered over to the window, landing on the sill.

“Go!” Rumpelstiltskin said frantically. “Go on! Get going!” He could hear Zelena’s footsteps echoing along the corridor towards the main hall. “Get out of here!”

The bird flew away out of sight just as Zelena entered. She stopped in the doorway, her expression suspicious.

“Who were you talking to?” she asked.
“Myself,” Rumpelstiltskin said sourly. “Living in a cage in one’s own home is bound to have a negative effect on one’s mental state, don’t you think?” He paused; Zelena really didn’t look convinced. “Well it’s not like there’s anyone else here!”

For some reason that seemed to mollify her and she came back over to the cauldron where the Dark Curse was brewing up. If she noticed the breadcrumbs covering the floor, then she didn’t say anything about them.

“It looks like we’re all set,” she said. “Everything’s falling into place just as it should. Just one more little insurance before we go.”

This was it, the part of his plan that couldn’t go wrong but had at least one hundred opportunities to do so. Zelena pulled two small vials of memory potion out of her pocket and unstoppered one, gulping it down.

“Can’t be going to another realm and not remembering why when I get there.”

She brought the other vial over to Rumpelstiltskin and set it on the horizontal bar that ran around his cage. Rumpelstiltskin just looked at it, unimpressed.

“I’m not quite sure what you expect me to do with that,” he said.

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Zelena snapped. “I expect you to drink it.”

“Are you so unsure of yourself that you need me to remember what you’re going to do as well?” Rumpelstiltskin sneered. The best way to conquer despair, he had found, was anger, and no matter how much she tried to wear him down, his blind anger and hatred for her could keep him going when he felt dead on the inside.

“No.” Zelena smiled cruelly and reached through the bars, caressing his face. Rumpelstiltskin leaned away from her touch but he knew that it was pointless to try and recoil completely. “No, pet, I want you to remember this year. I want you to remember every second you’ve spent in this horrid little cage bending to my every whim. But more importantly, I want you to remember what I’m going to do in Storybrooke, but be completely unable to warn anyone.” She withdrew her hand. “Take your potion, pet.”

She swept out of the room again, probably going to check on her sister, and Rumpelstiltskin grabbed the little obsidian vial.

“Never said I had to take it out of the bottle,” he muttered, before taking a deep breath and forcing the vial down his throat.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Emma was beginning to think that the inside of Storybrooke hospital’s waiting room was getting to be an all too familiar sight, but at least this time it was hopefully a happy occasion. Once it had become clear that Mary Margaret was in labour, the entire party had decamped from the diner by a kind of mutual agreement. Everyone was as nervous about this baby’s arrival as the prospective parents were, and whilst David and Mary Margaret had been whisked off to a delivery ward, Neal, Emma and Regina were left waiting for news.

“You know, we could be here a while,” Emma pointed out. “I was in labour with Henry for eleven and a half hours.”

Neal and Regina looked at her with mixed horror and admiration, but neither of them made any
move to leave. Emma grabbed her phone; it was time to check in with Henry and apprise him of the latest developments so that he wouldn’t think that she’d just vanished into thin air like Walsh had done.

Her phone began to buzz, and it showed that it was Henry calling.

“Huh. Speak of the devil.” She picked up. “Hey Henry.”

“Sorry,” Zelena drawled on the phone. “Henry’s somewhat indisposed at the moment.”

Emma’s blood ran cold. “What have you done with him?”

“Oh, nothing yet. I haven’t quite decided on the best method of despatch.”

“If you harm one hair on his head, I will hunt you down and tear you limb from limb!”

Regina and Neal had already been put on high alert by the substance of the phone call, and this bald statement had them on their feet and crowding around her.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Put him on the phone. I want to hear that he’s ok.”

“Mom?”

“Henry! Henry, are you hurt? Are you all right? Where are you?”

“The old cannery,” Regina said. “She’ll probably have taken him there. There’s a lot of magical residue left from when I was held there and the portal opened, and she’ll want to take advantage of that boost.”

The three of them left the hospital at a run.

“We’ve got to find him,” Emma said plainly.

“We should have told Mary Margaret and David where we’re going?” Neal asked as he dived into the back of the bug, Regina taking shotgun.

“There’s no time!” Emma exclaimed. “Besides, they’ve got enough on their plate right now!”

Neal had to agree, but the fact they’d left the expectant parents undefended troubled him. The timing was too convenient, and now the first line of magical defence against whatever Zelena might throw at anyone was on the move. Henry was his priority, but maybe calling in back-up wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

He dialled Belle, willing her to pick up, but there was no reply and it rang off to her voicemail. There was nothing for it: they would need to call different back-up. It was time to call in the cavalry.

“Granny’s bed and breakfast, how can I help?”
“Granny, it’s Neal, can you round up the dwarfs and go to the hospital? Take your crossbow.”

“Neal, what’s going on? I’ve just had Jefferson on the phone looking for Emma, now you wanting me to lead an armed raid on the hospital.”

“No, no, not an armed raid, just be there in case something happens.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“Hopefully nothing, but Mary Margaret’s having a baby and we all know what happened last time.”

“True enough. I’ll get a team together. Why aren’t you there?”

Neal sighed.

“Zelena’s got Henry.”

X

If anyone was surprised when Granny and four of the seven dwarfs marched into the hospital, then they didn’t show it. In the labour ward, David and Mary Margaret were blissfully unaware of all the chaos going on outside their own little area of high stress. Doc was talking to the midwife in hushed, urgent tones, and Mary Margaret was beginning to think that something was very wrong.

“What’s happening?” she yelled as another contraction took hold. It hadn’t been like this with Emma. As horrifically stressful as Emma’s delivery had been, it was nothing compared to this. The pain was absolutely relentless, even with the Land Without Magic’s drugs. Doc came over.

“I’ve never seen a labour progress so quickly,” he said. “It’s been less than two hours and you’re ready to push. It’s not unheard of, but I’m still concerned.” He looked apologetic. “I think your labour was induced magically.”

A fresh wave of fear doused Mary Margaret and she looked up at David, squeezing his hand as the pain hit again and the urge to push became overwhelming. Everything else went out of the window and all she could focus on was the pain.

It was only when she heard the loud and joyous scream of a new-born infant that she could finally come back to herself.


Out in the hospital waiting room, Granny and the gathered dwarfs tensed as a swirl of dark smoke heralded Rumpelstiltskin’s arrival.

Enchanted Forest – Missing Year

The watchtower had become Belle’s usual haunt. It was quiet and isolated, away from all the politics of the castle below that she took no real interest in, and the proximity to the scopes made her feel closer to Rumpelstiltskin even across the miles. The dwarfs were the perfect companions, leaving her to her own devices for the most part, but always willing to lend an ear if she wanted to talk through another idea for rescuing Rumpelstiltskin that would never get off the ground.

Sometimes Neal joined her, although he was often roped in to be a voice of reason in the arguments going on in the war room, and he had his own mission of trying to contact Emma to think about. As much as they hated to admit it, they couldn’t rescue Rumpelstiltskin on their own, and they couldn’t
exactly surreptitiously borrow a garrison for a raid on the Dark Castle.

Today Neal was with her, shielded from the high winds by the tower’s sturdy crenelations as they pored over their respective books, looking for something, anything, that they might have overlooked that could give them an advantage over Zelena and help to free Rumpelstiltskin from her control. Grumpy was on lookout duty, and Belle saw his brow furrow.

“Are we expecting any messages?” he asked.

“Us personally? No,” Neal said. “But Snow and Regina are in pretty constant contact with the guys in the woods, so they might be. Why?”

“Because there’s a bluebird coming towards the tower at Mach Three,” Grumpy observed. “I’ve never known a bird have such blind determination in its face before.”

Sure enough, a couple of seconds later, a bluebird zoomed over their heads, realised that it had overshot and turned back, landing on the parapet in front of Belle and Neal.

“Message from Rumpelstiltskin,” it said shrilly. “Come to Dark Castle if you can, have plan to get Emma to Storybrooke to help with memory potion, curse cast imminent within next few hours. End message.”

Having completed its task, the bluebird fluttered away, leaving Belle and Neal looking at each other agape.

“It might be a trap,” Neal said, although Belle could tell from his voice that he desperately wanted to believe that it was genuine.

“We’ll have to chance it,” Belle said. “If he can get a memory potion for Emma, then that saves one huge problem. And if what he says about the curse is true, then we have no time to lose. We should warn the others of that if nothing else.”

“I’ll go,” Grumpy volunteered, and he disappeared through the trapdoor into the tower.

“How would we get the potion to Emma though?” Belle asked. As good an opportunity as it was, it definitely presented some logistical difficulties. “So far we’ve only tried sending messages across the realms, either ourselves or by proxy, but sending a potion? There’s no way to guarantee that she’d receive it, and it might end up in that monkey’s hands.”

“Yeah.” Neal leaned back against the stone, aware that time was ticking away from them and that if they didn’t act quickly, they may not get the chance to act at all.

“Ariel,” Belle said suddenly.

“Pardon?”

“Ariel can swim across realms,” Belle continued, gesticulating excitedly as the plan began to take shape in her mind. “I never thought of her before because she spends most of her time on land now, and after Neverland she vowed never to swim between realms again. I think she might make an exception for something so important though. We could ask her to take the potion.”

“She can’t speak when she’s on land,” Neal pointed out.

“It’s never stopped her from communicating effectively before.”
“All right. I think you might be onto something there. Now we just have to figure out how to get to the Dark Castle and get into it without Zelena noticing, get to Papa, get the potion and get out again, and pray that it isn’t a trap. Even if it is a trap, we’d have to get past her barrier.”

“It would have helped if he’d given us a bit more notice,” Belle said, but it was a feeble joke and neither of them laughed at it. Presently, a couple of sets of footsteps on the tower steps below them heralded Grumpy’s return, accompanied by someone who turned out to be Charming.

“Grumpy says you’ve had a message from Rumpelstiltskin,” he began, no pre-emptive niceties. “The curse is coming very soon.”

“Yes.” Belle didn’t go into the details, knowing that Charming would shoot down their plans.

“Grumpy also mentioned you going to the Dark Castle.”

Belle glared at the dwarf, who looked a little sheepish.

“Have you…” Charming began, but Belle cut him off.

“Yes, we have considered that it might be a trap which is why I’m going alone,” she snapped. Beal looked at her as if she’d grown a second head.

“Belle…”

“No. You need to stay here. You need to be in one piece to get back to Henry and Emma. I’m going and I’m going by myself. If anyone stands a chance of getting through to Rumpel in whatever state he might be in, then it’s me. And if it is a trap, then so be it. The rest of you will all be all right and at the end of the day, in a few hours’ time none of us will remember any of this anyway.”

There was such a fierceness in her voice that neither of the men dared to argue with her as she got to her feet.

“How are you going to get in there?” Neal asked.

“The castle knows me,” Belle said. “The enchantments and blood locks on it were cast before Rumpel was enslaved and his magic is far more powerful than Zelena’s. It will let me in. And once I’m inside, well, I’ll just have to rely on my brains.”

“Belle, I can’t let you do this,” Charming said.

“And how are you going to stop me, Your Highness?” Belle asked coolly. “This is my life and my safety, no-one else’s, and only I get to make these decisions. Rumpelstiltskin, the man I love, is imprisoned in his own home and even if all I can do is get a glimpse of him to reassure myself that he’s going to be ok at the end of all this, then that’s enough for me. I hold out no hope of rescuing him, but he has asked me to go to him and so that’s damn well what I’m going to do.”

Charming and Neal looked at each other for a few moments.

“The others aren’t going to like this,” Charming pointed out.

“They don’t need to know,” Neal said. “We’ll cover for you. If you’re aware of the risks and you’re determined to go alone, then we can’t stop you. If you’ve got a plan to get inside and get out again, then I trust your judgement.”

Belle smiled. “Thank you, Neal.”
“I guess you’d better get going,” Charming said. “If you want to get there and back before the curse hits, then it doesn’t sound like there’s much time.”

Belle was already racing down the tower steps, with Neal and Charming hot on her heels.

“Take care of yourself, Belle,” Neal pleaded. “You know that Papa would never forgive himself if something happened to you whilst you were doing something for him.”

“I will,” Belle said. “I know how he is. You take care of everyone here, and if I’m not back before the curse hits, then you know I’m with Rumpel and I’m all right.”

Neal nodded. “Just try to make it back.” He followed her out into the courtyard where the stables were.

“You have my word,” Belle assured him. “Now, you figure out a way to contact Ariel and I’ll go and see Rumpel.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard. Legs or no legs, Ariel’s a Neverland mermaid and she should respond to the right call.” Neal gave Belle a leg up onto her horse; Charming had gone to open the side gate and check that the coast was clear.

The two men watched as Belle tore away from the castle at a gallop, heading out towards the mountains and the Dark Castle. All they could do was wait, and hope that she would get there in time.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Granny levelled her crossbow at Rumpelstiltskin.

“Please,” he said. He sounded tired and like there was no fight left in him, but although Granny felt a pull of sympathy for him, it was not enough to make her lower her weapon. “Please get out of the way. You know why I’m here and you know I can’t stop until I’ve got it.”

Granny nodded. “I know it’s not your fault and you’re not doing it of your own free will, but if you think that I won’t fire this at you then believe me, when it comes to protecting Snow and David I wouldn’t even blink.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “That’s the problem.”

He took another couple of steps through the waiting room and Granny loosed off the crossbow bolt. It stopped in mid-air before it reached its target, and slowly twisted around so that it was back facing the direction that it had come from.

“Please get out of the way,” Rumpelstiltskin repeated. “I can’t stop this.”

Granny stood her ground, and Rumpelstiltskin let the bolt go. It zoomed across the room and would have hit its mark if Leroy hadn’t crash-tackled Granny down behind a bank of seats.

“Your bravery’s admirable,” the dwarf panted, “but when an incredibly powerful sorcerer with no free will is pointing an arrow at you and tells you to get out of the way, you get out of the way.”

Granny nodded and she and Leroy made to get up, only to duck back down behind the seats when a pulse of magic ran around the room. They stayed down, listening to Rumpelstiltskin’s measured steps through the room, and once he was gone, they jumped up again. Everyone else in the waiting room was slumped over seats or on the floor, and Leroy raced over to Walter.
“It’s ok,” he said. “They’re just asleep. The spell must have missed us. Come on, we might still have a chance to waylay him.”

They rushed through the doors that led to the wards and along the corridor to the maternity unit.

“You know when Neal said ‘hopefully nothing’s going to happen’?” Leroy grumbled. “Well, I’m never trusting him again.”

“Yes, I think that’s justified,” Granny said. They had reached the maternity unit, following the trail of scared doctors and nurses down towards the room that Mary Margaret and David were in. Doc was on the floor outside, getting to his feet and rubbing his head gingerly.

“You’re too late,” he said. “He’s in there already.”

Leroy made to shoulder the door open, but he just bounced off it.

“It’s no use,” Doc said. “It’s sealed with magic.”

“Let’s see how magic gets on with this.” Leroy hefted his pickaxe and swung it at the door lock. The axe splintered and broke in two. “All right, it doesn’t get on with it. Brute strength it is.”

With Granny covering them with the crossbow in case anything else nefarious decided to intervene, the two dwarfs heaved the full force of their weight against the door, knowing that it was useless but unable to stand back and do nothing whilst their friends were in danger.

X

Mary Margaret knew that something was happening outside the room. She could hear the nurses and doctors and midwives exclaiming; she could hear Doc trying desperately to hold off whoever was outside, and she could hear the sickening thud of something or someone hitting the ground.

The door handle moved very slowly, and Rumpelstiltskin stepped inside the room. Mary Margaret clutched her son closer to her chest. He didn’t even have a name yet and he was already being snatched out of her arms, the key to some nefarious plot still unknown.

Rumpelstiltskin looked like he wanted to be anywhere else except in that room with them, and he just stood by the door. David was on his feet, hands grasping for a gun or a sword or literally anything else that he could use as a weapon. In the end he picked up the chair that he had been sitting in and lobbed it towards the door. Rumpelstiltskin caught it and set it down on the floor again.

“It’s not going to work,” he said. “I have to take the child, and nothing can stop me.”

“Are you sure about that?” David snarled.

Rumpelstiltskin nodded. “Don’t try it.”

David tried it anyway, rushing at the other man. A wave of magic flickered out from Rumpelstiltskin’s hands and he caught David as he slumped against him, depositing him in the waiting chair.

“He’s just asleep,” Rumpelstiltskin assured Mary Margaret. “He’ll be fine in a few minutes once I’m gone.”

“Please don’t take him,” Mary Margaret begged, tears streaming down her face as she cuddled her baby tighter.
“You know that I wouldn’t if I had any choice in the matter. I have to take him. But I won’t hurt him, I can promise you that.”

“She will,” Mary Margaret said.

“Not on my watch. I’ll keep him with me, and if there’s any hope of getting out of this, then I will bring him back to you, I promise. When David wakes up, tell him to go to the farmhouse, it’s the only chance we have. Get everyone he can, there’s no time to waste.”

Mary Margaret nodded. “I understand.” She paused. “Will you put me to sleep too, please? I can’t bear to see you take him.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded, and passed a hand over her face.

When Mary Margaret woke up, Rumpelstiltskin and the baby were nowhere to be seen. Neither was David. Doc and Granny were with her instead.

“David’s gone to get your son back,” Doc said. “The other dwarfs have gone with him.”

That was all she needed to know. She hadn’t needed to pass the message on, and Mary Margaret let herself give in to the indescribable pain of having another baby taken from her much, much too soon.

X

The yellow bug screeched to a halt outside the old cannery and Emma jumped out, not even bothering to close the driver’s door as she tore up to the building with Regina and Neal hot on her heels. She didn’t want to think about how many traffic laws she had broken on the journey from the hospital; the only thing running through her mind was the fact that Henry was in danger, and she had to get to him.

“Henry!” she screamed as she tried to open the door. “Henry, are you in there?”

“Here, let me.” Regina side-stepped in front of Emma and raised both hands. The door exploded inwards in a blast of magic and the three of them rushed inside.

“Henry!”

“Mom!”

The cannery was an old and rickety building, filled with machinery that hadn’t worked for a decade – or perhaps had never worked, knowing the nature of the curse, and Emma got the horrible foreboding feeling that she knew exactly what was about to happen.

“Hello there. I see that you brought back up. I guess that previous experience has told you that you shouldn’t take on little old me all on your ownsome. I do like it when people learn, it’s quite sweet.”

Zelena’s voice cut through the musty air in the abandoned building, and Emma finally saw her, standing with Henry above the cannery’s main apparatus full of jagged teeth and gears that would tear him to pieces with one false move. Henry was looking terrified, clinging onto the gantry railing with white knuckles.

“It was an interesting find, this place,” Zelena continued casually. “Does it bring back fond memories for you all? You should stop losing family members in here; it’s getting to be a very bad habit of yours.”
Zelena waved a hand and the machinery began to whir, slowly spinning up to its maximum speed. Neal raced off into the shadows, off towards the stairs towards the upper levels where Zelena and Henry were. Regina raised a hand, magic crackling on her fingertips.

“Ah ah.” Zelena tutted, leaning Henry further out over the railings. “If you hit me, I’ll drop him, and that would be a terrible mess for all involved.”

“What do you want, Zelena?” Emma yelled. “We’re here now, so if you want to talk, you can start talking!”

“I don’t want to talk.” Zelena sounded disgusted by the very idea. “I just wanted to get you out here to the middle of nowhere. Surely you understand that. You have to admit, it’s an excellent diversion. And if I can cause a little chaos on the way, then even better. But still, I need to be on my way. Places to go, things to do.”

She vanished, letting go of Henry. Emma screamed, surging forward.

“Henry!”

He fell, but he managed to grab onto the railing, his legs swinging wildly. Neal had reached the gantry that they had been on, and he had to take a step back on seeing that it was actually free-hanging, not attached to the steps at either side of it. Stepping on it would cause it to swing out and put Henry in even more danger.

“Emma, help me shut this thing off!” Regina yelled over the sound of the machinery. “Focus! Getting yourself killed won’t help Henry!”

Emma came away from the mass of gears and levers, looking for a kill switch as Regina tried to stabilise the thing. Whatever Zelena had done, she’d made it hard to undo. It was always easier to start something than it was to stop it, especially when magic and momentum were concerned.

“Hold on, Henry!” Emma called up to him.

“I am!”

Neal took a deep breath and leapt onto the gantry, causing it to swing wildly, and Henry looked at him fearfully. Neal tried to give him a reassuring smile but it wasn’t really forthcoming in the circumstances.

Emma was vaguely aware that her phone was ringing. Whoever it was could wait. She found the kill switch and slammed her hands against it.

Nothing happened. If anything, the machine just span up faster. Neal was still inching along the unstable gantry.

“Emma, it will have to be magic, we have to slow it down and undo whatever Zelena did!”

Emma nodded and took a step back.

“You can do this, we’ve done this before,” Regina encouraged her. “Neal will get Henry, we have to make sure they’re both safe!”

Emma took a deep breath, feeling the magic in her veins. It was hard to concentrate with so many other sounds and so much worry in the air, and her instinct, like so much of magic, always ran towards chaos rather than against it. She felt Regina take her hand, combining their power, and she
reached out with all her might.

*Stop!* She screamed silently at the machine. *Stop stop stop!*

“Don’t fight against the machine, fight against the magic!” Regina yelped.

Neal finally reached Henry, grabbing his hands.

“Dad!”

“Hey kid. Right, let’s get you back up here. Somehow.”

