I Know a Way Out of Hell

by DarcyFarrow

Summary

Delving into the degeneration of S4 Rumple: Zelena breaks him down, fear finishes him, but after he loses everything and almost everyone, he has to let go of his last possession, his pride, to ask for help. Three children will be his salvation: one to have faith in him, one to lead him, and one to need him.

Chapter titles are quotations from U2's album Songs of Innocence. This story was started before the OUAT writers came up with their Marian/Zelena switch.
Chasing Down the Days of Fear

Nahari: “I'm going to Hell! I killed a child! I smashed his head against a wall.”

Gandhi: "Why?"

Nahari: "Because they killed my son! The Muslims killed my son!"

Gandhi: “I know a way out of Hell. Find a child, a child whose mother and father have been killed and raise him as your own. Only be sure that he is a Muslim and that you raise him as one.”

—from the movie Gandhi written by John Briley

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A man can't survive without faith, without something to reach for, to hold tight to, even if that man was the evilest being in the world. There wasn't much Rumplestiltskin believed in, after a lifetime of abandonment, rejection, bullying and betrayal, but even after he took on the Dark Curse, he clung to one belief and never wavered from it: he would someday find his son again. And when that day happened, whatever the conditions under which it happened, however long it took, Rumplestiltskin would finally get to say to Baelfire the words his heart had been crying out every minute of his life since the portal opened and Bae fell away: I'm sorry; I always will be; and I love you; I always will.

It was this unshakable faith that led Rumplestiltskin to determine that he had to hang on to some part of his humanity and so, all his life as a sorcerer, he'd lived by a code, such as it was. Although it gained him some begrudging respect among heroes, who also lived by a code, it wasn't so he could live peacefully among them that he followed three rules, but rather, so that he could live with himself in the hope that someday Bae could stand to live with him:

1. Rumplestiltskin never breaks a deal.

2. Rumplestiltskin never harms children (takes them away from neglectful or abusing parents, yes, and finds them new homes, but never causes them injury).

3. Rumplestiltskin obeys the fundamental laws of magic.

In two centuries of living—and despite the Dark Curse's residency in his soul, desperate for destruction, calling for chaos—he'd never violated these rules since that awful night when he broke his deal with Baelfire.

But then came the years of revenge, as the villains of his past emerged from the shadows to seek his destruction, and worn down, Rumplestiltskin willfully broke each and every one of his own rules. He became, then, a true villain, blackhearted, unloved and unloving, undone.

Because after his enemies got through with him, he didn't care about living with himself any more. In fact, he didn't care about living.

Only a child's magic could save him then.

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A/N. This story will be moving between the perspectives of four characters. I'll use boldfacing to indicate Rumplestiltskin's perspective and plainface for everyone else's (Belle, Regina and Emma). Also, the first several chapters will alternate between 2013 (describing Rumple's captivity) and 2014 (describing the women gradually learning what happened to him). Once Rumple is freed, the timelines will merge, but I'll continue to move between Rumple's perspective and the women's.
Some days after Zelena had vanished from the jail cell, Regina and Emma returned to the farmhouse the witch had occupied.

The sheriff had come for what she called "a post mortem," tying up the loose ends of her investigation, though she really didn't expect to find any new information, and indeed, she didn't. She did, however, spend several long minutes crouching in the dank iron cage in which Gold had been kept prisoner for nearly a year. She examined the flea-laden layer of straw that had served as both bed and bathroom; she examined the plastic water bowl labeled "Fido" that lay on the floor beside the spinning wheel, and the scummy water left in the bowl. She stood and looked out at the damp, mildewed walls of the cellar and the cracked ceiling through which dirt drizzled, and she wondered what it would do to a person's spirit to have only this to look at, hour after hour, day after day, week after week. The cold and damp—this was spring: what would this cellar have felt like in winter? The silence, not even the wind or birds to listen to, only the skitter of an occasional field mouse. No sunlight with which to gauge time.

She rested, leaning, against the cage, wrapping her hands around the bars of the door. She found scuff marks on the floor there and scratches on the lock and the bars. She wondered what he'd used to make those scratches, and then she found dried blood crusted on the metal and she knew.

She remembered the makeshift prison in the fairy-dust mine, back in the Enchanted Forest—the cage that had made her ask, "How did he keep from going crazy?" and Mary Margaret's reply: "He didn't." She remembered Gold's babble rhymes: "All the voices in my head will be quiet when I'm dead." She remembered the reason for the rhyme, and she wondered if, to save Henry, she could have found the fortitude to do what Gold did (she was pretty sure the answer was yes). Then she tried to imagine what it would be like to carry her son's soul inside her, his confused and frightened thoughts filling her mind, with no escape, no reprieve for either of them for a year.

When she walked out of the cage and up the stairs into the sunlight, she ended her investigation. She knew then what had happened to Zelena, and she had no desire to start a murder investigation. Not that there was any evidence to find anyway.
June 2013

Most of the time, he couldn't think for all the voices shouting at him. They jumbled and tumbled in his ears so that he couldn't tell one from another, though in very brief moments of clarity, usually just before falling asleep, he could separate them long enough to identify them: Rumple, the quiet and meek spinner; the Dark One, loud and demanding; Gold, calm and calculating; and Baelfire, judgmental, practical, loving.

And then there was the witch's voice, which could rise from a kitten purr to a banshee shriek in half a second, particularly when he rejected her advances. She could command him to make love to her; they both knew that; even when he couldn't hear her over the other voices, his magic could, and it would force his body to do whatever she commanded. She could have forced him into her bed. He feared she would, and so he ratcheted up his crazy quotient, singing nonsense whenever she came around, and that seemed to put her off.

Trouble was, sometimes it didn't sound like nonsense to him. And that's when he got really scared. A Dark One under the control of a psychotic was bad enough; an insane Dark One scheming to obtain his freedom was frightening even to Rumplestiltskin.

In those moments, he hugged himself tightly and beat back the Dark One, Gold and Rumplestiltskin so he could hear Bae's voice. Someday, it assured him, this would be over. Someday the witch would be defeated, just as Cora and Pan before her. Someday, Rumplestiltskin and Baelfire would be freed and would return to their true loves and to Henry.

And someday, Rumplestiltskin would be free of that damned dagger and no one would ever own him again.
8 May 2014

In the farmhouse, Regina, as next of kin, sorted through Zelena's belongings. The dresses and shoes and undergarments were both old-fashioned and tacky, like an oversized child's Halloween costumes: Regina flicked her wrist disdainfully and made them disappear. There was a man's three-piece suit on a hanger in the closet–had Rumple changed clothes here, then? Had he (gods!) slept here? With Zelena? Great Merlin's beard! Had he done so willingly, or at dagger point? Regina set the suit on fire. The less evidence of the heinousness of Zelena's crimes, the better.

The magic supplies–potions and ingredients for potions, spell books, amulets–could be useful, so she packed them in boxes to be later delivered to her crypt. She recognized her former master's handwriting in one of the books; she recognized his intricate, elegant workmanship in some of the enchanted objects. She wondered if these had been gifts or if Zelena had stolen them. Regina shuddered as she imagined Rumplestiltskin teaching Zelena the very same spells he'd taught her. And then she remembered that before her and her sister, he'd tutored their mother, and that made her queasy. She hurried through the rest of the packing.

Under the false bottom of a trunk she found a small, leather-bound book written in a tight, closed hand, in the language of Oz. Regina flipped through the pages: she'd translate them later. They seemed to be a record of magic lessons. But on the last page was a sketch of a very short-limbed family tree dominated by question marks. Only six names were supplied, starting with Cora, Zelena, Henry and Regina (Zelena's record made Regina out to be three years older than she really was).

Joined with Zelena's name was the name Tunathal. Extending from those two names was a vertical line that led to the notation "Trajan b. 4 second moon in 23rd year Halloran's reign." Regina had no idea when that was, but one thing she knew for sure: somewhere out there was another descendant of Cora.

Which made Regina an aunt.
"I'm hot," the witch pouted, fanning herself with a newspaper. Never one for subtlety, she'd folded the paper so that he could see the headline: "SB's Wealthiest Businessman Still Missing, Feared Dead: Girlfriend Offers Reward for Info."

The witch waved her hand and a lounge chair appeared in the space between his cage and the stairs that led from the cellar to freedom. In his more lucid moments, when the voices in his head momentarily stilled, he would study those stairs, that cellar door, and search for the loophole that would permit him to use his magic and bust out. Stretching out her long, shorts-clad legs, she eased herself into the lounge chair. She knew full well she blocked his view of the stairs.

"Iced tea, doll?" She offered, as though he were a neighbor who'd just dropped by for a friendly chat on a summer afternoon. Not waiting an answer—she never did, when it came to providing him food or drink: if he refused what she offered, she'd simply force him—she conjured two tall iced teas (his in a plastic tumbler, lest he get some ideas about the usefulness of glass as a weapon) and presented him one through the bars of the cage.

He took it. He'd realized early on that refusing nourishment or drink was ridiculous. The curse wouldn't allow him to die.

She yawned. "Who would have thought this world, with all its entertainments, would be so boring? And this baby of Snow White's is taking forever to arrive. I crave amusement." She tapped her fingers on the glass, the condensation wetting her fingertips. "Doll... do you remember the tale of Scheherazade, the little harem girl who managed to stay alive by amusing her sultan with stories?"

It wasn't a good day for him: the voices in his head were especially loud and he had to struggle to focus on her voice. "Sultan?" he echoed. Some part of him knew the meaning of the word, but he couldn't grasp it.

"Give me some entertainment to pass this interminable time. Tell me a story."

He shook his head to clear it, but she took that movement as refusal. Didn't she realize by now that he couldn't refuse a direct order? Her mouth twisted, she hissed at him, "Tell me a story!"

"A story," he repeated. His magic, in its determination to fulfill her command, quieted the voices so that he could think more clearly.

"About you." She smirked and leaned back in her chair. "An intimate story. You have a son; he must have had a mother. Or did you steal him?"

He found the name buried deep in his hazy brain. "Milah."

"Did she marry you?"
He nodded.

"Tell me the story."

He clamped his lips together, but the magic forced the story from him anyway. "She was sixteen."

"Beautiful?"

"A beauty in a family of beauties. Gray eyes, luxurious dark hair, bright smile."

Zelena made a mouth as she twisted a lock of her red-gold hair between her thumb and forefinger, an unconscious imitation, he suspected, of his own habit of working nonexistent thread between his fingers. Over the two months of his captivity, he'd noticed several small mannerisms and ways of thinking that she'd picked up from him. Realizing how much of an impression he'd made upon her only added to the nagging clench in his belly. "How did the likes of you catch such a prize? A scrawny, pointy-nosed, scaly-skinned, rotten-toothed thing like you? Enchant her, did you, or was it your bad-boy image she was drawn to?"

"I was human then, looked more like I do now, but scrawnier and grayer. I was much older than Milah... and looked down upon because of my father. But I had a talent for spinning, and tailors, competing with each other for the business of nobles and royals, bought my thread at the price I asked, and so I made a comfortable living compared to other artisans. Milah's father learned of my success, and so he sent her my way, and it was I who was enchanted. I paid the largest bride price the village had ever seen."

Zelena sipped deeply on the straw in her iced tea. "And did she disappoint?"

"She... had much to learn. She was a fair cook, but couldn't clean or sew or tend a garden."

"That's not what I meant. Tell me about the wedding night." Zelena chewed on the straw.

"She was as beautiful out of her dress as in it. She... she wanted to please me, and she wasn't shy. She was inexperienced, but not naïve; her older, married sisters had instructed her. She did not disappoint, ever, in that regard, until I returned from war."

"And you? Were you inexperienced?"

He shot her a frustrated look, but the magic spoke on: "I was experienced but naïve."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Tavern wenches," he spat. "Never in my own village, but when I traveled. Sometimes. They took my money and taught me nothing, but they slaked my lust."

"Ah. Did you continue your tavern visits after you wed?"

"Of course not. I had responsibilities. I had happiness."

"How sweet. The little lovebirds billing and cooing in their cozy little nest. What went wrong?"
"Ogres. Seer. Hook." The words burst from him like machine-gun fire. For a moment, the magic eased its stranglehold on him, but of course she had to have details, and as she commanded more, the magic seized him by the throat again. "First Ogres War. I was drafted; I was stupidly pleased about it. I thought I would come home a war hero. What the hell did I know? I'd never seen an ogre before. I'd heard stories, sure, but the same men who talked about man-eating ogres also talked about talking trees and snakes that walk on hind legs. And the duke's army was large, well equipped, and possessed a secret weapon sure to win the war: a Seer who could foretell the future. Through her, we would learn the ogres' plans and weaknesses. On the morning we draftees marched off to training camp, the entire village turned out to cheer for us. A lute played and a balladeer sang us off to war, and our wives wept with pride."

"I've tangled with an ogre or two," Zelena remarked, off-handedly. "The smell is atrocious. They do indeed eat men—and women. Go on."

"On the evening before our first battle, the Seer was brought forth. They had her locked in a wagon; they were withholding food and water to force her to cooperate. I was ordered to guard her, to prevent her from escaping. She called out my name—she knew it—she knew my wife's name, and so I believed her when she said that Milah was pregnant."

"Aww, a widdle biddy Dark One. Go on."

"She foretold my child's fate: my actions on the battlefield would result in my son's growing up fatherless." Rumplestiltskin bit his lip to hold back the rest of the story.

"So, she predicted you would die. Obviously she was mistaken. Or a liar. Or Milah's kiss brought you back from the dead. Which was it?"

"None of the above. I tried to cheat the Fates by injuring myself so I would be sent home. I returned to find my son had already been born and my wife, along with the entire village, had turned against me. The reports of my cowardice had preceded me."

She tapped her chin. "Hmm, now who was it who once told me the laws of magic must be obeyed? And, hmm, didn't this same person tell me the Fates possess the most powerful magic of all?"

His hands trembled with anger. He wanted nothing so much as to wrap those hands around that long, alabaster neck of hers.

"So you became the village reject and your pretty wife kicked you out of her bed."

"Yes." His voice shuddered.

"Humiliated you, I suppose. Called you names. Punished you in passive-aggressive ways too, like, say, burning your toast or spitting in your porridge."

"Yes."

"Your pretty, gray-eyed, sixteen-year-old wife."

"Seventeen, by then."
"Refused to let you hold your son. Or was it the opposite? Made a woman of you, leaving you to change the nappies while she gossiped with the neighbors."

"Yes."

"And... your pretty, young wife took her lusts elsewhere? Seeking a real man for her bed?"

"Yes. No." He shook his head fiercely. "She wasn't like that. She did... she did run off to taverns to drink and flirt, but she came home to me, and she tried, tried to tell me what she wanted, needed; she gave me one last chance but I didn't realize it then. We should have left like she wanted, but I wouldn't go. I suppose I thought I deserved the rejection, or maybe I thought there was nowhere to run. When I refused to leave Loameth, she went looking for—yes, a real man. And she found one."

"Handsome?"

"Yes."

"Tall?"

"Yes."

"A hero?"

"A pirate."

"Oooh, a bad boy." Zelena licked her lips. "Did you catch them in bed?"

"No!"

"Did you catch them at all, or did she just run off in the dead of night, never to be heard from again?"

"Caught them." He stared a hole into the concrete at his feet. "Drinking. Gambling. Laughing."

"Together or at you?"

"Both. And then, a few days later, a neighbor told me the pirate had kidnapped her. I hurried to the docks to rescue her."

"Found your courage, did you?"

"Apparently not. I had no sword to fight him; I had no money to buy her back."

"You went onto his ship and in front of his crew, with no weapon in hand, you demanded he release her. And, thrilled with your devotion to her, she ran flying into your arms."

"I begged him to release her for Bae's sake. He challenged me to a duel. I didn't pick up the sword."

"And he and his crew and your wife laughed at you, and then you had to face the truth: she'd gone with the pirate willingly."
He stared at the floor. Since she hadn't asked a question, he wasn't obliged to reply.

"And your son grew up knowing his father was not only a war deserter and a weakling but a cuckold."

"I told him the pirate had killed Milah."

"Too cowardly to tell your son the truth."

"He was six years old. He needed to think his mother hadn't abandoned him."

"A coward, a cuckold and a liar. My, my, Rumple." She made her now-empty glass and the lounge chair vanish as she stood up, looking down on him. "You know, I think my instincts were right when I put you in that dog kennel, because you're nothing but a whipped pup."

Her heels clacked on the wood steps as she left the cellar.
Belle reached for her cell phone as she gave the front door of the library a little push. The lock showed no sign of damage: whoever had broken in, had done so with a key. Only two people besides herself had a key for the library: Leroy, who cleaned the building twice a week, and Mayor Mary Margaret.

Except... Rumple had said something about Regina at one time having had a set of master keys to every building in town. ...Belle had assumed he was exaggerating, but...

"Opening hours are clearly posted on the front door." Belle hardened her voice as she approached the ex-mayor. "If you were so anxious to read the latest Danielle Steele, you could have called me. I would've opened early for you."

Regina glanced up from the pile of books she'd scattered on a table. She still thought of the town as hers, so she didn't bother to feign embarrassment at being caught. "You were on your honeymoon. And no, Ms. Gold, I don't read Danielle Steele."

Curiosity quickly replaced anger as Belle eyed the stack of books. Some were dictionaries for languages of magical lands; some were histories for the same lands. Belle picked one up and read the title aloud: "Census, Land of Oz, Reign of Halloran. Who are you looking for, Regina? Perhaps I can help."

The former queen sneered, then reminded herself of two facts: one, she was no longer an evil queen, so was under no obligation to keep up that appearance; two, the bookworm had pulled off some pretty incredible research in the recent past, so maybe she could help. "It seems I have an existing blood relative I never knew about. Just out of curiosity—or maybe as a forewarning—I thought I'd try to find something out about him."

"Him." Belle picked up a notepad and a pen from the Reference Desk and came round to sit across from Regina.

"It appears I have a nephew, or a half-nephew, anyway, who may or may not be magical."

Belle blanched. "And who may decide to come here looking for his mother."

"A far cry from Danielle Steele, wouldn't you say, Ms. Gold?"
The acrid odor of her expelled magic brought him out of a half-sleep and he jerked up out of the pile of straw he'd formed into a bed of sorts. A tray in her hands, she was staring at him; when she noticed he was awake, she slid the tray under the space between the bars of the cage and the floor. "Just looking," she quipped, as though she was a shopper speaking to a sales clerk. "You look different now—I can almost see the lash marks on your back." At his puzzled frown, she elucidated, "You know. 'Whipped,' they call it here."

"That was long ago," he growled. Then he clamped his jaw. He should know better by now than to allow her to goad him.

"Where is she now, your Milah? Did Regina bring her here with your curse?"

"Dead."

"Old age? Or did she die young, from a life of carousing and cavorting with pirates?"

He bared his teeth at her. "She died of a crushed heart."

Taken aback momentarily, Zelena raised her eyebrows. "So...her pirate abandoned her? Or are you saying she came to regret abandoning her husband and child?"

He shook his head slowly. "I said 'crushed,' not 'broken.'"

"Well, then." Zelena cleared her throat. "What happened to change the sniveling spinner into the heart crusher?"

"You know: magic." It was a tiny victory, but it gave him a particle of hope. She controlled him, but he could, perhaps, still manipulate her in small ways through his own version of shock and awe.

"Really. I shall have that story from you, one day soon, but first." She held out her hand and a nail appeared in her palm. "A gift for you, in payment for yesterday's story. For each story, I'll give you another." She tossed it into the cell and he caught it. "When you finish, I won't need the dagger any more—oh, I'll keep it for old times' sake, but I won't need it. When you've finished telling me your story, you'll belong to me."

The voices competed with hers for attention. He had trouble concentrating. He pressed his thumb against the point of the nail, let it pierce his skin just enough to draw a drop of blood, just enough to give him a jolt of pain that cleared his head. "I don't understand."

"That's Milah's," she nodded at the nail. "The first nail in the coffin."

"Coffin?"

"Of your humanity. One by one, while we wait for Snow White's baby to arrive, you're going to pound in the nails. And when the last nail has secured the lid, we'll bury your humanity
and you will belong to me. You see, I know how much safer you feel in confined spaces. Now eat," she commanded, and he picked up the Fido bowl. She'd provided him a spoon this time (sometimes she didn't, preferring, she admitted, to watch him lick his fingers). The bowl contained oatmeal flavored with cinnamon, and that made him think of Henry and Ms. Swan, and that made him think of Bae, but she preferred, apparently, that he think of Milah. It was her way of swinging the emotional control back around to her possession. She cocked her head, her floral-scented hair falling over one shoulder (damn her, she was using the same brand of shampoo as Belle—which warned him that she'd been to see Belle, which alarmed him until he reminded himself that if the witch had harmed his beloved, the witch would certainly be bragging about it now.) "Was she your first love? Miss Milah, I mean."

He snorted. "Yeah."

"But you crave the burn of the lash, apparently, because now there's mouthy Miss Belle. But she's different, you're going to tell me: she's kind, gentle, ethical. Vanilla. I suppose there's a story there, but a boring one. You shall tell it to me when I need to be lulled to sleep."

Silently he released a pent-up breath. He scooped up a mouthful of the oatmeal—he'd learned to eat fast, lest she take offense at something and yank the food away.

She conjured her lounge chair again and as she stretched out across it, she pondered. "Hmm. It's still early—oh, you wouldn't know that, would you? Poor dearie, no windows to look out. Too early for anything heavy, so I'll have a mimosa" (the drink appeared in her outstretched hand) "and a story about...hmm...something sentimental. Long ago, when you gave me my first lesson, you mentioned a father, but you said nothing about your mama. Mamas are so important in a child's upbringing, don't you think?"

"I never met her."

"Poor baby." She made a mockery of a sad face. "Did she die giving birth to you?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't tell me."

"What did he tell you? What was her name, for instance?"

"I don't know. She was...not to be discussed."

"Brought up bad memories for him, did she?"

"More likely, no memories at all. He had no fond feelings for anyone."

Zelena plucked the little beverage umbrella from her drink and tossed it away. "No mama, then. That explains your relationship with Milah."

"She was sixteen," he snapped. "Hardly old enough to leave her own mother."

"And yet, you tumbled for her. Miss Belle too, barely out of her teens."

"She's twenty-nine!"
She mimicked his voice. "And very mature for her age!" She snorted a laugh. "And here you are, what? Fifty?"

"In this world, fifty-two," he admitted between clenched teeth.

"In our world?"

"Roughly, three hundred fifty."

"And yet you still chase after whip-wielding little girls. Seeking the mama you never had. Quite the cradle robber, aren't you?" She leaned forward as if to speak conspiratorially. "I have a whip, Rumple. Want to play?" When he shook his head fiercely, she leaned back and sipped her drink. "Too early in the morning, anyway. Perhaps tonight. Mmm, I can see you drooling in anticipation. So. Papa. You mentioned long ago, he abandoned you. Tell me that story."

His hand slid into his hair. "He was—he thought he was—a con man. Card games, shell games. His name was Malcolm."

"He raised you."

"I raised myself. I met him for the first time when I was about seven. He'd left me with a farm family. They were kind. I worked for them, but they fed me well and taught me to read and cipher, just as they taught their own children. Then Malcolm came to take me back. To see the world and have adventures, he said, but I soon found out I was to be part of his game. A pickpocket to work the crowds, a distraction when his cheats were discovered, a 'get out of jail free' card when the constables arrested him. We had adventures, all right: eating from garbage cans, sleeping in livery stables, hiding in alleys from angry victims of his sloppy games. I tried to run away, but when some men trapped him and began to beat him, I had to go back."

Her eyebrows raised. "Little Rum saved his papa."

"I cried and they let him go."

"And he scooped you up in his arms and hugged and kissed you and thanked you and promised to reform."

"He boxed my ear."

She sniffed. "So that was your role model for proper parenting. I suppose you grew up vowing you'd never be that kind of father to your own children."

"Yes."

"He used you, hit you, then abandoned you again."

"He was a terrible con man. He had no skills of any kind, no patience for learning, and he thought himself too clever for manual labor, so he wouldn't seek any other kind of employment. He kept saying, 'Just a tweak here, a tweak there, and we'll perfect our game, Rumple, and then we'll be rich.' But he wasn't half as clever as he thought, and he never
"So, in a backwards way, you can thank him for the man you are today: learned, hard working, clever, a good papa." She smiled slowly. "But the apple doesn't fall far, because, Rum, deep down, you're a failed game player too. Just a little more power and everything will be all right; that's how you play the game, isn't it? But the more power you collect, the less secure you've become—you and your family. Because the people you took from, they're waiting for you in those dark alleys, aren't they?"