The magic was strong and intense and extremely green. Zelena must have been planning this for a while, it was no spur of the moment thing. Whatever plan she was enacting now whilst they were distracted, she was definitely determined that nothing was going to stop her.

“This isn’t going to work,” Regina said; the strain of fighting against Zelena’s overpowered magic was evident in her voice. “Emma, you focus on keeping Henry in place so that Neal can get him back over the railing.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me, Henry’s more important!”

Emma closed her eyes and poured all her will into her magic, holding out her hand towards Henry and trying to keep him frozen in place. It was a lot more difficult than it looked; she had only ever really used her magic on inanimate objects before and now using it on a living person was very different.

Above them, Neal braced himself against the railings and began to pull Henry up, until his wildly flailing legs caught the gantry and he was able to pull himself up and over, back to safety.

Emma sagged back, exhausted from the toll that the magic had taken on her, and as Neal and Henry made their way back towards the end of the hanging gantry, Regina did the same, bending double and panting, the strain finally released. Without Regina’s stabilising influence, the machinery began to spin up faster and faster, steam and smoke rising from it.

“It’s going to blow!”

Emma grabbed Regina and shoved her behind a stack of packing crates full of ancient cans of fish, and she saw Neal and Henry dive for cover off the gantry as well.

There was a loud bang and the clatter of metal pieces hitting the ground, and Emma winced, waiting until it was completely quiet before peeping out over the top of the crate. The machine was now a smoking mess, and parts of it littered the floor.


“Yeah, we’re fine. Deafened, but fine.”

They all came out of their hiding places and raced to get to each other, the four of them all meeting in a group hug in the middle of the warehouse.

Emma wasn’t sure who did it in the midst of all the emotion and sheer relief that everyone was all right, but she felt the moment it happened, the breath-taking blast of magic that had occurred when she had given Henry true love’s kiss and broken the first curse.
For a moment, no-one spoke. Henry, Regina and Neal were all still recovering from the torrent of forgotten memories that were now available. Henry was the first to speak.

“Hey, Mom.”

Regina threw her arms around him, and Emma got the distinct impression that she was crying. She went over to Neal.

“So, you remember everything now?” she asked tentatively. He nodded.

“Yeah. To be honest, it’s pretty much more of the same. Zelena versus us right up until the moment she cast the curse. Of course, I managed to be on the losing side of a fight with a monkey whilst resurrecting my father, so I was out of action for a lot of the time, but that’s a story for another time.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Emma agreed weakly. It certainly sounded like they’d all been busy during the missing year.

Neal sprung forward, galvanised into action.

“We have to stop Zelena! She said that this was a distraction to her main plan! She’s going after the baby! She needed a child back in the Enchanted Forest so she’ll be going after Mary Margaret’s!”

All four of them looked at each other before running for the bug. Emma’s phone was ringing again and this time she didn’t ignore it. It was Belle.

“Emma, we know what Zelena’s doing. She’s opening a time travel portal and she needs Snow’s baby to do it; it’s the final ingredient.”

Emma swore violently and hit the accelerator, heading up towards the farmhouse at breakneck speed.

Enchanted Forest – Missing Year

Belle reined in her horse in the shadows of the Dark Castle. It had been a hard, pounding ride and the steed was steaming and panting. As she walked him up and down to cool him, she thought over her plan of action for getting inside the castle. She could feel the weight of Zelena’s protective dome hanging damp and heavy in the air like a fog, and she tested her fingertips against the invisible barrier. It moved, sticky and malleable, but it showed no signs of giving way.

The difference between the Dark Castle and any other building that Zelena could have chosen to throw up a shield around was that it was so steeped in and so connected with Rumpelstiltskin’s magic. Although he had not built the foundations, he had extended it many times by magic. Belle’s library tower had definitely not been there when she had first arrived. That was what she was counting on.

Leaving the horse, she moved around the building, dragging her hand on the stone and feeling something else between her hand and Zelena’s barrier. It was the castle itself, reacting to her presence and doing its utmost to break the barrier and let her in. All she had to do was find the point where the castle’s connection to her was strongest and Zelena’s barrier was weakest. Her library tower.

There was no outside door, but the first window wasn’t too far off the ground and Belle pulled herself up onto the ledge. The barrier was resisting, trying to push her away, but the castle recognised her as mistress of her domain. True love was the most powerful magic of all, and as Belle pressed both hands against the cool glass of the window, that was all she could think about.
“I’m coming, Rumpel,” she whispered, pushing at the glass with all her might. “Hold on, my love, I’m coming.”

There was a creak and the groan of wood under strain and the barrier gave way along with the window, leaving Belle in a heap on the castle floor and the window squeaking as it hung off its hinges. Belle grimaced; that was really not the clandestine entry she’d been hoping for. Someone would probably have heard. On the other hand, if Zelena came to investigate the noise, then that left Belle free to try and find Rumpel. She sprang to her feet and rushed down to the tower entrance, keeping to the shadows and drawing the knife from her belt. She could hear movement beyond the tower door and pressed herself flat against the wall, but no-one came in and the footsteps passed. Cautiously, she poked her head around the door. The coast was clear and she stepped out, making her way towards the main hall where she had seen steam coming out of the windows. That was obviously where the curse was being brewed, and if Rumpel knew how close it was to being ready to cast, then he was probably close by. There was still no sign of Zelena and her absence was making Belle uneasy; she kept watching over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure that she was not being followed. Not that it would make much difference – Zelena was a witch and could just as easily track her without leaving any trace, but it gave Belle some peace of mind. Finally she reached the main hall, and the doors opened for her as they had always done. Belle took that to mean that it was safe to enter. If the castle was rebelling against Zelena’s magic and her enslavement of its true master, it wouldn’t allow Belle to walk straight into a trap. All the same, she was nervous as she entered, treading silently on tiptoe.

She didn’t know what she had expected to see, but she had not been prepared for the sight that had met her. The dining table where she and Rumpel had shared so many conversations as they got to know each other had been shoved to one side, with Rumpel’s beloved spinning wheel balanced haphazardly on top of it. In its place was a large cauldron on a rolling boil, sustained by magical fire. The Dark Curse, almost complete.

Belle had no eyes for it, her attention fixated on the cage at the far end of the room.

“Rumpel!” All hope of secrecy was abandoned as she ran across the room towards him. If it was a trap of Zelena’s making, then this was where it would be sprung, but she reached the cage without incident, falling onto her knees and putting her hands through the bars to catch his. Rumpelstiltskin’s grip was tight, almost to the point of pain, but Belle didn’t care. It was the first time that they’d touched each other in far too long and Belle didn’t want to let go, even with the bars between them.

“Belle. You got my message. You came.” His voice was quiet and full of wonder, as if he couldn’t believe that she was real.

“Of course I came,” Belle said. “How could I not? Oh Rumpel, what has she done to you? If I’d only realised I’d have come sooner, I’d have got you out of here…”

“No,” Rumpelstiltskin said firmly. “Now’s not the time for laments. There’s nothing you could have done; Zelena keeps the dagger on her all the time. It’s too dangerous.”

“At least let me get you out of here.” Belle got back to her feet and went to the lock, but Rumpelstiltskin followed her up and caught her hand.

“No,” he repeated. “I’ve put you in enough danger by asking you to come here in the first place. I won’t put you in any more. I didn’t ask for a rescue; I need your help to contact Emma to make sure she’s ready for what comes next, because we won’t be. Zelena has the final ingredient practically in the palm of her hand. It’s a matter of moments.”

Belle nodded, as much as it broke her heart to leave him like this in this awful cage, she had to accept
that time was against them, and the saviour was more important than any of them at that moment.

“We’re going to send Ariel across the realms,” she said. “Your message said something about a memory potion.”

“Yes. Give me a moment. I had to hide it.”

Rumpelstiltskin moved away from her, and Belle startled when she heard the sound of retching.

“Rumpel? Are you all right?”

He held up a hand to stop her speaking and shoved two fingers down his throat again, bending double as he dry-heaved, finally spitting out a stream of bile and saliva and extracting a vial from his mouth, cleaning it on his shirt sleeve before bringing it over to her.

“I thought there was less likelihood of Zelena finding it like that,” he said grimly. “She hasn’t quite mastered the art of blocking all the loopholes when she orders me to do something.”

“Oh Rumpel…” Belle reached through the bars to touch his face and his hand found hers, pressing her palm up against his cheek.

“Go,” he whispered. “You have to leave before it’s too late.”

“I can’t just leave you like this.”

“Once the curse hits, you won’t remember seeing me like this,” Rumpelstiltskin said gently. “Neither of us will. Go, Belle, please go, get the potion to Emma or everything will have been in vain. Zelena’s coming; you have to get out of here!”

Belle left the cage, running back towards the way she had entered on light feet. She looked back over her shoulder as the main hall doors closed behind her again, and Rumpelstiltskin felt that he would remember the look of sorrow in her eyes for the rest of time.

In the castle dungeons, cool and dark and well-protected, Zelena looked down at the magical casket that had housed her sister for so many years. Not for the first time, the sight of Verdie’s peaceful face gave pause to her plans, but then she steeled herself against the soft emotions that were threatening to derail her, and she waved a hand, lifting the casket up and carefully transporting it throughout the castle to the main hall, where the Dark Curse was ready and waiting for its final ingredient. She would have preferred to do this extraction in the dungeon, just her and Verdie and the opportunity to say a proper goodbye that had been denied them when Dorothy’s house had dropped out of the sky. But hearts were best used fresh, and with so little life left in Verdie’s it was better to be safe than sorry.

Rumpelstiltskin was in an unusually sombre mood as she entered the main hall, and she wondered if she’d finally managed to wear him down. He knew what she needed from him and had done his utmost to remain defiant in the face of everything that she had done to him. At last, his spirit was broken and maybe now he would do as he was compelled without fighting her every step of the way. He didn’t look up as she entered, completely uninterested in the proceedings and resigned to his fate. Good. It was a fate that had been a long time coming and Zelena wanted to make sure that every part of it was perfect.

She set Verdie’s casket down on the table and gave her sister one final fond smile before carefully prising off the glass lid. Time was ticking for Verdie again, and Zelena only had a second in which
to act.

Just as Verdie’s eyes flickered open, Zelena plunged one hand down into her chest, pulling out her heart. It froze in her hand, bright red and pulsing. Verdie gasped, alive again for the first time in years, and Zelena almost cried with happiness.

“Zelena?” Verdie asked sleepily. “What’s going on? Where are we?”

“Somewhere safe,” Zelena assured her. “Somewhere far away from Oz. Nothing’s going to hurt you now, I promise.”

“What happened? I remember the tornado, and the house flying at me, but then nothing.”

“It’s all right,” Zelena soothed. She couldn’t keep Verdie’s heart stopped for much longer, she needed to get on and cast the curse before it beat its last, but the temptation to keeping talking to the one person whom she had missed so badly that it was a physical ache was too great to ignore.

“It’s going to be all right,” she said. “I’m going to fix everything. You’ll never be hurt, we’ll never be separated. I’ll protect you like I’ve always done.”

“Zelena, I don’t understand.” Verdie sounded fearful, and she struggled to sit up in her coffin. “What’s happening? You’re not making any sense! What are you trying to do?”

She took in the cage and Rumpelstiltskin watching the two sisters from its depths. She took in the unfamiliar castle telling her that she definitely wasn’t in Oz anymore. She took in the bubbling cauldron, and she finally saw the bright red heart in Zelena’s hand.

Verdie brought a hand to her own chest, but where she should have felt a quickening pulse, there was nothing. Fear flooded her veins.

“Zelena, is that my heart?”

Zelena nodded. “But it’s all right,” she said quickly. “When I’m finished, none of this will have happened.”

“What? What are you doing with my heart?”

“I need it,” Zelena said. “I need it to cast this curse. But it won’t be for long. Once the curse is cast and I have my ingredients, then I can go back and put things right, you see? You’ll never die and we’ll never be apart!”

Verdie shook her head in horror. “You want to turn back time. You’re sacrificing my life to cross realms and then you’re going to break the rules of magic in my name? No, Zelena, this is madness!”

“I can’t let you die!” Zelena exclaimed. “I don’t care what I have to do or how many lives I destroy in the process; I don’t care how many laws I break or how many people I kill or how many realms I have to cross! I am not letting you go! I am not letting him win!” She pointed at Rumpelstiltskin, who was still watching them in silence.

“It was your tornado that brought the house down on me, Zelena,” Verdie whispered. “You’ve got to accept that.”

“It was his fault,” Zelena said stubbornly. “But if I do this, then it won’t matter. There won’t be a house. Or if there is, then it won’t land on you. I can change it all.”
“Please, Zelena, just let me go,” Verdie begged. “Let my heart beat and please just let me move on!”

“She’s got a point, you know,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

“Shut up!” Zelena whirled around and threw a pulse of magic at him, sending him flying against the back of the cage with a crack. He slumped down, unconscious and silent, and Zelena smiled, turning back to Verdie.

“He’s really quite a fun pet,” she said. “Maybe I won’t kill him once I reset the timeline.”

“Zelena, what’s happened to you? You were never like this before. You were never cruel.”

“You try losing the only person you’ve ever cared about and see how benevolent you are then,” Zelena snarled. “You’ve been asleep for years, you wouldn’t understand!”

“Are you blaming all this on me?” Verdie asked.

“No! Of course not! You’re my sister! I love you!”

“Then let me go,” Verdie pleaded. “If you truly love someone, then you let them go.”

Zelena shook her head.

“No. You’re not the one who’ll have to live with that. You’ll be dead, it won’t matter to you. I’m the one who matters and I have to do this!”

“Zelena, please!”

Zelena squeezed her sister’s heart, watching it crumble into powder and fall into the cauldron, trying to ignore the rattling gasps of Verdie’s last breath.

The curse was beginning, acrid smoke filling the room, and Zelena smiled. They were on their way and soon, very soon, she would turn back time and save Verdie’s life.

X

Belle felt a rush of cold air behind her as she rode at full pelt, and she glanced over her shoulder to see the curse looming behind her, catching her up. Ahead, she could see Snow and Charming’s heavily fortified castle gates, no time to go around to the side entrance she’d left from. She could hear the warning bell ringing out, the curse nipping at her horse’s heels. Nearly there.

A shower of sparks shot from the tower, fairy magic, and Belle saw the gates begin to open. No time to waste. She pushed through them and careened into the courtyard. Charming was waiting but Belle pressed past him, out to the shoreline where Neal was waiting.

All they could do was hope.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Standing in the middle of the open field to the side of Zelena’s property, Rumpelstiltskin looked down at the baby in his arms, rocking him gently to keep him asleep for as long as he could. As soon as he woke up, he would miss his mother. Zelena paid them no mind, but she’d told him to stay where he was, so he couldn’t try to sneak away. It was more than the child’s life was worth.

He’d almost dropped him once already, when the intense magical blast of the curse breaking had hit him and his memories had returned. The vault, his resurrection, the joy of seeing Belle and Neal
again only for it to be dashed a few seconds later. A year in a cage in his own castle, crystallising everything that Zelena did to him into hard hatred that kept him from breaking down entirely. Too bad that it had all been for nothing, but he had held out for as long as he could. Hopefully the curse breaking would have restored everyone’s memories, and with them the sense of urgency. Help would be arriving soon. He had to hold that thought or else everything would be lost.

Zelena seemed unaffected by the curse break, but there was no way that she hadn’t noticed it. Perhaps she was confident that she was so far along in her plans now that no-one would be able to stop her even if they tried. Someone had to come soon. David if no-one else. He must have come round and received the message that Rumpelstiltskin left for him with Snow by now.

The four-point spell gimble was sitting in the centre of a large circle that Zelena had painted on the wet grass, and she gave it a couple of spins.

“Perfect. Everything’s turned out very nicely. And it’s really such beautiful timing, the curse breaking when it did. Now everyone can remember what’s happening just long enough to see the fabric of their reality get torn apart. How lovely!”

She came over to Rumpelstiltskin and the baby.

“Oh, just one more ingredient left,” she cooed, taking a vial out of her pocket and holding it up to the little one’s face. “Breath from the depths of the newest soul.”

The baby’s snuffly breath began to mist up the inside of the vial, and Zelena grinned wickedly.

“See, that wasn’t too painful. I’m not at total monster.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled in response. Someone had to come. As soon as Zelena slotted the vial into the gimble, the thing would start to work its magic and all would be lost.

The sound of engines revving had never been so welcome, nor had the roar of an incredibly angry David.

“Get away from my son!”

He charged towards her, four axe-wielding dwarfs in his wake, but Zelena just smiled, lazily waving a hand and sending out a pulse of magic that would send them flying backwards.

Except it never connected. The pulse was matched by another, weaker but still effective enough to push back and prevent it making contact.

Regina appeared in a swirl of dark smoke, pushing back against Zelena, protecting David and the dwarfs. A moment later, Emma’s yellow bug arrived on the scene and she, Neal and Henry tumbled out of it.

Zelena just grinned, letting out a piercing whistle, and a flock of monkeys swopped out of the trees at the edge of the field. The fight was evened out now, as they would try to avoid hurting the monkeys. Rumpelstiltskin was stuck in the middle of it all, Zelena’s command rendering him unable to move, the baby still cuddled in against his chest, wailing loudly at the catastrophe going on around them.

“Rumpel!” Zelena screeched. For the first time she sounded somewhat flustered, as Emma had joined forces with Regina, and holding off two of them at once was tricky even for her with her stolen boost.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’ve got my hands full with your last task, dearie,” Rumpelstiltskin
snapped.

“Do something!” Zelena screamed, as there was another battle cry from the trees and Robin Hood and his band raced out, armed with ropes and nets and tranquiliser darts, getting straight down to subduing the monkeys.

Zelena was going for the dagger where it was tucked into her boot. If she compelled him, then he was a goner, and the baby along with him.

“Henry!” he yelped, seeing the boy nipping between battling bodies towards him. “What are you doing? It’s dangerous! Get out of here!”

“Hey grandpa,” Henry said cheerfully. “I’ll get the baby out of here for you.”

Despite their precarious position, Rumpelstiltskin breathed a sigh of relief as he handed the child over.

“Take care of him, he’s your uncle.”

Henry didn’t look at all surprised and sped away from the main action towards the trees, out of sight and out of mind.

“Rumpelstiltskin, destroy them!” Zelena yelled. She had the dagger, and the command was singing in his veins. There was no choice but to obey. Destroy was a very loose term though, so he wracked his brains as the magic coursed through his body. The compulsion was telling him that the best thing would be a huge pulse of magic without discrimination, but he tried to fight it and go for something more targeted. He saw David fight off his monkey, which was subsequently roped in by one of Robin Hood’s men, and go for Zelena. She was still distracted by Regina and Emma’s combined efforts. He had a chance.

Sparks crackled at his fingertips; he was going to have to go after his two fellow magicians, there was no way around it. The spark ball loosed towards Emma, who was nearest.

“DUCK!” Neal yelled to her from his position grappling another monkey.

Emma didn’t question it and the sparks flew directly over her crouched frame, hitting Zelena squarely in the chest and sending her flying backwards. It was a moment of such gleeful irony that Rumpelstiltskin couldn’t help but laugh, until he felt the rush of freedom. The dagger had come out of Zelena’s grip as she had fallen, and now it was just lying on the ground, unclaimed. He was free. It was over.

The feeling brought him to his knees, gasping in air as if he had not been able to breathe properly for the last year. Everything felt different, the jarring in his blood was gone, replaced with just the smooth hum of the magic that he had known for so long. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw David run up and tackle Zelena back down onto the ground as she tried to get up, handcuffing her tightly.

“You know those won’t hold me,” she snarled.

“Maybe not.” Regina came over to them and before Zelena could lash out with magic, she had produced a familiar black cuff, closing it around the witch’s wrist. “That will, though.”

With Zelena’s power inhibited, all her spells and enchantments collapsed, and the flying monkeys instantly turned back into humans, Robin Hood’s men and the dwarfs hastily undoing them from the ropes and nets that they were trapped in.
“Let’s see how you like being in a cage,” Neal said darkly. “Hey! Leave that!”

One of the outlaws had gone to pick up the dagger, and he dropped it on Neal’s command. Rumpelstiltskin nodded to Neal gratefully; he couldn’t stand the thought of a return to bondage so soon after being freed from it, and he went over to retrieve the hated thing.

“Rumpelstiltskin!” David called over as he picked it up, warm to the touch and welcoming its true master. “Where’s my son?”

“Safe,” Rumpelstiltskin said. He called over to the trees. “Henry, you can come out now.”

Henry’s head peered out from behind a tree and surveyed the scene critically to make absolutely sure, but since the monkeys had vanished and Emma was hauling a handcuffed Zelena to her feet, he thought it was a safe bet and he emerged fully, carefully bringing the baby back to David, who took him with an expression of wonder.

“He’s all right,” he whispered. “He’s ok.”

“He’s probably cold and hungry, but I swear no harm has come to him,” Rumpelstiltskin said, slipping the dagger into his inside jacket pocket, ready to hide away later.

“Thank you,” David said. “Thank you so much.”

Zelena was scowling as Emma led her back down towards the bug, but when she caught sight of Rumpelstiltskin, her expression became more of a leer.

“These cuffs won’t hold me forever, Rumpel,” she said.

Emma stopped and gave her an incredulous look.

“Did you really just do that when you’ve got no magic and he’s got full free will and you tortured him in a cage for a year? Considering the merry dance you’ve led us these past few days, I thought you were intelligent.”

“Papa, no!”

Rumpelstiltskin was like a bull seeing red, and Emma was quite tempted to let him do whatever it was he would do, but Neal was holding him back.