"One day, you're going to make a mistake, Zelena, and then you'll find out just how powerful I am."

"Will I?" she chuckled. "You forget, I learned all your tricks." She vanished for a moment, reappearing in his cage, and she chucked him under the chin. "But I'm a much better player." She snapped her fingers in his face. "Roll over, Rum."

Gathering his knees under him and tucking in his arms, he rolled onto his back, then onto his belly. She laughed. "Sit up, Rum. Sit up and beg."

Kneeling, he straightened his back, raised his arms against his chest and whined. She patted his head. "Good boy, Rum." She bent to whisper in his ear, "Tonight I'll make you lick yourself." Then she pressed something into his hand. "Your reward, Rum. For Papa."

When the magic released him, he fell back against his spinning wheel. He opened his palm to find another nail.
Emma's spoonful of ice cream froze midway to her mouth as the bell over Granny's door tinkled and Regina's shadow fell across the table. "Really?" she groaned, with an apologetic glance at her date, followed by a scowl at the intruders.

"We need to speak to you, Ms. Swan."

"Can't it wait? Killian and I deserve a little alone time, after all—"

"So do Rumple and me," Belle snapped. "But that never stopped you and your parents from barging in."

"This is a matter of public safety. Now if you're resigning your position, I'll leave you in peace."

"No," Emma sighed, and Jones offered to send her ice cream back so Granny could refrigerate it. "Marvelous invention, refrigerators--"

"Save your musings for another time. This is urgent," Regina demanded.

"We need to talk to Emma alone," Belle emphasized.

"It's all right, love," Jones said. "I'll amuse myself with the dart board."

"All right. Outside," Emma slid from the booth and led them into the alley. Regina wrinkled her nose at the garbage cans; Belle wrinkled her nose at brick wall, against which, in another lifetime, Lacey had allowed a sleaze bag to grope her.

"Zelena has a son," Regina blurted.

"Crap. Is he a threat?"

"He's five," Belle answered.

"But the time will come when he'll want to find his mother, and if he has half the power she did--" Regina let the thought hang.

"We need to keep an eye on him. Maybe we could influence him." Emma pondered. "Where is he? Who's raising him?"

"As best we can determine, somewhere in Oz," Belle said. "His father is dead, so Zelena left him in the care of one of her henchmen. She had this crazy idea that if she could go back in time and change her history, Cora wouldn't abandon her, Rumple would love her, her son would be reborn and Rumple would be the father."

"You'd have to be crazy to want the Dark One as your baby daddy," Regina quipped, then glanced at Belle. "Bookworms excluded."

"One day, Regina, you and I are going to have a long talk," Belle snapped, "which may result in my stiletto planted in your arse. But for now, we need to, as Emma said, keep an eye on Trajan."

"Well, how do we do that, when we don't have any magic beans to make portals?"
"We do have a damaged magic hat and a slightly damaged portal jumper," said Regina.

"And four powerful magic practitioners who, if they pool their magic--"

Emma gaped at Belle. "Four? I'm all for cooperation, but it would take the entire United Nations to get the Evil Queen, the Savior, the Blue Fairy and the Dark One to work together."

"Well, fortunately for us, we have the little peacemaker right here," Regina touched Belle's shoulder. "Someone who gets along well with all four of us. . . stiletto threats aside."

"The kid is in a whole other world. Maybe he'll be okay where he is. Maybe he won't pull a Henry and come looking for his mom."

"The kid is being raised by flying monkeys," Regina reminded her.

"Well, have you thought about this? If you bring him back here, who's going to raise him?"

"We'll find a family. He won't go into the system," Belle vowed.

"Crap." Emma sighed again. "All right, let me go in and break my date, and then we'll talk to Blue."

"You won't go hungry." Belle opened her tote bag. "I brought hamburgers."
To Put Your Finger on the Trouble

August 2013

He'd lined up the two nails on the lowest-lying crossbar of his cage, so he could look at them as he lay on the floor, just before falling asleep. He knew what she was up to by giving him these nails—and frankly, it was working. Every time his eyes fell upon the nails—every time he even thought about the nails—he was reminded of Milah and Malcolm, and somehow, the memories made his blood both boil and run cold at the same time.

He successfully fought off the memories in his waking hours, but the emotions, he couldn't drive away, and his dreams were populated with his former wife and his former father. Sometimes, Bae's psyche stepped in, taking control of his dreams—it had taken some time for Rumple to understand that; he'd dreamt several times of places he'd never seen and people he somehow knew but had never met. Someday, when he'd figured out a way to keep Bae alive outside of himself, he'd thank his son for the respite from the Milah and Malcolm nightmares.

He could see where Zelena was going with this: she would break him down emotionally well before he got to the end of his story.

"Don't bother trying to get inside my head, dearie," he advised her. "It's already a full house in there."

"Well, then, maybe we'll have to evict a few of the current residents, hmm? Exorcise some of your demons. Really, Rumple, you should be paying me for what I'm doing for you. If you'd gone to that cricket psychiatrist, he'd have charged you double, once for you and once for your son." She conjured herself a straight chair this time (and a scotch on the rocks) and laid him out on a couch. A pair of bifocals on her nose and a steno pad in her hand, she announced, "Let's discuss the other being with whom you've shared your head, lo, these many centuries."

"Three centuries, not 'many,'" he corrected. "I'm not that old."

"Fine. Lo, these three centuries." She clicked a pen open. "Tell me about the Dark One."

"What do you want to know?"

"I've read some of the books about the history of the Dark One—"

"'History' is the wrong word. 'Fables' would be more accurate. No one knows the true story of the Dark One's origins."

"Well, it is known that there have been various Dark Ones over the millennia, including a few women."

"Yes."

"Your immediate predecessor was, before he acquired the curse, a farmer."
"Yes. It's believed Zoso was the Dark One for less than a century. He was already an old man when he became the Dark One. In fact, it's said he took the curse to gain immortality, not magic."

"And he was ruled through most of his curse by a greedy, land-grabbing nobleman."

"Zoso wasn't the brightest bulb in the chandelier."

"How did the Dark curse come to you?"

Rumplestiltskin ducked his head. "I . . . wasn't the brightest bulb either. He came to me at a time I was most needing help. I was a lame spinner, a war deserter, a cuckold—I owned nothing, not even the respect of my neighbors. Milah had left me long ago. All I had left in life was my son, and he was about to be drafted into the duke's army, to fight ogres. I feared for his life like I'd never feared anything before. With no one to turn to, no money to buy our way out, our back was to the wall. And then a stranger came with information that I thought would mean our salvation. I could gain control of the Dark One, he said, or even take the Dark One's magic for myself; the stranger explained how. I could save my son, I could end the war and save my village."

"Be a hero."

"Yes."

"But what did a spinner know of magic?"

He shook his head. "Not enough. That's what the stranger was counting on. I stole the dagger—and in the next moment I learned that the Dark One I now controlled was in fact the same stranger who'd told me what to do. He'd tricked me, and as I was wrapping my mind around that, he goaded me. I exploded—"

"Wait. What did he say that pushed your buttons?"

"It's not—it doesn't matter—" he sputtered.

"Humor me."

The magic left him no choice: he had to answer. "Zoso suggested that Bae wasn't my son."

Zelena's eyebrows shot up. "Oooh. That Milah had screwed around while you were off at war?"

"Bae is my son in every way. Anyone who looks into his face can see me in his features. But bloodlines don't make a man a father. From the moment I first held him, he was mine and I was his. His defender, his provider, his teacher, his counselor, his—" Rumple's voice broke and he had to clear his throat. He finished simply, "His."

"So why did you allow an offhand remark to upset you?"

He shrugged. "Fear. I'd been living on fear for weeks. When Zoso goaded me, I knew he could manipulate me, and though I held his dagger, I would never control him. So I killed
him, and only as he lay dying and laughing at me, and the curse consumed me, did I realize what I'd done. And then I was enraged. It wasn't the first time I'd been tricked, and certainly wasn't the last, but there was an extra layer of hurt to it, because I thought he was like me: an outcast, poor, ageing and disabled. As he died, his appearance changed, becoming more monstrous, less human, and then I understood he'd used a glamour to make himself look like a peasant so that I would trust him.

"What did it feel like, all that power surging into your body? I've never known what it was like not to have magic."

He licked his chapped lips, remembering exactly. "I felt the weakness and fear draining from me as the magic filled me. I felt physically strong for the first time in my life, and I was: I could lift a haywagon, driver included, with one hand. I could snap my fingers and make ogres drop to their knees, quaking. No one would ever harm me or my son again. I thought I'd never be afraid of anything, ever again."

Zelena snickered. "Who needs riches or titles when you have strength like that?"

"But it's a lie." His voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Magic is like steroids: makes you think you're more than you are. You know that the strength isn't yours, and so it can be taken away any time. Belle has always said that using magic is a cheat. What she doesn't know is that the person who's being cheated the most is the mage. The one using the magic is being used by the magic."

"You're an old man, Rumplestiltskin." The witch stood and made her chair, her notepad and her bifocals vanish. "You're too tired for this sort of power. Someone should do you a favor and take your magic away."

He lifted his face to search hers. "You?"

"No," she chuckled. "I'll use your magic while it's still in you, thanks very much. I have no intention to take on your curse." She paused on the bottom step leading out of the cellar. "Because I am the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Here. For Zoso." She tossed a nail into his cage before walking out.
You Can't Always See

9 May 2014

The nun known in this world as Sister Bernadette (formerly the fairy known as Chartreuse) had to leap to one side to avoid being trampled by an angry mob, or so it seemed, for the convent seldom had visitors. In actuality, the mob consisted of three women, only one of whom could be described as anything close to angry (Regina, who always seemed peeved about something). But Bernie stepped aside, the women entered and looked around, and Regina demanded, "The head lightning bug. Where is she?" To which Emma added, "We need to talk to Blue ASAP."

Bernie led them to Mother Superior's study, tucked into the eastern corner of the building. As they walked through the convent, Regina's sharp eyes quickly appraised the values of the objects d'art and the furnishings, both for monetary value (a shame churches didn't have to pay taxes) and for magical value (a few odds and ends, including a shelf of spell books, but nothing Regina hadn't seen before). "Reverend Mother, visitors," Bernie announced before backing away.

"Blue, we need your magic," Emma said, helping herself to the only chair in front of the nun's desk. Regina and Belle were left to stand behind her.

"Nothing like getting right to it," Regina muttered. "But Ms. Swan is correct. We've just learned that my half-sister left behind a dependent, and we need to rescue him."

"Her five-year-old son," Belle explained, "left in Oz."

"Son," Blue repeated, testing the word. "Zelena has a son."

"Had," Emma corrected. "She left him with some of her flying monkeys. Obviously he'd be better off here."

"The problem is, without that field of magic beans," Belle shot Regina a cutting look, "we can't make a portal. Our hope is that if you and Emma and Regina pool your magic, there might be enough power to regenerate Jefferson's hat, and then we can send someone to Oz to find Trajan. Please, Reverend Mother, he's only five. What kind of a life will he have if he's left with Zelena's minions?"

"He won't always be five," Regina added. "With a bloodline like his, he could well grow into a powerful warlock and decide to punish the town that killed his mother."

"I see." Blue sat down on the edge of her desk. "You're quite sure about all this."

"We're sure."

"What you're proposing, if I understand correctly, is dangerous for all of us. Combining light and dark magic produces a force that's unstable and unmanageable."

"Regina and I have done it before. Successfully."

"I notice that Rumplestiltskin isn't with you. Do you intend to involve him? His knowledge of magic is much more extensive than any of ours."

The women exchanged a worried glance before Belle answered, "After what Zelena put him through, it would be asking too much. It's been less than a week. He's still recovering." In a lower
voice, she added, "And grieving."

Emma cleared her throat. "We think we can manage without him."

"Besides," Regina dared to broach the subject the others hadn't touched," we don't know yet what damage has been done to him, or how angry he might be. He was never all that trustworthy to begin with, and if he's pissed at us for what Zelena did."

"Don't you mean, pissed at you because none of you 'heroes' or 'saviors' lifted a finger to help him over the year she had him locked up?" Belle snapped.

"To be fair, for the better part of that year, we were busy just trying to rescue ourselves," Regina said.

"So, short answer, no, we're not asking him," Emma summarized.

"But we will tell him what we're doing," Belle insisted.

"Now wait a minute. We never agreed to that," Emma cut in. "You tell him and he could blow the whole operation apart with a flick of his finger. Bet he would, too. After what she did to his son, no reason he'd want to help Zelena's."

"You have a point, Ms. Swan."

"Well, I'm not going to keep secrets from him. That's how things go from bad to worse," Belle argued. "He may just surprise you. He had a soft spot for kids."

"Yeah, he proved that when he shot an arrow at Roland," Regina sniped. "You're supposed to be smart, Ms. French. Act like it. Keep your mouth shut."

"Sorry, Belle, I'm with Regina on this one," Emma said.

"I didn't call for votes."

"Well, at least wait until we find out if we can fix Jefferson's hat before you tell him," Blue advised. "You may be upsetting him for nothing, otherwise."

Emma fished out her cell phone. "All right, ladies, it's time to pay a visit to the mansion on the hill."
When the Trouble is You

September 2013

He'd tried to keep count of the days, but between the chaos in his head and the lack of visual
cues to the passing of time, he'd soon lost count. But one morning as she trudged down the
stairs, Zelena seemed extra sleepy and unusually sloppy in both her appearance and her
precautions, for she left the cellar door open. A gust of wind brought in a ballet of orange,
yellow and red leaves and the scent of a recent, cleansing rain; he filled his lungs and his
eyes, so starved he was for the natural world. Without a greeting, she shoved his tray (cold
oatmeal, dry toast, lukewarm coffee) under the cage door and turned to go.

When she was tired like this, she tended to be less perceptive and less suspicious; he'd
learned that was the best time to ask a favor. He took a chance. "Zelena." He gentled his
tone. "What month is this, please?"

"By the local calendar, September." She turned to leave.

"And the date, please?"

"I think it's the 15th."

He didn't press for more information. "Thank you for breakfast." He dug his spoon into the
oatmeal (flavorless; she'd forgotten the cinnamon) and pretended to have an appetite. She left
without comment.

He spent the rest of the day weaving together stands of spun gold into a bracelet. If he ever
got out of here, this would be his gift to Belle, for September 17th would be her thirtieth
birthday. The thought both gave him hope and pissed him off. If she'd chosen to love anyone
ordinary, she would be spending her birthday bemoaning the fact that she’d reached the
milestone of thirty, and her love—no doubt, her husband, probably a plumber or a farm
implements salesman—would be reassuring her of her continuing youthful beauty. And then
their kids would come clattering in from play, with hand-drawn birthday cards and bouquets
of dandelions in their sticky little hands.

The three Fates must have been drunk on that day thirty years ago when they got Belle's life
threads tangled up with the Dark One's.

In the evening, Zelena returned with a take-out box from Granny's. The food had gone cold,
but at least it was substantial and flavorful: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans and a
dinner roll. It was more than his stomach could take at once, so much time having passed
since he'd last had a complete meal. He ate slowly and when she wasn't looking, squirreled
away the roll and the beans for later.

"Well, doll, I have a surprise for you," she crowed, and with a snap of her fingers a plate
containing a slice of cake appeared on his spinning stool. A single pink candle, its wick
dancing with a tiny flame, sat atop the cake. "Devil's food. Seemed appropriate." She was
quite pleased with her cleverness. She expected thanks, so he gave it.
"Oh, and I was mistaken: today is the 17th. Since you asked me today's date this morning, I assume you can guess what we're celebrating."

He dared not make eye contact with her, lest she see his nervousness. "How did you find out?"

"They were having a small celebration for her at Granny's. The old woman, the tarty waitress and the cook; they'd baked her a cake—her favorite, she said."

"Red velvet," he murmured.

"And the hairy dwarf came in with a gift from the lot of them. Some book; I didn't see the cover, but she seemed pleased. And they sang the birthday song—not a one of them could carry a note in a bucket, but she smiled graciously, because that's what princesses do, right?"

"Duchesses," he corrected. "She was a duchess."

"Until she met you and became the Dark One's toy."

He bit the spoon to keep from cursing. He needed her to continue her report; he was starved for news of Belle, but more importantly, he had to know if Zelena had hurt her in any way.

"And what happened after the birthday song?"

Zelena shrugged. "It got awkward after that. They'd run out of ideas, I suppose. I got the impression none of them really socialize much with her, because the conversation was pretty stale, the usual 'how are things at the shop' kind of talk. Then some of the sanitation crew wandered in on their lunch break, and the party broke up. She went back to the shop—alone." She leaned against the bars of the cage. "There, isn't that a nice surprise, doll? Your lover is loyal. She sleeps alone in that ratty little apartment above the library."

"Thank you, Zelena," he said, because she expected it—and because he meant it for once.

"Now." She straightened up and with a flick of her fingers produced her lounge chair and a strawberry daiquiri. "Story time." She made herself comfortable. "Seems appropriate that we have her story today. I already know how you met her—quite the comedy, that tale! I would have liked to have been the fly on the wall to witness you telling her papa that you'd save his dukedom from the ogres only if he surrendered his precious only child to you. How ever did you come up with that idea?"

"There were already rumors floating about that I dealt in babies, so I thought, why not give them what they expect? Bared teeth and growls can only go so far; one must occasionally do something horrifying to keep up one's image."

The witch hooted with laughter.

And because the magic wouldn't allow him to lie to her, he had to admit, "I'd heard reports of her: how, when she was a tot, her doting father had allowed her to play beneath the conference table in his war room as he and his generals strategized; how, when she learned to read, her mother granted her uncensored use of the library; and how her tutors taught her politics and rhetoric and philosophy and history, along with dancing and embroidery. I'd spied on her a time or two, after the ogres attacked her village, and I found the reports were
true: she was as vocal as her father in the war room, and as clever as any of his generals. I saw her behind the lines with the nurses, tending the wounded. I saw her tear her ball gown into bandages, and without shrinking back, wash the blood from the torn bellies of the dying. I saw her in the chapel, praying on her knees for the soldiers, and I saw her carrying baskets of food from the castle kitchens to the homes of war widows."

"How noble." Zelena wrinkled her nose.

"I thought a mind so independent as that could withstand life in the Dark Castle, and a heart so stout as that could perhaps tolerate me."

"You were...lonely?" the witch blinked. "With all your sorcerer acquaintances? With Regina hovering about?"

"Mages don't make the best of friends, dearie; I'm sure you've observed that yourself. Occasional allies, certainly; someone to trade spells or potions with, the way cooks trade recipes; and on a rarer occasion, a sympathetic ear. But rivalry is always present, even between mages of longstanding acquaintance and trust. I'm sure you're no stranger to such loneliness."

"I have been." She lowered her head; when she raised it again, she'd shaken off her vulnerability. She taunted, "So the Dark One was lonely."

"To an extent, though that was not my reason for seeking a caretaker for my house."

Zelena's eyes lit up with mischief. "You wanted a slave to play with." She toyed with the necklace at her throat. "A bedwarmer."

"No, dearie. I wanted a governess."

"A—what?"

"A governess. It wouldn't be long, you see, until Regina cast my curse and I would be sent to the new world, along with everyone else. Once the savior had carried out her responsibilities, the curse would be broken, I would find my son, and I would bring him back to live with me. My calculations were off, however; time runs faster here than in the Enchanted Forest. I thought the curse would bring us to this world thirty years before my son arrived here. And because he and I hadn't been on the best of terms when we parted, I thought a go-between would help us to reestablish our relationship. Hence, a governess."

"I see. But I heard the curse separated you from Belle."

"Not the curse: Regina."

Zelena got rid of her drink and set her elbows on her knees, bending forward in anticipation. "Ooh, tell me more!"

"Before the curse was cast, she came between Belle and me." Then he corrected himself. "She tried to trick Belle into robbing me of my magic."

"With the dagger?" Zelena gasped. "Did Belle try to stab you with the dagger?"
"How little you know of heroes, dearie," he muttered. "Regina told her True Love's Kiss could free me from the Dark curse."

"How delicious! So of course, naïve little sweetheart locked lips with you—" Zelena stopped herself to frown. "But that must mean her love isn't true, because obviously, the kiss didn't work. Or was it you who didn't love her?"

"He turned his shoulder to her so she couldn't see his expression. "I stopped the kiss. Without my magic, all my plans would fail and I would never find Bae."

"Oh, I would have loved to see the look on Belle's face! What did you do? Did you slap her for trying to take your magic? Did you turn her into a frog and threaten to yank her legs off for a snack?"

"I...shook her and yelled at her. Then I locked her in the dungeon. And when I had cooled down, I sent her away. Regina captured her and hid her away, but told me that she had committed suicide."

"And you believed her? Against what your own eyes had told you about Belle's strength, you believed she would kill herself in despair of losing...you? Typical man! With everything you knew about Regina, you—" Zelena shook her head in amazement. "There's just so much wrong with that picture, I don't know where to begin."

He agreed with her. "I was a fool."

"I repeat: men! Instead of believing the Queen of Mean, why didn't you check out the story for yourself?"

"I expected the worst. I...thought I had ruined Belle, caused her family and her people to think her tainted."

"Supposing they did think she had screwed the Dark One. Would they dare mess with the Dark One's bedwarmer?"

"The Dark One's discard," he amended bitterly.

"All right," Zelena sighed in frustration. "So you, what, remembered you were the Dark One and went raging out into the night and slaughtered everyone in Belle's castle."

"No. I shut myself away for several years, until the time was right to set the curse into motion."

"You, the most powerful sorcerer in the world. You shut yourself away. Huh! Well, why did you throw Belle out of your castle to begin with? Why didn't you just, I don't know, spank her for her impudence?"

"When she kissed me, I realized there was no going back. I was in big trouble."

"Because Regina now knew your weakness?"

"Because the Kiss would have worked."
Zelena mulled this over. "Because... you were in love. You know, this all could have been avoided if you hadn't panicked when she kissed you. There are ways to get around that 'kiss-breaks-curse' thing. You, with your library of spell books and your laboratory of potions, could have found a work-around easily enough. But you weren't thinking like a sorcerer; you were thinking like a boy suffering his first heartbreak, because you were in love." She studied him. "And still are." She thought for a long moment. "And so there are two ways to destroy the Dark One: with his dagger or with his lady love." She conjured the dagger and picked her fingernails with its tip as she contemplated. "So, if I wanted to cause you serious damage, I wouldn't kill you with this—because after all, I don't want all the misery that goes with being the Dark One. No, I would just... kill Belle. Slowly. With you watching." She grinned with a flash of inspiration. "Or better yet, make you do it."

His voice shuddered. "If you harm her, or force me to harm her, in any way, the bottommost layers of Hell won't be deep enough for you to hide from me. You know it as well as I do: someday you'll slip up, and then you'll experience the full meaning of suffering."

She pretended to ponder a moment, but he could see her foot jiggling with nervousness. She made the dagger vanish with a casual wave of her hand. "As entertaining as that all sounds, Rumple, my plans will go smoother if I have your cooperation. So your sweetie is safe from us."

He tried to take advantage of the opening. "What are your plans, Zelena? I can't help you with them if I don't know what they are."

"Not yet, doll. Besides." She conjured a new nail in her palm, smaller and shinier than the rest. "You haven't earned Belle's nail yet. Come, let's give her a birthday present." She snapped her fingers and placed in his lap a hand-mirror and a box of stationery (a child's set, the pen tuffed with a pink fuzzy ball and the paper decorated with prancing unicorns that looked little like the real beasties back in the forest). "We'll write her a love note, shall we? For inspiration, you may look into the mirror."

When he hesitated to pick up the mirror, she chuckled. "No, dear, not at your ugly mug." A puff of violet magic coated the surface of the mirror; when it dissipated, he was gazing at Belle's face as her dark-ringed eyes, bruised from lack of sleep, traveled across runes painted onto a crumbling scroll. "She works so diligently on your behalf," Zelena mock-sighed. "Doesn't she deserve a token of your devotion? Start writing."

He picked up the pen. Despite being watched, he thought he could manage to open up his heart and his thoughts, if he knew for sure Belle would get this letter, so he began, "My darling Belle."

Suddenly he felt the witch's presence. She was standing over his shoulder. "Very nice. Now, this won't be the clichéd love letter. It's coming from the Dark One, after all. No, what you're going to write is a list of all the ways you've wronged her. Chronological order, order of importance, I don't care, as long as it's specific and complete."

His hand shook and he glared up at her.

"Don't dawdle. It's going to be a long enough night as it is. Here, I'll get you started. 'Number One: I took you away from your loving parents and your duchy.' 'Number Two: I..."
made you a slave.'"

His hand was forced to write as she dictated, though his heart trusted that Belle would understand these were not his words.

Well, not his words, but they were mostly true nonetheless. When Zelena ran out of breath and information, he continued on, listing all the things other people had done to Belle in an attempt to get to him. Only then could he get down to the real confession: all the secrets he had kept from Belle because he was afraid of her rejection—worse, of her affection turning to revulsion when she came to understand who he really was.

Zelena grew bored of her game long before he had finished his letter. She went off to bed; he continued to write until he ran out of paper. In the morning, when she brought him his breakfast, he offered her the letter. He didn't care if she read it, as long as she delivered it to Belle.

"Very good, doll." She traded the shiny nail for the letter. As he ate the breakfast (Corn Flakes this time; she couldn't be bothered with cooking today) she read the first two pages, then began skimming, then gave up somewhere around page seven. "This is ridiculous," she complained. "You're supposed to be the darkest soul walking this earth, but this silly little girl has you begging for mercy." She dropped the letter and threw a fireball at it. As they watched it burn, she huffed, "If you had chosen me, you'd have kings and popes kneeling at your feet." When nothing was left of the letter but ashes, she stamped out the fire and blew the ashes away. "It wasn't a total waste of time: at least now I know how best to torture you. Stupid little man." She vanished in an indignant cloud of magic.

"So you're not going to ask him?" Jefferson shook his head as he contemplated the thought. "I don't know. The hat is awfully beat up. Without his magic--"

"Here, show me the hat," said Regina.

Solemnly, as if he were conducting a funeral, the hatter fetched from his closet a box containing the tattered remains of what was once a black silk top hat. He set the box on the coffee table, removed the lid, removed the contents, then set them carefully beside a bowl of artificial flowers on the table. "When you have a one hundred seventy pound prince throw himself upon a size 7 and 3/8 hat in the hopes of fitting into it to chase after his wife and daughter, this is the result." His voice was mournful.

The hat was indeed unrecognizable as such, but Regina took it into her hands, closed her eyes, and infused it with a blast of magic. When her hands stopped glowing, she sat the now reconstructed hat onto the table and smiled proudly. "There. Trust me now?"

"Well done," Belle applauded.

"All you did was repair the hat." Jefferson inspected his treasure.

"It's as good as new," Regina argued.

"But it's just a hat. Swell if you want to go trick-or-treating as Fred Astair, but if you want to jump realms, useless."

"Well, I've only just started. When Emma, Blue and I pour our energies into it, this hat will be our magic carpet ride to Oz."

"Magic carpet," Belle mused. "Do those things really work? I thought they were just in fairy tales."

Jefferson inspected the hat thoroughly before returning it to its box. "Very well, we'll give it a try, but to be on the safe side, I'm taking only two passengers: one to rescue the kid and one to remain behind in the kid's place." The women frowned at each other. "Forgot about that, did you? The hat's rule: the same number who go in must come out or the magic won't work."

"Well, I'm sure we can dig up another Claude somewhere."

"Oh, no, Your Majesty, I'm not hauling a corpse for you again."

"Corpse?" Emma raised an eyebrow at Regina.

"A story for another time. Fine. I'll check the census books. There's got to be a homesick munchkin in town."

"We'll help," Belle offered.

"Ten-twenty a.m. tomorrow. Meet me here," Jefferson pronounced.

"Why such an odd time?" Belle wondered.
"I have to have my morning tea first, don't I? Wouldn't be civilized otherwise."
"It's been a long time," the witch said, then she stopped and gave him a burning look that informed him of her meaning. But alas for her, even if he hadn't been her slave or just her adversary, even if Belle had never come into his life, he wouldn't have been attracted to Zelena: the scent of black widow spider lay too close to her skin.

"I took a paramour once. Did you know that? Oh, I'd had plenty of—one nighters, but this one I kept a while. Some years after you chased me away, he came to me. He was an ordinary, a knight of Camelot: they have the most exquisite table manners, you know. He was young and had much to learn about the craft of lovemaking, and I taught him. I allowed him to visit me whenever he liked, and spend the night in my bedchambers. He brought me trinkets and wild game for my table; he seemed blissfully unaware that if he displeased me, I could crush his heart. I never did: he satisfied me, as much as an ordinary could. Are you jealous, Rumple? Is that why you're blushing? One morning in the third year of our love, he was called to the frontlines. He asked for my handkerchief as a token to wear into battle. I didn't disillusion him: witches have no need of handkerchiefs, of course; we never sneeze. But I conjured one for him and he tucked it into his shirt, near his heart. He left me his kiss in remembrance—and a child growing in my womb."

"You have a child?" Rumple jerked upright.

"A miracle, isn't it? So few mages can bear children. I'll bet Regina can't. I heard her Henry is adopted."

"Yes."

"And the product of a dalliance between the savior and your son. Which would make him your natural-born grandson."

"Yes."

"But rumor has it you have little to do with Henry. Why?"

"He skews to the hero side."

"So, he avoids you."

Rumple shrugged, distracted; if he could find out more about Zelena's child, he might learn her weakness. He would have to be careful, though, not tip her off to his interest. "He has two moms, a grandmother and another grandpa, plus he's on the baseball team. His time is claimed."

"Does that bother you?"

"He'll be curious about me someday. Or need money; then he'll come round." He tried to
sound nonchalant. "And your child? A son or daughter?"

"We're not talking about him. It's your nail for Regina we're working on, not mine for Trajan. Now, I heard you were the one who arranged for Regina to adopt Henry. How did that strange coincidence happen?"

"The curse gave me a degree in family law. Never used it until that moment and haven't since, but it was convenient. As to how it was that the infant I arranged for her to adopt happened to be my own grandson, I have no idea. The Fates, apparently, have some sort of plan there."

"Why did she adopt? Is she sterile? Or would no one sleep with her?"

"She... has a hole in her heart. She needed love to fill it."

"Has it?"

"Not entirely. She has much to learn yet about giving."

"How did she acquire that hole?"

"Same way you did yours. Bad choices."

"Name one."

"She let me corrupt her."

"You made her evil?"

"The tendency was there, but she was barely eighteen when she first called upon me. Her accomplishments at the time were limited to some unpleasant thoughts about causing small harm to her mother. That and heavy panting sessions in the barn with her riding instructor. I had to teach her what evil really is."

Zelena latched on to the middle sentence. He'd considered the odds of her choosing a mom story over the smut pretty even. "Tell me about her relationship with Mother."

"From the moment of her conception, Regina's future was laid out for her. Cora had delusions of grandeur; she herself had risen from poverty to marry, through cunning, a prince, but alas, Prince Henry was fifth in line to a throne which the occupant wasn't about to depart from. Having a queen in the family would be Cora's big F-you to the people who had snubbed her. I had plans for Regina as well, plans that she fulfilled to a T. A bit slow about it, but wholeheartedly, once she committed to the project."

"The curse."

"And the Fates, who outrank and outlast us all, dearie--you'd do well to accept that--they had planned something different for Regina: motherhood."

"How did they get along, Mother and Regina?"

"Regina was a bit stressed already; add to that her own volatile nature, a marked contrast to
her mother's cold calculations, then throw in magic from all parties—well, except poor, clueless Prince Henry—and sparks flew."

"So they fought a lot."

"Regina's first word wasn't 'dada'; it was 'no.' Cora, through her coldbloodedness and her magic, always won, so much so that Regina and her stable boy decided to run away. Cora caught them, yanked his heart out, sent Regina to her room to await a better catch of husband, and so my curse caster was formed, though it took me years to shape her."

"I know. I spied on her lessons. I would have cast your curse much faster and to perfection if you'd chosen me."

"Now, now, missy, we discussed that at the time. One of the ingredients of the curse is the heart of the thing you love the most. You loved only me, and since the intent of the curse was to bring me to this land, killing me off would have defeated the purpose. Can't you see that?"

"I could have fallen in love." She began to pace as she imagined. "I could have found—my paramour, I could have fallen for him. I would have done that, for you. Can't you see that?"

"The Fates chose Regina, even before she was born. Water under the bridge, dearie."

"No!" She stormed up to his cage and rattled it. "Don't you get it? This—" she indicated his hunched form in the corner of the cage—"is about no one choosing me! You and her, rejecting me! And choosing a decidedly inferior product over me! This is about fixing the bad call you made."

Rumplestiltskin pondered. If he could understand her thinking, he could predict her reactions, perhaps, though she'd always been a bit unstable.

Starting up the stairs, Zelena wheeled about. "You and Cora will choose me next time! Next time it will be Regina who's abandoned!" She threw a nail at his face; he caught it. "This one's for me." She slammed the cellar door.

In the dark, he began to understand. Abandonment, he knew a bit about. Zelena was mistaken about one thing, though; this nail couldn't be hers. If it was his coffin he was to pound them into, the nails would have to represent people who had hurt him. The sad truth was, she just hadn't mattered that much to him. No, this nail was Regina's, for by corrupting her, he'd blackened another chamber of his heart and he'd caused Belle awful suffering at the queen's/the mayor's hands. Until her sudden reappearance in his life, Zelena hadn't even merited an afterthought.

For just a flicker of a thought, he felt sorry for the witch.
"Ow!" Regina landed on her bustle as she tumbled through the portal. "Jefferson! You did that on purpose!"

"Maybe if you'd roped Rumple in on this venture, the hat would've had enough juice for first-class accommodations," Jefferson snapped back.

"So it's going to be one of those adventures, eh?" The queen surveyed the landscape, with its foliage and sky painted in primary colors. In the distance they heard high-pitched and high-spirited singing. Their traveling companion, soon-to-be-formerly the dance instructor at the Storybrooke Arthur Murray Studios, yelped and with a hasty "'bye!" dashed off in the direction of the music. "So much for munchkins," Regina grumbled. "Their attention spans are as short as--"

"The road," Jefferson interrupted, pointing toward the horizon. Then he elucidated: "The famed Yellow Brick. Leads to the Emerald City."

Regina started forward in the direction he'd indicated, but he grabbed her arm. "No. If town is that way, the Wicked Witch's lair will be," he pointed in the opposite direction. He set out without finishing his sentence. A half-hour into the trek, the sun was beating down on their heads; Regina conjured herself a parasol.

"She has an entire army of them, you know," Jefferson said abruptly. "And monkeys have a keen sense of smell. They'll know we're coming before we're in striking distance. Are you ready for them?"

"I've had plenty of experience with flying monkeys," the queen said drily.

They marched on.

Suddenly a shadow loomed overhead and the flapping of large wings drew their attention skyward. The monkey circling above them was small and (for a monkey) youthful-looking; "a perimeter guard," the hatter determined. "He'll size us up, then fly off to warn the others."

"No, he won't." With a single fireball Regina incinerated the scout.

"They'll smell that. The stench of charred monkey carries for miles. Get ready. Won't be long now."

"This will be fun," Regina chuckled.

"Must you always do things the meat-handed way?" Jefferson huffed. "Why don't we save time with a couple of suitable glamour spells."

She smiled slowly as the idea dawned on her. Glamour spells had always come hard for her, but if it would save time in the long run and get them back to Storybrooke all the faster, Regina would put forth the effort. She closed her eyes, reciting the spell, and in a moment Jefferson was transformed into--

"Oh my gods," the hatter-turned-Glinda-the-Good-Witch groaned. "Regina! Are you that out of practice?"
"Sorry." The second effort produced the desired result. Monkey-faced Jefferson flapped his wings and rose into the air.

"They won't recognize my scent," he complained.

"You smell like a monkey to me."

"Well, to them I'll smell like a stranger."

"How do you expect me to remember the scent of one of her minions? I burned them as soon as I laid eyes on them."

"Regina. . ."

"Never mind." She transformed Jefferson into a winkle.

"Now you. Picture yourself green. . . ."

"Oh good gods." Regina wrinkled her nose, but his suggestion made sense. Her reluctance made this attempt all the harder to get right, but after several adjustments, she had the green skin and frizzy hair of her half-sister. "Really, she should do something about her split ends. And her taste in clothes. . . ." She shuddered. "One would never know to look at her we were sisters." But straightening the black picture hat on her head, the queen marched on.

The sun had begun its slow slide toward the west when they reached a thick forest. Jefferson paused to inhale the scent of everblue trees and cringing willows. "Ah, almost like home," he said. "I wonder if the mushrooms here are edible."

Regina shot him a cutting look. "Once a fungus hunter, always a fungus hunter. That mansion I created for you in Storybrooke was just a waste of energy, wasn't it?"

Jefferson gave her a half-smile and shrugged. "You know, Your Majesty, the places that make us the happiest are usually the ones where we were surrounded by the people we love. Of course, you may be the exception to the rule."

Regina conceded, "Well, you may have a point. My current home, lovely as it is, is no match for my Spiral Castle, but I prefer it just the same." Her voice lowered. "Because every corner reminds me of Henry." She allowed a small smile to pass between her and her fellow traveler. Perhaps, deep down, they understood each other better than either would admit, because they were in the same parenting boat: each had to share with a second set of parents the custody of the child he/she had raised. If Regina was so inclined to accept advice or emotional support in her struggles to co-parent with Emma, Jefferson would have been a good choice. Someday, perhaps . . .

A chattering and a flapping of wings pulled their attention skyward: a trio of large flying monkeys—and Regina had had enough experience with the species now to judge sizes—blocked off the sun. They landed on the path leading into the woods, with the largest in front, the others flanking her. The largest sniffed, and apparently was satisfied with Regina's scent ("Eau du Wicked," she called it—a mix of Zelena's perfume, the scent of the foods the witch usually ate, and her natural scent). The lead monkey bowed so low her gray muzzle touched the dirt, and her lieutenants followed suit.

Regina conjured a voice that mirrored Zelena's in cadence as well as accent. Jefferson couldn't help it; right at first, he cringed automatically in reaction to the sound of that feared voice. He slapped on his poker face, however; he'd had plenty of experience hiding his feelings in the presence of non-human beings. Regina was at a slight disadvantage, knowing nothing about Zelena's treatment
of her servants, nor her level of involvement in her child's upbringing, nor the level of her affection for the boy, so she kept her remarks brief and factual. "Take me to Trajan."

The lead monkey bowed again and rose slowly into the air, just a few feet, enough that she could travel comfortably but not so high that the wicked witch would take offense. The other monkeys joined her, remaining several feet back from those on foot, acting as a rear guard. Without glancing at Jefferson—because after all, Zelena would consider no one but Rumplestiltskin her equal and therefore worthy of walking beside her—Regina started forth, maintaining a yard's distance ahead of the hatter.

Actually, Jefferson preferred this position. It enabled him to keep an eye on the queen from the back, where, if her glamour started to slip, he could spot it and warn her with a previously agreed upon request to pause for rest.

They continued another two miles through the dark woods, where nature suddenly silenced its natural sounds and trees bowed their leafy heads in reverence as they passed through. Jefferson noticed the tension ease out of Regina's shoulders: so far, her guise was working. But he also knew, from conversations with Rumplestiltskin during the young queen's training period, that glamours were a weak area for her. For one thing, they were extremely detailed, and Regina wasn't a detail-oriented individual; for another, Regina had always been proud of her appearance, so she saw little need for glamours.

The lead monkey—Regina wished she knew the creature's name; addressing her by name would have helped to keep up the disguise—brought them to a dark, nearly furnitureless castle in a clearing. What Zelena hadn't expended in décor, she had expended in wards: the castle was thick with them, all secured by blood magic. Jefferson and Regina exchanged a glance, both wondering why Zelena had bothered: who would come here willingly? Completely unlike the Spiral Castle or the Dark Castle, there were no treasures here, no art, no gold, just some tacky old dresses and some dusty old couches. Of course, Regina was sure there were some storerooms for magical objects, potions, ingredients and spell books, perhaps a lab similar to Rumple's, but Zelena could have warded just those rooms and left minimal protection on the castle itself. Apparently, Zelena hadn't taken to heart Rumple's "law of conservation of magic" lessons. Or perhaps they hadn't gotten that far in her training.

For the slightest moment, Regina was almost grateful to Cora: her blood was similar enough to Zelena's to allow her to lower the wards. She did so quickly and effortlessly, barely pausing as she walked in, as if taking down the wards was an everyday occurrence. A glance from the corner of her eye as she entered the Great Hall showed her a twenty-person dining table (a direct copy of Rumple's), with a single, tall-backed seat at the head (just like Rumple's). Yawning as though tired, Regina seated herself at the table, then conjured a second chair to her left for Jefferson. "Bring my son here," she commanded the monkeys; as a lucky afterthought, she added, "And his favorite toy." Then she occupied herself with conjuring and pouring tea and making idle conservation with her traveling companion, as if she fully expected her servants to obey her without question.

The lead monkey sauntered back into the Great Hall, walking rather than flying, so that she could hold onto the hand of a small, dark-haired boy (in need of a haircut and a bath, Regina judged). The boy was dressed in a sleeping gown and rubbing his eyes—had he been put to bed already? At age
five, Henry had had an eight p.m. bedtime; by the position of the sun, the local time couldn't be past five. But Regina didn't allow her surprise to show, since she had no idea what was normal in this household. The boy had a stuffed patchwork dragon under his arm.

Regina conjured a chair for him. "You may be seated, Trajan." She watched the boy's reaction closely: did Zelena call him by his given name, or did she have a nickname for him? Still half-asleep, the boy gave her no clue. "I would like you to meet Mr. Hatter."

"Hello, Trajan." Jefferson smiled easily; his charm was his strongest magic, and he called upon it often. "Or do you have another name you prefer to be called?"

The boy shook his head and clutched his cloth pet. Regina and Jefferson exchanged a quick glance: was the boy simply uncomfortable around strangers or did he suspect something? Recalling how shy Henry had been at this age—how withdrawn he was in his first weeks in kindergarten—Regina chose the easier answer. "Mr. Hatter is an old friend of mine, Trajan. We're going to go visit his house this evening, you and I. Would you like that?"

"I have a daughter named Grace. She has a collection of stuffed animals that she'll be glad to let you play with. I also have a magic box that tells stories, all kinds: funny ones, exciting ones, stories about faraway places. Does that sound good to you?"

"Stories about dragons?" Trajan's voice was still thick with sleep.

"Yes. In fact, one of Grace's favorite stories is called How to Train Your Dragon. We can watch that tonight if you like."

Trajan nodded and began to wake up.

"Very good," Regina said. "We'll leave as soon as we've finished our tea." She poured half a cup for Trajan and pushed it towards him, along with the plate of cookies. "Have a little fortification for the journey, Trajan."

The boy seemed puzzled by the language, so Jefferson translated: "A nibble for the road." The boy accepted a cookie, sniffing it first before breaking off a bite; Regina wondered if he'd never tasted a cookie before. Maybe Zelena had been a no-sweets kind of parent. Or maybe she hadn't fed Trajan herself, but left that task to the monkeys, who probably couldn't cook.

"Trajan and I will return later tonight, after our visit," Regina said to the lead monkey—she made no eye contact with the creature, because after all, she was the master and the monkey, the servant. The lead monkey simply stared. Regina distracted her with another order: "You shall clean Trajan's bedroom and mine while we're away. I expect to find the rooms spotless."

The monkey's brow drew down. Uh-oh; apparently Regina had said something wrong. Did the monkeys clean? Or were there other creatures Zelena assigned that task to? Or did her magic take care of domestic chores? Regina hid a gulp behind her teacup.

She stood, conjured a change of clothes for Trajan, then announced, "It's time to go." She held her hand out toward the boy; he stared at it. Had his mother not held hands with him?

Frowning deeper, the lead monkey inched forward; her lieutenants did likewise. Regina seized Trajan's hand, then with her free hand grasped a handful of Jefferson's D & G silk shirt. In a puff of magic, she transported them back to the edge of the forest—she was too tired to take them all the way to the portal. Just as they vanished from the castle, the monkeys pounced.

"A bit slow on the uptake, Your Majesty," Jefferson griped, inspecting his right arm: the sleeve
was torn and blood was dripping down his wrist.

"Nasty things." Regina grumbled, releasing her passengers to brush the monkey slobber from her skirt. "Come, Trajan, as I promised, we're going to Mr. Hatter's house to see his magic box and his stuffed animals."

The boy began to cry.

With a sigh, Regina knelt to be on the child's level. "Don't be afraid, Trajan. We're going to have a lot of fun. And I promise, you're going to love Mr. Hatter's house."

The boy struggled to choke back his tears—had his mother not allowed him to cry? Regina swept him up her arms, ignoring his attempts to wiggle free, and with a last huge expenditure of magic—for overhead, they could hear wings beating—she took her passengers the rest of the way to the portal. When they arrived, she had to set Trajan down and lean on Jefferson's shoulder; as much as she resented her neediness, she was too exhausted to stand on her own.

"You okay?" Jefferson patted her back awkwardly.

But before she could answer, Trajan had backed away from her and was staring at her as he shrieked, "Magwa! I want Magwa!"

Puzzled, Regina glanced at Jefferson, who shook his head. "'Magwa'? Is that Ozian for 'Mama'?"
Hardest Thing You'll Ever Do

September 2013

A boot prodding him in the ribs woke him and the devilishly handsome face of Captain Hook peering down at him made him bolt to his feet, clutching at empty air when he couldn't find his cane. Pain streaked up his leg and as his ankle buckled under him, he reached out for the spinning wheel, but Hook grabbed his arms instead. As he wrenched away, Hook laughed—a feminine sound that made his head jerk upright, throwing him off balance. "Happy Halloween, doll!" With a single finger, Hook lifted Rumple's chin and kissed his lips.

As Rumple's muddy brain reached for rational thought past all the foggy voices, Hook's wry smile dissolved and his bearded face and narrow body became Zelena's. "There now, wouldn't you rather wake up to me each morning?" She conjured his breakfast tray—sausage, toast and scrambled eggs (she must be close to enacting the next stage of her scheme, he realized, to be finally fortifying him with protein). Setting the tray on his stool, she vacated his cage but assumed her usual position—with lounge chair and drink (Bloody Mary)—just beyond his reach. "Eat up, love. And in honor of this world's only holiday meant for the likes of us, your story today will explore your relationship with the dashing and debonaire crocodile hunter."

He settled onto the floor, using the bars of the cage for support. "Don't be fooled," he grunted, taking up the coffee she'd provided, "by long legs and chest hair. He's a jackass in leather pants, nothing more."

She raised her tall glass of spiked tomato juice in a salute—whether to him or to the pirate, he couldn't guess. He sipped his coffee and attacked the sausage before she could change her mind about feeding him so well. "Let's have his story nonetheless." She settled comfortably and sipped, licking away the drops of seeming blood from her lips.

"Barely a footnote, dearie." He waved his fork dismissively. And that was the truth, as far as he was concerned: in the pantheon of Rumplestiltskin haters, Hook could barely be seen for all the truly powerful people (Zelena included) standing in front of him.

"Not the way he tells it," Zelena said. "I overheard him in Granny's talking to the tart. He seems to think you and he are epic enemies."

Rumple snorted into his coffee (weak, but still, it helped wake him). "A sneak thief, not the swashbuckler he'd have women believe. A sneak thief and a low-rent playboy."

"A wife stealer."

Rumple amended, "No challenge there. She would have run off with a troll."

"A son stealer." He stopped chewing and she chuckled. "I wondered if you knew. He claims that after you abandoned Bae—"

"I didn't—" But the magic choked off his lie.
"Of course you did, doll. After you abandoned Bae, the boy somehow ended up in the sea, off Neverland, and the JollyRoger fished him out." At his raised eyebrows, she smirked. "Seems I have a story to tell you, for a change. Yes. Well, Hook 'saved the lad's life,' as he put it. Dragged him out, dried him off, clothed him, fed him, put him to bed and darn near sang him a lullaby. Oh, and hid him from Pan's little army. Seems Pan wanted him--a case of mistaken identity; mistook Bae for Henry. That 'heart of the truest believer' thing. Well, Hook--or as his friends call him, 'Killian,' though I suppose you've never referred to him thus. Killian had custody of your son for about a week--though who can tell time on Neverland? They became quite close."

Rumplestiltskin dropped his fork. "Did they now?"