“Papa, no,” he repeated, struggling against twelve months of his father’s rage and pain and torment and avoiding the dagger blade. “I know what she’s done, I know the horrific things you’ve endured and she deserves it, I know, I agree. But not by your hand. She’s not worth it. You don’t want her blood on your hands; you don’t want her death on your conscience. If you do this, then she wins. She will always be with you and you’ll never move on!”

Rumpelstiltskin stopped fighting, sinking onto his knees. The dagger dropped to the ground beside him as he pressed his hands over his face, shoulders shaking in silent sobs as everything that had been through during this last hellish year was finally allowed to come to the fore.

“It’s ok,” Neal soothed. Truly, it unnerved him to see his father so defeated and broken, but Rumpelstiltskin had stayed strong for them for so long, and now it was up to Neal to be the strong one for a while. He rubbed his father’s back as he cried. “It’s ok. You’ll be ok. Belle and I will help you. You’ll get through this.”

Emma watched them for a moment before shoving Zelena into the back of the bug without much
delicacy or regard for her comfort. There would be a long road to recovery ahead of them, but she was sure that they could pull together and make it. Leroy had taken on organising the dwarfs into an expedition to find any remaining and likely disorientated former monkeys. Robin was welcoming his lost Merry Men back into the fold. Regina had got a nice bonfire going, and Emma realised that it was Zelena’s four-point gimble.

Henry was still with David and the baby, and Emma exchanged a smile with him. The year of peace that they’d had in New York was well and truly over, but Emma didn’t think that, in the long run, she would be too upset. She could worry about what to do with the rest of her and Henry’s lives later. For now, she had a prisoner to book in and a little brother to meet.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Belle was pacing up and down behind the counter in the pawn shop. It was the one place in town where she’d always felt safe and she gravitated back there in times of crisis. This was definitely a time of crisis. She had no idea what was going on and she really felt like she ought to be out there doing something to help the fight against Zelena, but she had no idea what to do. The curse breaking had come as a complete surprise, and the memory of the last time she had seen Rumpelstiltskin before it had hit back in the Enchanted Forest had brought her to tears: looking at her mournfully through the bars of his cage as he told her to leave him and run.

*You won’t remember seeing me like this*, he had said. Only now she did, and it was horrible. The thought of it made her shiver. Her father had told her to have hope, but it was so difficult when she had no idea what was going on.

The bell over the door jangled and she whirled around so fast that she almost gave herself whiplash, almost afraid of what she might find in the doorway but still wanting to hope.

Neal was entering, and although he looked tired and like he’d been through the mill a bit, he was smiling. And then…

“Rumpel!”

She would have rushed over to him, but something kept her rooted to the spot. She remembered the last time that she’d been reunited with him, only for him to be ripped away from her within a few hours.

“Belle,” he breathed. “My darling Belle. It’s all over.”

“We got her,” Neal added. “She won’t be going anywhere or getting her hands on the dagger any time soon.”

“Oh, Rumpel…” Belle came out from behind the counter. She remembered now, and approached him slowly, but he opened his arms for her, inviting her in for an embrace that she never wanted to end.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Neal said. “I’ll see you back at the house.”

Belle wasn’t listening. She was too busy losing herself in the feeling of Rumpelstiltskin’s arms around her, knowing that it would be all right. His face was buried in against her neck, and Belle stroked his hair.

“It’s over,” she said. “It’s all over. I’ve got you.”

She didn’t know how long they stood in that tight hug, but eventually he pulled away a little so that
he could look her in the eye.

“I missed you so much,” he said.

“I missed you, too.”

“I love you, Belle.”

“And I love you, Rumpel.”

Their lips finally met, and Belle’s faith that things would be all right in the end was finally renewed.

X

Mary Margaret was certain that she had cried herself dry and would have no more tears left for the rest of her life. She was staring at the wall, the empty chair that David had sat in at the corner of her vision, and she kept hoping that if she closed her eyes, when she opened them again, he would be sitting there again with their baby in his arms. Granny was sitting on her other side, and she squeezed her hand.

“They’ll be ok,” she said. Mary Margaret wished that she could believe the older woman.

There was a tap on the door, and she felt Granny’s hand leave hers to go and open it.

Mary Margaret heard the cry before she saw David. It was the plaintive cry of a newborn in need of its mother, and she was jolted back into the present as David entered, their baby unharmed in his arms.

“Time you went back to Mama,” he said softly to the baby as he brought him over and Mary Margaret reached out for her son. He nursed greedily, and Mary Margaret could only look on in wonder. She’d been denied this with Emma, but now she had a second chance. They all did.

“He’s all right,” David said. “Rumpelstiltskin and Henry saw to that.”

“Thank you for bringing him back.” She almost couldn’t get the words out; she was so choked up with happiness.

“I wasn’t going to come back without him.”

It was close to a miracle, that everything had been resolved and everyone was all right. Mary Margaret kissed the top of her son’s head, the tears that she thought dried up now flowing again in full force in her happiness. She would never not be grateful for this happy ending.

Outside the room, Emma and Henry were waiting patiently to be introduced. Zelena was safely locked up in the station and whilst Emma had no idea what she was going to do with the witch, it was a decision that could wait until tomorrow. For once, she felt absolutely no trepidation about being in a hospital waiting room.

“So, what happens now?” Henry asked.

“I haven’t got a clue, kid,” Emma admitted. “Apart from Archie getting overrun with people needing therapy, your grandfather being first in line. But I figure that we’ll be able to work it all out as we go along. That’s usually how things work around here.”

David appeared in the doorway and beckoned them inside.
“Henry, Emma, we’d like you to officially meet the newest member of the family.”

“Does he have a name yet?” Emma asked.

“Yeah, I felt a bit stupid calling him ‘small’ when I was holding him earlier,” Henry added.

Mary Margaret laughed at the temporary appellation and nodded.

“We’re going to call him Lancelot, because without him, David and I might not be here to have you both in the first place. And his middle name is Leo, for my father.”

“How come I never got a middle name?” Emma teased.

“You did,” David said. He sounded surprised. “I guess no-one ever knew it and we didn’t think to say. It’s Ruth, after my mother.”

Slightly taken aback by this revelation about herself, Emma nonetheless came over to meet her little brother.

“Welcome to the world, Lance. It’s going to be an adventure, that’s for sure.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

Zelena stared up at the ceiling of the sheriff’s station holding cell. She could feel her magic bubbling under the surface, and she could feel the heavy dampener of the magic-inhibiting cuff around her wrist. She’d failed and there would be no chance of any kind of a redo. Not with Rumpelstiltskin out of her clutches again and the new-born no longer new-born. But she was damned if she was going to stay here and let these pathetic denizens of the Enchanted Forest decide her fate. A faint breeze stirred the hair around her face. She was madly furious enough that had her magic been free, she would have called up a tornado by now.

Zelena wondered. So far, all her tornados had been made in Oz, and they’d dragged unsuspecting idiots out of their lives in the Land Without Magic and dumped them in her native realm. Perhaps that was her way out of here. She was out of magic beans and the silver slippers had not been in her possession for a long time, so those methods were out of the question. So was modifying the Dark Curse; Verdie’s heart had already been sacrificed. A tornado would be the way to go, and if she could wreak a little havoc in Storybrooke along the way, then so be it. The only problem was the cuff. It needed to come off, but how? With her magic suppressed, all the curses and compulsions that she had cast over the monkeys had vanished so she had no-one to call on for aid. She glanced down at her wrist, the skin rubbed raw and covered with bloody scratches and bite marks where she had frantically tried to get rid of the hateful thing. She’d heard of animals chewing their own limbs off in order to escape from traps but she hoped that she wouldn’t have to subject herself to that indignity.

A sound came from the station entrance and Zelena sat upright, suddenly awake and alert and no longer contemplating drastic escape measures. Truth be told, she was a little nervous. Although Zelena was not scared of a lot in her life, she would admit to fear of Rumpelstiltskin. It had been fun enough to torture the beast whilst he was in his cage and couldn’t hurt her in return, but now he was free, and if he came back to finish the job that he had started earlier then she would be completely at his mercy and just like she had done to him, Rumpelstiltskin would know how to make it hurt.

A shadowy figure slipped into view, moving furtively and very obviously not meant to be there. Her heart beating in her mouth, Zelena stood up and crept towards the bars.

“Who’s there?” she called, trying to sound imperious and mask the quavering in her voice. The figure didn’t reply. It looked too tall to be Rumpelstiltskin. Too gangly.
Walsh stepped into the scant moonlight that was illuminating the station through the half-closed blinds, and Zelena breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness, it’s only you. I thought it might be Rumpelstiltskin.”

Walsh gave a snort of laughter. “Yes, the big powerful sorcerer isn’t quite as fun to goad now that he’s in full control of his power and he can act on that burning hatred, is he?”

“Oh, shut up and get me out of here,” Zelena snapped. She was actually very grateful that he’d come back, there was certainly no compulsion on him to do so anymore, but she wasn’t about to let him know just how badly she needed his help.

Walsh raised an eyebrow. “Now why on earth would I want to do that?”

That threw her for a moment. Why else would he come back, stealthily, in the dead of night? Time for a change of tactic.

“I'll make it worth your while,” she wheedled. “If you let me out and get this godforsaken cuff off then I'll send you home to Kansas and everything can go back to normal. No more magic, no more monkeys.” She gave him a contrite look, and she could see his resolve failing. “You must have come here with something in mind, after all.”

Walsh nodded slowly and came over to the cell, taking out a set of picks and beginning to work the lock, and Zelena felt almost giddy at the prospect of freedom and escape. The lock clicked and the door swung open, and she stepped out. Nearly there. She held her hand out to Walsh, and he just looked at the cuff then back at her face, his expression sneering.

“Do you really think I’m that stupid?” he said. “You’re right. I did have something in mind when I came here.”

Zelena saw the moonlight glinting off the switchblade in his hand and she knew she had only seconds to make a decision.

“Rumpelstiltskin’s not the only one you should be worried about,” Walsh snarled, and he lunged forward. Zelena kicked out, hitting him squarely in the groin and making him drop the knife. She grabbed it, jabbing it into his neck and slicing, a spray of blood splattering out over the floor. He slumped down and Zelena stood triumphant over him, panting with the sudden exertion.

It was only then that she realised she still couldn’t get the cuff off, and she looked from the bloodied blade to her own wrist. Once she had her magic back, she could take away the pain and stop the bleeding. It would be all right, and once she was safely back in Oz she could do something about restoring her hand.

Zelena reached down and pulled off Walsh’s belt, strapping it around her arm as best she could and pulling it tight.

She bit down on the end and began to cut.
Storybrooke – Present

Emma was at a complete loss. On the face of it, it seemed that everything was back to normal in Storybrooke – well, as normal as a town imbued with magic from another land could ever be. Everyone’s memories had been restored and the evil presence in the town had been defeated at last, subdued and waiting for justice to be served.

For the first time in as long as Emma could remember, the town felt calm. It wasn’t a feeling that Emma particularly enjoyed, as it set her on edge, afraid of being lulled into a false sense of security. Every time that things had shown any sign of calming down in the past, they had always been followed by yet another catastrophe, even bigger and bolder and more dangerous than the previous one.

Emma knew that she should probably be relaxing and making the most of this downtime before whatever the next problem that she would have to deal with in her capacity as sheriff came along, but she just couldn’t settle. Although comfortable, her room at the inn just didn’t lend itself to calm contemplation. No hotel room ever did; Emma had lived out of enough of them in her time to know that.

What she really needed was somewhere that actually felt like a home, and it was with a little jolt back to reality that she realised she had never really had that in Storybrooke even during her first stay here.

She’d had the loft with Mary Margaret, during the first curse, but ever since that curse had been broken and David had moved in, it had felt increasingly like she was encroaching upon the couple’s space, although they had never given any indication that they were tired of having a third wheel.

Now that the new baby had come along, the loft felt even less like a home. For the first time in a long time, Emma truly felt like a little girl lost in the foster system, chivvied from children’s home to children’s home without ever finding somewhere that she could call her own.

Emma sighed and grabbed her jacket. There was no use in sitting here in the inn feeling sorry for herself. She might as well go and join in with the rest of the town’s celebrations in the diner, or check up on David, Mary Margaret, and little Lance at the hospital.

Henry was staying over with Regina for the night, catching up on the year they’d spent apart, and Emma couldn’t begrudge them that. She knew how hard it had been for Regina to pretend not to
know Henry during these last few days, and they deserved this time together.

Emma made her way around the corner to the diner; it was getting late, but the party still seemed to be in full swing and if the tales of the dwarfs’ drinking capacity were to be believed, then it would probably continue until the early hours of the morning, licensing hours be damned.

Emma gave a wry smile at the thought. Maybe her instinct was correct and there was something lurking just around the corner, and it was waiting until tomorrow to strike, knowing that they would all be so hungover from celebrating their victory over the Wicked Witch that they would be easy pickings.

“Hey.”

Neal’s voice beside her made her jump, and she turned to see him smiling at her.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, it’s ok, I was miles away.”

“Everything ok?”

Emma nodded. “Yeah. I’m just getting the feeling that it might be too good to be true, if you know what I mean. We’ve defeated Zelena, but what happens now? Nothing ever stays good in this town for long. The happy endings just never seem to be able to stick.”

She gave a frustrated huff of breath. “And I know that I should be feeling somewhat positive and celebrating with the rest of the town, but when it comes down to it, I just can’t bring myself to feel that way because I know that as soon as the next thing goes wrong, everyone will be looking to me to fix it because I’m the Saviour. The responsibility can be a bit much.”

“I know how you feel,” Neal said. “Not the Saviour bit, obviously, but being unable to let go of the feeling that something’s going to happen to ruin the peace.”

It made Emma feel slightly better to know that she wasn’t the only one who was feeling this way and had these worries.

“Are you going in?” Neal asked eventually, indicating the diner and the carousing going on inside.

“I don’t know. Are you?”

Neal didn’t answer her immediately.

“I didn’t intend to. I just came out to let Belle and my dad have the house to themselves for a bit.”

Emma snorted. “Yeah, I would not want to be a fly on the wall for that particular reunion.”

“It’s not that,” Neal said. “It’s just that Papa’s so broken at the moment. I don’t think he can cope with more than one of us hovering over him at a time. Now that he can remember everything that happened last year… He needs some kind of closure and catharsis to let him know that it really is all over and he doesn’t have anything to fear anymore.” He paused. “I’ve known him both before and after he took on the curse of the Dark One, but I’ve never seen him like this before. It’s unnerving in a way.”

“I guess that no matter what happens, we always look up to our parents as invincible and unbreakable.” Emma thought of the various parental figures that she had looked up to at various
points in her life, only for them to have let her down. “When we see that they are human after all and they have all the same fears as we do, it’s a jarring thought.”

“Yeah. I just wish I could help, but I don’t know how. Belle’s better at it than I am, she knows all the right things to say. I think because my relationship with him was always rockier and had only just begun to heal, and now this has happened… It’s put us into a weird little limbo.”

“I’m sure you’ll get there. It’s just going to take time. These things always do.”

“I know. But how much time are we going to have before the next villain springs out of the wings and drives another wedge between us somehow?”

Emma didn’t have an answer for that one and they fell into silence.

“Come on,” she said eventually, turning away from the diner. “There’s no use in us just standing out here like poor relations if neither of us actually want to go in.”

They set off down the road, going in no particular direction.

“I mean, I’d ask you back to mine for a quiet drink away from the revellers, but a bed and breakfast doesn’t really have the same vibe,” Emma said presently.

Neal laughed. “Same problem here.”

They walked on in comfortable silence for a while, past all the darkened shops, until Neal spoke again.

“Emma, what happens now? I know we’ve talked about it a couple of times over the past few days, but we’ve never really come to any conclusions. We’ve always parked the conversation until some nebulous point in the future when the curse had been broken and Henry had his memories back. Now the curse is broken, and Henry does have his memories back, and I think that we should probably think about it. Otherwise that’s another thing that’s just going to stay up in the air until something bad happens.”

Neal did have a point. Something was going to have to be decided sooner rather than later – before fate decided for them.

“I don’t know. Part of me wants to go back to New York and the lives – the nice, uncomplicated, magic-free lives – that we led there, but I know that most of that life was a lie. Part of me wants to stay here in Storybrooke because this is where you and Regina and my mom and dad are. At the same time though, I just don’t feel like I belong here properly. Storybrooke doesn’t feel like home.”

“Maybe that’s just because you haven’t had chance to make it into a home yet,” Neal suggested. “You don’t feel like it’s home because you’ve never really had a place here that you can call home. If you got your own place somewhere in the town, you could make a new start like you did in New York, and it would be somewhere that was yours, whilst still having all your friends and family around you, and Henry would have me and Regina here as well.”

Emma nodded. “I think you might be right,” she said. “If I make the conscious effort to put roots down then they might stick.”

“And you don’t have to do it alone,” Neal added. “We’re all here to help you. Home’s not necessarily a place. It can be people too.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. I’m still getting used to the fact I have friends and family again. I
was just about getting used to it when I lost my memories, and then I had a year of having to be self-
sufficient and not having anyone to rely on. It’s a bit of a culture shock.”

“You’ll get through it. And just because you might make a home here now doesn’t mean you can’t
ever move on again. What you do now isn’t going to set the rest of your life in stone.”

Emma laughed. “Since when have you been so philosophical?”

“Since this last year when I’ve had to cling onto every last shred of hope that I can get my hands on,
desperately believing that this wasn’t the be all and end all and that things would get better.”

Emma reached for his hand, squeezing briefly. “Things are getting better.”

Neal smiled. “Yeah, they are.”

They walked on in silence for a while, until Emma stopped dead.

“Emma? What is it?”

“Something not good.” She crouched down and stared at a dark splatter mark on the sidewalk in
front of her. “Is it me, or does that look worryingly like blood?”

Neal crouched down beside her. “Yeah, that’s not good, you’re right.” He moved away, still peering
at the ground. “There’s some more here. Looks like a drip trail.”

Emma looked up at the direction that the blood trail seemed to be going in, and her own veins ran
cold when she saw its destination – or perhaps its origin.

“The station. Zelena.”

She leapt back up to her feet and raced across the road to the sheriff’s station with Neal hot on her
heels, fumbling for her keys in her haste to get inside before realising that the door was already open
and just leaning ajar. Emma wished that she had her gun on her, but it was locked away in the station
safe; she had nowhere secure to keep it in the room in Granny’s.

She flicked the lights on and immediately recoiled at the sight that met her.

“What the hell happened?” Neal asked as he came in behind her. The was blood splattered all over
the floor, and in the middle of a particularly grim and congealing pool of it was Zelena’s severed
hand, the magic-inhibiting cuff still around her wrist. Naturally, the cell was empty.

“Walsh!” Emma raced across the room to the slumped figure in front of the cell, turning him over
and giving an exclamation of horror on seeing the gaping slit in his neck.

“Dammit Walsh, what did you do?” she said, but there was no anger in her voice, just sadness. For
all it had been a sham on Zelena’s part, she had been in love with his man and to see him so brutally
murdered was still horrific.

“Emma, if Zelena’s got the cuff off then she’s got her magic back,” Neal said. He was sympathetic to
her situation but there was still an urgency in his tone, and Emma knew that with a dangerous witch
with nothing to lose on the loose, time was of the essence. They had to find Zelena and contain her
before she could cause any more mayhem. There would be the opportunity to mourn later when
things weren’t going from bad to worse. She got back to her feet and got her gun out of the safe.

“Ok, let’s go. From the direction of the blood trail, it looked like she was headed back to the
farmhouse. We don’t know how big a lead on us she’s got, but if she’s losing so much blood then she won’t be moving quickly.”

They left the station again and followed the blood trail down the road and off the path; it would have been quicker to follow her in the cruiser, but she was going off road, probably on purpose to prevent pursuit. Emma had to give it to her – even with only one hand she was still extremely canny.

She pulled out her phone, dialling David. Although it felt wrong to disturb him when he was enjoying time with his wife and new-born, this was a matter of life and death, and if Zelena was after little Lancelot again, then he would want to be warned.

“David, it’s Emma. Zelena’s escaped.”

X

Zelena was in trouble and she knew it. This wasn’t the first time that she’d been so stressed that she’d lost control of her magic – the tornados were a case in point and after all, it was a tornado that she was trying to create now.

The problem was that the magic that she was trying to use to stop her wrist from bleeding wasn’t holding, no matter how many times she tried. The wound would close for a minute or so, but then the next thing she knew, blood was dripping down her arm again.

She didn’t mind the pain, she could live with that and she was practically numb from the blood loss anyway, but she was unfocussed, fuzzy, and she could feel her entire body shaking with the shock of losing her hand. It was so much effort just to put one foot in front of the other, and when the farmhouse was in sight, she let herself fall down onto her knees, slumping on the ground and closing her eyes as she felt the winds of the tornado whip up around her.

She smiled. Nearly there. Nearly home. Soon all would be well, and she could start over. There had to be other ways to turn back time.

“Zelena!”

It was Emma’s voice, but Zelena didn’t turn. The tornado was in full force now, tearing up everything in its path. All she had to do was wait until it reached her.

There was a creak and an ear-splitting bang as the tornado blew through the farmhouse that she’d called home these past few days. Zelena slumped further. She really wanted to lie down. Nearly there.

She didn’t see the rafter beam heading towards her at over a hundred miles an hour, borne on the tornado-force winds that were ripping around the field.

X

It was impossible to get close to the huddled shape on the ground that was obviously Zelena. The winds were far too strong, blowing Emma and Neal backwards, and they clung to each other as the only things there were to cling onto.