"They had much in common. Seems Killian had been abandoned by his father too. But he'd gone on to make something of himself. To hear him, he was the most successful pirate on the high seas."

"Dubious distinction."

"Envious as well as jealous, doll? Killian taught him how to sail a ship, then offered to make him his second lieutenant. Or, maybe a better word would be 'heir.' Yes, heir. Offered to make him the stepson he and Milah had always intended."

"So he told him about Milah. Did he tell him how Milah had come to be in his possession?"

"Had to. Bae found a portrait of her in the captain's quarters and demanded an answer. Killian admitted to the affair, but assured Bae it had always been the plan to return for him, once Bae was old enough. There were rough seas between the pirate and his heir presumptive after that, not ameliorated much by Killian's telling him your part in the story. You know, how you ignored her and made her suffer verbal abuse from the neighbors and practically starved the family, because you were too afraid to move to another town, where they wouldn't know you. And then the whole heart crushing thing. Bae was quite upset about that, but hardly surprised, Killian says. Are you? Surprised, I mean. You look it. I suppose you neglected to mention to Bae how his mama died."

Rumple gripped the coffee cup. He wanted to fling it against the cage, but she would've punished him for that.

She chuckled. "Of course you didn't tell him. That would've required bravery. What did you tell him about his mama?"

"That the pirates killed her."

"I thought as much. I just wanted to hear you say it." She waved her fingers at him. "Eat, eat. Do you want me to think you're ungrateful for what I provide?"

He shoveled egg into his mouth.

"Now, where was I? Well, Killian took to Bae right off, offered to adopt him, thought they would bond over their mutual love of Milah, but he wasn't counting on the kid's anger. Bae was understandably upset to learn that Milah had willingly left him to run off with pirates.
What kind of mother would abandon her child to run off with a paramour?" She frowned. "Hmm. Seems Bae and I have more in common than he and the pirate do. Anyway, according to Killian, once the boy pieced everything together, that was that. Bae didn't want anything more to do with the captain, other than to kill him, of course. A chip off the old block, eh? Tried to, too, but at thirteen, he was hardly a match for pirates."

"Fourteen," Rumple corrected automatically, visualizing the scene. He was proud, yes, of Bae's reaction. "Was he injured—Bae?"

"Only emotionally. Betrayed. But wait, it gets worse. When Bae demanded to be allowed off the ship, Killian turned him over to Pan's boys. Once a pirate, always a pirate."

"So that's how he fell among the Lost Boys," Rumple muttered.

"Now wasn't that a lovely tale? From the clutches of his evil stepfather to those of his even eviller grandfather. You shall tell me that part of the tale soon, but alas, it's time for work. I have a new job, you see, as nurse to Snow White." She stood and conjured a change of clothes, into a very modest English nanny style outfit. "Aren't you going to thank me for the story?"

"Thank you, Zelena."

"Here's Hook's nail." She tossed a bent, rusty piece of iron at him. "An unimportant nail for an unimportant character in your life. See you at supper, doll."

After she'd vanished, he tried to focus on Bae's voice in his head. Past the Dark One's pointless proddings to "Kill the pirate," he thought he heard a single word that sounded a bit like "forgive."

But surely he'd misheard.
Regina stumbled as the hat spat her out, but she subtly smoothed her clothes and pretended she'd not taken a misstep; Jefferson had the intelligence to pretend he hadn't caught her pretending. She reached out for Trajan, who was lying on his back and staring at the sky with his thumb in his mouth. "Are you okay, Trajan?" She inspected him for broken bones or lacerations; finding nothing more serious than some bruises, she tried to smile reassuringly. Jefferson, meanwhile, had located the patchwork dragon and had tucked it under Trajan's arm in the vain hope of distracting him from the shocking occurrence he had just experienced.

The situation grew even more shocking: Regina's magic sputtered and gave out. The glamours faded and Jefferson and Regina returned to their previous forms. Trajan let his thumb fall away and opened his mouth. . . for just a moment not a sound came from his throat, but then he shrieked. The more they tried to hush or comfort him, the longer and the more high-pitched the shriek grew. Regina tried to conjure something, anything to amuse him, but she hadn't an ounce of magic left.

Jefferson motioned to her face, then to his own. "The glamours are gone."

"Oh." She nodded and took Trajan's hands in her own. From long experience, both parents knew that the tantrum would wear itself out eventually, but it wasn't so much the shrieking that worried them as the panic on the child's face. Well, of course he was afraid, the parents' shared expression conveyed the same thought. He had every right to be: he'd just been snatched from his home, from the only world he'd ever seen, by total strangers who, apparently, had no intention of returning him to his mother or his Magwa (whatever that was).

Regina shifted her position, sitting cross-legged on the grass; Jefferson had opened the portal in her backyard so that when they returned, she could immediately go inside to rest. His choice was even more fortuitous, as the hatter soon discovered as he looked around in a desperate desire to escape the tantrum: the backyard featured a sandbox and a swingset, neither of which had been used in several years, but the lawn service had not allowed them to fall into disrepair. Jefferson hooted, "Trajan! Look!" and ran to the sandbox to immediately begin to construct a pyramid of sand.

Trajan wasn't impressed with the hatter's antics but the red-and-white striped swingset drew his notice. His shrieks decelerated. "Trajan," Regina said softly, "I tricked you and I'm sorry. I pretended to be your mother so you would come with me. I brought you here to be safe. I promise you, you'll have everything you need here, and a family and friends and toys and school. You're going to be happy here. Trajan, my name is Regina. I'm your aunt, your mother's sister."

"Where's Magwa?" the boy managed to ask.

"I don't know." It wasn't a lie: Regina didn't even know who or what "Magwa" was, though she assumed the kid meant "Mother." Eventually he'd have to be told his mother was presumed dead, but he'd had too many shocks to deal with already. They'd have to get Archie in on this, to figure out how and when to tell him about Zelena's disappearance.

Jefferson had given up on the sandbox and strolled back to his travelling companions. Brushing his hands together to knock off the sand, he guessed from Trajan's confusion that the boy had no idea what an "aunt" was. The hatter caught on to Regina's mistake and asked, "Trajan, buddy, who's Magwa?"
"Magwa," the boy insisted. "She takes care of me."

Jefferson mouthed the word monkey; Regina nodded. The problem had just doubled: How to explain to the child that his mother was dead and his monkey-nanny was now literally worlds away.

Watching the child's face shift between fear, suspicion and hope, Regina sifted her memories. She recalled a bumpy period in Henry's development around age four, when he was convinced a child-eating witch lived in his bedroom closet and if he fell asleep, would sneak out to gobble him up, starting with the toes. No good would it have done to try to talk him out of his belief: he would have only been confused if she had tried to reason with him by explaining that yes, there really was a child-eating witch, but the curse had turned her into a denture-wearing vegan cat lady, known in this world as Miss Ginger. Regina had discovered then it was best to play along, so she'd poked around in the closet with a broom, yelling, "Out, out, you horrid old witch! My son and I aren't afraid of you!" In his Tron jammies, Henry had climbed out of bed and pattered over to his mom's side to join in her demands: "Get out, witch!"

Finally Regina had leaned on her broom, sighing tiredly. "I don't hear her any more. Do you?"

Henry had shaken his head grimly.

"Do you think she's gone?"

Holding her hand, Henry had peeked around her, into the dark closet. Then he reported, "She's gone."

"I don't think she'll come back, but I'll leave this broom right here in case she does." Regina had then offered a glass of water and a story (one without witches, monsters or evil queens). The closet-residing witch had never returned.

She tried that tactic now. "May I borrow your dragon for a minute?" When the boy released it, she whispered in its ear, "Brave and powerful dragon, I charge thee with protecting the princeling in all his adventures in this world. If you accept this charge, nod once."

Trajan made the dragon nod.

"Very good, Sir Dragon." She stood and held her hand out. "Shall we go inside for chocolate cake?"

She might as well have been speaking Russian; his bewilderment led her to understand he'd never tasted chocolate cake. But he chose to trust her—maybe he realized he had no choice; after all, the dragon couldn't do everything by itself. He accepted her hand and allowed her to lead him inside. Over her shoulder, she suggested to Jefferson, "Call Archie and get him over here ASAP." As an afterthought, she added, "And let Ms. Swan and Ms. French know we're back."
I Have a Will for Survival

October 2013

Still in her English nanny garb, Zelena clattered into the cellar. Past her shoulder, Rumplestiltskin could see through the open door; a gust of cold, night air swirled curled brown leaves in a mock cyclone. Rumplestiltskin sucked in a deep breath, relishing the fresh air.

Her eyes were wide as she confronted him. "I heard them talking about you. Charming and Snow. They said something—if they're telling the truth, wow, doll, you really have gone dark, haven't you? You were bad before, but this goes beyond anything you did in the old days."

He didn't respond, just sat in his corner and stared into the night sky through the open door.

"Well?" She demanded.

"I don't know to which of my many evil acts you're referring." He made his tone as crisp as the night.

"You're going to tell me this story." She conjured herself a straight-backed chair. No drink this time: she was apparently rattled. "What did you do to Henry?"

"Oh." His fingers, clutched together in his lap, twitched as magic rushed through his veins; he fought the compulsion by attempting to divert her. "I have much more tantalizing stories, dearie, for instance, the time a brothel madam tried to welsh out of a deal with me and I found myself in possession of nine ladies of the evening—"

"No." She smiled coldly. "I want to hear the story you don't want to tell. Are you avoiding it because you don't want me to know, or because you can't face it? Either way, I want to know. Tell me about your attempt on Henry's life."

He didn't want to travel this road, not even for a few steps. The less time spent on this particular journey, the better, so he focused his answer on her question only: "Henry was riding on a rope swing in the park. I caused the rope to begin to unravel, strand by strand. But I didn't finish, because of the Charmings. They came running up asking for my help, as always."

"If timing was an issue, why didn't you choose a quicker method to dispose of him? A car accident, perhaps—then you could've pushed the blame onto someone else."

It was a surprisingly astute question for Zelena. He shrugged, but the magic forced him to answer: "I may have been having doubts. I suppose I was buying a little time to fix things, if I found I couldn't go through with it."

"Would you have, if the Charmings hadn't come?"

"I don't know."

Her eyes were just as wide now as they had been when this conversation began. "What—Yeah,
you're a cold-blooded killer, but a child?"

"What's the matter, dearie? Didn't you hear those 'baby eater' tales about me?"

"I've seen you do some nasty things, but never to a child. That's one of your weaknesses. I always looked down on you a bit for it: soft-hearted when it comes to kids."

"Not when the child threatens my life," he muttered. A hundred needle teeth pierced his skin all the way through the bone as the magic punished him for corrupting the truth. Henry hadn't threatened him; Henry wasn't even aware of his part in any prophesy. Yet, the boy's continued existence was a threat.

She crossed her legs and folded her arms. "I want the full story, from the beginning. A kid! And your own grandson—other than your son, your only living blood relative!"

"A threat, nonetheless." He drew in a breath as he contemplated where this story actually began. "Zelena, I have a hundred stories more entertaining—"

Her feet slammed against the floor. "You will tell me!"

And the words yanked out of his throat: "The Seer I told you about—"

"The one who got you to break your own ankle?"

He nodded. "After I lost Bae, I tracked her down. I wanted to kill her for what my life had become: if she hadn't spoken in riddles, I might have gone home a war hero, to the loving arms of my proud family. She'd tricked me by withholding information; I thought she might have been in collusion with Zoso, to trap me into becoming the Dark One; or maybe she was working for the Reul Ghorm. Whoever she was working for, or whyssoever, I would make her pay for her deceit, but first—I was still foolish enough to think I could get a straight answer out of her, if I tortured her, and I had to know about Bae. I..." He shook his head in frustration. "I knew that anything she told me would just confuse me more, but I couldn't stop myself. I strangled another prophesy from her, and as she lay dying she informed me that a curse would bring me to my son, but someone else would cast the curse—"

"It should've been me," Zelena waved her hand disdainfully in the direction of town. "This—this Tinker Toy town of Regina's is ridiculous. I would have given you an Alexandria, a Rome, an Athens, a city of such majesty it would stand forever in history." Her face shone as her imagination showed her the metropolises she could have created, could have gifted him, if he had chosen her. She didn't hear his response: "All I wanted was my son." After a long moment, she vowed, "I'll fix it. Very soon, I'll give you a city to remember, and in gratitude you'll give me your heart."

"No, Zelena," he said—but softly, because she could kill him with a single thrust of his dagger.

She exchanged her straight chair for her lounge chair and conjured herself a gin and tonic. "Go on. Finish the story."

"The Seer told me I would reunite with my son in an unexpected way. A young boy would lead me to him, but that boy would be more powerful than he appeared to be and he would
"Ah." Zelena tossed her curls. "Well, then, of course you had to kill him. Who wouldn't? But it's not like you, Rumple, to be so sloppy. You let your emotions get in the way, didn't you?"

He nodded shamefully; let her think it was his failure he was ashamed of. The words rushed out: "But I tried to make things right. When Pan's minions kidnapped him, I went after them. I expected to die—I did die—to free Henry. I was wrong before, more wrong than I've ever been. When I let Bae go, that was instinct, survival instinct, I immediately regretted it and I did everything in my power to fix it. But killing Henry, that was planned, that was survival too, but I'd had hundreds of years to think about it—I didn't know it would be my grandson, but I did know it would be a young boy, and I was willing to kill him to spare myself. But then they took Henry and I went to bring him back. Doesn't that make things right? Why can't Bae believe me? Give me another chance to prove I've changed. I'd never hurt Henry again. I died for him, and for Bae and Belle. I accepted my fate, because I love them."

"Did you, now? I challenge you to rethink that. See, I don't think you've changed nearly as much as you think you have." She studied him as she sipped her drink. "Answer this plainly, no doubletalk. Rumple, doll, if I brought Henry here tomorrow, pushed him into your cage and turned my back for a few minutes, what would you do?"

Hoarsely, he answered, "I'd tell him to run."

She chuckled. "You're such a practiced liar, you can even convince yourself. Rumple, doll, how do you feel about yourself, that you screwed up such a simple task?"

He blinked, his eyes burning, no doubt from the dust in this filthy cellar. "I don't know how to answer that."

"What's the problem? The question was perfectly clear."

"I'm ashamed."

"Ashamed because you failed or ashamed for trying?"

"For gods' sake, Zelena, he's my grandson."

"Here's something for you to look forward to: you'll never have to choose between Henry and yourself again. Because where we're going, there will be no Henry or Belle." She examined him critically, then conjured a bucket of water and a towel. "Wash your face, doll. I do so hate to see a sorcerer cry."

He cupped his hands into the water. "I should be sorry for you, Zelena, for the family you never had." But he wasn't.

She clicked her tongue. "Still weak, even after a year with me. I suppose I should be pleased. Your concern for your loved ones is a weakness I wouldn't take away, because in the next life, that concern will be for me and our children."

He looked up at her in shock, hastily arranging his features to hide his revulsion. She tossed
him a new nail.

After she'd departed, he held that nail, staring at it all through the night, so deeply ashamed, and so, so sorry.

----------------------------------------------

A/N. You'll notice that Rumple's recitation of the Seer's prophesy isn't exact. That's not due to my faulty memory, or his, but rather his interpretation of the prophesy. It's too bad he's never told Belle about this prophesy: being the diction-sensitive reader she is, she could have given him alternate interpretations that could have changed his entire course. . .
"No child can resist bubbles," Archie declared as Regina came out of the bathroom, leaving the door propped open so she could look in on the kid splashing in the tub, making a rubber duck attack a battleship that actually squirted water.

"Henry certainly enjoyed bath time," Regina said. "We had an entire cupboard full of tub toys." Then he'd turned five and had started school, and everything went downhill after that: first the questions she couldn't answer, "How come last year Paige was in kindergarten and she's still in kindergarten this year? How come Mrs. Shoeman's baby didn't get borned yet when it was supposed to be here before Christmas?" Then the isolation as Henry, realizing he was different from the other kids, withdrew into television and books. And then the weekly visits to Archie, the assumptions of "delusions" and "fantasy" and the failed attempts to "help Henry adjust" with play therapy.

Regina knew that was what Archie was thinking as his smile wavered. She broke eye contact. "Well, Doctor, what about Trajan?"

"From such a short visit, I can't draw any conclusions." Hopper pushed his slipping glasses up his nose. "He doesn't seem to have had much interaction with his mother. He speaks of two of the monkeys as his primary caretakers and only sources of affection."

"That's so sad," Belle clicked her tongue.

"Monkeys are surprisingly good parents," Archie explained, "just... with their own species. And Trajan's behind the learning curve. Until I test him, I won't know if his IQ is low or if it's just lack of education."

"He can get caught up, can't he?" Emma asked. "Once he's settled in."

"We'll see."

"Which brings us to the big question," Belle started, but Regina interrupted, "No, there is no question. He can't stay here."

"There are some families who'd take him. The Wilkersons—they've been trying to conceive—"

"Ms. Swan, I know what you think of the system, and I understand your reasons, but Trajan can't stay in Storybrooke."

"But shouldn't he continue to live in an environment kinda like what he's used to? One with magic?" Emma protested.

"If he is magical, he needs to be with people who can help him understand his power and control it," Belle added, "and to teach him so he can reach his full potential."

"He'll be a lot better off never knowing he has power—never even knowing that magic exists except on TV. Magic is no gift, believe me; it's a burden, as all of you should know." Regina folded her arms as if to shut the world out—or herself in.

"But—"
"Ms. Swan, name me one magical being who's happy. Just one."

"Blue."

"She's happy in her cursed role, Ms. Swan. As a nun. If you'd known her when she was the Ruel Ghorm, you would know what a burden that power was."

Emma couldn't come up with an answer, so Regina continued, "Then name for me the magical beings who would be better off without that power."

"Me," Emma admitted. "Though I haven't used my magic enough to say for sure."

"Rumple," Belle said in a low voice.

Regina dropped her voice too. "And me."

"But to hide the truth from a child, about who he is, where he came from..." There was a bitterness in Emma's voice. "To leave him with a void--"

"Either way, that boy will have a hole in heart that can't be filled," Belle said. "Growing up without a father or mother."

"It need not be so bleak, ladies," Archie tried to bolster their courage. "The child protective system has improved greatly since you experienced it, Emma. I have contacts at CPS in Augusta; they'll work with me to find Trajan a good temporary placement until we can find the right family for him. And there is a loving family out there for him, I promise you; I'll be involved every step of the way, and once we find the right home, I'll visit with them and Trajan on a frequent basis, to help everyone adjust."

"So you think he should go," Emma surmised.

Archie's face reflected his conflicted feelings. "I think...the time will come, when he's old enough to understand, that he'll need to be told the truth, all of it, including what happened to Zelena--"

"But we don't know what happened," Belle argued.

"We'll tell him as much as we know. I'll stay in contact with him so I can help with that conversation. And he may want to meet you--" he glanced at Regina--"as his only living relative."

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good idea. A kid needs to think well of his parents, and I don't have anything kind to say about Zelena."

"A kid needs the truth," Emma blurted. "Even if it's rotten."

"When the time comes, we'll have a better idea of what's needed," Archie assured them. "But for now... Even for the short time he's here, I think he needs to be kept away from most of the town. I hate to say it, but most people here are pretty vocal about their hatred of Zelena, and for a small boy to be exposed to that kind of talk, it would cause serious harm." Archie knew that firsthand: his own parents, traveling snake-oil salesmen and petty thieves, had left behind angry mobs everywhere they went. Once he'd grown up, in the Enchanted Forest, there was nowhere he could go to escape his family's tarnished reputation.

"And I'm not so sure I could protect him, once words gets out he's Zelena's kid," Emma admitted. "Not that anyone would intentionally hurt a little boy, but if he shows any signs of having magic..." She sighed. "Okay, I guess he's better off in Augusta. I'm glad you're going to keep an eye on
him, though, Archie. Let me know when you're ready to take him there; I'll drive."

"I'll call my friend at CPS." Archie dared to touch Regina's shoulder in a show of support. To her credit, the queen didn't flinch. "Good night, all."

Regina pasted a bright smile on her face and called through the bathroom door, "Okay, Trajan, time for that chocolate cake."

"You, uh, need any help?" Emma offered. "I could stay a while."

"Emma and I can start supper while you finish his bath," Belle suggested.

Regina's shoulders stiffened, but she nodded, then called out, "Trajan? I hope you washed behind your ears."
"Now, doll, yesterday you mentioned something about dying to save Henry." Zelena conjured her usual lounge chair and drink (a strawberry daquiri this time). "I can't wait to hear this one. Sounds delicious—unless you were exaggerating?"

He shook his head.

"Well, on with it, then, doll! Don’t keep me waiting. When you told me Hook's story, you neglected to mention that dear old dad underwent an identity change in the years after he abandoned you, yes?" She flicked her fingers and an old copy of the Daily Mirror appeared in his lap, with the headline "Henry's Heroes Make Triumphant Return."

"That tarty waitress at the diner is quite the chatterbox. She told me you and Papa had a High Noon showdown in the middle of the street—just before you committed murder. So, tell me the story, doll, beginning with the abandonment, and leading to your death, and don't spare the details."

The magic squeezed the words out of him like toothpaste from a tube. "I got in his way. I was an inconvenience, never mind the many times I'd saved him from arrest or a beating. 'A child can't have a child, Rumple.' So when I was eight, he got rid of me."

"How?"

"I'd acquired a magic bean. Stupidly, I gave it to him so that we could go somewhere else and start over. I was taking a risk; he could have sold that bean for money to drink and gamble, but I wanted to—I needed to—trust him. And at first, it seemed he wasn't going to let me down this time." Rumplestiltskin closed his eyes, consumed by the memory. "'We'll go to a place where we can have everything we want, just by wishing. Where life is easy and so much fun, Rumple. A place of magic.' And it was. Neverland was, is, just as he described, a child's toy box, with never-ending adventures and wish-magic, and most importantly to me, a place my papa and I could be safe and stay together. But what I didn't know was that it's also a place of irresponsibility and selfishness, and what Papa soon learned was that it's a place only for children. He made a deal with the island: he would be restored to his youth, he would be made immortal, he would rule Neverland, but the price that the island required—the price he was happy to pay—was me. I was sent back to the Enchanted Forest."

Zelena clicked her tongue as she made notes in her steno pad. "And grew up an orphan."Worse," he barked. "Grew up knowing my father didn't love me."

"When did you see him again?"

"I was the most powerful mage in the world, the most feared; no one dared harm me or mine. I thought we were safe, my son and I; I thought Bae would be happy. And why not? I could give him anything. He would be respected, admired, I thought, and protected. No one dared tease him. But at the same time my magic provided for him, it isolated him."
She nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. It does. It makes you different. Loneliness is the price you pay for magic every day of your life. It must have been especially horrible being the son of the Dark One, watching you murder and maim with just the flick of your little finger."

He nodded in shame. "Bae grew to detest the monster I’d become. He had such a noble soul; he didn't fear me; instead, he feared for me, the evil that was eating away at me, slowly killing the gentle, loving man I’d been. He feared he was losing me, and he was right. When you have magic, you can do almost anything—"

"And so you do." Her eyes widened as she sampled the power flowing through her. "All the silly rules that humans follow don't pertain to you." She smiled at him as though sharing a secret with him. "We make up our own rules."

"No, dearie," he cautioned her. "What was the first thing I ever taught you? Have you forgotten it already?"

"Three laws of magic," she recited. "One: all magic comes with a price; if your customer doesn't pay it, you must. Two: there is a power that supersedes even the strongest magic, and that's the power of the Fates. Three: There are lines not even magic can cross. Magic can't bring back the dead or make someone love or rewrite the past. Oh, but Rumple, you're wrong about that, as I shall soon prove."

"How, Zelena? What do you intend to do?" He growled, but she wouldn't reply except with a smirk. "Answer me, Zelena. You foolish girl! If you intend to attempt to violate the very nature of magic by raising the dead or—" he interrupted himself as he wondered briefly whether she would attempt to make him fall in love with her.

She made her voice sweet. "No, darling, I haven't been slipping love potions into your porridge. I won't need to, after I've accomplished my goal."

He mulled it over. "A baby... a True Love baby... Charming's broken sword..."

"Containing elements of his courage," she elucidated.

"True Love, courage..."

"You're halfway there. But no, you'll just have to wait for the 'big reveal,' as they say on television. Now, we weren't talking about me; we were talking about you and your dear papa. Where you left off, you'd acquired the power and it was frightening your son. What does that have to do with Daddy Malcolm?" She conjured a drink for him. He tasted it, and when he realized it was a Long Island Tea, he took only the smallest of sips, just enough to avoid offending her by refusing her gift. What the combination of booze and his addled brain would do, he didn't want to find out.

"Boys started disappearing from our village. At night they would be sent to bed; in the morning, their beds were found empty." His mouth twitched as he remembered.

"Bae disappeared."

He flashed a quick hard glare at her, resenting her use of his son's nickname. But she held all the cards, for now, so he continued his story. "I found them, about thirty boys, dressed in
animal skins and prancing around a roaring campfire, under the spell of his pipes. Free of rules, they thought they were, free of their unloving parents, but he controlled them, the one they called the Piper. Ah, but when I snatched away his hood, the Piper wasn't a boy at all, but rather-

"Malcolm, in his transformed body." Was that sympathy in her gaze?

"He called himself Peter Pan."

"And he'd come to steal away your son. But why? He'd already got shed of you; why cause you any more misery?"

"He was looking for one particular boy, a boy whose heart could regenerate the magic that was being drained away from Neverland. Stopping time so that boys will never grow up requires a great deal of power, you see, but the legends claimed that refueling was possible if the heart of the Truest Believer was sacrificed."

"Was that..." she chose her words delicately. "Was Bae the Truest Believer?"

"No."

She released a sigh of relief, as if she almost cared about her captive's emotional well being. "And so Malcolm let him go?"

Rumplestiltskin nodded. "Pan returned to Neverland with a group of boys in tow, to form his own little kingdom. Bae returned home with me."

"Flash forward to last year. Is that the next time you saw Malcolm?"

"Yes. He'd found his Truest Believer: my grandson Henry. Pan's minions kidnapped Henry and we, his family, went after them, to Neverland. We defeated Pan and rescued Henry, and that's the end of the story."

But she knew it wasn't; she'd heard bits and pieces from conversations in Granny's Diner. Her mouth stretched flat and her eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me, Rumple."

Magic gripped him by the throat and squeezed. He fought giving her the satisfaction of hearing the remainder of Pan's story, because its ending was his ending, and he wasn't ready to come to terms with the circumstances of his own horrifying, albeit temporary, demise.

"Finish the story, Rumple."

"We went to Neverland. Pan had rigged it with psychological traps intended to demolish each of us separately; he almost succeeded, but we managed to rescue each other. To save Henry, I would have to kill Pan, and in the process, I would die, but I willing to pay that price. I tried to avoid it, but the Fates would not be denied; our attempts to trap Pan failed."

Her green skin glowed with magic as she grew excited. "Tell me how you killed him."

He stared at the concrete floor. "I took him in my arms, this teenage boy with the soul of a very old man; I raised my dagger and he transformed himself back to the man I
remembered. He begged me, he bargained with me, promised me the love and attention I–" 

his voice broke. "I've walked this earth nearly three hundred years, but in that moment, I 
was seven again, and my papa had come for me at last. I needed him, even then, but he'd 
tricked me too many times. I kissed his cheek; a part of me, the foolish part, still loved him, 
but I'd finally accepted the truth. He would have killed all of us if I had let go. I held him 
closer and I raised my dagger and as he begged me for his life, I plunged it into his back and 
into my own chest."

"What did it feel like, killing your father?"

"The dagger shuddered as it pierced his skin; his muscle slowed down its progress; I had to 
push it through bone. I felt in my own body everything my dagger was doing to his."

"No, I meant, how did it feel emotionally?"

"How do you think it felt?" he snapped. "That was my father!"

"Don't duck the question, Rumple."

"It felt great!" he roared. "He was finally getting what he deserved! And my son and my 
grandson and my beloved would live."

"And you would be remembered as a hero."

"But I wasn't."

"No." Satisfied, she leaned back in her chair. "You weren't, except to Belle, Henry and Bae. 
For everyone else, one act of sacrifice and bravery couldn't erase centuries of villainy. For 
everyone else," her words came in a hiss, "you got what you deserved and they were glad to 
be rid of you."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. Tell the truth, Rumple. You needed their approval, because you never had your 
parents'."

"I didn't die for them."

"No, but admit it: it bothers you that they didn't mourn you. Even now, when they talk about 
you, there's no respect for your sacrifice, there's no concern for your welfare, only worry 
about what I might make you do. Your son is missing: Emma is making a half-hearted effort 
to find him, but she's preoccupied. No one else even speaks of Bae."

"I don't believe that."

"It's the truth. For most of them, he's just some loser from New York who knocked up the 
savior and dumped her long ago. They don't even know his real name. Henry? Henry doesn't 
remember him at all. And your precious Belle? Who comforted her in her grief, when you 
died? Now that she knows you're my slave, who's comforting her in her worry? Go on, 
guess."
"Ruby," he grasped a name. "Ruby is her friend."

"Nope. Guess again."

"Emma. Emma would care, for Bae's sake."

"Nope. Guess again."

The truth was finally wrenched from him. "No one! No one cares about her! No one's checking to make sure she's not sick with worry."

"Bingo!" Zelena laughed. "She spends her days shut away from them in your shop. She's studying your books in hopes of finding a way to free you. A fruitless task—and for the rest of Storybrooke, a thankless one. They don't want you back. Oh, they don't want you under my thumb, of course; they're shaking in their boots over the power I now control. But they avoid the Dark One's Lady because she reminds them of you, and that's scary. She's alone. She's wasting away, and no one so much as brings her a cup of tea to soothe her nerves."

His lips started to quiver. He bent his head, covering his face with his hair; she mustn't see his face.

"You killed your papa. You killed yourself. And what the hell good did it do?"

"They're alive."

"Alive!" she snorted. "That—thing—you're carrying around inside you, is that alive? The minute he leaves your body, magic will take him. You hear his voice, don't you? Listen to it, and then tell me, is this what he wants, this half-life, driving his father crazy? Or is he asking you to let him go?"

"Henry—he's all right; he's safe—"

"Another half-life. Regina filled his mind with false memories. He doesn't remember Bae or you. To him, Belle's just a weird woman hiding out in a store. And Belle, she's afraid to sleep; her dreams are all nightmares. Her hours are consumed with a useless search for a solution that doesn't exist. Is that the life you envisioned for her, when you saved her from Pan?"

"She'll recover. She's strong." But he wasn't: tears were dampening his cheeks.

"So I'm asking you again: how does it feel, to have killed your father?"

"I killed my father. I loved him and I killed him," he admitted. "I'm in hell." He crawled as far away from her as he could, turned his face to the stone wall and let the tears come where she couldn't see them.

But she wouldn't let him go, wouldn't let him have the space to mourn. She pressed on, "Finish the story, Rumple. Your death! How does an immortal die?"

"He doesn't." Rumplestiltskin gritted his teeth. "I felt the full power of the magic of every Dark One that's preceded me rush through Pan's body and into mine. I felt my limbs go numb. My blood stopped circulating. My heart stopped beating. My breath leaked out of my
lungs like a punctured balloon. And then my vision and my hearing leaked away, and everything went black. My last thought was the hope that my life and my pain were over. But it was a vain hope: gradually my heart started beating again, my lungs started drawing in air, putrid air, the stench of rotted flesh. Feeling came back to my hands and my legs, but I couldn't move. I stood there, frozen, as pain shot up my ankle. I should have fallen; my ankle couldn't support my weight, but magic kept me standing, locked in place. I couldn't see: there was no light. But I could hear, and I wished I couldn't: I heard the most piteous moans, pain beyond the pain of the body, everlasting, unrelenting pain of the soul. I heard my name repeated, over and over, incessantly, in the voices of every man, woman and child I'd ever made a deal with. Pleading with me, reviling me, taunting and teasing and pulling on me, but I couldn't move, even to open my mouth to answer them. I felt hands, the hands of every man and woman I'd ever killed, clawing at my skin, ripping it from my bones. Incessantly, forever, picking my bones clean, and the flesh would grow back and the ripping would continue. I felt their tongues on my neck, my throat, in my ear. Laughter, but the laughter of derision, not humor. The wound in my chest from where my dagger had pierced me wept tar-thick blood.

"This was my ending, the ending intended for all villains. It's your ending too, Zelena."

She chuckled. "You're reading the wrong book, doll."

"Then suddenly the voices stopped, all but one. I heard Baelfire call my name. The other beings around me fell away; I was lifted, I passed through a barrier of dark lava that burned my raw flesh but healed my wounds, and then there was light. Pale, but light, to be sure, and fresh, cold air for my lungs, and her face, sweet and anxious and hopeful, and my son, dying, paying the price for resurrecting me."

She allowed him at last to fall silent. She plucked a strawberry from her drink, dangled it over her open mouth, prodded it with her tongue before biting its tip. When she'd consumed the entire strawberry, she licked her fingers and sighed in satisfaction. "There now, that was quite a thriller. Sort of Stephen King meets the Bible, huh? And for once, someone suffers because of you but not by your choice. How did that feel, once you realized what Bae had done, and what it would cost him?"

He bared his teeth. "I wanted to die—but only after I'd killed you first."

She lay a hand on her chest and blinked innocently. "Me? I was just a simple bystander."

"You knew," he hissed, "what the price would be. You could have told him. You could have stopped him."

She shrugged. "Maybe I've got a touch of Dark One in me. Who knows, maybe Zoso was an ancestor of mine." Then she set her feet on the ground and sashayed over to his cage. "He'll still alive, though, your son, I mean. Sort of. But suppose I tell you I can fix everything? I can bring him back to you as a newborn babe, and you can start over, do it properly this time. Your son, my son, me and you, in the life we deserve."

His lips trembled. "Go away, Zelena."

Surprisingly, she softened her tone. "Just think it over, darling. What kind of future does he
have now, living inside your head? You'll have to release him eventually, and then he'll die. The one consistent theme in all your stories is the abiding love you feel for him. So save him, give him the life he should have had, give yourself an opportunity to be the father you were meant to be." She popped inside his cage, raised his chin and kissed his cheeks and his mouth, punctuating each kiss with a suggestion. "Just... say... yes."

The magic didn't awaken; this was not a command. For a reason he couldn't grasp, she was giving him free will in this one decision. He pushed her away. "Go away, Zelena."

"You'll change your mind." She patted the top of his head. A nail appeared in his hand.

"You already gave me one for Malcolm. Or is this for Pan?"

"This is for you. For your pointless death."
"They seemed to hit it off," Regina said, closing the door to the guest bedroom.

"They could help each other in ways we adults never could, to find their places in this world." Robin took her elbow and escorted her down the winding staircase. Or, more likely, it was she escorting him; from the quick glances he kept casting at her mansion, he was clearly out of sorts here. She'd lived here so long, so comfortably, and the curse had given her all the information she needed to manipulate this world's technology; she had to remind herself that the world he'd come from lacked the gadgetry and the noise of this one. Fortunately, Robin had no macho pretense to keep up: his native skills gave him the assurance he could survive and protect his family anywhere he went, so he didn't hesitate to ask when he needed teaching.

It was one of the many qualities Regina admired (though she'd never use the word admired aloud, not yet; their relationship was too new) about him. His self-assurance gave her room to be the confident, strong-willed woman she'd always been. Without that shared strength between them, they would never have clicked as a couple: she would have crushed him on the first date. Regina smiled a little when she remembered all their times they'd clashed, each giving just as good as he/she got, and then, after one or the other had won (she'd kept count: the score was even) or (rarely) they'd compromised, their arguments had ended in increased respect (and intense passion). She'd never had that kind of relationship before, not even with Daniel, who'd always been conscious of her rank. She liked it, a lot.

And now in the quiet house their boys—no, she couldn't think that way: the boys, Trajan and Roland—slept in twin beds she'd conjured in the guest room, Trajan with his patchwork dragon and Roland with his stuffed monkey. Downstairs, a simple meal of tomato soup and gruyere toast, cooked by Emma and Belle, had been laid out on the dining room table, and those two ladies, professing the need to return to their own awaiting gents, had bade their goodbyes. For one night, life would be perfect. No doubt, there would be trouble tomorrow; there always was. But for three or four hours, she could pretend this was their forever.

Robin drew out a chair at the dining table—not at the head of the table, for that would imbalance them, but at the side, and he would sit directly across from her. "Darling," he said, indicating that he meant the chair for her. She smiled her gratitude, pleased that Robin called her "darling," not "Your Majesty" or "my queen" or "Madame Mayor," as she was used to. Darling belonged to him and him alone.

She seated herself instinctively gracefully (how to move regally had been among the first lessons Cora had taught her). As he seated himself, she unfolded her napkin, spread it across her lap, then sipped from her glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Although the foods and their manner of preparation were unfamiliar to him, Robin's innate manners (he'd been raised a nobleman, after all) made him a charming dinner companion, and they fell into easy conversation as they ate.

It was only after they'd carried the dishes into the kitchen (and she'd taught him about dishwashers) that he hinted again at the possibility of blending families. "I meant what I said earlier, Regina. Not to put pressure on you, but if you did decide to keep Trajan, the boys would be good together." He clasped her waist. "As we are."

"We can't forget who his mother was," she reminded him. "Because the people of Storybrooke sure won't. It's a tempting notion, Robin, but it would cruel to keep him here. He needs a fresh start,
someplace where they've never heard of Zelena." She set her hands on his. "And we need to remember, we're still new. There are things we need to learn about each other. Things about my past that you need to hear—"

"I know who you are now. That's what matters." His eyelids lowered and his voice grew husky. She could feel a kiss coming.

"To us, yes. But just like Trajan, we live in a community, and we need to get along in it. People talk—"

"Let them." His hands drew her in.

"Oh, Robin, you tempt me," she sighed, sliding her arms around his neck. "You really do."

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"Hello, sweetheart." Rumplestiltskin turned away from the stove as Belle came into the kitchen through the back door. He held a wooden spoon, his free hand cupped beneath it to catch overflow. "Dinner is ready."

She set her hand on his wrist and leaned in to taste the sample in the spoon. "Mmm, sweet pea soup." She peeked in the microwave. "And Majorero cream." She peeked on the stove. "And Roncal crisps." She knew how much work went into preparing this meal (and how much clean-up would be required). "What's the occasion?"

"I just felt like cooking." He'd been doing that a lot lately: time-consuming, sometimes elaborate gourmet meals that were far more than the two of them could finish. Since he'd come back, since he'd been freed, he'd spent a lot of time on time-eating tasks, just as he had used to spend so many hours spinning. Since he'd come back, he hadn't touched his spinning wheel. She'd asked Archie about that; Archie had said, "It makes sense, considering he had nothing else to do but spin while he was in that cage."

"But it's not like him," she had objected.

"Give him time," Archie had advised. "He spent more than a year not being himself."

She fetched two glasses and filled them with Cabernet Sauvignon. Though the fruits of this land were quite different from those of Avonlea, Belle had an instinct for pairing wines with entrees; as a noblewoman, she'd been taught the fine points of planning state dinners. It was one of the skills she'd brought to the Dark Castle, one of the reasons, the imp had told her, he'd chosen her, rather than an experienced housekeeper or cook: she brought a touch of elegance to the castle and to his life. Rumplestiltskin could have been a king, an emperor, but he had no stomach for politics, no respect for titles, and no patience for leadership; he did, however, have an innate taste for elegance. Between the money he provided and the knowledge of fine living that she provided, they'd lived quite well in their Dark Castle (though neither of them used that term, they both thought of the castle as theirs, not his), and after she was freed from the "asylum," he'd striven to bring back that elegance to their life together.

As he dished up the soup, she tossed a salad. Preoccupied as they were, she decided it was a safe time to bring up the touchy subject. "Rumple, when Regina was cleaning out Zelena's things, she discovered something surprising."

"The identity of Zelena's father?" he guessed.

"No, she knew that already. While you were in prison, she summoned Cora's spirit—"
His brows drew down. "She didn't learn that from me. Very dangerous, that sort of magic, not to be dabbled in. I steered clear of it, myself."

"She was desperate to learn why Cora abandoned Zelena. She thought if she could find that out—"

He snorted. "What? She could help her? Zelena was beyond help. She chose her own path. She had a choice that few of us get, an offer to join Glinda, and she chose to go dark instead. Some of us," he set the soup pan in the sink a bit too forcefully and it clattered, "had no choice."

Belle touched his shoulder soothingly. "I know. But magic is different here; you have a choice here, don't you?"

He pulled away from her to plate the crisps. "I take it Regina succeeded in speaking to Cora."

"Cora told her Zelena's father was a gardener—and a bounder, who pretended to be a prince so that he could get Cora into bed. As soon as he'd taken her virtue—"

Rumple snorted again. "Cora and virtue: two mutually exclusive words. If she slept with a man she thought was a prince, I can assure you, no innocence was lost."

"Well," Belle admitted, "it wasn't a love match. She did expect the act would elevate her into royalty."

"She found her way there regardless," he said drily. "You needn't feel sorry for her."

"I don't. But Rumple, she's your past. She can't hurt you again, if you'll let go of her memory." She encircled his waist with her arms and laid her head on his chest. "Don't give her the power to haunt you. Or any of the people who hurt you: they're gone now, and we're here. It's just you and me. We can be happy, if you chase the ghosts away."

He set aside his spatula to hold her close. "Your optimism never flags. Sweetheart, you're so good."

He kissed the top of her head. "So good for me. But—"

"Don't you dare say it. No 'buts.' You and me together, happy. And Henry—we need to reach out to him. He needs us and we need him. Bind our family together, Rumple. Give Henry and me the same dedication you gave Bae. That's where your choice is. Choose the future, not the past. Choose us."

She felt him nod, she felt him breathe deep—a cleansing breath, she thought. After her plea that he leave the past behind, she couldn't tell him that once more, Zelena could haunt them now. There was no real reason to, anyway: Trajan would be taken to Augusta soon. Rumple need never know Zelena's son had come here—or for that matter, even existed.

She changed the subject, chattering about Robin and Regina (but not Hook and Emma). They deserved one night, at least, of peace and happiness. For one night, life would be perfect. No doubt, there would be trouble tomorrow; there always was. But for three or four hours, she could pretend this was their forever.
"You know," she said casually, "when I first met you, I used to daydream that you were my father. Isn't that funny?" Zelena laughed humorlessly. "I still don't know who my father was, but the more I learn about you—the whipped pup you are beneath the wolf's clothing—the happier I am that you're no kin of mine."

Even from the corner of his cage, he could smell the alcohol on her breath. She unlocked the iron door, leaving it wide open, but the dagger was tucked securely into her belt and the magic forced him to kneel as she entered the cage. She stroked his spinning wheel, then stroked his cheek with the same sensuous touch. "I'm in the mood for a little romance tonight, doll. But first—" She wrinkled her nose. "Good gods, you need a bath."

With a flick of her unsteady fingers, he found himself naked, standing in a claw-footed bathtub filled with hot water and lavender-scented bubble bath. The water burned his feet, but when she ordered him to sit down, he did, his skin reddening angrily. She tossed a loofa at him. "Here, wash up."

As he obeyed, she fetched a fluffy white towel from a cupboard, and sitting on the closed toilet lid, she laid the towel across her lap. "Isn't this nice? Almost like an old married couple, me sitting here chatting while you take a bath." She peered over the edge of the tub. "Hmm. I can see why the tavern wenches didn't take their time with you."

He dunked his head under the water. When he reemerged, water dripped into his eyes from his shaggy hair. "Still," she murmured, then setting the towel aside, she crossed behind him and leaning over, pushed him forward. "Here, I'll do that." She poured some of her floral shampoo into her palm, rubbed her hands together and began to lather his hair. He shivered involuntarily; the scratch of her fingers against his scalp felt good, and he hated himself for it.

She pushed his face down into the water, rinsed his hair, then jerked him up again, pressing him against her chest. She reclaimed the loofa, soaped it and began to scrub his chest. "Now." Her voice rumbled against his back. "I know it wasn't the wenches or your wife, so tell me, who taught you how to make love?"

He swallowed hard. "You—surely you don't want—"

"I want!" She slapped his cheek with the loofa, splashing water into his eyes.

"It was your mother."

"Liar!" With a shriek she seized him by the hair and yanked him backwards, submerging him into the water. He held his breath for as long as he could, his hands clawing at her wrists, but even without magic, she was at this point physically stronger, and as his lungs gave way and the air seeped out between his lips, the voices in his head grew frantic. The loudest of them all, the Dark One's, reminded him that drowning was how the people of this world
executed witches, not sorcerers; he would turn the tables upon her at the first opportunity.
He could not die, Rumplestiltskin reminded himself as he slipped into unconsciousness.

He awoke to a sharp slap that brought blood to his nose. "You—and my mother?!" the witch was shrieking, shaking him by the hair. "You made love to me, knowing who I was?! You sick—"

"I never touched you," he said, gasping for air. "Any such imaginings you have along those lines, they're a fantasy." He had to get mean to himself as well as to her, to turn this conversation to anger and away from hurt. Anger was the one gift he could give her: it would push her away from her dependence on him without wounding her fragile ego—if she would accept the gift of anger. "Sociopaths, not psychotics, are more my type. You're too unstable to tempt me, dearie." He knew the moment the words left his mouth he was in for a round of torture worse than she'd previously subjected him to.

With a wave of her hand, she sent him, naked and dripping wet, back to his cage, shackled and hanging from the ceiling, his feet dangling. The muscles in his shoulders tore as they strained to support his weight. She paced before him, her heels clacking on the concrete, magic sparking from her fingertips. "Not your type, am I? Not pretty enough? You puny, wrinkled old man—who do you think you are?" She made her clothes vanish and stood before him, displaying her curvy, firm body. "You could have had me, all of me, my body, my magic, my heart. But I wasn't good enough for you. I wasn't pretty enough, was I? Young enough. Stupid enough." She re-conjured her dress and resumed her pacing. "Not petite enough. Not dark-haired. Not gray-eyed or bee-stung-lipped." She wheeled about. "Regina! You sick bastard, did you take Regina to bed too?"

"I never touched Regina."

"Well, at least that's one thing." She studied him, his hair hanging in his face, his body hanging limply from the chains. "I have news for you, Rum: you're never touching any woman ever again." She slapped him, then clattered up the stairs, her magic slamming the cellar door and plunging him into darkness.

He wondered how she would carry out that threat.
I Get So a Many Things I Don't Deserve

11 May 2014

She had breakfast waiting for him: a pancake with a strawberry nose, chocolate chip eyes and a whipped cream smile. The boy had never seen anything like it before, that was obvious as she boosted his chair up to the dining table. He stared at the clown pancake, then stared up at her, uncertain how to proceed. "Go ahead," she chuckled. "You can eat it."

He picked up his fork but continued to watch her as she walked around to her seat at the head of the table. She sat down, spread her napkin across her lap—he imitated her. She poured a little syrup on her cake—he imitated her. With her knife and fork she cut a slice of her pancake—he imitated her. When she started to chew, he suddenly grinned and tucked in to his breakfast as though he hadn't eaten in days. Regina flushed with pride: the domestic arts were ones she never studied, but this boy seemed to think she was a gourmet cook. He finished his pancake before she'd taken her third bite. He saved the strawberry for last, sniffing it before he poked the whole thing into his mouth. "Did you like that?"

He nodded.

"Are you still hungry? Would you like some fruit?" When he nodded, she held out her hand. "Give me your plate." She dished up a sliced, fresh peach; this, at least, was familiar to him and he knew how to eat it. Cooked foods had not been a part of his life, before. Nor had manners. She demonstrated by example how and when to use the napkin, then when their meal was over, she said, "In this land, it's customary for people to say 'thank you' to the ones who prepare the food."

"Thank you," he said soberly.

"And it's customary to assist in cleaning up." They carried their dishes to the dishwasher. He was fascinated with the sounds the dishwasher made, so she allowed him to listen for a while, and she introduced him to a few other kitchen gadgets. "Is it magic?" He wanted to know about the light inside the refrigerator.

"It's a form of power that anyone in this land can use, not just mages. There's a lot like that here. You'll get used to it. Ordinary people have a lot of power here." She allowed him to play with the garbage disposal so that he could discover some of that power.

Then she sat him down in the living room, making sure he had his patchwork dragon. "Trajan, I have some news for you. Some of it is bad news, but I want you to know, you're safe here, and soon you'll have a family who will love you. You'll have a wonderful life here, I promise. There will be a lot of changes coming, and some of them will be uncomfortable, maybe a little scary, but I want you to promise me something, okay? Promise me you'll remember what I just said: you're going to have a wonderful life here, with a loving family and a home of your own, and friends, and maybe even a brother or sister. Will you try hard to remember that?"