“Can you stop it?” Neal yelled above the roar of the tornado that was decimating the farmhouse.

“I can try!” Emma replied, but she already knew that it was likely to be useless. This was pure, raw, unfettered magic, charged with high emotion, and they already knew that Zelena’s magic was more potent than most.
She closed her eyes and pushed out with both her hands, Neal hanging onto her around her middle to try and stop her from blowing away, but it had no effect. The magical whirlwind had grown beyond even Zelena’s control by now, and the only way to stop it would be to let it run its course and blow itself out, like any other tornado.

“Emma!” Neal screamed, and Emma’s eyes flew open to see the tornado veering across the field straight towards them. They tried to run, but the headwinds were too strong, keeping them in place and fighting uselessly against a force of nature that was so much more powerful than they were.

All they could do was cling to each other and pray as the tornado finally caught them, lifting them off the ground and buffeting them around inside the whirlwind, green smoke and lightning crackling all around them.

Emma closed her eyes. *It’s all a horrible dream. I’ll wake up in a minute.*

Even if she didn’t survive this experience, though, the thought that she was not alone gave her comfort.

X

Pounding his truck up the hill towards the farmhouse for the second time in twenty-four hours, David could only watch and feel his blood run cold as the tornado crossed the field and went full tilt towards Emma and Neal, sweeping them up effortlessly. It continued to rumble in place for a moment and then vanished, dissipating as quickly as it had begun to form.

There was no sign of Neal or Emma and David parked up the truck, jumping out and running across the field.

“Emma! Neal! EMMA!”

He’d rescued his second child, only to lose his first to the same witch. Zelena was sprawled on the ground face down, if not dead then close to it, and he checked for a pulse.

Nothing. Now he couldn’t even make her reverse whatever it was that she had done. With her last breath, the witch had had the last laugh.

Oz – Past

If Dorothy Gale was sure of one thing, it was that she definitely wasn’t in Kansas anymore. The world she had found herself in when she stepped out of her house was something out of a dreamworld, and she immediately through that she was in fact lying unconscious and bleeding out on the floor of the house in the middle of a tornado in Kansas, and that this was all a happy hallucination.

Except, looking at the scene and its vivid colours more closely, she could see that it wasn’t a happy hallucination at all. Most of the trees in the surrounding wooded area had been flattened, and the castle that had no doubt at one point shimmered like glass seemed to have had most of its windows blown out.

To top it all off, there was a very green woman sobbing over the body of someone who looked like they’d had a house dropped on them. Dorothy’s stomach gave a lurch, and the house gave a very ominous creak as she pushed the door open a little wider.

The green woman looked up with the sound, and as her eyes locked with Dorothy’s, her face became a mask of fury. Dorothy could see flames licking over her fingertips, and she scrambled back
inside the house and slammed the door shut as the fireball soared through the air towards her. She screwed her eyes up tight, hoping that when she opened them again, the witch outside would have gone, and she’d be back in the middle of nowhere. Oh, to think that just this morning she’d complained to Auntie Em of life on the farm being boring.

She shuffled over to the window on hands and knees and peered through the glass. Unfortunately, she was still in the hallucination world and the very angry witch was still outside. Perhaps it wasn’t a dream. Surely your own subconscious wasn’t supposed to attack you like this.

She ducked down as another fireball came her way; it blew out the window, showering her with glass, but thankfully nothing caught fire. Dorothy just froze where she was, curled up into a little ball, afraid to move and either injure herself on the broken shards or incur the wrath of the witch outside. She put her hands over her ears as she heard shouting and screaming outside, and she hoped that if she just believed hard enough, then she could wish herself home.

“When I open my eyes, I’ll be in Kansas,” she muttered. “When I open my eyes, I’ll be in Kansas.” It didn’t work. She hadn’t really expected it to, but anything was worth a shot. Dorothy didn’t know how long she stayed there in her frightened little ball, until she felt a light hand on her shoulder, making her jump and lash out at the hand’s owner.

It was a young blonde woman all in white, and she took a step back, raising her hands to show she meant no harm.

“It’s all right,” she said. “Zelena’s gone. It’s safe to come out now.”

Still trembling, Dorothy got to her feet, noticing that the woman had surreptitiously cleaned up all the broken glass with a wave of her hand. Another woman was peering around the door, a worried expression on her face and her pale pink dress stained with dust and rubble.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “Are you hurt?”

Dorothy shook her head and took a step towards the other woman. It was obvious that they were witches, but at least they didn’t appear to be quite as hostile. Nor as green.

“Who was that?” Dorothy asked, ashamed of how horribly squeaky her voice had become.

“Her name is Zelena,” the witch in white said. “She is our Cardinal Witch of the West. My name is Glinda, Witch of the South, and this is Phoebe, Witch of the North. Zelena was our sister in arms. We have been the protectors of this land for years now, although Zelena has lost her path recently.”

“What is this land?” Dorothy asked. “Because it’s definitely not Kansas.”

“This is Oz.”

“This is absolutely not Australia.”

“Not Australia. Oz. This is a different realm to yours.”

“I don’t understand. How did I get here? Am I dreaming?”

“Unfortunately, no. The tornado brought you here, with magic.”

Dorothy felt faint. “I need to sit down.”

Phoebe pulled up a chair out of nowhere, all the other furniture having been upturned or destroyed
during the house’s flight, and Glinda lowered Dorothy into it.

“How do I get home?”

Phoebe and Glinda looked at each other with worried expressions and Dorothy immediately knew that she had asked the wrong question.

“I can get home, can’t I?”

More silence.

“It is possible,” Phoebe said eventually. “But crossing realms is difficult, and all the methods that we know of require vast amounts of power. You’ve come from a place with no magic, so it’s unlikely that you have that necessary power.”

“I didn’t need any power to get here!” Dorothy protested. “That was all the tornado! Can’t you get a new tornado to take me home again?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that,” Glinda said gently. “Zelena is the only one of us with enough power to create these tornados, and she has no control over them.”

“And considering that she just tried to chargrill me, I’m guessing that asking her to create another one is out of the question,” Dorothy muttered. Oh God, when she got back to Kansas, she was never, ever going to complain about her life ever again. She buried her head in her hands, trying to remain calm, and she could make out Phoebe and Glinda’s voices above her.

“There’s that portal jumper that Zelena knows,” Phoebe was saying.

“No, he only travels between magical realms.”

“Beans?”

“Phoebe, you know they’re only in fairy stories.”

“Fairy dust?”

“See my previous comment about the fairy stories.”

“Ask Zelena’s portal jumper friend to bring us some from a land with fairies?”

“Phoebe, you’re clutching at straws here. We’ll need to put our heads together to work out a solution to this one. In the meantime, we need to put her somewhere safe, where Zelena won’t find her.”

“I’m sitting right here, you know,” Dorothy said, finally looking up. Phoebe and Glinda gave her apologetic smiles.

“The munchkins will take care of you. Now that Verdie has gone, the east requires someone to watch over them. I think that the arrangement could be of mutual benefit.”

Dorothy let herself be guided out of the house by the two witches, and soon found herself enveloped in a pink bubble with them. No one said anything, and when Dorothy looked down to see that they were floating over the landscape, she was too numbed by everything that was happening to have any kind of reaction.

“The silver slippers that Verdie was making for Zelena,” Phoebe said suddenly. “Those would take her home no matter where she went. Perhaps the magic could work for Dorothy too.”
Dorothy’s ears pricked up at that suggestion.

“They’re also currently on Zelena’s feet and therefore somewhat inaccessible to us,” Glinda snapped, with a tone of finality that suggested the conversation was closed indefinitely. The idea, however, remained squirreled away in the back of Dorothy’s mind.

When they arrived at their destination, the bubble burst without a sound and immediately a group of small people who could only have been the aforementioned munchkins started to crowd around the witches and Dorothy.

“Miss Phoebe! Miss Glinda! Is it true that the Good Witch Verdie has perished in a falling house incident?”

“I’m afraid so,” Phoebe said. Dorothy remembered the broken, bird-like body in Zelena’s arms and gulped, but the witches made no mention of her part in the tragedy.

“This is Dorothy,” Glinda said. “Newly arrived in Oz from another realm. We need you to keep her safe just as you kept the Good Witch Verdie safe.”

The munchkins began to fuss around Dorothy, who closed her eyes.

I want to go home, she repeated in her head like a mantra. I want to go home, I want to go home, I WANT TO GO HOME!

Storybrooke – Present

At first, no-one in the town realised that anything was the matter. It was only when Regina and Henry went to meet Emma for breakfast at Granny’s and learned that she hadn’t been back to her room all night that they began to wonder if something unsavoury might have happened.

When Emma still didn’t show in the diner, Henry began to get worried. This worry was compounded by Belle coming into the diner and asking if anyone had seen Neal as she couldn’t get him on his cell.

As few of the less suspicious townsfolk – who had been less involved with the entire Wicked Witch debacle and who knew Henry’s parentage – just gave each other sage looks and went back to their breakfasts. Young love rekindled, they thought, but Henry and Regina knew better.

“I can’t get through to Mom either,” Henry said to Belle as she waited for her take-out order. Rumpelstiltskin was hanging around outside the diner, not wanting to brave so many people at once. “I’ve tried five times. She doesn’t pick up. It doesn’t even ring. I just get a message saying: ‘your call could not be connected’.”

Belle nodded. “It’s the same with Neal. I dread to think what might have happened to them. We’ve just got over one crisis and we’re about to walk head-first into another.”

It wasn’t exactly an encouraging thought, but Henry could well understand Belle’s point of view. It had been a pretty dire year for her and Rumpelstiltskin so far and they still weren’t out of the woods.

Everyone in the diner’s attention was immediately drawn by the sound of David’s truck pulling up outside, and the man himself getting out of it. There was something covered with a tarpaulin on the bed at the back, and Belle’s heart began to beat painfully in her mouth as she rushed out of the diner with Henry and Regina hot on her heels.

“David, what’s going on?” she pressed frantically.
“Zelena escaped,” David said grimly. “She was headed back towards the farmhouse and created a massive tornado out of magic. I don’t know what she was trying to do.”

“Escape justice,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled. Belle felt his hand clutch around hers and squeeze, holding on for dear life. “Where is she now?”

David gestured to the tarpaulin in the back of the truck. “She’s dead. Looks like flying debris from the tornado took her out if blood loss didn’t.”

No-one needed to be told why Zelena had undergone so much blood loss.

“David, where are Neal and Emma?” Belle asked. “No-one can get hold of them and if Zelena escaped the station, then Emma at least should have known about it.”

David sighed, and the rest of the gathered crowd knew at once that it was not good news.

“They were caught in the tornado,” he said. “I saw it pick them up.”

“That’s the news you’re supposed to open with!” Regina exploded. “Where are they? Are they ok?”

“That’s the thing,” David said. “I don’t know. After it sucked them in, the tornado vanished. They’ve just gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean gone? They can’t be just gone; they’ll have to have gone somewhere!” Henry said. He’d just lost two of his three parents in one swoop and on top of everything else that had happened over the last couple of days, he thought that he was justified in panicking.

“What is it about this family and being split between realms?” Regina muttered. “We have to get them back.”

“We don’t even know where they are to start with,” David pointed out.

“We can work it out,” Regina said. “We just have to put our heads together and work together, that’s what we did in Neverland to get Henry back. It’s what you’re always going on about.”

Belle left them to it, going over to Rumpelstiltskin, who had since pulled away from her and gone to sit down at one of the tables outside Granny’s.

“We’ll get Neal back,” she said, taking his hand again.

“I just can’t believe that it keeps happening,” Rumpelstiltskin mumbled. “It’s like something out there just doesn’t want us to reunite. Every time we manage to come together as a family and we have the chance to sort things out, one of us gets ripped away by forces beyond our control.”

“Things will work out, Rumpel,” Belle said firmly. “We will get Neal and Emma back. There’s a way. I know there is. We just have to find it. This isn’t the end of your story together.”

Rumpelstiltskin didn’t speak for a long time; he just kept staring intently at the tarpaulin in the back of the truck. Eventually he got up, and Belle followed him over to the truck, wondering what he was doing. He flipped up the tarpaulin, exposing Zelena’s bloodless face, her hair matted with blood from the gouge out of her head that the debris had taken.

“What are we going to do with her?” he asked David bluntly.

“I haven’t thought; I’ve had more pressing things on my mind.”
“Hmm.”

Rumpelstiltskin kept glowering at the corpse for a long time, his hand never leaving Belle’s.

“I would have killed you, you know,” he said conversationally. “I wanted to, so much. But Neal said that if I did that, you’d always be with me, always in my head. I think you’ll be there anyway, even without your filthy life on my conscience. And now you’ve taken Neal from me as well. You shouldn’t have done that.”

The magic was sharp, like a whip crack, and Belle watched as Zelena’s body crystallised into porcelain and shattered into dust before her eyes.

Rumpelstiltskin smiled.

“Perhaps now there’s a chance that you’ll get out of my head.”

**Oz – Present**

Emma felt like she’d been hit by a bus. She supposed that being caught up in a tornado would probably have such an effect, and she gingerly tried moving all her limbs to ascertain that nothing was broken. Although she ached all over, she was still mobile, which she was treating as a good sign.

Finally, she opened her eyes, looking straight up into a brilliant blue sky. That was her first sign that something had gone very wrong somewhere along the line. When she had been caught up in the tornado, it had been the middle of the night and David had been on his way to the farmhouse, and there was no way that David would have left her lying bruised and battered in a field for several hours. Unless he had been caught up in the tornado as well, of course, in which case someone should have noticed his absence – and indeed Neal and Emma’s – by now and mounted a search party.

The second clue that something had gone wrong was, of course, the fact that she was looking at a bright blue sky in the first place. Such cloudless perfection was a rare sight in backwater Maine and the forecasters had been predicting a run of gloomy weather. The sudden sun was alarming.

For a moment, Emma wondered if the tornado had affected the entire town or if it was just localised to where she and Neal had been. She decided that was something that she could find out in due course. The first thing she had to do before anything else was to find Neal in whatever strange new land that they had ended up in. They’d been clinging onto each other so tightly when the tornado hit that it was almost impossible for him not to be in the vicinity.

Emma scrambled up to her feet, aching limbs slowing her down, and she looked around, letting out of huge breath of relief when she saw Neal sitting up and checking himself for injury just a few feet away. She went over and gave him a hand off the ground.

“Somehow, I get the feeling that we’re not in Kansas anymore,” he said, looking around at the field that they had landed in. Although there was nothing inherently sinister about it, it definitely looked wrong. The colours were too bright and saturated, as if they had stepped onto the set of a technicolour film. In a way, Emma supposed that they had.

“So, let’s lay out the facts,” she said, looking around at the too-green grass and the too-blue sky. “Wicked Witch, check. Tornado, check. Want to bet that we’ve landed in Oz?”

“I’d say it’s highly likely.” Neal peered out across the horizon, but it was just fields as far as the eye could see. “I know that Jefferson’s been here before and I know this is where Zelena originally came from, so it’s not too much of a stretch of the imagination to think that we’re here too. Especially if
she was going to use this tornado to escape from Storybrooke.”

“Right.” Emma was silent for a moment before kicking the ground angrily. “Why does this always happen?” she yelled to no-one in particular, focussing her gaze on the sky and whatever cruel deity was up there controlling their fates. “Why is it that whenever things get under control in that bonkers town, something always happens to pull the rug out from under our feet?”

“Em…” Neal’s voice was low and carried a warning tone, but Emma was too riled to pay any attention.

“First the curse broke and everyone should have been happy, but then Mary Margaret and I got catapulted into the Enchanted Forest. Then we found you in New York and everyone should have been happy, but then Henry got kidnapped and taken to Neverland.”

“Emma!” Neal hissed urgently. “Emma, be quiet!”

Emma took no notice. “Then we got back from Neverland and everyone should have been happy, but then your father had to sacrifice himself and you all had to go back to the Enchanted Forest again. Now we’ve just defeated the Wicked Witch, and everything should be great again, but we’re in flipping Oz!”

“Emma, shut up!” Neal squeaked.

“Don’t tell me to…” Emma tailed off on seeing that Neal had gone very still, his eyes wide and barely blinking as he looked across the field. Emma followed his sight line and gulped when she saw what had held him so transfixed.

Two rather large tigers were padding across the field, their bodies low as they stalked their prey. To make matters even worse, these tigers were sporting rather large sabre fangs protruding from their mouths.

“Since when were there sabre-tooth tigers in the Wizard of Oz?” Emma hissed to Neal, wishing desperately that she had listened more attentively to all the nature documentaries that she’d used to play in the background whilst she was working from home. What was the best way to stop a tiger attacking you? Were the guidelines different for sabre-tooth tigers in a completely different realm? Probably.

“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my,” Neal replied. “Wasn’t expecting the fangs, though.”

“Well, it seems like everything else here in Oz is turned up to eleven, so why not the teeth?”

“True.” There was a pause. “So, how are we going to get out of this with all our body parts unchewed?”

“Play dead?” Emma suggested. “Or is it lions who won’t chase dead prey?”

“Nothing chases something that’s dead and not running away.”

“You know what I mean, smart ass.” The tigers were getting closer now, still stalking low and beginning to circle. “Get down on the ground really slowly.”

She began to drop into a crouch, keeping her movements slow and as languid as her protesting muscles would allow; no sudden or jerky movements. Perhaps as long as they didn’t run away, the tigers would not give chase. Of course, that wouldn’t stop them from pouncing and tearing the squishy humans limb from limb with those incredibly lethal-looking teeth.
The beasts were still coming closer as Emma got down on the ground, Neal beside her, but they weren’t showing any signs of pouncing. Yet.

Emma felt for her gun; miraculously it was still in her hip holster and she pulled it out. Neal gave her an incredulous look but then looked back at the circling tigers. If it came down to it, hopefully the noise would be enough to scare them off. She really didn’t want to have to wrestle a tiger with a live gun in her hand.

They were getting very close now; Emma could hear their breathing. She remembered back in the Enchanted Forest when the ogre had been bearing down on her and Mary Margaret had swooped in and despatched it without batting an eyelid. It was too much to hope for such a last-minute dramatic rescue now. She and Neal were alone here in this strange technicolour land, and now they were about to be eaten alive.

The tigers met them, stopping short by barely more than a few inches, and the one closest to Emma sniffed at her hair before taking a step back, as if it was weighing up the effort it would take to pounce versus the reward that it would gain for doing so. Emma just stared at it, mute with fear.

The tiger didn’t pounce. It didn’t move. It locked eyes with her like a staring contest, and it was one that Emma was absolutely not going to lose. The moment was so intense that she could feel the cold sweat prickling down her back and along her hairline. She had to keep it back. Maybe then she could get a shot in, or some kind of magical intervention. Oz was a magical realm after all, so a well-placed fireball ought to work.

The tiger broke the shared gaze, giving a sharp, barking growl to its companion, and then both cats had turned and were padding back across the field in the direction they had come from, soon disappearing out of sight.

“I don’t know what you did, but I’m very grateful that you did it,” Neal said. “Shall we get going before they return with reinforcements?”

“Excellent idea,” Emma agreed, and they moved off quickly in the opposite direction to the tigers. “Although I have no idea where we’re going.”

“Take the old advice, I guess,” Neal said. “Follow the yellow brick road.”

“We’ll have to find it first.”

“Find the yellow brick road, and then follow it.”

They continued on in silence for a while, looking for the edge of the field and hopefully some geographical clues.

“You know, when Dorothy has the choice of the red or yellow brick roads and they all tell her to follow the yellow, I think we’re on the red road,” Emma said. “With tigers and who knows what else ahead of us.”

Neal didn’t reply. He was thinking the same thing.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Regina was beginning to wonder if there would ever be a time in Storybrooke when they weren’t having crisis meetings. This particular one was being held in the town hall and was somewhat
reduced, with Emma, Neal and Snow all absent. David, Henry, Granny, Belle and Rumpelstiltskin made up the numbers. Henry’s story book was open on the table in front of them, looking to all intents and purposes like some kind of sacred text that they were all about to bow down to. In a way, they were.

“Think about it,” Belle was saying, flicking through the book to the pages containing the story of the Wizard of Oz, a man that looked remarkably like Walsh. “We know that all the stories in this book that pertain to us really happened, and they happened as the book describes. There’s no reason to assume that the stories we’re not familiar with ourselves didn’t happen in the same way if we assume that the entire book was created at the same time. I’ve said it before; we need to use the book as a reference even though we’ve already lived it.”

David nodded. “So, you think that Emma and Neal are in Oz?” he asked.

“Yes.” Belle’s voice was firm, and it didn’t broker much in the way of negotiation. “Zelena is originally from Oz. If we work on the principle that she was trying to get back there, then whatever transportation method she was using would be headed there when it swept up Neal and Emma.”

“Dorothy went to Oz in a tornado,” Henry pointed out. “As did the wizard. Looking deeper into the story it’s likely that the Wicked Witch of the West, IE Zelena, was responsible for those tornados.”

“She was certainly responsible for Dorothy’s.” It was the first time that Rumpelstiltskin had spoken for the entirety of the meeting, and all eyes turned to him. “That’s why she was here. That’s what she was doing. You know that she was attempting a time travel spell. She was travelling back in time to prevent Dorothy’s house landing on her sister.”

The others digested this information for a while.

“So, Neal and Emma are in Oz,” Regina said eventually. “We know where they are. Now how the hell do we get them back?”