He clutched his dragon tighter in preparation for the bad news, but in a small voice he promised to remember.

"Very well. Trajan, your mother—" she paused. Maybe she should wait. Maybe Hopper should be here; maybe Hopper should be the one to break the news.

"My mother is a witch," the boy volunteered. "Like you. But she's—" he touched his own cheek
"green."

"Trajan, did you spend a lot of time with your mother?"

He seemed confused by the question.

"Did she play with you? Did she teach you things?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Did she teach you how to do magic?"

He shook his head again.

"Did she tuck you in at night, read you a story?"

"Robin read us a story!" he chirped. "About dragons!"

"Yes, he did. You liked that, didn't you?" From his nod, she understood that bedtime rituals were a novelty to him. "Did your mother cook food for you, eat dinner with you?"

"We had pancakes!" He bounced on the couch cushion—like a three-year-old, she thought; Henry had stopped bouncing on the furniture when he was four.

"Your mother made you pancakes?"

He pointed at her. "You did."

"Trajan. . . " she hated to ask, but she felt she had to. "Did your mother say 'I love you'?"

He stopped bouncing and stared at her.

"When you got hurt, who fixed you? When you were scared, who cuddled you?"

He answered promptly. "Magwa." Then his face screwed up. "Where's Magwa?"

"She's still at your mother's castle, a long ways away. We won't go back there. Trajan, your home is in this land now. Your mother—she died. You won't see her again."

"I want Magwa!" he wailed.

She came to sit beside him, cradling him. "I can't bring her here, but maybe this will help." She conjured a stuffed toy for him, a winged monkey. "Like Roland's."

He threw it across the living room and threw himself onto the arm of the couch to cry. She patted his back.

"I know it's hard," she said. "But you will have a good life here. I promise."

------------------------------------------

She had breakfast waiting for him: yogurt with muesli, oatcakes with raspberry jam, a rasher of bacon, a link of sausage, baked beans and a tattie scone (she'd Googled "traditional Scottish breakfast"). He didn't remind her that his Scottish accent was a result of the curse; he tucked in eagerly, and she flushed with pride. Even after all these years, it still thrilled her when he received her offerings with enthusiasm, and vice versa. "I would have tried to make black pudding too, but I couldn't find the ingredients in the store."
"Just as well," he said. "There's so much here, I don't think I could've found room for it all." He was still gaunt and prone to digestive problems. Whale had had to place him on a diet to gradually reintroduce heavier meals, after a year of near-starvation. He'd graduated from the diet, but he still had to eat slowly. "Thank you, sweetheart."

She allowed him to enjoy his meal (she made a show of enjoying hers, though she was nervous). When they'd finished, they carried the dishes to the dishwasher, and she dared then to bring up the topic she should have raised last night. "Rumple, sit down, please. I need to tell you something; you're not going to like it, but I hope you won't let it upset you."

His mouth turned down, but he resumed his seat.

She drew in a deep breath. "Rumple, promise me something. Promise me you'll remember—we're the future." She clutched his hand from across the table. "You and me and Henry, we can be happy together, if we chose to be, and not hang on to the past."

"Belle. . . ." "I'm not asking you to do or not do something. I'm just asking you to remember we have each other, if you'll let it be."

"All right. I can promise that much."

"Rumple, Zelena had a son. He's five, he's here in Storybrooke."

"What?" he jerked his hand away.

"Regina and Jefferson brought him here. He's an orphan, Rumple. He's only five. He needs parents, a home; he was being looked after by her flying monkeys. That's no life—"

"Why is he here? Why didn't they—" he waved a dismissive hand. "Leave him in Oz, with the munchkins or the Ryls? Leave him where he belongs."

"Rumple, he's here now. He's only five—"

"Regina again! Meddling, with no idea of the consequences, no thought to the damage she might be doing!" He slammed his hands on the table.

"He won't be here long. Archie is working with CPS to find him a foster home in Augusta. He'll be in Storybrooke only a day or two. Maybe he'll even get adopted. He's so cute and sweet—" As Rumple pushed away from the table and turned to lean on the sink, she persisted, "I understand, believe me, I do, and I feel the same way as you do about Zelena."

"You couldn't possibly," he muttered.

"We all agreed it's best if he doesn't stay here, after all the awful things his mother did here. But I know you know," she came to stand beside him, "what it's like to be a little boy, an innocent, helpless little boy, who gets blamed for the awful things his parent did, and who has to grow up alone. He's only five, Rumple."

"Did it occur to any of you that his mother was born magical, and he may have inherited that?" He bared his teeth at her. "And that he may come back someday, intending to get even?"

"Evil isn't born; it's made. You've always said that." Undaunted by his glare, Belle pushed his hair back from his eyes. "Archie will find him a family that teaches him to be good. Someday, he might
want to know about his birth mother. He might even come here. But even if he has magic, he won't be like her. He'll have grown up secure and loved. What kind of future do you think he would have had in Oz? Where do you think it's more likely he'd have grown up angry and revengeful?"

"What do you want from me, Belle? Why are you telling me this?"

She shook her head. "I don't want anything. I'm just telling you so you'll know. So there won't be any secrets between us." She stroked his back. "Because you trust me and that trust is precious to me."

"All right." He allowed his body to relax against her ministrations. "But I won't help him. He's her blood."

"I wouldn't ask you to. It wouldn't be fair to you."

He set the dial on the dishwasher. "I'm going to the shop. It's time to open."

She started to point out that no one expected him to open his shop, after all he'd been through; he had earned the right to rest, and he'd been home less than two weeks. But she realized that reopening the shop wasn't for the town's benefit; it was for his, to give him something productive to do, something normal.

He paused at the threshold to the foyer. "Will you be going to the library today, or would you like to come with me?"

She grinned at him. "Let me get my coat."
Either he fell asleep from total exhaustion or he passed out; he wasn't sure which, but when he became conscious again, he was still hanging from shackles. From the dampness in the air, he assumed he was still in the cellar, though it was too dark to tell. He was still nude, and cold, and at some point he'd lost control of his bladder. Without her permission, he dare not free himself from the shackles or clothe or clean himself. He was too tired to be ashamed.

The voices in his head fussed and fretted, the Dark One plotting tortures for Zelena, Bae urging him not to act rashly (not that he could do anything anyway), Rumple whimpering in a corner. He forced himself back into sleep to shut the voices off.

"My gods, you're disgusting." Her voice splintered his peace. He opened his eyes, but he couldn't see her through the darkness. How she could see him, he had no idea. Her fingers snapped and a spray of lukewarm water falling from above drenched him, then a blast of warm air dried him, and at last a suit of clothes covered his body (cotton shirt and polyester slacks and jacket; his skin rebelled as it identified the fabrics). She chuckled, "Oh, you have to see this" and with another snap of her fingers, light filled the cellar. Obediently he glanced down at his new Hawaiian-print shirt and powder-blue jacket and trousers.

"There, isn't that nice? Oh, almost forgot the shoes." Another snap of her fingers produced a pair of white loafers. "This is Thanksgiving Day, so how about expressing a little gratitude to your benefactor? Say 'Thank you, Zelena.'"

"Thank you, Zelena." His voice cracked.

"Oh." She looked disappointed. "Guess you need some water." She whipped her arm through the air, and in an instant he was crashing into the straw of his cage, the empty shackles clanging against rock. His tailbone cracked against the concrete and he rubbed it, unconcerned with his dignity. "Hold your hand out." She conjured a cup of a clear liquid and he gulped it, then coughed as the fluid burned his throat. She'd given him straight vodka. After a giggle fit, she changed it to water and he drank his fill. "Where are your manners, pet?"

"Thank you, Zelena." Now that she had released him, his magic went about repairing his injuries. It did so automatically, and would do so as long as she didn't command otherwise; the first fundamental law of the Dark Curse was that it must survive, and for it do so, it must have a host.

She settled herself in her lounge chair and provided herself with a margarita. "I owe it to every woman in the land to carry out my threat, you know." Casually she ran a finger around the rim of the glass, gathering up salt before popping the finger into her mouth. "But that would defeat my larger purpose, so I'm giving you a second chance. Not because you deserve it, but because that brain of yours is a necessary ingredient in my spell. And after I cast it, well," she shrugged, "you'll have a whole new attitude to go with your whole new family. Does my generosity impress you, doll?"
"I'm stunned, Zelena. Absolutely stunned."

She cocked her head to peer at him. "It occurred to me that, my mother apparently being a bit of a tart, she may have been partially to blame for your dalliance with her." She raised an eyebrow. "It was a dalliance, wasn't it?"

Magic forced him to shake his head, even though that brain of his that she admired so much pleaded with him to worm his way out of this.

Her tone heated. "No? It was a—a relationship? Oh, gods, don't tell me it was a romance!"

"I intended to marry her. We had... an agreement."

"A contract?! You had a contract to marry her? Rumplestiltskin, did you buy her?"

"Of course not. She signed willingly. She'd shot off her mouth, trying to impress a king: she claimed she could spin straw into gold. I may have given her a small nudge with that idea: she'd heard such stories about me, and so all I had to do was plant a stray leaf of straw on her gown to trigger her memory."

"My mother was impetuous."

"Not usually; she was a calculating woman by nature, but she'd gotten herself into a tight spot and so she—"

"Grasped at straws," Zelena finished, groaning at her own pun.

"The king gave a deadline to produce the promised gold, as kings do—"

"I think I've heard this story before."

"You may have. Several writers adapted it, though none got it quite right."

"So she was imprisoned in a tower, sentenced to hang—"

"Beheading. King Xavier preferred beheading. More dramatic."

"If she didn't carry out her claim. And, I take it, she summoned you?"

"Of course. I'd kind of set it up that way."

"Why? Was she so beautiful you couldn't resist her?"

"No. I've seen more beautiful."

"Charisma, then. She was too charming to resist."

"No. She was the daughter of a drunk. She'd grown up too poor and too busy earning a living to practice the feminine arts."

"Intelligence?"

"She was intelligent, though I'd known smarter women. Her ambition exceeded her
What was it then, that you set her up so that she'd be beholden to you?"

"Regina." He gulped the last of his water. "A scrying had told me Cora would give birth to my curse caster." He knew he was in for it now.

She didn't disappoint: she threw her margarita at the cage, the glass shattering and the liquor splashing on the bars. "You damn fool! Didn't you realize that was me in that vision? I was the one meant to cast the curse!"

"No, Zelena, you weren't. I saw her clearly: dark hair, brown eyes."

"I should have been!" She waved a dismissive hand. "Never mind, I will be. In just a few months, I'll cast a curse that surpasses anything you ever dreamed of! And you'll thank me for it."

"Regina is no better off for having been chosen by the Fates to cast my curse," he admitted. "The next time you visit the tarty waitress, why don't you ask her about Regina? You'll learn she has no lover, no friends, and she has to share her only child with another woman. She had clout, but no one respected her; she has money, but how many Chanel skirts can one woman wear?"

"You idiot. I don't care if she's happy. I care if I'm happy." She conjured herself a fresh drink, her hand shaking. "In your vision, didn't you see me at all?"

"No." If he had—if he'd been shown just an inkling of what she would do to him—he would have sicced a pack of werewolves on her when she first appeared on the grounds of the Dark Castle. She was growing depressed; he had no idea how that would affect her behavior. He changed the subject as swiftly as he dared. "Perhaps you'd like to learn more about your mother."

Still distracted, she fluttered her fingers, urging him to continue the story.

"Despite her upbringing, Cora had grand plans and grand manners. She didn't walk; she floated. She spoke like an educated woman. Her hands were red and rough from work, but she moved them with such grace as to give the impression she was of royal blood. And of course that's what she most longed for. In her mind, it was a simple equation: royalty equals respect equals happiness. I knew better. I'd lived a long time already by the time I met her. I knew better, but I didn't disillusion her. One must not, you see, or you risk tampering with the events that form the future, and it was vital to me that nothing alter the path the future of the Enchanted Forest would take. I'd studied it carefully, every detail, over three hundred years: I knew which events were necessary for the outcome I needed."

"To bring you to this land and your son." She sneered. "And to this cage, on your knees at my feet."

"To see my son again, I would have paid any price, even this one."

"There you go again, acting the fool. Did you make love to her?"
She'd changed the direction of the conversation so quickly he couldn't keep up. "What?"

"You heard me. Cora—did you make love to her? Don't evade the question. You know exactly what I mean."

"Yes."

"Was she any good?"

"Zelena—"

Her magic gripped him by the throat and squeezed. "Was she any good?"

"I thought I loved her," he gasped. "But she extracted her own heart so that she couldn't feel anything for me."

She released him. "Loved her? You?!"

"I saw in her a mirror of my own dark soul. I thought we understood each other, when no one else could. I looked into the future and saw her, with the child who would bring me to this world. Cora would be the means by which the prophesy would come to pass. I thought... I could see her by my side as I reunited my family."

"You actually wanted to marry her." Zelena said lowly.

"I thought the daughter I saw in my visions could be mine."

"Regina, your daughter." Her eyebrows shot up.

"I wrote it into the contract. But she outsmarted me. The value of a contract is all in the semantics, you see. She chose the words, and with them built a loophole that I fell into, and then she jilted me to marry a prince."

"Wait a minute: she could have become the wife of the most powerful sorcerer in the world, a man through whom she could have ruled the entire world. And she chose to walk away from the golden goose to marry a—a turkey?"

He had to chuckle a little.

Zelena threw her hands into the air. "Does stupidity run in my family?"

For the first time, he admitted aloud the thought he'd secretly harbored for many years: "Cora and I were better off without each other."

"Really?"

"We would have destroyed each other. She with her ambition needed to rule; I with my superior power would not be ruled. With the bloodlust running high in both of us, one of us would have killed the other in short order." He smiled ruefully. "I think I would have been the loser in that deal, either dead of knife in my back or wishing I were."

"I never met her, you know." Zelena paused to consider. "Was she so fixated on power that
she would have killed the one and only man suited to be her mate?"

"In a heartbeat, dearie. In fact, she did try. Last year she came to Storybrooke with the
intention of bringing her daughter to heel, then walking away as the new Dark One."

Zelena raised her glass to him. "The old man defeated her. Congratulations."

"I didn't. Another killed her."

"Regina?"

"Snow White."

Zelena considered this. "Huh. So Snow isn't as pure as she lets on. That baby of hers could
have been an interesting specimen. Too bad there won't be anything left of him after I cast
my spell."

"You're going to kill him?"

She shrugged. "What did you think I was going to do with him? It's a spell, doll, not a
Mommy and Me play date." She leaned forward. "Don't worry, dear. If I'm careful, I can get
what I need from you without destroying the outer shell. And I intend to be careful, because I
have other plans for that shell." She popped into his cage to drop a new nail in his lap. "For
my mother, who broke your heart by yanking out her own. What an intriguing combination
you and she would have been. Oh well, her stupidity is my gain." She brushed his hair aside
to whisper in his ear, just before kissing it, "Doll... I make love with my whole heart." As she
walked away, she kissed her fingertips up at the sky. "Mama dear, wherever you are, if you
can hear me: I win!"
Archie had dialed all but the last number to connect with his friend at the Augusta Child Protective Services office. His finger poised on the final button, he suddenly realized Penny Hall would want Trajan's backstory, and "The boy's mother, the Wicked Witch of the West, left him with a pack of flying monkeys" just wouldn't cut it. Archie canceled the call and sank back in his swivel chair to think. . .and to conjure a lie.

It had been a very long time since he'd had to lie. Under the curse he'd been living a lie, but he'd believed it. He drummed his fingers on the desktop and considered. On the one hand, Penny would think Archie had gone round the bend if he told her about Oz and Storybrooke. But on the other hand, the more honest information Ms. Hall could be given, the better; any prospective foster parents or adoptive parents should be told about Trajan's background so they'd understand him. Otherwise, what would they think when Trajan started yammering about Magwa or witches? Either they'd brand him as a disturbed child and return him to CPS, or they'd send him to therapy, as Regina had Henry. The poor child would probably be put on Ritalin and be assigned to special ed. classes.

Archie's conscience made the decision for him: there was no wrong in fabricating a story for Trajan. The trouble was coming up with something both believable in this world and in keeping with whatever secrets Trajan might spill. He poured himself a cup of coffee and patted Pongo's head as he struggled to concoct such a tale. The alarm on his wristwatch sounded, warning him that his first appointment of the day (the Blind Witch, a. k. a. Miss Ginger, who was having difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the curse had given her nine cats to live with) would arrive in ten minutes. Ten minutes to concoct a background for Trajan that the boy would have to live with for the rest of his life. Pongo nosed his inattentive palm. Archie resumed petting him and the Dalmation settled his chin on his master's knee.

Archie needed help. Someone adept at lies. . . Mr. Gold. Ah, no. Gold wasn't inclined to help anyone, least of all his torturer's son. No, it wasn't a master of lies that was needed—it was a master of stories, both fantasy and realism. A reader. Archie seized his phone and called Belle.

They met at Dave's Fish and Chips for lunch. Belle had resisted the idea at first; she claimed she'd been leaving Gold alone too often recently as it was. "I don't think he should be alone," she had said.

"Why? Is he acting strangely?"

"No. That's just it. He's been acting normal ever since he got back. He went right back into his routine. He goes to bed at eleven every night, gets up at seven, he even brushes his teeth at the same time every day. And now he's re-opened the shop."

"He sleeps well? Eats well?"

"He pretends to. I catch him sometimes, in the middle of the night, staring at the ceiling. I haven't said anything about it. I'm giving him time, like you said. I understand that a sense of normalcy will help him readjust. Still, I want to be there for him. He shouldn't be alone when the shock wears off."

"I understand, Belle, and I wouldn't pull you away from him if it wasn't necessary. I won't take up
too much of your time. It's for Trajan."

She rushed into Dave's and tossed herself into the booth without a greeting. "I think I have something. On paper, it's kinda lame, but you have this face and this voice that make people want to believe you, so I think you'll put it off. Here it is." She slid an unsealed envelope across the tabletop: he could see newspaper clippings contained inside. "Barney & Haley Traveling Circus. It was a tiny thing, only operated four years before it went bankrupt. Barney died last year and his wife Haley remarried and moved to Europe, so finding her to verify the story would be a hassle. According to their newspaper ads, they had a female magician and a chimpanzee act. So suppose the magician and the chimp trainer were married—"

"And had a son—"

"And when the magician and the chimp trainer passed through Storybrooke last week, on their way to join up with another traveling circus, there was an accident and the parents were killed."

"Emma would have a report on the accident."

"I already talked to her. She's working on it."

"A traveling circus would explain why there's no birth certificate, no immunization records—"

"Oh, but there is a birth certificate. And a driver's license for Trajan Brown Sr. Mr. Dove will have them ready this evening." Belle's eyes twinkled; this was an adventure to her.

"Mr. Dove is a very handy man to have around," Archie mused. When he'd first become aware of Belle's relationship with Gold, he'd worried about the negative influence the pawnbroker might have upon her. She was such a sweet, innocent person, Archie thought—but after she'd rescued him from the pirate, Archie had come to know her better. Belle was innocent, yes, but resourceful and hardly naïve. Over time, Archie had come to hope that if there was influence going on, it was her acting on Gold.

"Thank you, Belle. I'll call my friend at CPS this afternoon. May I buy you lunch?"

She glanced at the clock on her phone. "If you don't mind, I'll get something to go. I want to take something back to the shop for Rumple."

"I'd be pleased to treat both of you to lunch." Archie signaled to a waiter, then lowered his voice. "When the time comes that your husband is ready to talk about Zelena and Neal, I'd like to help." A shadow passed over his face. "Since Regina's curse broke, I've had quite a lot of experience in treating shock, disorientation and grief."

"Thanks, Archie."
December 2013

Days went by without an appearance by Zelena. At least, he assumed they were days: he could only judge the passage of time by the meals that her magic presented him. He assumed her absence meant she was busy assembling the ingredients for her spell and therefore was closer to enacting her plan... closer to destroying Belle, Bae and Henry. The voices in Rumplestiltskin's head were in an uproar over this (at least, the Dark One, Rumple and Bae all agreed Zelena had to be stopped), making it impossible for him to pull two thoughts together, let alone formulate an escape plan.

But he could still feel. He wished it were otherwise. Spinning didn't drive his emotions underground as it used to: the nails lined up neatly on the crossbar of his cage kept pulling him away from the once-hypnotic motion of the wheel, kept pulling him into the past. In the gaps between shouts of the voices in his head, he slipped backwards in memories so vivid he could no longer sense the cage or the cellar or anything else in the present moment: his eyes, his ears, his nostrils were filled with memories. Even as his hands transmuted useless straw into useless gold, his mind was locked in the past, with the ghosts of the people who had taken his innocence, his pride, his hope, his ability to trust and to love: Malcolm, Milah, Hook, Cora. And seeping up from the oily surface of those memories was a thought: what had been taken from him, he'd taken from others. The lessons he'd learned from his tormentors, he'd carried into his relationships with Bae, Regina, Zelena, Henry and Belle. The betrayed had become a betrayer.

"It's Christmas!" Wrapped snugly in her cape and tights, Zelena seemed oblivious to the blast of snow that swirled around her legs as she clattered down the stairs with a tray in her hands. "Happy Christmas, my pet! I've brought you a treat." As she approached the cage, she whipped off the napkin covering the plate, and a cloud of heat rose from the food contained therein. With a flutter of her magic, the tray vanished from her hands and appeared on the straw-covered floor of his cage. She wasn't lying, for once; she'd brought him a full meal: ham, yams, green beans, rolls and pumpkin pie. To his coffee she'd added a splash of whiskey.

After months of half-meals, his stomach couldn't handle so much solid food. The very aroma made him choke. He tried to turn away, but her urging—from anyone else, an invitation; from the dagger-holder, a command—made him pick up the fork and attempt to eat. Moments after swallowing the first mouthful, he'd vomited.

Insulted, she shouted at him and with her magic, flipped the tray upside down. She stormed back up the steps, slamming the cellar door.

It was only then that he noticed the sprig of mistletoe she'd hung from the bars of his cage.
"You're out of breath," Regina muttered as Emma, with Belle in tow, bound across the ex-mayor's manicured lawn and onto the porch.

"Trouble in town?" Robin inquired.

Emma shook her head and Belle explained, "We just dashed into the shop to get a going-away gift for Trajan." She produced a brightly wrapped cylinder from behind her back. "Tinker Toys. Rumple picked it out." The harsh edge in her voice warned of a fight if Regina made any snarky comments, but the queen wasn't really listening. Her phone buzzed even as a stationwagon pulled up to the curb, and her eyes fixed on Archie as he climbed out of the vehicle. "Would you get Trajan?" she asked Robin as she pressed a button on her phone and spoke. "Yes?"

Robin walked out onto the lawn, calling Trajan and Roland to him. He took their hands and led them back to the porch as Archie approached.

"Not now, Mrs. Nolan, I'm quite—" Regina paused, and when she spoke again into the phone her tone had softened considerably. "Are you—Tuesday, you said? Five o'clock? Yes, I believe I'm free then. I'll check with Robin and call you back in a few minutes. . . . A potluck? Yes, I'd be happy to bring my lasagna. Thank you, Mrs. Nolan." She raised an eyebrow at Robin as she slipped her phone back into her jacket pocket.

"What's a potluck?" the outlaw mused.

Emma was grinning like a Cheshire cat, but said nothing until Regina turned her puzzled frown upon her. "Ms. Swan, are you behind this?"

"Nope." Emma seemed all the more pleased for her answer. "It was Mary Margaret's idea." She explained to Belle, "You'll be getting the call next. A naming ceremony for my new little bro. American style: no crowns, no gowns, just jeans and potluck. After all the trouble we've been through lately, we just want to let down our hair and party." At the flicker of doubt in Belle's expression, Emma continued, "Your husband's invited too, of course."

Belle relaxed. "We'll be there." She placed a slight emphasis on the first word.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Archie said. He was smiling uncertainly, his eyes running across the faces of the adults, then the Iron Man suitcase sitting at Regina's feet. "How are you all?" His tone made it clear the question wasn't an idle one.

"He's ready to go," Robin said, patting Trajan's back. "He's looking forward to meeting his new family, aren't you, young man?"

Trajan stared up at them and inched a little closer to Regina. Archie knelt on one knee to address him face-to-face. "Are you a little nervous, Trajan?" The boy popped his thumb into his mouth. "It's okay to be nervous. But your new family is eager to meet you. Remember, we talked to them on Skype yesterday?"