It was a mark of Regina’s development that her first and foremost priority was to get their absent friends back to Storybrooke. With two of the three people who staked a claim to Henry’s parental rights out of the picture, it would have been deceptively easy to take over that area completely and let things go back to the way they had been before Emma had ever come to town and kick-started this chain of events. But the thought hadn’t even crossed her mind. Emma and Neal were no longer rivals for Henry’s affection, they were friends and allies in need of her help and that was what she was going to give them.

“How did Dorothy and the wizard get back?” David asked. “How did Zelena leave Oz and end up in the Enchanted Forest, for that matter?”

“The wizard never left of his own accord,” Henry pointed out. “He got turned into a flying monkey and somehow ended up in New York with us.”

Given that Walsh was now in the mortuary, whether having helped Zelena escape and then outlived his usefulness or for some other reason that was still unknown, David did feel a slight pang of sympathy for the man despite all the trouble that he had caused.

“Zelena would have used magic beans; I know that she had some put away for safekeeping when I was teaching her,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

“And Dorothy would have used the silver slippers.” Henry pointed to the book. “No matter where you are in whichever realm, they’ll always take you home.”
Rumpelstiltskin nodded. “I was wondering where those might have got to.”

“So how is any of this going to help us get Emma and Neal back?” David pressed. “We don’t have any beans, we don’t have any slippers, Jefferson’s hat’s been destroyed, and we don’t have any pixie dust or detached shadows hanging around. What other methods for crossing realms are there?”

“I think you’ve managed to exhaust most of them there,” Regina said. “And you’re right, we’re no better off than we were before.”

“We could get the slippers,” Belle said. She was concentrating on the middle distance and David could almost see the cogs whirring in her brain as her plan formed in her mind.

“How?” Regina asked incredulously.

“Dorothy used the slippers to get back home to Kansas. The Kansas of the Land Without Magic. The Kansas that is a state just like Maine, the state we are currently in. If Dorothy is still in Kansas and still has the slippers, then we can get them from her and deliver them back to Oz.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Regina asked. “I’m not knocking the plan; it’s more than the rest of us have been able to come up with, but are you really just going to knock on Dorothy’s door and say ‘hey, you know those silver shoes you used to get back from another realm, can we borrow them please?’”

“Pretty much,” Belle said frankly. “It’s not like she’s not going to believe us. She did go to Oz, after all. She knows it’s real.”

Nobody could argue with Belle’s logic.

“How are you going to get the shoes to Oz?” David asked. “If they only ever take you home, then they’d just bring you straight back to Storybrooke. Or perhaps the Enchanted Forest.”

“We wouldn’t be going anywhere.” There was a small smile on Rumpelstiltskin’s face; he seemed to have cottoned onto Belle’s idea and was wholeheartedly in approval. “We’ll send the shoes back to Oz.”

“How?” Regina asked. “You’re still talking about crossing realms!”

“Lost and found potion,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “You know that one; it’s the first one I taught you.”

Regina nodded slowly. “Yes. Sprinkle it on an object and it returns to its rightful owner. But Zelena’s here in Storybrooke in a trash bag full of dust.”

“Best place for her,” Granny muttered, but Regina ignored her and pressed on.

“How will you get the slippers back to Oz?” she asked.

“The lost and found will only guide you to a living person,” Rumpelstiltskin explained. “It’ll travel as long as it needs to in order to find a true rightful owner. If there is none, it just won’t move.”

“And if the slippers don’t move?”

“They will,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “The Cardinal Witches of Oz form a sisterhood. These slippers were made by the Witch of the East for the Witch of the West, but in the event of their demises, which have indeed occurred, the ownership would pass to the surviving members of the sisterhood – North and South.”
“Who are still in Oz,” David finished for him.

“The Witches of North and South helped Dorothy in her quest against the Wicked Witch of the West,” Henry said, tapping the story book. “I think it’s reasonable to assume that they would help Mom and Dad too.”

“What happens if it doesn’t work?” Regina asked.

“Then it doesn’t work, and we find another way,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “But if you think that I’m not going to explore every angle I possibly can when it comes to getting my son back, you are sorely mistaken. I’m not going to give up on a plan before it’s even started just because it might fail.”

Regina nodded. “You’ve got a point there.”

“I guess the next question to ask is how we get to Kansas,” David said.

“There are perfectly good roads,” Belle pointed out. “Now that the monkeys have gone, there should be no reason why we can’t cross the town line and go to Kansas ourselves. You already said that you thought the monkeys were acting as gatekeepers to prevent people leaving town because there were no other preventative methods in place.”

Regina nodded. “Yes. Keeping everyone in one place with cursed personalities was my part of the curse,” she said. “We had no cursed memories this time, just no memories at all. The town line should be safe to cross but we’ll check it. The fairies should be able to re-brew their cure potion for us.”

“It’s settled then,” Belle said. “Rumpel and I will take the potion to Kansas and find Dorothy and the slippers.”

It hadn’t exactly been voted on, but since it had been Belle and Rumpelstiltskin’s idea and since they had a very heavily vested interest in getting Neal back, none of the others protested.

They just hoped that the plan was going to work.

**Oz – Past**

Crouched in the shadows of the Emerald City where Zelena now made her base of operations, the grand wizard having been exposed as a fraud from Kansas like herself, Dorothy carefully carved another little notch onto the butt of her munchkin-made crossbow. She didn’t need to count how many notches there were. She’d counted them more than enough times already. Three years. Three awful years she’d spent in this hallucinogenic hell hole called Oz, and each of those years felt like an eternity.

The munchkins of the east had afforded her protection for all of a week before Zelena’s plans for expansionism had taken shape and begun to be put into play. After that, the munchkins had looked to her for leadership and guidance that she was woefully unprepared to give. She was not their precious Good Witch Verdie, she had told them, fruitlessly, time and again. She wasn’t a witch at all, she had as much magical potential as a pumpkin, so why they thought she could put up a stand against as powerful a witch as Zelena was beyond her.

The munchkins, for all their short stature, were incredibly and ridiculously stubborn, and wouldn’t take no for an answer. They had unanimously voted her as their leader and that was what she was going to have to be. Dorothy began to feel a great deal of sympathy for the ‘wizard’ who had been pressed into similar service for the Ozians of the Emerald City.
Still, they had survived this long without any major losses, and now Dorothy felt comfortable in the role that the munchkins had given her. That still didn’t mean that she had to like it though. All through her time here, that thought at the back of Dorothy’s mind had never faded. Zelena’s silver slippers. They were the key. They were her ticket out of here and back to Kansas. They would take her home. Every time the two of them had met during the brief skirmishes that had filled Dorothy’s time in Oz, she had always made sure to look at the witch’s feet. Sometimes she wore ordinary boots, but on some occasions, Dorothy had caught a glimpse of the coveted silver footwear. She had an image of the locked in her memory, ready for the time that she would swoop in and take them. Hell, she’d prise them off Zelena’s cold, dead feet if that was what it took to get her home.

And now, finally, the opportunity had presented itself. It had been a rare streak of victory for the munchkins, and now they were gaining a little ground on some of Zelena’s winged monkeys. An opening in the forces had become visible; a small part of the Emerald City’s outer wall was no longer patrolled as vigilantly as the rest of the complex.

Dorothy had managed to persuade a small group of her most trusted munchkins to accompany her on a short reconnaissance mission. Hopefully the rewards would be two-fold. More information for the munchkin resistance, and another look at the silver slippers for Dorothy.

They pressed themselves in flat against the Emerald City’s walls as another winged guard made a pass overhead, and Dorothy reckoned that they had six minutes before the next patrol came over. She sprung into action, affixing the grappling arrow into her crossbow and tying the rope around her waist. To either side of her, the munchkins were doing the same. Five minutes. On Dorothy’s signal, the grappling arrows fired, springing out into hooks and catching over the top of the wall. Four minutes. Dorothy reloaded the crossbow with a regular bolt and slung it back over her shoulder before beginning to climb, hand over hand. Climbing up the outside of the barn in Kansas had its uses, so that was one in the eye for Auntie Em who said that she’d never amount to anything. The training that she’d given to the munchkins in the halls of the newly-repaired crystal castle had come in handy too and they were turning into quite the batch of guerrilla warriors. If she wasn’t so desperate to get out of Oz, then she’d be proud of her efforts. As it was, she had bigger things on her mind. One minute. She could already hear the leathery flapping of the approaching monkey’s wings as she reached the top of the wall and jumped down onto the roof on the other side of the city limit, rolling into the shadows with the munchkins just as the guard made its pass overhead. She peered upwards, watching it out of sight before letting out a long sigh of relief. They were in.

Dorothy jumped off the roof on light feet and the munchkins followed her, fanning out with their crossbows at the ready, prepared to shoot at anyone who might threaten their mission, although at this time of night there was no-one around in Oz. It was no longer the same vibrant city that it had been under the wizard; looking around at the boarded-up houses and shops, Dorothy found herself wishing that she could have seen it in its heyday.

The only building showing any hint of its former splendour was the castle itself, the emeralds glistening in the moonlight. That was their goal, and Dorothy sped up the steps, flanked by a munchkin on each side.

“How are we going to get in?” one of the munchkins hissed. “The door is always barred; the witch comes and goes out of the windows on her broomstick.”

“All the more reason for us to use the door, then.” Dorothy took a dagger out of her belt and began to cut at the heavy lock. The wood was old and damp, and it gave way comparatively easily, until she could snake one skinny hand into the gap and feel for the bolts on the other side.

“These doors were built to keep out ozians, not munchkins,” she said, hefting her weight against the
door to open it a fraction. She couldn’t fit through the gap, but the munchkins could, and they slithered inside. A moment later, the bolts were drawn back fully, and Dorothy was being ushered into the building.

It seemed as deserted as the rest of the city, but Dorothy knew that it was crawling with flying monkeys, and they kept to the dark places as they moved towards the main staircase.

“You go after the war room,” Dorothy said to the munchkins. “It’ll be a large central chamber, likely to be that way.” She waved them down the corridor besides the staircase. “Get as much information about her plans as you can.”

“What about you?” the munchkins asked.

“I’m going after the witch herself.” Well, more accurately her shoes, Dorothy thought to herself, but there was no need to mention that to the munchkins.

“On your own? Surely someone ought to go with you for your protection.”

“I think I can handle it,” Dorothy said. “Besides, you two need to get the plans out to munchkin headquarters, no matter what. If I’m not back in ten minutes, leave without me.”

“But Miss Dorothy!”

“That’s an order, Sergeant.”

The munchkins nodded their unhappy accord and rushed down the corridor. Dorothy took a deep breath and made her way up the stairs towards Zelena’s inner sanctum. Get home or die trying.

The first few doors that she tried didn’t yield anything, but it was fifth time lucky. This was obviously Zelena’s bedroom, and there on a shelf in pride of place were the silver slippers.

Dorothy looked around furtively; surely Zelena wouldn’t leave something so precious unguarded. There was no-one around, and she crept over to the slippers, lifting them cautiously in case she activated a trap. Nothing happened.

Dorothy wrenched off her boots and pulled on the slippers instead. They were a perfect fit, and Dorothy smiled. Home was within her grasp.

“You found them, then.”

Dorothy whirled around on hearing Zelena’s voice. The witched materialised in the room, smiling benignly.

“Well, go on then,” Zelena said. “You can be home in a matter of seconds. Click the heels,” she added.

“You’d really tell me how to use them and let me go whilst I’m wearing them?” Dorothy scoffed.

“Of course,” Zelena said. “You, little girl, have been the ultimate thorn in my side for these past few years, and if I can get rid of you, I will. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t actually enjoy killing people. You go home, and I get you out of my hair. It’s a win-win situation, isn’t it?”

Dorothy took a step closer.

“What’s the catch? Why are you smiling like that?”
“Oh, no reason. I’m just wondering how your precious munchkins will fare after you’ve gone.”

“They can take care of themselves,” Dorothy retorted.

Zelena raised an eyebrow. “Are you absolutely sure about that?”

She snapped her fingers and the window flew open, to the screeching of flying monkeys and the screams of munchkins. It certainly sounded like a pitched battle.

Zelena came over to her.

“Hand over the slippers, my dear, and I’ll call the monkeys off. It’ll only take a moment. Then we can discuss the terms of your surrender.”

Dorothy shook her head. She’d spent three years here in a job she didn’t even want, every day hoping that she’d wake up from a horrible dream. She was so close to home and nothing was going to stop her. Not Zelena, and not the munchkins.

“No,” she said. “No, I’m going home.”

“Whatever will the munchkins say?”

“Whatever the hell they like.”

Dorothy closed her eyes and clicked her heels together three times. She felt a pulse of what could only be magic; she’d been in Oz long enough to recognise it. When she opened her eyes, she was standing in a dusty field, staring at the same farmhouse that had been transported to Oz in the tornado three years prior.

Well, not exactly the same. She could see the differences in the new building that replaced the one that had been taken to Oz, but it was definitely, undeniably home, and she sank to her knees, sobbing with relief.

“Dorothy? Dorothy? Good grief, girl, where have you been? What on earth have you got on your feet? Heavens, is that a crossbow?”

Auntie Em was running across the fields towards her.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “First you vanish in a tornado, then three years later you drop out of the sky! Was It the flying saucers? Little green men?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Auntie Em,” Dorothy said, drying her eyes and accepting her aunt’s tight hug. “But I’m home now. I’m home and I’m never going away again.”

Dorothy took a moment to spare a thought for the munchkins she’d left behind at Zelena’s mercy, and she felt a knot of shame twist in her stomach. She wasn’t their saviour or their leader; she’d told them enough times that she didn’t want to be the person that they were trying to make her into. She couldn’t be blamed entirely.

All the same, it did send a shiver down her spine to think about what might be happening in Oz.

Auntie Em led her into the house.

“We rebuilt your room,” she was explaining. “We knew you’d find your way home in the end.”

Dorothy nodded. Home at last.
She took off the silver slippers and her crossbow, and she stowed them away safely at the bottom of her closet.

Out of sight, out of mind.

**Land Without Magic – Present**

Rumpelstiltskin watched the doors of the motel reception from the driver’s seat of the Cadillac, waiting for Belle to emerge. She’d taken on all the responsibility of organising this trip; all he had to do was take his turn with driving and navigating. He wasn’t even sure what state they were in at that moment. He just knew that they were not yet in Kansas and it would be a while before they were.

He wondered how Neal and Emma were getting on in Oz. With any luck, they wouldn’t have run into anything dangerous, now that Zelena was no longer there to create terror and havoc. Hopefully the witches of North and South would have found them like they had found Dorothy and would be helping them to get home.

He remembered the sight of Zelena shattering into dust and gave a grim smile. It was over. She was never going to be able to hurt him or any of his family again. He had made sure of that. Once Neal was safely back with them, Rumpelstiltskin would see that they would always be protected from whatever villain might arrive in Storybrooke next.

Belle came out the reception and made her way back across the car park, holding up a key with a smile.

“I signed us in as Mr and Mrs Gold,” she said as Rumpelstiltskin got out of the car. “That’s the kind of thing that only happens in my cheap romance novels, but I was quite excited about it nonetheless.”

She paused. “Or we can get separate rooms if you want.”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “No. I don’t want to be apart from you.”

Belle smiled, all traces of unsureness gone from her face, and she hooked her arm through Rumpelstiltskin’s as they made their way up to their room. He was grateful for the support; without magic to soothe his old injury, his ankle was complaining bitterly about the long day on the road that they’d just had.

Once they were safely inside the room, Rumpelstiltskin made sure that the door was bolted before collapsing down on the end of the bed. Belle came and sat down beside him, spreading the map out over her knees.

“We’re making good time,” she said happily. “Another day on the road and we should make it.”

She reached across and took one of his hands, squeezing lightly.

“It’ll work,” she said. “We just have to have hope. After a good night’s sleep, things will look brighter in the morning, I promise.”

Rumpelstiltskin snorted. A good night’s sleep was proving beyond him at that moment. Last night, curled up with Belle in his arms, afraid to let go of her in case she disappeared, he had stared up at the darkened ceiling all night, unwilling to close his eyes with the fear that when he opened them, it would all have been a dream and he’d be back in his cage in Zelena’s storm cellar. He stayed unmoving at the foot of the bed as Belle pottered about getting ready for sleep, before realising that he should probably show some willing himself. When Belle came out of the bathroom in her pyjamas to find him still where she had left him, she came over and pressed a soft kiss to his forehead.
“She’s gone, my love,” she whispered. “You destroyed her with your own hand. You can take comfort from that, and know that no matter what, she can’t hurt you ever again.”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head. “What if this is all a dream?” he asked. “What if none of this is real? I dreamed of you so often, Belle. I dreamed of rescue. I can’t help feeling scared that this is all just another dream.”

Belle put her hands on his shoulders and deliberately leaned in slowly so that he knew she was coming, and she captured his lips in a kiss that began soft but soon had all of the fears and desperation being poured into it.

“Does that feel like a dream?” Belle asked as she finally broke away.

“If it is a dream, I never want to wake up.”

“I can assure you, Rumpel, I am completely real. And I’ll tell you that as many times as you need me to.”

Rumpelstiltskin took her hands, pressing a kiss to each palm before pulling himself upright and going into the bathroom to freshen up.

“Thank you, Belle.”

X

Belle wasn’t asleep. Rumpelstiltskin could tell from the way she kept shifting in his arms. He liked to have her close, although they had not yet gone any further than this tight embrace in their reunion. He couldn’t bear to lose her, not after he had almost lost everything. Not after he had lost Neal again and his fate was up in the air. Belle was here, and she loved him, and he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He couldn’t lose her.

“Belle?” he whispered.

“Yes, Rumpel?” She was definitely awake and alert, and not in that half-asleep state. Good. He didn’t want to say his piece and then find out that she’d fallen asleep before he got to the end of it.

“Will you marry me?”

“Pardon?”

Her eyes were wide and almost disbelieving in the gloom, illuminated by the neon from outside.

“Will you marry me, please?” Rumpelstiltskin repeated nervously, searching her face for any hint of rejection. “I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know it might seem sudden, and not the right time with Neal stuck in Oz, but this time last week I didn’t know if I would ever see you again. I don’t want anything to happen and you not to know how much I love you and want to marry you.”

Belle’s face broke into a wide smile, even as tears of happiness welled in her eyes, and she pulled him into a long, deep kiss.

“Yes,” she said at last. “Yes. I love you so much, Rumpel, and I will definitely marry you.”

Their next kiss seemed to last for a blissful eternity, and Rumpelstiltskin wouldn’t have it any other way.
Oz – Present

It was a road and it was made of yellow bricks. Well, the bricks had once been yellow, but it was obvious that the road had fallen into a state of disrepair, stained with years of weather and the marks of many feet traipsing over the bricks.

Emma and Neal exchanged a look.

“You know, I really hope I’m not the only one who thinks that this doesn’t look too promising,” Emma said.

Neal nodded his agreement. “No, I’m right with you on that one. I think we might have discovered post-apocalyptic Oz.”

Emma shuddered. “Don’t tempt fate, seriously. Considering that the Wicked Witch is bleeding to death in a field in Storybrooke, the wizard is face down on the sheriff’s station floor, and there’s no Dorothy in sight, I dread to think what we might be walking into.”

“Isn’t this about the time when Glinda’s supposed to come down in her bubble and offer some vapid life advice?” Neal asked, scanning the horizon for noticeably absent witches.

“Yeah, in the original tale. We haven’t dropped a house on anyone though.”

“We nearly dropped a house on Zelena. Surely that earns us some kind of reward. Like directions.”

“Face it, Neal, I think we’re on our own.”

Neal shrugged. “I’m sure we’ve got out of worse scrapes in the past. Admittedly, I’m hard pressed to think of any right now, but give it time,” he added when Emma gave him an unimpressed look.

She shook her head in despair and carefully stepped out into the middle of the yellow brick road, looking left and right.

“When they say to ‘follow the yellow brick road’, they don’t tell you which way,” she said. “There’s no sign of the Emerald City in either direction. And there aren’t any handy scarecrows. I’m beginning to think that the sentient scarecrows were a myth.”

Neal just laughed at her indignant expression and came up beside her.

“Well, Dorothy didn’t need any directions because the yellow brick road started in Munchkinland, where she landed,” he said. “So whichever way we go, we’ll either end up at the start of the road in Munchkinland, or at the end of the road in the Emerald City.”

“I guess that this is where in a horror film, we’d split up and one of us go one way and the other goes the other way. However, having seen enough horror films in my time and having been nearly eaten by tigers, I’m not convinced that’s the most sensible course of action.”

“Agreed. In a place full of lions and tigers and bears and possibly malevolent witches, it’s best to stick together. And even if we get it wrong, it’s only two directions, it’s not like we’re in the middle of a huge hedge maze.”

“True.” Emma closed her eyes, spun around three times on the spot and stuck out her left arm.

“We’ll go that way.”
Neal moved her arm a couple of inches so that she was pointing down the road and not straight at a tree, and Emma glared at him.

“Well, that’s certainly one way of doing it, I suppose,” he said.

They set off in the direction that Emma had pointed in.

“Don’t expect me to start skipping or anything,” she said as they walked.

“I’ll expect nothing of the sort.”

Despite their rather precarious position, Emma had to admit that it did feel good to be out on an adventure with Neal. It reminded her of the old days; before everything went wrong, and she wondered what life would have been like if August hadn’t got involved with his scheme to set everything into motion. Would she have even come to Storybrooke in the first place if she hadn’t given Henry up for adoption? Would her family still be under the first dark curse? And what about her and Neal, would they have found Tallahassee after all?