Trajan nodded. Regina handed him his patchwork dragon.

"Do you remember their names?"
The boy's face screwed up as he focused. "Jonathan, Abby, Marcia... Mr. Hoffman and Mrs. Hoffman."

"Yes. You and Jonathan will share a bedroom. They've already got the room ready for you." Archie showed him a photo on his cell phone. "See? A new comforter on the bed."

Trajan smiled as he pointed at the photo. "Dragons!"

"You're going to like it there." Archie engulfed him a hug. "Are you ready to go?"

Trajan picked up his suitcase. Belle knelt and presented him with the gift and a kiss. Archie slid an arm around his shoulders and directed him toward the station wagon.

"Bye, Trajan!" Roland called out.

"Have fun in Augusta!" Emma suggested, as the others chipped in with farewells.

Trajan paused at the passenger side as Archie put the suitcase in the trunk of the car. His mouth quivered as he waved goodbye.

"Oh, for pity's sake," Regina muttered. She hurried down the lawn. "Look, I don't have any appointments this afternoon. You'll need someone to read the road map. I'll go with you, Dr. Hopper." She climbed into the backseat and waved Trajan in after her. "See you this evening, Robin. Bye, Roland."

"Bye, Regina!" her two men answered.

As the station wagon drew away from the curb, Emma shook her head in wonder. "A year ago, she couldn't have been bothered." She glanced down at Roland. "They have a way of changing you."

"That they do," Robin agreed, hugging his son.

"Henry sure changed me," Emma admitted, then glanced meaningfully at Belle.

Belle raised her hands defensively. "Whoa. Rumple and I have only been married two weeks."

"Yeah, but you've been together, like, forever."

Belle dropped her voice. "It may be a long time before he's ready to be a father again."

"You have to save them."

Rumplestiltskin sat bolt upright, his hand automatically reaching out in the darkness for the visitor he was certain had come. He strained to see through the blackness, but his abnormally sharp eyesight failed him. "Bae? Bae, where are you, son?"

"You have to save them. If Zelena succeeds in her plans, Emma and Henry will cease to exist. Don't let it happen, Papa, I'm begging you. Whatever it takes, you have to stop her. If you still love me, do this for me. This is the magic I want from you. Not for you to make me fourteen again, or give me a castle. I want you to save my son."

"I do, I love you, Bae. I'll do anything you ask."

"I can't protect them any more. My fate is sealed. You have to do it for me. Stop Zelena."

"Make her pay. Your son is dead already because of her. Take her down, Rumple. The town will honor you for it. Henry and Bae will thank you for it." This was the voice of the Dark One, raspy and commandeering.

"She controls me."

"Who are you?" the Dark One bellowed. "Are you the coward who crouched at the feet of Hordor? The fool who allowed his wife to belittle you to your face, to flaunt her infidelity around the village, to leave your son alone, cold and hungry, while she cavorted with drunkards? Are you the whiny pup that I tricked so easily?"

He rose to his feet, a fireball forming in his hand. "I'm the Dark One, you son of a bitch, the most powerful and feared man in the world, I know more about magic than any who's ever lived, and I will not be belittled or tricked or made a fool again, and I will destroy all who threaten my family!"

The Dark One laughed. "Then act like it."

The voices suddenly stilled and he dropped onto his stool to think. He sat for hours, in his now clear head sorting through every book and every experiment he'd ever encountered to find a loophole in the laws of magic.

Suddenly he knew, and he kicked over the spinning wheel, which he'd relied upon to save his sanity, and he threw back his head and invited the pollution and confusion back into his brain, for he realized his salvation lay in madness.

January 2014

She yanked on a lock of his hair as she snapped her fingers in his face. "Rumplestiltskin! Rumplestiltskin! Look at me!"
The magic forced him to raise his eyes to hers, but her form kept blurring and fading into the myriad other images dancing before him. Over the voices yammering in his head, he couldn't hear her; only his magic could, and whenever it recognized a command, it took control of his body and made him obey, though his mind wasn't aware of what his body was doing.

"Rumplestiltskin! Wake up!"

The sharp slap to his face drove the voices to a corner of his brain. He jerked his head back, blinked, rubbed his aching jaw.

She took a step back and crossed her arms. "You're babbling. Do you hear me? You're babbling." She sighed. "I guess there'll be no story today. You're getting worse, Rumple. You just sit there in that corner, babbling and drooling, hour after hour. You don't even spin any more. You're just no fun." Despite her insults, she sounded genuinely concerned. She pointed at the ground, but he couldn't concentrate long enough to understand until she barked, "Eat your breakfast!"

She'd provided a spoon, but he just stared at it, unfamiliar with its purpose. He curled his fingers and scooped up a bit of cornmeal mush, ignoring its burn on his skin, ignoring the lumps sliding down his wrist. He thrust his fingers into his mouth and swallowed the mush without chewing.

"Use your manners!" she snapped. "You used to be such an elegant man. Gods, what's happened to you?" Zelena removed herself from the cage. With her back to him, she muttered, "You're getting harder and harder to control."

He sucked on his fingers and blinked.

30 March 2014

The voices were shouting today, filling his ears so that he couldn't hear when Zelena opened his cage and dropped his breakfast tray on his stool. She shook his shoulder; he could feel her fingernails dig into his shoulder, he could smell her shampoo (copied from Belle), he could see her mouth twist and her brows furrow but he couldn't hear a word she said over the voices, the voices, the voices demanding he rise up and kill her and step over her bleeding body and walk out of this cage and into the arms of his family. He shook his head frantically to try to clear it, to no avail. After some time of shaking him and, finally, kicking him, Zelena yelled something and left him.

Sloppy, she'd become, as the voices had taken over more and more of his mind. Perhaps she saw he was incapable of doing more than simply cowering in the corner, arms wrapped about his knees, rocking back and forth in a useless effort to soothe himself. He couldn't find space enough between the shouts to think long enough to feed himself or sleep or wash. He lost all conception of the outside world, including that of his own body.

"OPEN!" "OPEN!" "OPEN!" All three of the voices shrieked at once. The unity of thought enabled him to lift his head and look across the cage—the gate was unlocked—across the cellar—a beam of light was leaking in through a crack in the cellar door. She'd given up on him, apparently, assumed he was permanently lost to the madness. She'd left him to die
slowly, to starve to death. Hadn't even bothered to lock up after her last visit.

"RUN!"

The magic wasn't holding him down any more. She truly had quit him, then. He felt alone and frightened, abandoned, but he also felt a rush of adrenaline that shot power to his knees, his legs, his hands, and he skittered across the straw to the cage gate, and grasped the bars and he hauled himself up by sheer will, because his body, too weakened from hunger and exhaustion, had nothing left to give.

"RUN!"

He managed to gather enough magic to pop the cellar door open.

"RUN!"

He ran.

Blindly. Falling, picking himself up again, running. Fresh air, cold, smacked him in the face, awakening him. He gained strength, gained dexterity, clarity. He ran in the direction of the sun, though he had no idea of the time of day, and therefore no idea whether he was headed east or west, or which direction town lay in. Ran. With each footfall the red fog in his brain lifted a little more. He spotted a faint path and followed it. As his head continued to clear, he realized the danger in clarity: if her voice could sift through the madness, he would hear it, and the magic would take command of him, force him to return to her, assuming she realized he was gone. He sneered then and provoked the voices, talking aloud at them:

"Rumplestiltskin, you damn coward! Running is what you've always done! Why not stay and fight the witch? Dark One, since when do you allow the spinner to boss you around? You're the strong one. You're the one with the ideas. Prove it. Take control of this mind and this body, and plan a way for me to destroy the witch. You who are more powerful, more scheming, than ten of her kind, than twenty! Stand up and fight, Dark One! Baelfire, will you allow the rage and the fear to prevent this body from returning to your son and to your love? You have the strength of persistence, of moral courage. Fight the coward and fight the evil and drive these feet home!" And the beings with which he shared his brain stirred themselves, rose again, started shouting against each other and against him, and the red fog thickened, rendering him safe from Zelena's reach once more.

He ran.

But the pain, the pain was unbearable, intolerable. He fell again, dropped to his knees, surrendered to it; he had no choice.

"... all right?"

Mittened hands touched him. A blonde angel in a parka hovered over him. Savior. He couldn't remember her name, but his body jerked, reacting to her presence, and Baelfire cried out to her, cried out for her. Rumple pressed his hand to his forehead; the physical pressure eased the pain just enough that he could catch snippets of what she was saying. "Can't quiet the voices," Rumple sobbed.
Behind the savior, a man in leather appeared. The Dark One sneered at him, mocking: Charming!

The blonde angel spoke slowly, soothingly. "... the witch... where she is..."

"Yeah," he panted, fighting past the voices to collect words. "She's—" But the red fog blinded him and lightning crashed in his brain. "There's no room, no room! There's too many voices, too many voices!"

One of Zelena's minions dropped from the sky, attacking the savior and her companion. The flying monkey meant the witch couldn't be far behind.

"GOLD!"

"RUN!" the spinner and the Dark One shouted, while Baelfire moaned, "Emma!"
Emma leaned back in her roller chair and dropped the packet of photographs she'd been examining. This afternoon, she'd filed the report of her investigation at the farmhouse—just routine procedure, because none of her reports, nor Graham’s, had ever made their way to the State, and with her mother being the mayor now, written reports weren't necessary. She wrote them for her own sake, really; following procedure gave her a false sense of security, as if there was a safety net beneath her.

She thought about refilling her coffee mug, but it was after nine o'clock and she really ought to try to get to sleep at a decent hour. Still, she couldn't help staring at those photos: the dank cellar, the kennel Gold had been locked up in for nearly a year, barely tall enough for such a short man to stand up in, the straw that had served as bed and blanket. The dog bowl the witch had served water to him in. She remembered the howls of agony that had issued from him when she and David had found him galloping through the woods, the stench of his rumpled Armani suit, the clumps in his matted hair. Far, far from the elegant Mr. Gold she'd come to know and—respect, if not love. The floating madness in his eyes.

It wasn't what he had done to Zelena that Emma was trying to figure out. However he'd managed to make it appear a suicide, it didn't matter; he'd killed the witch, all right. But what Emma was trying to figure out, as she studied these photos and tried to imagine herself trapped in that kennel for a year, was how could he have gone from that howling madman in the woods to, just a few hours after his release, his old, elegant, unflappable self?

She glared at the photo of the red dog dish labeled "RUMPLE." He couldn't have recovered so completely, so quickly. No one could.

She remembered how convincing an imitation Cora had done when she had taken on Regina's image. Was that what Gold was doing, walking around wearing a façade—a, what did the mages call it? A glamour? She wouldn't put it past him. And she understood perfectly why he'd pull such a stunt. She herself had lived under a façade, ever since Neal had betrayed her, and she'd been only a runaway, a jailbird from juvenile hall. How much worse would it have been for the most powerful man in the world to have been brought to this, confined to a cage, eating out of dog dishes? A man whose motto was "perception is everything," who wouldn't be caught on the street with his pocket square crooked. A man who had a grandson and a girlfriend to protect, to shelter from the nasty details of his confinement. A man who'd been insane for a year.

That man was going to crack, all right. The pressure building up inside him had to find its release sometime. The only questions were when and who would get hurt.

It was after ten o'clock when Archie returned Regina to her home. They'd spent the day and much of the evening at the Hoffmans', going over paperwork with the CPS agent, Ms. Hall, then remaining behind after Ms. Hall left to take supper with the happy family and to see Trajan off to bed in the bunk bed he would now share with his sort-of brother Jonathan. Dragon tucked under his arm, Trajan seemed tired after his long day, but fairly content in his new home. He allowed Mrs. Hoffman to kiss him goodnight after Regina tucked him in. Just before he closed his eyes, Regina gifted him with a cell phone. "You may call me sometimes, if you like, though I suppose you'll be quite busy, with three children to play with."

"Thank you." Trajan set the phone on his nightstand, then yawned and slid down into his new
"Well." Regina rose from the edge of the bed and followed the Hoffmans and Archie from the bedroom. "I suppose that's that."

"He's adjusting already," said Archie. "You needn't worry, Regina."

"Of course not." Regina raised her chin.

"Feel free to call him whenever you like, or write, or Skype," Mr. Hoffman offered.

"I think we'll play it by ear," Regina answered. "Let him contact me, if he wants. If not, I'll know he's already blended in here. It's best if he forgets his short time in Storybrooke." She raised an eyebrow at Archie. "Isn't it?"

"I suppose so. He's going to be a busy boy, starting school, making new friends. Shall we go, Regina?"

As she crossed her dark lawn and entered her quiet house, Regina half-hoped that Robin and Roland had changed their minds about returning to the Merry Men's camp tonight, but a short goodnight note informed her they hadn't. Just as well, probably. She was tired. She'd pour a glass of wine, soak in a bubble bath, then go to bed. She'd see her men tomorrow.

But, wine glass in hand, she caught herself standing in the open doorway of the guest room. The twin beds in which Roland and Trajan had slept were unmade. It wouldn't take long to tidy up, but she chose not to. For tonight, she'd leave things just as they were.

The sheets were impeding her—from what, Belle didn't know, but they were holding her down, preventing escape. She kicked them away in frustration, and then the chill night air shook her awake. She sat up, shoving her hair from her face as her eyes adjusted to the absence of light.

She'd been dreaming. She could recall every detail vividly: dressed in her gold ball gown, she was kneeling in a thin bed of straw, scrambling about, searching for something. Her dream self couldn't remember what it was she'd lost, but she knew it was something vital, something that was hers alone, something no one must ever be allowed to take from her, something that she feared and abhorred but couldn't survive without. She sensed the presence of others. When she looked up, perhaps to ask for their help in recovering her precious object, she saw first that she was locked inside a cage, and that the cage was shrinking. But on the other side of the cage were three women: they would rescue her, wouldn't they? Or if they could find the precious thing for her, she could use it to free herself, she was certain. "Help me," she tried to beg, but the words became birds as soon as they left her mouth, and they flew away, through the bars of the cage.

The others stared down at her from their great height: a raven-haired, middle-aged woman in a black pantsuit; a red-haired woman with shocking green skin; and a petite, auburn-haired lady with sky-blue eyes. They began yelling at her, a cacophony of demands that made her ears bleed. She couldn't make sense of what they were shouting, let alone guess what they expected from her, but she dragged herself to her feet, brushed off her gown and stared them down. "No one," she declared, "decides my fate but me."

The three women laughed at her. "Oh, really, dearie?" they said in a single voice.

And she looked down at her hands, which should be holding her precious object but were empty... and the skin of the back of her hands, gray-green and dusted with gold... and the nails of her long, artist's fingers, grown razor sharp and black.
She knew now where her missing precious had got to. "Give it back," she whispered.

But the women just laughed, and the blue-eyed one flicked her wrist and the precious appeared in her grip. She turned its face toward Belle so she could see the name etched deep into the blade, and she giggled, "No one decides your fate but me."

And into the surface of the blade was branded her name: Rumplestiltskin.

"Not me," her dream self insisted. "I will never command you, Rumple." And her waking self unwound from the sheets carefully, unwilling to disturb her mate. She soon realized she needn't have bothered: his side of the bed was empty. She pattered across the bare floor to the bedroom that would have been Bae's; the windows there looked out over the garden. Rumple was there, of course, sitting on the trellised bench, just staring blankly, just a darker shadow in a waning mooned night, but she knew it was he.

Lately, night after night, it always was.
He was swimming. It was night, moonless, and he was swimming in an ocean and nowhere was there land, nowhere.

He stopped swimming. It was just a waste of energy, pointless when there was nowhere to go. He floated. Waited. No land, no time, nothing but ocean. Or was that his imagination? Did the ocean exist at all?

Was this death? He tried to remember—he'd died before. He couldn't conjure a memory of his first death. There was the blade piercing his skin, his muscle, his bone; there was blinding pain, then blinding light, then no pain, no sensation at all, no touch, no sound, no sight. For eons, perhaps—he couldn't remember; when there was only darkness, there was no way to tell time. Or maybe time died too, a sensation only for the living, or only for those living in the light. For hours, for eons, nothing. Then light rose, and he could see the angel kneeling in the snow and his son dying in her lap. He remembered her name; he spoke it. He felt the cold. He knew his son's name; he spoke it. He heard the wind, heard his son groan. He smelled burnt flesh, death in the air.

He died before, he's sure of it. This time was not like that. Now, he felt—something. Air currents and water brushing against his skin.

There was a howl of pain—not his voice. Then it was his voice, raw, primitive and new. His body vibrating, then nothing, no sensations at all, then vibrating again. Pain everywhere. Then light, but still pain. Blackness, then light again, and still pain.

And then an angel. Not her from before—his heart cracked open and love and anguish spilled out. Not her, not Belle. The angel was holding his hands. He jerked away. He mustn't let her touch him, mustn't let the savior save him, because that meant someone else must take his place in death.

So what, a voice in his brain asked dully. Better them than you. Life is out there; take it. He allowed the light to leak under his eyelids, allowed the breath to leak into his lungs. Light and life, he seized them; he had a right to them.

Then every memory of every thing, every event, every person, every dream, every thought and hope and fear flooded back into his brain and he wasn't floating any more. He was here, fully here, in life.

The pain was gone, but a new pain filled him. Worse that the first, this pain was three hundred years in the birthing. Now he knew, and he couldn't live with the knowledge.

"What have you done?"

A cyclone of time swept them, the Dark One, the savior, and the son, up. Too fast: just a few seconds to perceive, to realize, to understand, to react, to plan, not enough. Or maybe it didn't matter that time was too short: this was the Law of Magic exacting its price, and the
only price that is sufficient to buy Life back from Death is another life.

"Please, let go."

Oh gods.

"Hmph."

Zelena stood over the body of his son, stared down, wrinkled her nose. "So long, Baelfire."
She stepped over the body, the heel of her muddy boot nearly connecting with Baelfire's nose. Rumple would have killed her for that if he could have. And oh, he'd kill her again for so much more.

"Now that your head is clear, you'll finally be of use to me."

They exchanged threats. Pointless, but threats were all the Dark One had now. She ordered him back to the cage but his hand snaked out, grasped her wrist. "Please." He choked on the rest of his plea.

She raised her chin and smiled, flattered. "Really? 'Please'? Oh, but if you're going to ask me to bring him back to life— that will have to wait, doll. I need a few ingredients yet."

"What did you say?" he couldn't wrap his grief-soaked mind around her remark. "You—it's a resurrection spell you've been working on all this time?"

"Not exactly. But let's show some respect for the deceased, shall we? We'll talk magic later. Now is the time for mourning."

"Please. Let me bury him."

She stroked his cheek in mock sympathy—or maybe a little actual pity. "Because, despite your worst efforts, I love you, I'll honor your request. And later, I'll allow you to bury your girlfriend." She looked over her shoulder at his son. "How very convenient, how very considerate of you, Baelfire, to provide us a body just when we're ready for one." She returned to Rumple. "Some gifts for you, doll." Her magic produced a spade, a casket and a jewelry box. With a flip of her hand she opened the casket.

She tossed him the spade. "Best get to work. Night is falling. You may use a little magic for this work, to speed things up."

"No." He rested the spade against a tree and slid his arms under his son's shoulders. He couldn't lift the body. As much as it shamed him, he had to drag Baelfire to the coffin, then pull him in. Panting, he folded Bae's hands across his chest, smoothed down the boy's hair. When he regained his breath, Rumple took up the spade and began digging.

With a sigh of annoyance, Zelena conjured her lounge chair, a hot toddy and a Vogue and amused herself as he dug.

It was after dark when he finished, sweating, filthy, muscles aching. She had to conjure a pair of Tiffany lamps so she could read her magazine as he worked. When he had created a space deep enough, he hauled himself from the hole and leaned against the tree to rest, shaking
"Before you wrap up here." Zelena presented him with the jewelry box. He glared at her before opening it: if this was a wedding ring she was going to force him to wear in some sort of sick mock marriage—or if it was a slave collar—

The box contained ten nails.

"You're probably thinking right now, 'That Zelena! She's remarkable. She must have Second Sight, to have given me these nails in preparation for this moment.' But I'm sorry to say that while I did expect you to use these nails on somebody's coffin, I thought it would be Belle's. After you killed her." Zelena walked around him, her fingers trailing across his shoulders and his chest. "Voluntarily, of course, to get her out of our way." She kissed his ear. "So you could be with me."

He stepped away from her.

"Go on. Finish your work so we can go home." She reseated herself, tucking one leg daintily under the other.


When the last nail had sunk into the wood, he fell back on his knees. She made his hammer vanish, lest he get ideas of using it against her, then she rose and stood behind him, petting his hair. "I don't like to see you like this, Rumple," she said softly. "You're much more attractive when you're upright and snarling. Here, I can get you on your feet again." Her magic yanked him to his feet. "Well, go on, finish it. Then back to the cage."

She didn't have to watch to see if he'd obey. She took herself away in a cloud of magic.

He could cry then. Again, he was free to cry. He permitted his pain to pour forth as he studied the coffin. He couldn't finish. He couldn't lift the coffin, and he'd be damned if he'd push it into the grave. As much as Baelfire would have hated it, Rumple had to use magic to convey the coffin to the grave.

When the coffin lay securely, snugly in its resting place, he spoke an ancient prayer over the grave, commending his son's soul to whatever gods might still exist, somewhere. He'd learned this prayer as a child; death had been a common occurrence in his village, and the spinsters who had raised him had spun many a shroud. He didn't remember a lot of that old language any more, but he could recite the prayer flawlessly.

He then added some words of his own, words of affection and pride, sorrow and shame, and finally, vows of vengeance and protection. "Because you were mine, Zelena came after you. Because he is mine, Pan came after Henry. Because she is mine, Hook came after Belle. I swear to you, on all that is within my power, I will protect what is mine. Let no man, let no
magic, let no law prevent me from it."

He thrust his hand into his chest. "And no weakness." He yanked out his heart and tossed it into the grave.
15 May 2014

The apartment was empty for a change—for a major change, Emma observed as she entered. David was out on patrol, Henry out playing baseball, Mary Margaret at Doc's getting a check-up for herself and the baby. For an hour or so, Emma could be herself, by herself.

She had a lot she should be thinking about—so she took a bubble bath instead. A beer in one hand, a Sam Spade novel in the other, she let her body sink into the hot water and let her mind float numbly.

"A voice said, 'Thank you' so softly that only the purest articulation made the words intelligible"—So much to decide. Would she bend to everyone's will and remain in Storybrooke, or take herself and Henry back to the—ironic—peace and quiet of New York City?—"and a young woman came through the doorway. She advanced slowly, with tentative steps"—Henry had brought home the paperwork yesterday to register for middle school here, and he'd made appointments with the mysterious Mr. Dove to inspect some apartments and duplexes (all of them owned by Gold) available for rent. At the same time it annoyed her that he would force the issue, she was proud of Henry for acting so decisive where she couldn't be, so mature where she wasn't—"looking at Spade with cobalt-blue eyes that were both shy and probing."—Sounds like Belle. Which reminded Emma of Gold. She really ought to check in on them. After all she'd been through, Belle deserved a little kindness, and the people she spent most of her time with, Gold and Dove, weren't exactly kindly.

And Gold—a volcano rumbling. She ought to talk with him, encourage him to get therapy—ack. No. She couldn't say therapy; that would shut down the conversation immediately. Say something bland, like have a chat. However she phrased it, she had to be persuasive, and she had to do it soon.—

"She was tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere."—Zelena. Yeah. David had been wanting to talk about what happened to Zelena. He'd pretty much come to the same conclusion as Emma had, and he wanted to investigate. He wanted to catch a killer. He wanted to jail Gold, though he'd readily admit that was impossible, unless they took the dagger away from Belle. David wanted to talk about crime and punishment, but Mary Margaret only wanted to crawl into a cocoon with her family, and Emma—Emma had a healthy fear of vigilantes, but in this case, she was glad to be rid of Zelena.

"Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long"—hmph. Hook would get off on this book. She'd have to share it with him. There were a lot of things she'd have to share with him. Hook presented just one more set of decisions that clamored to be made. Once again, Emma's heart and head were at war, and she was allowing public duty to prevent her from dealing with personal problems.

So much to decide, so much to do, when really, all she wanted was to float here in this tub with Sam Spade. Why not? Hadn't her family earned the right to a little R & R? How about letting someone else step up to the plate for a change and fight the town's battles, cater to the world's woes? Even a hero required a day off now and then. Sam Spade would understand that.