She shook her head. What was done was done, and there was no chance of a do-over. She’d almost had that chance to see how things could have been different during the last year in New York, but in the end, it was not to be. It hadn’t been real. As Zelena had just proved, time travel was a risky business, and forbidden for a reason.

She was about to ask Neal what he would do if he had the chance to do it all again, but before she could, something caught her eye in the tree canopy above them beside the road. She shot out an arm to stop Neal in his tracks.

“Em? What’s up?”

“Something’s watching us,” she hissed. “In the trees.”

Neal followed her sight line and he too caught the slight movement amongst the uppermost branches.

“Flying monkey?” he asked.

“I don’t know. They all turned human again when Zelena’s magic was suppressed.”

“Yeah, but that was back in Storybrooke. We’re in Oz. Maybe the cuff’s influence doesn’t stretch across realms. Maybe not all the flying monkeys started out as humans. Maybe some of them are actually monkeys.”

“True. There’s another one!”

A faint rustling in the undergrowth betrayed the presence of something alive in there, but when Emma turned to look at it, there was nothing to see.

“Great,” Neal grumbled. “First it’s sabre-toothed tigers and now it’s invisible tree monsters. We’ll be lucky if we get to either end of the yellow brick road at this rate.”

Everything happened rather quickly after that. There was a horrendous battle cry from the trees and something swung out on a rope, slamming straight into Emma and knocking her flat on her back, all the air going out of her and spots dancing in front of her eyes where her head had hit the bricks.

“Emma!” Neal came over to her, trying to make sure that she was ok, but before he could get to her, another assailant on a rope was swinging in and knocking him off his feet too.
Emma struggled back into a sitting position, but then she was jumped from behind, a bag being pulled down over her head and rope tightening around her arms, pinning them in against her sides.

“Neal!”

“Emma!” She heard his voice, muffled through fabric, as she tried to fight her way free and get to him.

Something wet and heavy and sickly sweet-smelling was pressed over the cloth that covered her face, and Emma spluttered against it before giving in to the drug.

For the second time that day, Emma came round feeling like she had been hit by a bus, and she groaned, screwing her eyes up as she remembered what had happened before she’d been knocked out.

“Please let that have all been a dream,” she groaned.

“Sorry.” It was Neal’s voice, and Emma felt an immense wave of relief that he was with her and he was all right. She opened her eyes and his face swam into view above her.

“Hey. You ok?”

Emma nodded and accepted his hand to pull her into a sitting position.

“Don’t stand up quickly, the ceiling’s really low.”

Emma looked around her new environment. They were underground somewhere, and definitely in a cell. It reminded her of Rumpelstiltskin’s cell in the Enchanted Forest, and she shivered at the memory.

“Where are we?” she asked Neal.

“I don’t know, but I can hazard a guess,” he said. “You know we said that no matter what direction we went in, we’d either hit Munchkinland or the Emerald City?”

“Yeah?”

“I think we hit munchkins.”

He gestured towards the cell bars and Emma peered through them to see a small group of short, stocky men pointing crossbows at them.

“What is your business in Oz?” the foremost munchkin asked.

“We don’t really have any,” Emma said. “We came here by accident.”

The munchkin scoffed. “Yeah, we’ve heard that one before. Let me guess, you came via a tornado as well?”

“Well, now that you mention it, yes.”

The munchkin shook his head. “You’d better have a very good story after the stunt your good friend
Dorothy pulled.”

Neal and Emma looked at each other. This definitely wasn’t in the book

**Kansas – Present**

They had been following the same dusty road for miles without seeing another soul, and Belle was, for the first time, beginning to think that maybe she had brought them out here on a fool’s errand. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time, but now that she was actually doing it, she was feeling the effects of her impulsiveness.

She glanced over at Rumpel, dozing in the passenger seat, and the map on the dashboard between them, and she smiled. The trip had been good for one thing, at least. She and Rumpel were going to get married and everything was going to work itself out in their relationship. Now, the only hurdle was to get everything else to work itself out as well, starting with getting Neal and Emma back from Oz.

She looked over at the map again. Regina and Rumpel’s combined efforts had managed to triangulate the approximate location of the silver slippers and Henry’s story book had told them the rest. People were starting to warm to the idea of using it as a reference work for the stories they were not themselves familiar with. If most of the rest of the book was trustworthy, then there was no reason why all the other stories shouldn’t be.

They were on the right track. It was just a case of following it till they got there.

At last, just when Belle was beginning to lose hope of ever finding a turn off or anything that would give them an indication of where they should be looking, she saw a hand-painted sign leading down a small lane.

**Gale Farm 3 miles**

She pulled over and touched Rumpel’s shoulder to wake him. He startled, and Belle felt a pang of guilt. At least they knew that Zelena was gone now and wouldn’t be able to hurt them again.

“Rumpel, I think we’re nearly there.”

Rumpel looked over at the sign and gave Belle a wide smile.

“We made it. I knew you had the right idea.”

Belle felt a surge of pride through her veins at that remark, and she started the car again, driving carefully down the lane until they reached a farmhouse standing alone. It looked worryingly similar to the one in Storybrooke that Zelena had occupied, and out of the corner of her eye, Belle saw Rumpel shift uneasily in his seat.

“It’ll be all right,” she said. “We’re going to get Neal and Emma back.”

Rumpel nodded, and together they got out of the car.

An older woman was sitting outside the farmhouse sorting eggs, and she looked up as they approached, eyeing the dusty black Cadillac with suspicion.

“Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” Rumpel said. “We’re looking for Dorothy Gale.”
“Neal, where even are we?”

“You’ll see. Just keep a lookout.”

They were in a dingy back alley surrounded by dumpsters that smelled suspiciously of popcorn, and Emma was beginning to think that she knew what was going on. She leaned back against the wall as Neal fiddled with a fire escape door that had no visible means of opening it from the outside. She certainly couldn’t deny that she’d had a good few days since she’d met him, and it was infinitely easier for two teens on their own to survive together rather than apart.

“We’re breaking into a cinema, aren’t we?” Emma asked.

“Yes, indeed we are. Have you still got that screwdriver?”

Emma handed it over. “You know, I’m sure that there are easier ways to get inside cinemas without paying for a ticket.”

“There are, but none of them give you as good a view.” The door opened a fraction and Neal heaved it the rest of the way, waving Emma inside with a little bow.

“So, what are we going to see?” she asked as they picked their way through a labyrinth of little corridors, ducking out of view of the CCTV cameras. Neal had obviously done it before, so Emma just let him take the lead, until they were sitting in a hidden area at the back of the theatre, just under the projectionist.

It was a great view, Emma had to admit that.

“No idea,” Neal said cheerfully. “Whatever’s on.”

It turned out that the cinema was having a classics afternoon, and the film was *The Wizard of Oz*. Emma had seen it before, but she still watched with rapt attention until the end credits were rolling.

“No place like home, huh,” she muttered. “God knows where the slippers would take me. What about you?”

Neal looked thoughtful for a long time, and Emma was beginning to think that he wasn’t going to answer.

“With my dad, I guess,” he said eventually.

“I thought you hated your dad.”

“I did. I do. But I love him too, and it wasn’t always bad. I miss the good parts. I miss the good in him more than anything. It never mattered how dire the circumstances got. I had him, and he had me, and that was what made it home. People, not a place.”

Emma mulled it over.

“I don’t think I have a home,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever had one.”
“Sometimes you don’t know it’s home till you’re not there anymore. One day you find yourself missing it, and then you realise that was home.”

Emma fell silent. Neal and the bug were the closest thing to a home that she’d even known, and she didn’t want to think about the possibility of losing them.

**Storybrooke – Present**

Regina looked at the neat stack of boxes on her desk and took a deep breath. She’d been meaning to do this ever since Neverland and the horrible experience of having her shadow taken whilst she was there, but there had always been more pressing circumstances that had prevented her from following through on her plan. Now that Zelena was out of the picture and things had calmed down a bit, she could get back to it.

She opened the first box and took out the softly pulsing heart within. She had no idea whose heart was whose anymore, so there was really only one very quick way to find out easily and with the minimum of fuss.

Regina held up the heart and spoke to it directly.

“Please come to the mayor’s office at your earliest convenience.”

A moment later, there was a knock at the door, and Regina startled. She hadn’t expected it to be quite that quick.

“Who is it?”

“Henry.”

Regina hastily put the heart back in its box and closed the lid.

“Come in.”

Henry entered bearing a bag with a take-out sandwich from Granny’s.

“I brought you some lunch; you’ve been in here all morning. Also, Belle called. She and Rumpelstiltskin are hoping to reach Dorothy by the end of the day.” Henry paused, taking in the boxes. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Regina said, slightly too brightly. “Just some housekeeping, that’s all.”

“I’ve read the story book enough times, Mom. I know that those are your heart boxes.”

Regina slumped in her chair a little.

“I’m trying to give them all back,” she said. “But I’ve got no idea whom any of them belong to anymore, so I don’t want anyone to know that I’m giving them back or the office will be mobbed. I have to do them one at a time or I might end up with the wrong hearts in the wrong bodies.”

“Yeah, that wouldn’t be good,” Henry agreed. “But I think that you’re doing a really good thing by returning them.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It shows how much you’ve changed from the Evil Queen. You could just have decided not to use them anymore, but by giving them back, you’re actively trying to make amends, and own up to
the person that you were before instead of trying to ignore it.”

Regina smiled, feeling warmth suffuse her veins.

“Thank you, Henry. That means a lot.”

The door was still open from Henry’s arrival and a young man came up to it, looking slightly dazed and confused.

“Sorry, Madam Mayor,” he said. “I’ve got no idea why I’m here. I’ll leave you in peace.”

“No, no.” Regina grabbed the heart box and rushed around the desk before the man could leave. She recognised him as one of her black knights from back in the Enchanted Forest. “No, it’s all right. I asked you to come here.”

“You did?”

“Yes.” Regina held up the heart and the man’s eyes widened. “It’s high time that I returned this; you’ve been without it for too long.”

She pushed the heart back into its rightful place and waited with bated breath. The guard blinked a couple of times, then a smile spread across his face.

“It’s been gone so long I’d forgotten it was missing,” he said. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“It’s really the least I can do after taking it from you in the first place. I’m very sorry for what I did to you.”

The man went on his way with a noticeably lighter step, and Regina went back to the desk.

“You see, it’s not that hard to do good,” Henry said sagely. Regina shook her head.

“Somehow I don’t think that they’re all going to be as accepting as that one,” she said. “There are a lot of hearts, and the balance of probabilities says that some of them are definitely going to be angry.”

“Heroes don’t do the right thing because it’s easy,” Henry pointed out. “They do it because it’s the right thing.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Regina took the next heart out of its box. “Please come to the mayor’s office at your earliest convenience.”

Regina took a bite out of her sandwich, and she and Henry continued to eat in silence for a while as they waited for heart’s owner to make an appearance.

“So, have you thought about what’s going to happen once we get Emma and Neal back from Oz?” Regina asked presently. It wasn’t something that she particularly wanted to ask because she feared the answer, but she knew that it was a conversation that needed to be had.

“You mean in terms of where we’re going to live?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t discussed it with anyone yet. I haven’t really had chance. I want to stay here. This is where I grew up and where I spent most of my life, and I have friends and family here. You and my dad are here, and I don’t want to lose either of you. It’s more a question of whether Mom wants to go back to New York or not. I’m hoping that she’ll want to stay here, but I know
she’s made a life for herself in New York and she might not want to give that up.”

“I don’t know,” Regina said. “She seemed pretty happy to stay here in Storybrooke before, during the first curse. This wouldn’t be the first time that she’s uprooted in order to be with you and the rest of her family.”

“I know, but so much has happened since then. Storybrooke doesn’t have the best track record when it comes to a safe place to live, if the number of strange portals are anything to go by. I really wouldn’t try to sell it as a tourist destination. And then there are other things to think of, besides her wanting to stay close for me.”

“Like what?”

“Well, Mary Margaret and David have little Lance now,” Henry pointed out. “Emma has a sibling who’s going to get to grow up with his parents in a way that she never did. I’m sure that she might have some mixed feelings about that.”

“That’s a good point.” Regina sighed. “It’s a bad situation for me to think about because it’s not Mary Margaret and David’s fault that Emma never got to grow up with her family. That’s all on me.”

“At least you’re trying to make amends now,” Henry said. “But I think it’s something that Emma might have a hard time getting over.”

“It’s true that her relationships with Mary Margaret and David were always the closest that she had in the town, and now they’ll be irrevocably changed. But you’ve both got a lot of other friends here. I think that Emma’s a lot more beloved and respected in the town than she realises. Maybe once she knows how many friends she really has here, she’ll be more inclined to stay. And I get the feeling that Neal at least does want to try and make things work between them, so there’s that as well.”

“Yeah. I just really want us all to be able to stay in the same place, you know? I want to be with my family. All my family.”

Regina smiled. “Thanks Henry.”

There was a knock on the doorframe and David poked his head around it. Regina looked down at the heart box and then up at David.

“Well, I know that this definitely isn’t yours.”

David came into the office, looking from the stack of heart boxes to Regina to Henry and back again.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Something that’s been very long overdue, and if I don’t start it now, it’ll never get done,” Regina replied calmly. “I’m returning all the hearts that I took.”

“Right.” David looked at the boxes again. “That’s very admirable, Regina, but don’t we have a slightly bigger problem to deal with here? Emma and Neal are trapped in Oz and we need to get them back!”

“We are getting them back. Belle and Rumpelstiltskin are on their way to get the silver slippers right now and by this evening we should have an update from them.”

“But what if it doesn’t work?” David exclaimed. “What if they get there and Dorothy doesn’t have the slippers, or their theory of sending them back to Oz with the lost and found potion turns out to be
wrong? We need a back-up plan.”

“And we will think of one,” Regina said. “Believe it or not, I can multi-task, and whilst I’m waiting for the hearts’ owners to arrive, I can think of other things as well.”

“Regina, this is important! My daughter is missing! Gold’s son is missing! Henry’s parents are missing!”

“I know that, David, I’m not stupid, but we can’t expect to just drop everything whenever a catastrophe happens, which in this town is remarkably regularly. Last time Emma and Mary Margaret went missing after the first curse break, the town ended up in chaos. Poor Billy was murdered, and Ruby took the blame. We can’t let that chaos descend again, David. I know you’re worried about Emma and Neal, I am too, but we can’t just forget everything else for them. You’re a king, David, you should know that. I’m still mayor of this town and I still have a duty to make sure it’s taken care of, and that includes all of its citizens, not just the ones who’ve been swept up in a tornado. Emma is important, I am not saying that she’s not, but everyone else is important too. We can’t just forget about the rest of Storybrooke.”

It was clear that David was trying to come up with a counter-argument and failing. Regina could sympathise with him. He and Mary Margaret had been through so much over the last couple of days and naturally he was worried about Emma.

“Grandpa, why don’t we do and talk to Jefferson about alternative ways to get to Oz and leave Mom to take care of the rest of the town,” Henry suggested. “That way we get the best of both worlds. We’re already researching in case Belle and Rumplestiltskin’s method doesn’t work, and you can concentrate on Neal and Emma, and Storybrooke is still in the hands of a capable authority figure.”

David nodded.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Thanks, Henry. Thank you, Regina. I’m sorry; I know everyone else in important too, it’s just…”

“It’s ok. I understand. I’ll see you for dinner later, Henry, ok? I’m making apple pie.”

Henry grinned. “I’m looking forward to it.”

They left the office and Regina settled back to finish her sandwich and continue the long-winded process of returning the hearts. A moment after David and Henry were gone, Robin came in.

“Hello,” he said. “I was coming to ask if you knew of any empty property in Storybrooke that I could move the Merry Men into, and I couldn’t help overhearing some of the conversation.”

“Well, most of the property in town is in Gold’s name, but I can take a look at the deeds and we should be able to come to an agreement with him when he’s back.”

“Thank you. By the way, I think you’re doing the right thing, keeping the town going like this. Everyone needs an unflappable leader in times of crisis.”

Regina smiled. “Thank you.”

They weren’t very far apart, and for a moment, Regina thought that they were leaning in for a kiss. Then she remembered Marian, and Robin’s ignorance of his wife’s fate at Regina’s own hands, and she pulled away.

Robin frowned. “Are you all right?”
“Yes, yes, I just…” Regina sighed. “There’s something I have to tell you, but I’m still too much of a coward right now.”

“Ok…” Robin raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’ll be ready when you are.”

He left the room, and Regina rested her forehead on her desk with a groan.

**Oz – Present**

For all their small stature, the munchkins certainly looked ferocious enough to be scary, and the fact that Neal and Emma were squashed into a cell that was designed for people a lot shorter than them wasn’t really helping matters. It was clear that the munchkins weren’t going to leave them alone until they got some answers, so Neal and Emma were going to have to talk their way out of this one pretty quickly.

Neal and Emma had done their fair share of talking their way out of things back when they had been teenagers on the run, but there was something in the implacable munchkins’ faces that made it obvious that just spinning a yarn and hoping for the best wasn’t going to fly.

“I’m sorry for whatever it was that Dorothy did to you,” Emma began, “but we don’t know her.”

The leader of the munchkins stepped forward.

“You know of her, though, don’t you?”

Emma nodded. “Yes. The land that we came from in the tornado is a land without magic. All of the things that happened in other worlds, like Oz, are written down and told as fairy tales for children. No-one there thinks that they’re real.”

The munchkin lowered his crossbow and leaned on it as he pondered their story.

“So how come you know they’re real?”

“Because we’re not originally from the Land Without Magic,” Neal said. “Emma and I originally come from the Enchanted Forest.”

At the mention of the Enchanted Forest, a murmur went around the gathered munchkins. Their leader hissed at them to be quiet.

“How did you end up in the Land Without Magic?” he asked.

“There was a curse,” Emma said. “It took a lot of people from the Enchanted Forest and transported them to the Land Without Magic.”

“And who cast this curse?” The munchkin was leaning in now, both wary and intrigued, as eager to try and catch them out as he was to learn more about them. Emma decided that honesty was probably the best policy here.

“There were two. The first was cast by Regina, the Evil Queen. The second was cast by Zelena, your Wicked Witch of the West.”

There was another rumble of conversation, and the munchkin leader went over to his comrades. Emma couldn’t make out what they were saying but the bits that she could hear were encouraging.

“…telling the truth… Enchanted Forest portal jumpers… where Zelena went after she left Oz… the Wizard… Dorothy…”
The huddle broke up and the munchkin leader came over. “We accept your story so far,” he said. “But there are some other things still to clear up. If, as you say, you know Dorothy’s tale as a fairy story, then surely you know what she did.”

Emma shook her head. “She came to Oz with a tornado, killed the Wicked Witch of the East, the munchkins rejoiced, she followed the yellow brick road to see the wizard who turned out to be a fraud, and Glinda the Good Witch gave her silver slippers which took her home.”

The munchkin scoffed. “Your fairy tale writers are delusional,” he said, completely matter of fact. “For a start, the witch of the east wasn’t wicked. She was the sweetest of the four by a long way. It was a dark day indeed when she was taken from us and I can assure you that not a single munchkin rejoiced. You’re right, the wizard was a fraud, but Glinda didn’t give Dorothy the slippers. They weren’t hers to give. They were Zelena’s. Dorothy stole them and left us munchkins to fend for ourselves in a war against the Wicked Witch of the West that we couldn’t hope to win.”

“Right.” Emma and Neal looked at each other. “That’s definitely not the version of the story that we were told.”

“Well, now you have been told. And between the wizard and Dorothy, I think you can understand our distrust of strangers blown in on tornados.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. But honestly, we just want to get home.”

“Dorothy and the wizard just wanted to get home too,” the munchkin leader said darkly.

“Look, maybe we can come to some sort of arrangement,” Neal said. “Zelena’s not here in Oz right now. We know that she came from Oz to the Enchanted Forest and from there to the Land Without Magic.”

“Who’s to say that she won’t come back in the same way that you got here?” the munchkin snapped. “Tornado transportation is becoming a regular occurrence in these parts and I for one am sick of it.”

“I can quite sympathise,” Neal said. “But Zelena’s not going to come back here.”

“You can vouch for that?”

“She’s dead,” Emma said.

“Are you absolutely sure of that?” The munchkins weren’t convinced, and whilst Emma could understand why they were so wary, she didn’t know how she could get past their sheer stubbornness and get them on the same side.

“She had been defeated,” Emma began again.

“That’s not dead.”

“I’m not finished! She had been defeated and her magic was oppressed. She’d found a way to get her magic back, but at great injury to herself. She was dying when she created the tornado we were caught in and she wouldn’t have lasted much longer. The others in the Land Without Magic will have finished the job.” Emma thought of Rumpelstiltskin and of the anger rolling off him whilst Neal had restrained him. Without Neal there, with him gone at Zelena’s hand, she dreaded to think what he might do.

“Wait.” The munchkin looked less suspicious and more curious now. “You said that Zelena created the tornado.”
“Yes. She was trying to come back here, but she failed.”

“And you say that she was close to death.”

“Yes.”

“So, she won’t be creating any more tornados?”

“Unlikely.”

The lead munchkin was lost in thought for a long time, then motioned for one of his comrades to unlock their cell.

“You’re letting us go?” Emma asked hopefully.

“Not exactly. We need to test the truth of your story, but there’s an easy way to do that, if long-winded.”

“Follow the yellow brick road?” Neal suggested, only half in jest. The munchkin leader looked at him incredulously.

“Why would we go and see the wizard?” he asked. “He’s a fraud and he’s not in Oz anymore.”

“He’s dead too,” Emma said. She thought of Walsh’s body on the floor of the sheriff’s station. “He’s definitely dead.”

The cell was unlocked, and Emma and Neal shuffled out on hands and knees, crawling along the corridors after the munchkins until they were out in the open once more, in the middle of a small village.

“We used to be such a large group,” the munchkin leader said sadly. “Thanks to Zelena, this is all that’s left of us.”

There certainly weren’t very many, and Emma could see why they were so angry with Dorothy for abandoning them in their hour of need.

“So, if we’re not following the yellow brick road, then where are we going?” Neal asked.

“The Crystal Castle,” the leader said. “The home of the Cardinal Witches. If what you say is true, then Glinda and Phoebe will no longer be under the monkey curse and will be able to help you return home. If not, well…” He patted his crossbow. “You are Neal and Emma, and you may refer to me as Captain Boq. If we move out now, we should reach the Crystal Castle in good time before the bear hunting time starts.”

“And if we do meet any bears?” Emma asked.

“Or tigers?” Neal added, thinking of their close encounter with the sabres.

“Or lions?”

“Oh, the lions are harmless,” Captain Boq said. “Cowards, the lot of them. As for tigers and bears, well…” He grinned as the other munchkins brought over bags of provisions for them. “You’d better be good at running…”

Kansas – Present
“We’re looking for Dorothy Gale.”

The old woman continued to regard Belle and Rumpelstiltskin with suspicion as they came towards the hand, one hand on her hip and the other brandishing the undoubtedly sharp knife that she had been using on the vegetables in the bowls around her.

“Who’s looking?” she asked.

“My name is Mr Gold, and this is Miss French,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

The woman narrowed her eyes.

“You’re not one of those Men in Black people from the government, are you? The Area 51 types who click their little flashy pen things and wipe all your memories?”

Belle and Rumpelstiltskin looked at each other. Whilst Rumpelstiltskin’s dark suit might have given that impression, Belle’s blue sundress was really not the attire of government agents.

“We’re not with the government,” Belle assured the woman.

“Are you sure? Because I swear on my honour that we’ve had no alien abductions here and absolutely no probing went on during the abduction that didn’t happen.”

“We’re not here about aliens.”

“Yeah? Are you here about her disappearance? Because there’s a perfectly good reason for that, you can ask any of the other press people who kept snaking around after the fact.” She paused. “You’re a little late picking up the story, aren’t you? It’s two years since.”

“We’re not with the press,” Rumpelstiltskin said quickly. “We really need to talk to Dorothy because we think that she can help us with another, similar disappearance.”

“So, you’re cops? You don’t look like cops. Not in a skirt that short.”

“No, we’re not cops. I’m just a concerned father trying to find out where the hell my son is,” Rumpelstiltskin snapped.

The woman snorted. “I don’t know how Dorothy will be able to help with that. She hasn’t left the farm in two years.”

“She disappeared in a tornado, didn’t she?” Belle said.

Immediately, the woman’s face changed, from angry and defensive to fearful. They’d struck the right chord at last. She dropped the knife and backed up towards the house, calling inside.

“Dorothy!”

“Yes, Auntie Em?”

“Dorothy, there are some people here to see you. It’s about the, well, the you know what. They’re not cops or press or government folks.”

There was silence for a while, the old woman still not taking her eyes off Belle and Rumpelstiltskin, and then a woman in her mid-twenties appeared in the doorway. She had the eyes of a person who had seen a lot, and Rumpelstiltskin knew at once that she was the person they were looking for.
“Come on through,” she said. “There’s ice tea.”

Belle and Rumpelstiltskin followed Dorothy through into the kitchen, noting that she closed the door firmly and pointedly to keep her aunt out.

“So, what is it that you want to know?” she asked once they were all seated around the table with drinks. “If you’re not any of the things that my aunt just described, then who are you?”

“We…” Rumpelstiltskin began, but he tailed off. He knew that he had to begin at the beginning, but how far back did he have to go? “We need to know what happened in Oz,” he finished.

Dorothy’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know about Oz? I’ve never told anyone what happened there, or what the place was called.”

“But it still ended up as a story though, didn’t it?” Belle said. “You may never have told another soul, but everyone still knows the story of the Wizard of Oz.” She pulled Henry’s story book out of her bag and laid it down on the table, carefully opening it to the bookmarked page containing Dorothy’s story.

Dorothy went pale.

“We’re like you,” Belle said. “Characters in our own stories. We’ve found ourselves here in this world where our lives and our experiences are just fiction. Just like you came back from Oz to find that your time there was just a story, and always had been.”

“So why are you here?” Dorothy asked. “I don’t know where you’ve come from and I don’t really care, but I’m Kansas born and bred; this is my home and it always has been. Oz was just an interlude.”

“Where we’re from isn’t important,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “We’re here because we have a problem and we believe that you can help us.”

“What sort of a problem?” Dorothy asked. Although she was still guarded, there was a definite tone of curiosity in her voice now.

“A tornado-shaped problem.” Rumpelstiltskin sat back. “Sound familiar?”

Dorothy snorted. “Whose house got dropped on a witch this time?”

“The witch dropped the house on herself, but my son and his friend were caught up in the tornado, so we have reason to believe that they’re currently in Oz. We’re looking for a way to get them home.”

Dorothy laughed bitterly. “Good luck with that. It took me three years to get back here, and it wasn’t for want of trying.”

“But for those three years, you didn’t have the one thing that you needed to get home.”

Dorothy’s expression hardened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The silver slippers. If you used them to get home from Oz, then they must still be around here somewhere.”

“Even if I still had them, how would you propose getting them back to Oz?”

“We have our methods,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “And I think that you do still have them. Innocuous as
they might look, you of all people know that they’re a powerful magical artefact and they shouldn’t be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.”

Dorothy was unwavering in her conviction. “How do I know that yours are the right hands?” she asked. “If you really are fairy tale characters like I became, and we really are dealing with powerful magical artefacts, then surely you’re aware that there’s good and bad in every tale.”

“What is it to you?” Rumpelstiltskin asked.

Dorothy was silent for a long time, viewing them with tight-lipped scepticism.

“I left the munchkins in a pretty dire state,” she said eventually. “I don’t want to be responsible for making matters even worse for them. You could be working with the Wicked Witch for all I know.”

“Believe me, we hold no affection for Zelena,” Rumpelstiltskin snarled.

Dorothy seemed taken aback by his vehemence.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to cause offence.”

“The munchkins aren’t the only ones whose lives Zelena made hell.” Belle reached across the table for Rumpelstiltskin’s hand and he squeezed it, the small gesture giving him the strength he needed to continue.

“Zelena is dead,” he said. “You’re going to have to take our word on that one, but I swear that she won’t be doing anything to anyone anymore. She was trying to escape our realm and use a tornado to get back to Oz, but she failed. The tornado took my son and his friend instead. Please, you have to help me to get them back. You’ve been to Oz, you know what it’s like there. Even without the Wicked Witch of the West, my sources tell me that it’s still a pretty grim place. You really wouldn’t want anyone to be trapped there any longer than they had to be.”

Dorothy didn’t meet their eyes, tapping her fingers against the side of her empty iced tea glass.

“I was trapped there for three years,” she murmured. “Part of me wants to leave them there for three years, because why the hell should they have it easy after everything that happened to me? But if I’d had a life line and people with the means to get me back as soon as possible, I know I would have leapt at the chance and been eternally grateful.” She gave a long sigh. “Wait here.”

She left the room and Rumpelstiltskin let out a long, shaky breath.

“What if she doesn’t help us?” he asked.

“She will,” Belle said. “She doesn’t sound to be a cruel person by nature; she’s just bitter about what happened to her.”

The minutes dragged by, each one feeling like an eternity until the kitchen door opened again and Dorothy slipped inside, holding a cardboard box.

“Sorry, it took me a while to find them,” she said. “They were hidden at the back of my closet along with all the other crap relating to memories that I’d rather forget. I think that these are what you’re looking for.”

She opened the box and took out the silver shoes inside, setting them carefully on the table. Rumpelstiltskin picked one up and looked at it with a practised eye. Although he had no magical ability of his own outside of Storybrooke, he could still detect its traces, and he could tell that these
shoes were very powerful indeed.

“Yes,” he said. “These are what we’re looking for. Thank you for giving them to us.”

He could feel the powerful light magic that permeated the shoes. They had been created from no motive besides pure love and a desire for reunification, no matter how far. For a moment, he found himself thinking of just how wrong Zelena had got it. She’d had power, respect, and moreover a family who loved her more than anything, and yet it had never been enough for her. She had always wanted more, and in the end it had been that hunger that had led to her downfall and demise.

“So, what happens now?” Dorothy asked. “How are you going to get them back to Oz? I mean, it’s not exactly like I’m going to have much use for them now. I’m not planning on going anywhere that’s more than ten miles away from this farm.”

“That’s a shame,” Belle said. “You could come and visit us in Storybrooke and meet all the other characters pulled out of their tales.”

Dorothy looked at Henry’s story book as Belle put it back into her bag and started rummaging around for something else.

“You haven’t told me who you are,” she said pointedly.

Rumpelstiltskin smiled, the trickster’s smile that showed the gold in his teeth.

“I’ll give you three guesses.”

Dorothy opened her mouth to say something then thought better of it as realisation dawned.

“Rumpelstiltskin?” she hedged.

“At your service.”

“Huh. It’s a small world.”

Belle pulled out a small, dark vial and handed it to Rumpelstiltskin, who uncorked it and dripped out a small measure of the clear liquid within onto the slippers. Nothing seemed to happen.

“Maybe we need to take them back to Storybrooke for the magic to take hold?” Belle suggested.

Rumpelstiltskin was about to make the same observation when a rush of inky-dark smoke enveloped the slippers. When it dissipated, they had vanished.

The three gathered around the table looked at each other.

“Did it work?” Dorothy asked.

“I guess that we can only wait and hope.”

Rumpelstiltskin squeezed Belle’s hand tightly. Only time would tell if her plan had been successful.

Oz – Present

Once upon a time, the Crystal Castle had no doubt been impressive, but now it looked very much the worse for wear. Emma looked up at the dilapidated structure, reserving judgement on whether or not
those inside would be able to help.

It looked as if it had been all but destroyed, and parts of it had been restored and rebuilt but whoever was in charge of repairs had run out of either time or inclination or money or all three. Some of the broken windows had new glass in, and some of the shattered crystal structures had been replaced, probably just enough to make the place liveable in again. In a way, the abandoned rebuilding efforts made the place look even worse than a complete ruin would have done. They gave the impression that someone was still trying to live in the middle of it all.

“You should have seen it in its heyday.” The nostalgia was heavy in Captain Boq’s voice. “It was so beautiful. It shone out for miles around, brighter even than the Emerald City. The Crystal Castle and the Cardinal Witches were the pride of all Oz.”

“What happened?” Emma asked.

“The tornado.” Boq indicated the flattened trees around them. “Not yours; Dorothy’s. The castle is so steeped in centuries of cardinal magic that it would take all four of them working in unison to repair it fully. Without Verdie and Zelena, well, Glinda and Phoebe did the best that they could, but they’d never be able to get it back to its original splendour.”

He shook himself out of his reminiscences and marched on towards the doors; Neal and Emma had to run to keep up with him. The munchkin pounded several times on the heavy wood, then without waiting for a response, heaved the doors open.

The three of them stepped inside the seemingly deserted castle and looked around in the dim gloom. Every surface as covered in dust, and Emma didn’t hold out much hope of finding the witches here to corroborate the story of Zelena’s demise. Boq was still holding up his crossbow, and he was obviously more than ready to use it.

“Can you tell if they’re here or not?” Neal asked Emma. “You know, with that magical stuff you use to find Zelena’s presence.”

Boq looked at her. “You’re also a witch?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say witch,” Emma said. “But I can do some bits of magic.”

She closed her eyes, searching for magical signatures. There were traces of Zelena’s sickly green everywhere, in amongst the faintest facets of a rainbow of other colours, all part of the very fabric of the castle itself, the remnants of Cardinal Witches long gone.

Two colours shone brighter than the rest, both pale and white, tinged with silver and pink. Very similar and very pure. This was bright light magic, unlike the darkness in Zelena, Regina and Rumpelstiltskin’s signatures.

“I think we’re in luck,” she said, although she was very aware that she didn’t sound at all sure of herself.

“Excellent,” Boq said. “I suppose we should look for them.”

“Or they might come to us,” Emma muttered to herself. Regina and Rumpelstiltskin had both told her that her magic was very bright and very loud, so she’d probably attracted the two witches’ attention without even trying.

“The most potent magic is kept in the lower levels; the witches live on the upper floors,” Boq explained. “Ordinarily I’d split the party here, but I don’t entirely trust you two yet. Let’s go up and
start in the library sections.”

Boq led the way up the stairs, poking into all the rooms with his crossbow, in case of any flying monkeys lurking around corners. Emma and Neal followed close behind him, but Emma wasn’t paying all that much attention to her surroundings and was instead trying to formulate a plan for getting them out of this crystal maze if it turned out that Phoebe and Glinda were in fact still monkeys.

She was brought out of her thoughts sharply when a shard of crystal whizzed past her right ear and she spun on her heel to see who had attacked her.

A blonde woman in a white dress was standing at the other end of the corridor, hands outstretched, looking ferocious.

“Hey, hey, Glinda, it’s ok. They’re with me.” Boq pushed past Emma and Neal, swinging his crossbow over his shoulder, and putting his hands up. Glinda relaxed out of her combative stance.

“It’s only you, Boq. I thought that we had intruders. That castle’s been unprotected for so long that I wouldn’t be surprised if opportunists had started looting.”

“Are you all right?” Boq hedged. “Not monkeyfied anymore? What about Phoebe?”

“I’m all right.” Phoebe appeared beside Glinda in a swirl of white smoke. “Monkeys one moment and human again the next. It feels like the curse is broken, but since there’s no sign of Zelena, I think we can all assume what this means.”

“Zelena’s dead?” Boq asked.

“At the very least her magic has been stopped,” Phoebe said. “She’s powerless now and unable to sustain any spells.”

Boq took a moment to digest the witch’s words, then turned to Emma and Neal.

“Your story check out then,” he said. “I’ll leave you with Glinda and Phoebe to work out a way to get you home. No hard feelings about the cell?”

“No,” Neal said quickly, wanting to avoid any diplomatic issues as much as possible.

“Good. Good luck with getting home. You’ll need it.”

Boq turned and bowed to the witches.

“Your Graces, this is Neal and Emma, borne in on a tornado from the same place as Dorothy. Emma and Neal, this is Phoebe and Glinda, the Witches of North and South.”

He marched back out of the castle without another word, leaving Emma and Neal standing in the corridor with the witches.

“So,” Emma began. “Can you get us home?”

Phoebe and Glinda looked at each other with worried expressions.

“Well,” Phoebe said, “as we said to Dorothy when she first came here, crossing realms is a difficult and serious business and not to be undertaken lightly.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “From the amount of times I’ve crossed realms in the last couple of years,
I honestly wouldn’t have guessed.”

“We were always told that Dorothy got home with the help of silver slippers,” Neal added. “Is that true? If it is, do you have another pair hanging around somewhere?”

Neither Neal nor Emma missed the uneasy look that passed between the two witches.

“The silver slippers are one of a kind,” Glinda said. “Created by Verdie for her sister. Dorothy stole them from Zelena. They aren’t ours to give.”

“We’ve already established that Zelena is as good as dead,” Neal pointed out. “I don’t think that she’s going to be using them again any time soon.”

“We don’t have them,” Glinda said quickly. Emma narrowed her eyes. Her lie detection had been off for a while, but this time she was sure of it.

“Yes, you do,” she said firmly. “Don’t ask me how they got back here from wherever Dorothy was hiding them in Kansas, but you’ve got them.”

Phoebe sighed. “Considering what happened last time, we’re somewhat reluctant to just hand them over.”

“Zelena’s gone,” Emma pressed. “We’ve only been in Oz a few days, we’re not leaving you in the lurch in the middle of a war.” She thought of the munchkins. “I know that you’ve been bitten in the backside before, but it’s all over now. I highly doubt that Zelena’s coming back, and if she is, then she has so little power and she’s so weak that you’ll easily stand up to her. Keeping Neal and me in Oz against our will isn’t going to achieve much more than making our families come on a mad rampage across worlds to find us. We’ve done it before when one of our own got taken from us and you can bet we’d do it again. And when you consider that Neal’s father is the sorcerer who taught Zelena in the first place…”

She left the threat hanging in the air.

Phoebe sighed. “I guess you’re right. Follow us.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

After his conversation with Regina and his research with Henry and Jefferson, David had come to the unhappy conclusion that there were other people far more qualified to deal with this latest crisis than he was. When it came to diplomacy he was good, having spent a year back in the Enchanted Forest effectively co-ruling with the Evil Queen who until comparatively recently had been a mortal enemy. When it came to tactics and military campaigns, he was even better, despite never having been trained as a soldier and being entirely self-taught in the art of warfare.

When it came to magic, however, David would be the first to admit that he was absolutely not an expert, and as such, he’d relinquished the investigation to those who knew a lot more than he did about magic and portals and how they all fitted together.

“They will find Emma and Neal,” Mary Margaret said firmly, strapping on the baby sling that Ashley had donated to them. Whilst they’d managed to get quite a few things sorted ready for the baby’s arrival during the short time that they had been back in Storybrooke, suddenly waking up to find themselves eight and a half months pregnant with no memories had naturally not left them with a lot of preparation time. Since Alexandra was now happily toddling about, Ashley had been happy to help out with things that she and Sean no longer required.
“I know.” David sighed, looking out of the loft window towards the rest of the town.

“David.” Mary Margaret left her sleeping son for a moment and came over to her husband, putting her arms around him and resting her head against his shoulder. “I know it’s hard. I know you’re worried about her. I am too. But Emma can take care of herself, and we have another child who can’t.”

David felt something in his gut twist. It was true that with all the upheaval that had accompanied Emma and Neal’s disappearance, he hadn’t been spending nearly as much time with Mary Margaret and their new-born as he should have done.

“I just don’t want her to feel like we’ve given up on her or abandoned her because we have another child now. I don’t want her to feel like Lance has replaced her.”

“I’m sure she won’t. She’s a parent herself, David. She knows what it’s like. Please. We haven’t given up on her, but right now we are really not the best people to help her. She wouldn’t want us to neglect Lance because we were too busy trying to help her. Come on. Let’s go and meet up with Henry and Grace and Jefferson. Hopefully they’ll have some news for us.”

Mary Margaret strapped Lance into the baby carrier and they left the loft, heading out in the direction of Granny’s.

Before they could get there, however, David saw a familiar black car parking up outside the diner, and he rushed over to the Cadillac as Belle got out of the driver’s seat.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“No welcome back? No hello? No how was the trip?” It was good to hear Gold back to his usual sarcastic self after everything that he had been through, but his dry smile told David that he wasn’t entirely serious, and Belle gave a good-natured eyeroll before turning back to David. She was wearing a wide and sincere smile, and David took that as a good sign.

“We found Dorothy and the slippers,” she said. “And the slippers should have arrived in Oz by now.”

David let out a long breath of relief.

“Thank you both so much, for everything.”

“Well, they aren’t back yet,” Gold said darkly. “It’s up to Emma and Neal and the benevolence of the remaining Cardinal Witches now.”

David knew that, but his heart was still lightened by the fact that the plan had worked so far. He trusted Emma to be working to get herself home from the other side, and now she had the silver slippers to aid her.

“We had a more than successful trip, actually,” Belle said. “We picked up a couple of hitchhikers.”

For the briefest of moments, David remembered the last time that strangers had come to Storybrooke and he felt a jolt of panic, but then he saw that the two women getting out of the back of the Cadillac were not strangers at all.

“Aurora! Mulan!”

Robin came rushing down the diner steps towards them, hugging Mulan tightly, and then Aurora less
tightly so as not to crush the baby in her arms.

“We thought that it was time to come and see you all,” Mulan said. “You know, we were getting lonely in New York. But of course, Storybrooke isn’t on any maps and the outside world hasn’t heard of it, so asking for directions was a fruitless pursuit. We’re lucky Rumpelstiltskin drove by or we might have been wandering around rural Maine for months.”

Henry, Jefferson, and Granny had all come out of the diner to investigate the scene outside, with Granny immediately fussing over Aurora’s child and Jefferson expressing sheer relief at seeing them all right.

“When the worms opened that portal I honestly dreaded to think where you might have ended up,” he said. “I’m so glad that you came to the right place.”

“It was an interesting time, that’s for sure,” Mulan replied. “But we got through it.” She reached for Aurora’s hand and squeezed.

“Belle and Rumpelstiltskin filled us in on what’s been happening,” Aurora began. “I’m sorry to hear about Emma and Neal.”

“We’re getting them home,” David said, and this time, he firmly believed in his own convictions. “Let’s focus on the people here in Storybrooke; I’m sure that you’ll want to be reunited with Philip.”

Aurora nodded. “Please. I know that Zelena’s dead now and the curse should have been broken, but I know that I won’t believe that he’s all right until I see him with my own eyes. Besides.” She looked down at the baby in her arms. “He needs to meet his son.”

“I’ll take you,” Robin said. “All of the Merry Men and former monkeys are living out by the edge of the forest. We should hopefully be moving into houses soon if the rent agreements can be worked out.”

Gold gave a snort of laughter. “I’m sure that I can get something drawn up with reasonable terms. For a price, of course.”

Robin bowed slightly. “I would expect nothing less from the master dealmaker.”

As Gold and Belle returned to the shop, ostensibly to make the necessary arrangements, Robin led Mulan and Aurora through the woods towards the Merry Men’s camp.

“I like this place much better than New York,” Aurora murmured, looking around at Storybrooke’s buildings. Mulan squeezed her hand again.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I can see us finding a good home here. Not as many people.”

“Not as many cars.” Aurora shuddered at the memory of the city that they had just left.

“Mulan! Aurora!” Roland bounded out of one of the tents as they approached the camp. “I was scared that you’d been turned into flying monkeys! Where have you been? You weren’t in the forest with us.”

“We’ve been in New York,” Aurora explained. “We had to keep little Philip safe.” She showed Roland the baby and he wrinkled his nose with a child’s typical disdain for such things.

But Aurora wasn’t paying too much attention to Roland’s reaction, as Philip came out of a tent, unable to believe what he was seeing.
Soon he, Mulan and Aurora were enveloped in a three-way hug, little Philip squeezed in the middle.

“I’m so glad that you’re all right.” Philip’s voice was choked with emotion. “When I saw that you weren’t here in Storybrooke, I hoped you’d been spared, but when Jefferson said you’d escaped via portal I didn’t dare hope that I’d ever see you again.”

“We’re here,” Aurora said softly. “We’re all here and we’re all safe and well. Including your son.”

Philip took his baby from Aurora, cradling him close.

“My son,” he breathed. “My beautiful son.”

The rest of the Merry Men retreated away silently, leaving the trio to complete their emotional reunion in private, and Robin smiled. He had long since given up hope of reuniting with Marian, but he had Roland, and he had seen another family become complete once more. That was more than enough for him.

Oz – Present

Neal and Emma followed Glinda and Phoebe down the corridor and up another flight of stairs, getting ever more lost in the midst of the shattered, dusty crystal. Almost every surface was mirrored in some way, and Emma wondered if they were walking towards a trap in the centre of a labyrinth. She guessed that they’d find out once they got there. If she hadn’t walked into her reflection or a sheet of glass first, of course. She and Neal followed the witches closely; they at least seemed to know where they were going.

“In here.”

Phoebe opened a door and Emma and Neal entered a room that was thankfully not quite as disorientating as the rest of the castle. In the centre, on a small table, the silver slippers stood in pride of place.

“They came back to us just this morning,” Glinda said. “We woke up and they were just there, staring us in the face. We don’t know where they came from, but we can tell that they’re the same ones that Dorothy took from Zelena.”

Neal went over to the shoes, picking one of them up and turning it over and over in his hands.

“Seems innocuous enough,” he said. “I don’t think they’ll fit me though. They look more your size, Emma.”

Emma picked up the other shoe. She could feel the magic in them just as she could feel the magic in the castle. It was distracting, and she wished that she could just turn off whatever magical receptors she had. Before she’d always had to concentrate to find magical traces but the longer she remained in this place so steeped in magic, the more everything was turned up a notch. She furrowed her brow.

“Rumpelstiltskin’s magic is on these,” she said. “I can feel it.”

“Well, he did teach Zelena,” Neal said. “It’s not impossible.”

“No, it’s too strong for that. I think he sent them back here.”

“For us to use?”

“Why else would he send them?”
Neal handed the other shoe to Emma. “Like I said, they won’t fit me.”

Emma looked at the silver slippers and then down at her own practical boots, then finally at Glinda and Phoebe.

“Are you sure that this will work?” she asked. “It won’t just take us off to some unknown land and we’ll end up worse than we started?”

“They’ll only ever take you home,” Glinda said. “It depends on where home is for you.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Emma muttered. “And what about Neal? It’s all very well me putting these things on, but how’s he going to get home?”

“You should be able to pull him along with you,” Phoebe said. “As long as you hold on tight.”

Emma nodded. “Right.” She still wasn’t entirely sure that it would work. It all seemed so easy, after everything that had come before.

“You’re really ok with us taking them?” she asked. “I don’t know what Rumpelstiltskin did to get them back here, but he might not be able to do it again.”

Phoebe nodded. “We are home,” she said simply, reaching out and taking Glinda’s hand. “We’re not likely to be leaving any time soon. There’s so much to rebuild after Zelena’s reign of terror; now that we’re no longer under her curse, we can help the munchkins to get back on their feet as well and recruit new Cardinal Witches to make our sisterhood complete. Maybe we’ll finally be able to restore the Crystal Castle.”

Glinda nodded her agreement. “At the end of the day, these were Verdie’s gift, to ensure that her family could always return to her, wherever they might be trapped. I’m sure that she would have wanted them to be used to reunite other families.”

“Right.” Emma sat down on the end of Phoebe and Glinda’s bed and pulled off her boots. The slippers were a good fit, a remarkably good fit, and Emma wondered if there was some kind of magical assistance going on.

“Ready?” Neal asked. “Do you have to click the heels together three times to make them work, or is that just Hollywood embellishment?”

Glinda and Phoebe looked at each other and it was quite clear that neither of them had a clue what he was talking about. He sighed.

“Never mind. It can’t hurt to try.”

“It can hurt my pride when I stand here looking like an idiot clicking my heels together with nothing happening,” Emma grumbled.

“As far as I know, you just have to visualise your home,” Phoebe said. “Think of that place, and the magic will do the rest to take you there.”

Emma stood up and made her way over to Neal on unsteady feet, unused to the shoes.

“Are you ready?”

Neal held out a hand. “After sabre-toothed tigers and munchkin jail cells, I’m more than ready.”

“The tigers are loose again?” Phoebe sighed. “Glinda, we’re going to have to do something about
that.”

Emma grabbed Neal’s hand and clicked her heels together three times.

Absolutely nothing happened. Neal looked down at her feet.

“Maybe they’re a bit rusty?” he suggested.

“There’s no place like home,” Emma muttered closing her eyes and bringing her heels together with such force that she hurt her ankles. “There’s no place like home.”

She opened one eye, but they were still in the Crystal Castle.

“Oh, this is hopeless!” She let go of Neal’s hand and sat down heavily on the bed again. “How are we going to get home now? I don’t even know where my home is! I don’t have a home! I never have!”

“Emma.” Neal came over, crouching in front of her. “You do have a home. Maybe you don’t realise it yet, but you do have one.”

“Where, Neal?” Emma sighed. “You remember that first time we saw the Wizard of Oz? On our first date? I said I had no idea where the slippers would take me, and I still don’t!”

“Yeah, I remember,” Neal said. “Do you remember where I said that home was for me?”

“Back in the Enchanted Forest with your dad.”

“No. I never said anything about the Enchanted Forest to you back then. I was still pretending to be normal, remember?”

“Back with your dad, then.”

“Exactly. With dad. I didn’t care where that was as long as I was with him.”

“People, not a place,” Emma said, echoing an almost-forgotten conversation from a first date so many years ago.

“I know it’s an old cliché, even here, but home is where the heart is,” Glinda said. “These slippers were made to reunite the sisters. It didn’t matter where they were.”

Emma took a deep breath. Henry. Mary Margaret. David. They were her family, and she wanted to get back to them. She had spent so longer over the last few days in Storybrooke feeling out of place and not at home, but as long as she was with them, then it didn’t matter. Neal was right. She could put roots down anywhere, but Henry was what would make any place into a home for her. Her family, and Neal’s too. If he were wearing these slippers, he’d be wishing himself back with Rumplestiltskin and Belle, wherever they might be.

She stood up again and took both of Neal’s hands in hers. She closed her eyes and saw Henry’s face.

“There’s no place like home.” Click. “There’s no place like home.” Click. “There’s no place like home.” Click.

This time she felt it, powerful light magic swirling around the two of them, as intense as the tornado had been, but nowhere near as frightening. Neal held onto her tighter.

Glinda and Phoebe shielded their eyes as the white light in the room grew blinding, and then Emma
and Neal disappeared.

“Did it work?” Phoebe asked.

“I guess we’ll just have to trust that it did,” Glinda said. “Now, with Zelena gone. I think we ought to start assessing the damage.”

“Are you sure that can’t wait till morning?” Phoebe’s expression was cheeky. “Once Boq gets the news out that Zelena’s gone, we’ll be overrun with munchkins. We need to make the most of the quiet.”

Glinda rolled her eyes then smiled.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll start tomorrow.”

Phoebe just kissed her.

X

Emma could feel the powerful magic surrounding her and buffeting her just like the tornado had done, but this time it was different. It was just as nerve-wracking as last time, but now it felt more controlled. This wasn’t a random side effect from Zelena losing her already precarious hold on her overpowered magic. This was something that was intended, and Emma could feel the pure light magic all around, threatening to overwhelm her entirely.

She was clinging onto Neal so tightly that her hands were hurting, and she was scared that her fingers would go numb and she would lose her grip, sending him off to whatever unknown place might be halfway between Oz and Storybrooke.

“Emma.”

The roar of magic in her ears gradually began to fade, and she could no longer feel it blowing her hair around.

“Emma, you can open your eyes.”

Neal sounded happy, but the part of Emma that still expected everything to go wrong at any given moment was unconvinced.

“Did it work?” she asked, her eyes still screwed tightly shut.

“It worked.”

That was David’s voice, and Emma’s eyes shot open to find herself standing in the middle of Granny’s diner. On the counter, actually, much to the astonishment of all the patrons who were enjoying their evening meals.

“Emma, you can let go now.”

Emma looked down at her and Neal’s clasped hands, her knuckles white and his fingers turning blue from her vice-like grip. She let go, and let David give her a hand off the counter as Neal jumped down and accepted Granny’s huge hug.

“We knew you could find your way home,” David said, guiding Emma over to where Mary Margaret was sitting with the baby. Despite Emma’s protests, she got up awkwardly and enveloped her daughter in a one-armed hug, David embracing them all. Yes, Emma thought. This was home.
She could have been in any city, in any diner, in any realm, but as long as she was with these people, then she was home. As she broke out of the group hug, she could see several of the diner customers on their phones alerting the rest of the town that their missing persons had returned.

“What can I get you?” Granny asked. “Whatever you like, on the house. You two deserve it after all you’ve been through.”

“Honestly, Granny, all I want is some decent shoes.” Emma looked critically at the silver slippers, realising that she had left her boots in Oz. “They’re lovely, but they’re just not me. These are more Belle’s style, I think. But speaking of Belle and Rumpelstiltskin… What happened to Zelena?”

“She’s dead,” David said firmly. “The blood loss from her wound and the injuries she sustained from the debris in the tornado killed her. Her body’s been destroyed, and we buried the ashes. She won’t be causing anyone anymore pain.”

Emma nodded. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

A small, cynical part of her kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the next terrible thing to go wrong in the town, but she pushed it to the back of her mind. She had been worried about the future for too long, and it was time for her to live in the present. As Henry rushed into the diner and threw his arms around her without any pre-emptory greetings, Emma really didn’t care what happened tomorrow.

“Neal!”

Neal spun around as the diner door opened again by another exuberant hand, and a group of Merry Men came in, led by Mulan.

“You’re all right!” Neal exclaimed. “You got here safely! Did you find the apartment in New York? Where’s Aurora? Is the baby ok? How did you get to Storybrooke?”

“Aurora’s fine, she’s here too,” Mulan said. “She’s with Philip, and baby Philip. They haven’t seen each other for so long; they need some time alone. And we got here because we got your postcard.”

She pulled a battered card out of her pocket, a simple cheap picture postcard reading Welcome to Storybrooke. Neal recognised it, and the single word scrawled on the back: FIXED.

“Your father picked us up on his way back from Kansas,” Mulan continued. “It seems like we’ve all been having adventures.”

“It certainly does.” Neal remembered what Emma had said about feeling traces of Rumpelstiltskin’s magic on the shoes, and he wondered just what had been going on whilst they had been dodging tigers in Oz.

He didn’t have long to wait to find out; Belle and his father were the next people to enter the diner, and Neal broke away from Mulan and the Merry Men to go over to them.

“Bae…” Rumpelstiltskin’s voice was barely more than a whisper of wonder, as if he couldn’t quite believe that he was really looking at his son. Neal didn’t bother to correct his name and just hugged his father, letting him know that he was really here and not just some figment of his imagination that had been brought on by so much torture at the hands of the Wicked Witch.

“Thanks for sending the slippers,” he said. “I don’t know how we would have got home without them.”
“It was Belle’s idea,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “I simply provided the means.”

“Thanks, Belle.”

“You’re welcome.” Belle was looking a little nervous and Neal’s brow furrowed.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no. Something’s very right, actually.” She smiled. “Neal, we have something to tell you.”

“You’ve not been back together long enough to be pregnant.”

“Neal!” Rumpelstiltskin exclaimed. Belle just giggled.

“No, it’s not that,” she said. “We’re getting married.”

“Honestly, you go away for a couple of days and anything can happen.” Neal grinned.

“Congratulations, you guys. You deserve this.”

He hugged Belle, pulling Rumpelstiltskin in as well. They were home, and everything was going to be all right.”

**Storybrooke – Present**

Moe looked up as the door to *Game of Thrones* opened, and he smiled when he saw Belle walk in.

“I heard that you were back from your trip,” he said. “How did it go?”

“Well, Neal and Emma are safely back in Storybrooke, so I think it was a success.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.”

“Papa, there’s something else.” Belle paused and came over to her father, closing the distance between them. Things weren’t perfect in their relationship; they still had a long way to go, but they were making progress.

“What is it, Bluebell?”

“Whilst we were out of town, Rumpel asked me to marry him. I said yes. I’m not asking for your blessing, because we both know me well enough to know that I will marry him with or without that. But I wanted you to know, and when we do get married, I would like you to be there. If you would like to come, of course.”

“Belle…” Moe reached over and took her hands. “All I want, all I’ve ever wanted, is your happiness. I was so caught up in my own preconceptions that I couldn’t believe that Rumpelstiltskin would make you happy. I thought I knew your own mind better than you did yourself, and for that I am truly sorry. I saw him as a villain who stole you away from me, and I couldn’t see past that.”

“He didn’t steal me, Papa. I went with him freely. I’m not a thing to be stolen, I’m my own person.” She remembered saying the same thing to the Blue Fairy just after Rumpelstiltskin set off to Neverland. *He is my true love, and I am my own person.*

“I know that now. These past few weeks have been enlightening in many ways. But if being with him is what truly makes you happy, then that’s good enough for me. You have my blessing, both of you, and I would be honoured to walk you down the aisle.”
Belle came around the counter and embraced her father.

“Thank you, Papa. That does mean so much to me.” She smiled as she pulled away. “Would you please do me the honour of making my bouquet?”

“Of course. White roses, I think.”

“And honeysuckle, for Mama.”

Honeysuckle had been Colette’s favourite flower, and it felt right to include an homage to her in the bouquet. Moe glanced at Belle; the issue of her birth mother was still one that they had yet to discuss, but that was a conversation for another time. For now, it was a time of happiness and celebration, and neither Moe nor Belle were going to let anything get in the way of that.

X

“Do I look all right?”

“Neal, you look fine, stop worrying.”

“I’m not worrying. It’s just that Papa always looks immaculate in his Dolce and Gabbana suits and as his best man, I don’t want to let the side down.”

“You look great, Dad.”

Neal adjusted his tie in the mirror of the bed and breakfast room that Emma was sharing with Henry and finally deemed himself satisfied.

“Do you think that maybe they’re rushing into this a bit?” he asked, relinquishing the mirror to Henry and Emma. “You know what they say. Marry in haste, repent at leisure.”

“I think I trust Rumpelstiltskin and Belle to know what’s best for them,” Emma said levelly. She had been surprised when they had invited her and Henry to their wedding after only a week of being engaged, but she wasn’t too shocked by it. “After everything that they’ve been through, I can’t really say that I blame them for wanting to make it official and wanting to get it done as soon as possible and as quietly as possible before the next magical catastrophe arrives. Besides, no-one can deny that they’re ridiculously in love with each other.”

“I know, I don’t doubt their feelings for a moment, but it takes more than just love to make a relationship work. Look at us, for example.”

Emma didn’t have a response to that one. She didn’t really know where she stood with Neal right now. She knew that she wanted him as a friend and co-parent, and she knew that a part of her still held deeper feelings for him that would never die. She liked to think that there was hope for them to fix what had been broken between them, but at the same time, she was still mourning the end of her relationship with Walsh and it was too soon for her to be thinking about another one. The last thing that she wanted was to come back to Neal on a rebound and make everything even more complicated between them.

“I think they can do it,” she said eventually. “They have all of us to support them at any rate.”

“Come on, we’re going to be late!” Henry said. He was already waiting impatiently by the door and Emma had to wonder at his excitement before realising that in the end, it all came down to happy endings. Belle and Rumpelstiltskin had been denied their happy ending in the story book and so many times since, and now they were finally getting it. It was certainly enough to make an ardent
believer in hope and happy endings giddy.

The proceedings were simple, with just a few close friends and family invited to the well in the forest. Archie was already there to preside over the ceremony, along with Leroy and Astrid who had spent the evening decorating the grove with fairy lights and wildflowers. Rumpelstiltskin was nervous, fiddling with his fingers as he waited for Belle to arrive.

“Papa, it’s going to be fine,” Neal assured him. “Belle will be here, and nothing is going to go wrong.”

“What if her father’s kidnapped her again?” Rumpelstiltskin asked frantically.

Neal sighed, rubbing his forehead.

“You know, I’m not even going to ask,” he muttered. “But look. There was no need to worry, see?”

Rumpelstiltskin turned to see Belle walking serenely through the trees towards him on her father’s arm. All in white and cream, she looked like an angel against the dark backdrop of the forest, and the sight of her took Rumpelstiltskin’s breath away.

She was smiling radiantly as she came towards him clutching her bouquet, and Rumpelstiltskin knew that after all the bad decisions he had made in his life, this was definitely a good one that he would not regret.

Belle let go of her father’s arm and made the last few steps to Rumpelstiltskin on her own, reaching out her hand for his. He squeezed her fingers.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“So do you.”

“Thank you.”

They turned towards Archie, who stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“I think I speak for everyone here today when I say how happy I am to witness this union. After all the tumult and all the separations that you two have been through, I am very glad and honoured to be a part of your happy ending at last. Please, begin your vows whenever you’re ready.”

Writing vows had been a major stumbling block for both of them over the last couple of days. Belle had always assumed that she would be married in a traditional religious ceremony in the Enchanted Forest with a priest spouting archaic phrases at her, and however pleased she was to have been given a lot more control over her wedding, she’d found herself at a loss for what to say.

Leroy had advised her to simply speak from the heart, and that the right words would come when they were ready. So, that was what they did. Theirs had been a long and complicated road, but despite all the losses, they had kept fighting for each other, and no matter what might happen next, they would keep on fighting for their forever.

“That was beautiful,” Archie said after they had finished speaking. “Now that you have exchanged your vows, I can pronounce you husband and wife.” He winked at Belle. “You may kiss the groom.”

Belle’s arms were around Rumpelstiltskin and pulling him in for a kiss almost before he had finished sliding the ring onto her finger. In that moment, the cheers and applause of their guests faded away
into the background. There was nothing else in the world but them. They were married, and they were going to be together. Nothing was going to go wrong now.

At length they broke away, both of them wiping tears from their eyes, and the others crowded around them to offer their congratulations. Moe and Rumpelstiltskin shook hands; the air was never going to be completely clear between them, but at least there was a truce of sorts now.

“Remember, if you need anything, either of you, you know where to find us,” Astrid said as the rest of the group were about to leave. She and Leroy were staying behind to clear up.

“We’ll see you through, no matter what,” Leroy added.

Belle smiled. “Thank you so much.”

“That’s what friends are for, sister.”

“So, what happens now?” Rumpelstiltskin asked Belle as they meandered back through the forest towards the town, their fingers entwined.

“Papa, do I really need to explain the birds and bees?” Neal joked from behind them. Rumpelstiltskin just rolled his eyes and didn’t deign to reply.

“In all seriousness though, we thought that you might like some peace and quiet for your honeymoon,” Emma said. “Mom and Dad found a big house when they were doing the census after you first came back from the Enchanted Forest again. It’s unoccupied and out of the way, and they thought that you might like it to get away from everything for a couple of days.”

“That sounds wonderful, thank you.”

Emma led the way to the empty house, and Belle looked up at it in mesmerised awe.

“Oh my, it’s beautiful. Are you sure that no-one lives here?”

“We’re sure.”

They had to break in but once inside it was clear that the place, although furnished, was deserted.

“We put some food in the fridge and stuff,” Neal said. “So, we’re not expecting to see you for the next three days. I think that should give you some time to explore.”

“Neal!”

“What? It’s a big house!”

Emma sighed and dragged him away, leaving Belle and Rumpelstiltskin swaying softly to inaudible music in the ballroom.

“I think that’s all’s well that end’s well,” Emma said as they headed back towards town. “Celebratory drink in Granny’s?”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, what’s that?”

Henry was pointing to a shimmering trail on the road. On closer inspection, it turned out to be ice, the road rimed over.
“I know this is Maine, but it’s still the wrong season for ice,” Neal said. “I don’t like the look of this.”

“Me neither.” Emma looked at the trail. “It’s headed towards town.”

“Or away from it.”

“Either way, I think we need to get to the bottom of this.”

They followed the glistening trail back into the town, and Emma gulped when she saw that it led to the pawn shop. The lock had been broken with frost, but it had been broken on the inside.

She stepped into the shop and flicked the lights on.

“Hello?”

There was no response. Just a large urn smashed into pieces on the floor where it had toppled from a shelf. The rime trail was leading from it.

Emma groaned.

“Oh no…”

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