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Regina was enjoying a spa day.
It had been so long—too long, she had to admit as she inspected her split ends. After she finished here, she'd call her hairdresser for a cut and her manicurist for a mani-pedi. But for now, a whirlpool bath filled with lavender scent awaited, to be followed by—oh heavens—a two-hour massage. She lowered herself into the bubbling water and positioned herself directly in front of a jet spray. The bursts of water bombarding her back pulsed the tension out of her muscles.

She'd have to borrow the spa's phone so she could call her hairdresser. She'd left her phone at home. It was the only way she'd get any peace. Not that the townfolk were exactly beating down her door to deal with their problems—that was the Charmings' job. Sometimes villainy had its perks. But with the phone came decisions, and Regina needed a day to avoid making decisions. Things were going so well with Robin, but the bliss was just temporary, she had to keep telling herself that. Another of the features of being a villain: your defeat was guaranteed.

Unless she and Henry managed to find the Author and force—no, wrong word. She needed to remove that word from her vocabulary. Persuade, urge, compel, even beg, then, but somehow, get the Author to rewrite the rules so that villains could—if not win, at least, come out all right in the end. Or if that would disrupt the order of the universe, well, surely the Author could be made to see that one villain had changed and deserved to be rewritten as a hero.

So much happiness—yes, Regina could allow herself to use that word—had come to her ever since she'd chosen to be good—and yes, she could see that now: goodness was a choice. Her heart may be dark as coal but she could still act as if she were good. Every day, she could choose to do the good thing. And how easy it was to decide what the good thing was: she need only ask herself what Henry (either Henry: her father or her son) would choose. So much love had come to her: the innocent love of Roland, the proud love of Henry, the understanding love of Robin, her soul mate, who perfectly understood her struggle. So many wonderful rewards for being good—how could she ever consider doing evil again, when it had failed her, time and time again, failed to satisfy her or relieve her pain?

Although, there was something addictive about the adrenaline rush that came when throwing a fireball at that two-faced hypocrite Snow White or that smugly self-righteous Charming—

No. Just no. Regina closed her eyes and sank back in the bath. She breathed in deep, letting the lavender fill her lungs. She was a hero now. Roland looked up to her, would someday soon start asking her guidance. Henry admired her, placed her right alongside Emma and Snow now. And Robin—well, he was a man of ideas, and he had lots of ways that they could indulge their naughty side together.

Trajan, though. She caught herself thinking about him, especially when she chatted with Roland. Trajan hadn't called, hadn't needed to, Archie reported; he was getting along with the Hoffmans just fine. Well, good. He would grow up happy, safe, normal, out of reach of his mother's shadow. Free from magic. She'd done the right thing, the good thing, for him by giving him up.

Regina grunted softly. Give him up. As if he had ever been hers. No. Just no. She'd done the right thing: now he could live his life and she, hers, and if the Author had a speck of human sympathy, never the twain would meet again. Regina was quite sure about that: Trajan must never learn his heritage.

While he was training her, Rumplestiltskin had often said (what a nag he could be, with his lessons in the morals of magic) that evil wasn't born; it was made. But Regina didn't quite hold with that philosophy. She believed evil was in the blood, like a virus waiting to be unleashed, and with Cora for a grandmother and Zelena for a mother, Trajan was a carrier. Best if he was quarantined in a land without magic, so that evil in him remained dormant.
Rumple had thrown himself back into his work, his suits, his schedules, his ledgers, his things. Well, normalcy was good, wasn't it? He could relax into the routine. And he seemed so—well, normal wasn't a word one used with Rumplestiltskin, but he walked and talked just as he had before Pan knocked down their house of cards. He ate regular meals (though without appetite), he chatted with her about their favorite topics, he listened to classical music on the radio as he repaired objects in his workroom, he watched Best of the Boston Symphony every Thursday night and read the newspaper every morning.

Normal, except for the insomnia. Normal, except for—

Belle didn't want to go there. It was a truth she didn't want to face, because it came too close to her dearest hopes. Do the brave thing, she used to say, and bravery will follow. She'd done her best to always do the brave thing. Didn't she deserve a break from hero duties, just this once?

She clicked on the library's computer. She needed to run a report on the overdue books, start writing some gentle reminders. But her mind wouldn't settle into the work. Her eyes kept wandering to the ring on her left hand.

All right, damn it. Yes. As normal as he pretended to act, there was something off about Rumple. A distractedness in his manner, a halting in his speech, flashes of terror that would suddenly arise in his eyes during the most routine, the safest times. And the abnormal state of his mind had been proven when, just seconds after their reunion—less than an hour after his release from Zelena's control—he had proposed to her.

There. Now it was out in the open. Belle started breathing again. A problem recognized was a problem that could be solved, yes? Deep down, she'd known, even as "yes, I'll marry you" had gushed from her lips, it was WRONG. Not wrong for them to marry—no, never that. Their love was forever, their devotion and dedication to each other unquestionable. It was right for them to marry, but, damn it, it was too soon. The man had killed his father, killed himself, been sent to Dark One Hell, been resurrected, been forced to surrender his dagger in order to save his son, been caged, taunted, threatened, starved, forced to attack his town and his girlfriend, forced to watch his son die, and who knows what else? Belle certainly didn't. She didn't know everything he'd been through because he wouldn't tell her.

She began to sob as she imagined the agony Zelena must have put him through and, worse yet, the hurt he still must be carrying inside. The hurt he wouldn't share with her or anyone else, because confession wasn't in his nature (because, she now knew, he'd never had anyone to unburden himself to, no one to comfort him, to accept him, to love him, damaged as he was. Until Belle had entered his life—well into his third century of life—he'd been truly abandoned.)

It had been too soon for them to marry. He should've unburdened himself first; he needed to heal. And that wouldn't happen as long as he continued to pretend everything was normal. His proposal—she was sure it had come from a place of love, but she was equally sure he'd asked for the wrong reasons. To avoid being alone with his nightmares? To bring her under his protection, so no one could attack her again? To cheat Fate, as he'd spent so much of life trying to do? To steal a happy ending?

Marriage was right for them, but marriage right now was not. As happy as she was—as blindly happy—in her new marriage, she had to face the truth heroically. She touched her wedding ring. It was too soon, but it was too late.

She had to save them. Rumple was drowning in a black ocean, and he clung to her as his life
support. They would both go down if her strength failed—when her strength failed. For as much as she loved him, she couldn't save him if he wouldn't fight for his life.

She needed help. Oh, he would hate her for this! He would yell and stomp and slam doors and throw china, but she had to force this to a head. She fished her cell phone and a small white business card from her tote bag. Oh, he'd feel so betrayed by her, by her exposing his pain to a near-stranger, but... "Hello, Archie? It's Belle. Would you please call me back when you get this message? I need to make an appointment with you. It's—I'm worried about Rumple."

A/N. Emma is reading The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett.
Brings You to Your Knees

31 March 2014

He sat on his small stool, the only piece of furniture in his cage. His knees and back ached from the cramped position the stool put him in, but he'd long ago learned to ignore the discomfort; between his hunger and the wounds, emotional and physical, Zelena had inflicted upon him, he'd drowned out lesser pains.

Tonight, he felt such pain as he'd never experienced in his entire life. Tonight, he was a childless father. In shock, he rocked back and forth, a pitiable imitation of the way he used to rock the baby Bae to sleep. He couldn't manage tears; those would come later, when the realization set in.

When Zelena came down the creaky stairs with a bowl of something flavorless and nutritionless, he stopped rocking but he couldn't meet her stare, couldn't respond to her sarcastic quips. Frustrated at his lack of response, she sniffed, "What are you pouting about? He wasn't even magical. Besides, from what I heard, he didn't want anything to do with you. He was only interested in his kid."

Still Rumplestiltskin wouldn't rise to her bait, so she continued, "He chose to die. Just remember that. He preferred to be a dead hero instead of your living son." She grasped the cage bars and leaned in to sneer. "He did it for them, not you. Just like all those self-styled heroes, he didn't give a damn about you. That so-called savior: she wouldn't even exist if you hadn't played matchmaker for her parents, but has she lifted one of her magical fingers to save you? Snow White with her pure heart has time to rescue injured birds, but has she time to rescue you? Prince Charming in all his bravery would ride a hundred miles to aid a dwarf, but would he drive that rust bucket of his three miles to aid you? And your beloved Beauty who promised you forever, where is she now? Is she mourning you? She's playing shopkeeper in your store, living in your mansion, sleeping—who knows with?—in your bed, spending your money. Has she shed a tear for you? It's been a year, Rumple: you're as dead to them as your son. Do you know how many rescue attempts they've made in the past year? Zero. Not even your grandson, the last of your flesh and blood, spares a thought for you."

She paused to allow her words to cut through his thick hide, then she tossed out a lifeline: "I'm your family now, Rumple. I'm your protector, your caretaker, your beloved. Just as soon as you realize that, just as soon as you own it, I'll unlock this cage and bring you into the house to live with me in comfort, in love. And together, with our incredible powers joined, we'll take quick revenge on this town, and then we'll rewrite history."

His throat dry, he managed one word: "No."

She slammed his supper bowl against the bars of the cage, cracking the bowl and sending lumps of oatmeal flying. "Starve, then! You'll come crawling to me soon enough."

2 April 2014
Tucked next to the bowl of cold rice on his supper tray was a newspaper clipping: "NEAL CASSIDY FUNERAL TOMORROW. Body found buried in woods. Hero sacrificed life for town."

The green witch chuckled low in her throat as he picked up the clipping. "Clearly, heroism must be a learned behavior, because he certainly didn't inherit his courage from you."

His fingers trembled—he couldn't stop it; he was exhausted and malnourished and cold to the bone. He touched the photograph accompanying the article: Neal (he forced himself to think "Neal," out of respect for his son's choice; a man has the right to choose his own name), grinning cavalierly. That was how the community would remember him, and that was how Rumplestiltskin should remember him too, as Neal would have wanted. But that wasn't how Rumple dreamed of him. In his dreams, Neal was always Baelfire, seven or ten or twelve years old, swinging a broken tree branch like an epee, or riding the bellwether's back, or trotting along beside his papa, going off to market to sell thread.

"Would you like to go?" Zelena asked casually, as if inviting him to tea. "To his funeral, I mean. I hear the entire town is shutting down for the day so everyone can attend."

Rumplestiltskin couldn't prevent hope from rising in his eyes, so he fixed his gaze to the newspaper.

"Make a deal with me then. I'll give you a new suit, a haircut and a bath; I'll even throw in a bouquet of lilies you can lay at the headstone. Your end of the bargain is simple: agree to help me cast my spell. No tricks, no lies, no complaints."

He didn't reply.

"With me, you can have everything! A history rewritten to your specifications, just like mine. Your son, alive and by your side. Your power. Your wealth." She softened her voice to a plea. "My love, completely yours, forever. Don't you get it? I'm going to reverse time so I change my life, and I'm taking you with me. I can fix everything that the Fates screwed up for both of us."

Slowly, he answered. "I won't dishonor his sacrifice."

She slammed her hand against the bars of the cage. "Stupid, stubborn little man! Why did I ever think you were worth my time?" She started to vanish in a cloud of magic, then thought to add, "You can just stay there, wallowing in your self-pity and your filth. You don't deserve to be with the good people standing at your son's grave." Then she disappeared.

"You're right, Zelena," he said. "I don't deserve to be with my son." Bae had died a hero, but Rumplestiltskin was, and always would be, a villain.

A villain, not a slave. It was time he started acting like one.

3 April 2014

She came late the next morning, dressed in black, her hair pinned up. Had she been to the funeral then? The heroes would have tried to chase her away, but there were many ways a
skilled mage could get around such feeble human resistance. She brandished his dagger to remind him that everything about him, even his tears, belonged to her. If he cried, it was because she allowed him to. Crouched in the straw, he turned his back to her so she couldn't see those tears.

Her voice was soft, as if she pitied him, but her words were typically sarcastic and probing: "You spent so long figuring out how to get to this land." Soon (if her spell worked as she claimed) she would transport herself through time, something many mages had attempted but none had ever succeeded in doing. Her observation not only dug its claws into his grief, but also reminded him she would soon prove her skills far outstripped his. "Groomed Regina to cast your curse and spent twenty-eight years waiting for it to be broken." Her tone suggested that she thought his grand curse with all its intricate webbing amateurish. "All so you could be with your son, and now he's gone. Tell me, Rumple, was he really worth all that trouble?"

With the dagger in her possession, he couldn't lie to her. "Every bit of it. He was family, something you know nothing about."

She returned at mid-day. "They held a wake for him, at the cafe. Bizarre custom, don't you think? People drinking liquor and stuffing their faces while the tears roll down their cheeks. I attended in your place. Oh, they didn't invite me, but I made myself welcome. Do you think, if you'd been... unencumbered... they would have invited you to your son's wake? I suspect not, since the only time they ever give you a thought is when they need some information or some magic."

He remained silent, still hunched on the floor. He hadn't budged since the morning.

"Would you like to know who was there? My dear sister and your darling protege. Her married lover. Your--well, I guess we can't say 'daughter-in-law,' can we? What is the term for a man's son's baby mama? So hard to keep up these days. Your grandson's other grandparents were there; Snow is about to pop any minute now. Your sweetheart, drinking alone and looking every bit the grieving stepmama. Too bad you didn't marry her before you ran out on her. She certainly looks the part of a widow in waiting. There were dwarfs and assorted fairies, including your archenemy. Several teenagers. I think they must've been Lost Boys you dragged back from Neverland, because they seemed to know Bae." She scraped the dagger along the cage's bars, and magic sputtered off from the contact; the magic enveloped his body, sending an electrical jolt through him.

"Here's the best part. Sis and I had a chat. Turns out she had no idea of my existence. Mama never bothered to tell her. Out of sight, out of mind. I'm sure Mama never bothered to tell Regina's daddy about me, either, or about her dalliance with my papa. One of the oldest tricks in the book: convince the groom that his bride is a virgin by smearing a little pig's blood on the sheets. Did Milah pull that trick on you, doll?"

"Once I set Regina straight, of course she had to threaten me. You would have appreciated the scene; very dramatic. Very Zane Grey. 'This town isn't big enough for the two of us. Meet me on the street at sundown for a showdown.' So clean up, Rumple. We're going to a block party tonight. Or maybe I should say, a shoot-out. And after I drag her bleeding body by the hair down the street and deposit it at your feet, I'll permit you to bury her, for old times'
sake. And because you're such a skilled grave digger."

"Tonight," the witch promised. He'd stopped thinking of her by name; she didn't deserve the courtesy of a name. She slid him a tray of lunch slop. "They know who I am." She sniffed in derision. "But they know nothing about me." She shook her head at him. "And neither do you. I thought you were so clever, so knowledgeable, so understanding. Boy, was I wrong. Lucky for you, you're still good looking, unkempt as you are. Wash up, doll. I want you to look your best when you bury your darling protege."
Exaggerate My Pain and Give it a Name

3 April 2014

The witch had left him alone with a basin of water, a bar of soap and a towel. She'd gone off to dress herself; she'd said she wanted to look her best too, for the audience that would witness her victory.

He removed his tattered clothes and washed. As soon as he'd dried himself, the basin and the towel disappeared. He brushed off the dust from his clothes as best he could–she'd forgotten, apparently, to conjure a new suit for him–and dressed in his rags, moving mechanically. His grief had shifted into numbness; he was grateful for that. He needed to fight to keep his head clear. Tonight, while she fought Regina, there would be chances for him to escape, or at least, to turn on her, if he could spot them fast enough and act. He would be ready.

He had often wondered what it felt like to be literally heartless. He'd yanked out a few hearts in his day, but it was delicate work, and the results could be unpredictable: he'd seen captives die unnecessarily when the task was performed incorrectly. For the heartless victims that survived the procedure, he'd seen the light go out of their eyes. Their bodies moved stiffly, even those who were not being commanded by the heart-holder. They were less sensitive to physical sensations, and though they could feel the primitive emotions—fear, anger, lust—to a small extent, the depth at which the feelings ran was shallow and quick to dry up.

Those had been his observations, anyway, when he'd performed experiments (only on deserving victims, of course; serial murderers, rapists, deposed tyrants, and men and women who had eagerly sold their souls to him in return for money or power or revenge). Now that he could experiment on himself, he knew his observations to be accurate. He felt, but the feelings soon passed, even the grief. He suspected that what he was feeling were not fresh emotions but rather memories of emotions: his mind was telling him, based on experiences, how his heart, if he still had it, would have responded to a situation. And if that was so, he could very easily squash any shadow emotion that arose.

Good. Very good. Now he was ready. He began to visualize how tonight might go, the gaps during which he could sweep in—

His head jerked back. He heard a scrabbling at the cellar door. The witch didn't have to scrabble; she simply popped the lock and flipped the door open. Heels on the wooden steps. Panting. A shadow light from behind. The smell of roses.

"Rumple?"

"Belle!"

The memory of his heart leapt in his chest and he stood hastily, ran to the cage as she clattered down to his level. "I've come to free you!"

The joy on her face mirrored that in his chest, but he couldn't let this happen. Even now the magic of the dagger was reacting to the rise in his blood pressure as hope pulsed through his
veins. The reins of his magic were taut, which meant that Zelena had his dagger somewhere on her body. Any second now, the dagger would heat up and vibrate in response to his excited state. He sat down, forcing his breath to quiet.

Belle's sweet face fell in confusion. Of course she didn't understand; he'd never discussed with her how the dagger worked. He never discussed anything of consequence with her. It was one of the ways he protected her; that's what he told himself anyway. But truthfully, it was one of the ways he protected himself. And in truth, there was much he hadn't known about the dagger, because, since it had come into his possession, he'd never allowed anyone else to touch it.

"No," he insisted hoarsely. "Leave. Leave! You have no idea what that witch will make me do to you if she catches us."

"I'm not afraid." The naïve girl swung his cage open. "You could never hurt me."

Even as he feared for her safety—and his sanity, should he be forced to kill her—he fell in love with her all over again, this trusting, daring soul who'd come to rescue him, without weapons, without soldiers. So—the researcher in him observed, Cora had lied: without a heart, one could still feel some semblance of love.

"As long as she holds the dagger, I cannot leave." He rushed his explanation, hoping that she would simply take his word for it and run away.

The stubborn girl leaned into the cage. "I'm not leaving without you."

"It's not worth the risk."

She reached for him. Magic pushed her back, but she thrust her arm past the barrier magic had created and she grimaced. "Just try." She was attempt to summon the magic of True Love to break through the barrier. Such a foolish hope, but he had to grant her this attempt. He lifted his arm too, and for a moment, their fingers touched, their hands grasped. "You just have to believe in us." She nearly fell over as she stretched her body its full length to reach him. All this for him. Risking her life for him.

No one had ever risked so much for him. No one had ever loved him like this. For a moment, he believed. He felt the reins loosening; he felt his mind coming back under his control. He got to his feet and walked to the edge of the cage. But then he felt the dagger yanking at him: Zelena was coming. "Run!" He propelled Belle backwards. "Run! Go!"

The laugh. Zelena.

Belle ran.

The dagger pushed him up the stairs, where Belle was falling into the protective arms of heroes. He emerged into the hazy daylight. "Zelena sends a message. She will face Regina without interference. The next time you try to stop her, I will kill you."

"Son of a bitch," David muttered.

From Tinker Bell's arms, Belle stared back at Rumple. At last it had sunk in with her: there
was nothing to be done; there was no hope as long as Zelena held the dagger.

As long as Zelena lived.

So fast he couldn't catch his breath, magic swept him from the cage. When the world stopped spinning, the first thing he saw was his master's back. The second thing he saw was the circle of lamplight in which she stood, her elongated shadow shining in the damp asphalt of the street. The third thing he saw was his dagger in her right hand. He fixed his eyes on that dagger. Any second now, any second now... . . .

Zelena threatened to sic the Dark One on the town. He hung his head; he couldn't bear the disappointment underneath the shock in Belle's eyes. She knew Zelena controlled him, but she felt betrayed by him nonetheless.

Zelena posed and postured, traded empty threats with Emma; he paid the conversation little attention. He watching that dagger. Zelena gestured toward Emma and automatically, he threw a gust of wind at the savior, bowling her over.

And then Regina appeared. More quips, more threats. Watch the dagger, watch the dagger. Regina slapped Zelena; Zelena hung onto the dagger. A traffic light was knocked down. The combatants yelled at each other, circling like boxers in a fight ring. Still Zelena kept the dagger. She threw Regina onto the hood of a car—but still kept the dagger. Regina came back, throwing fire; Zelena's magic blew out the flames. Zelena threw Regina into the clock tower. Now! "Belle!" he whispered, nodding frantically at the dangling dagger. Belle nodded and rushed forward. They both dove for the dagger, but Zelena heard them coming and flicked the dagger at him. In a blink he was back in the cage. In another blink, Zelena was slamming the cage shut. Hope was gone.

Still, he smirked. Belle was alive. Henry, wherever he'd been hidden, was safe. Zelena had lost the battle, though the war was yet to be fought.

"What, no meat pie?" he mocked her.

She punished him for that remark.

"We are doing it all over again," she smirked right back. "What I'm casting isn't a curse. It's a second chance."

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4 April 2014

"Robin Hood has possession of my sister's heart. You will get it for me." With that she sent him into Robin Hood's camp. He was momentarily surprised to find Regina had trusted her heart to a common thief (and a married one at that), but he had a mission to carry out. Before he made himself visible to the Merry Men, he surveyed the field in search of an advantage. He found it straight off—and he tried to pretend he didn't see it. He couldn't do it, he couldn't bring himself to use a small child as a weapon against a father, so he frantically sought something else to use, but the magic caught him out and left him with no choice. Pleading with Robin Hood for cooperation, he trapped Hood's little boy and threatened to kill him. He returned to the witch with Regina's heart. "Good boy." Zelena patted his head.
"You may go back to your cage now and celebrate our impending victory."

He went back to his cage and wept, ashamed, because to use a man’s child against him was the act of a craven coward; and grieving, because the shaggy-haired Roland looked so much like Bae at that age.

5 April 2014

"They're having a field day," the witch reported as she fed him his breakfast. "They're celebrating in the streets. They're saying the Dark One is an overrated Vegas magician barely capable of pulling a rabbit out of a hat." She threw a spoon at him. "They've raided your shop and they're taking back their belongings. And they've stopped paying rent. Your man Dove just stands there blankly while they tear up the rent checks and toss the confetti in his face." She flicked her fingers and he began to eat in response to the unspoken command. "You lived among them for thirty years, paying your taxes, obeying their little laws, mowing your lawn. And what good did being good do you? They don't just disrespect you—they're laughing at you."

He turned his back to her. A small part of him believed her, but he would keep trying. What the town thought of him didn't matter: Belle loved him, loved him so much she'd risked her life to try to free him. That was all that mattered. That was enough to revive his hope. He'd been studying people for hundreds of years, and one thing he knew for sure: sooner or later, everyone slipped up. Sooner or later, he'd retrieve that dagger.

She brought him a suit, one that he recognized from his own closet. So she'd been in his home, snooping through his belongings. What else had she taken? If—when—he returned, would he find the house trashed, as if a gang of delinquents had used it for their flop house?

She invited him to wash and dress—didn't command it. She announced they would be celebrating tonight, as the baby would soon be born and her spell would soon be cast. From the flush in her cheeks, he realized she intended to act out one of her romantic fantasies with her doll. An opportunity. He would take it. He laughed bitterly as he bathed. He'd never thought of himself as an object of anyone's desire, and the condition he was in now made him even less tempting. But without magic, without money, without even physical strength, he had no weapon to wield, so he would prostitute himself, if it gave him a chance at the dagger.

For some strange reason, Zelena wanted him to want her. He'd convince her he did. If necessary, he'd take her to bed and make her sexual fantasies come true. He knew a great deal about pleasuring a woman—after all, he'd learned from Zelena's mother. He rinsed out his mouth, trying to remove from his tongue the sour taste of shame.

She'd cooked a chicken pie, and she'd worn a dress that revealed her ample cleavage, and as she poured a glass of wine, she bent over him, her partially exposed bosom scant inches from his nose. She was wearing Clive Christian No. 1, which cost $2,200, and of which there was only one bottle in all of Storybrooke. He knew because he'd bought it as a birthday gift for Belle; it had been wrapped in gold paper and stored in his sock drawer, awaiting the special day, which of course had been stolen from them when Pan came to town. So now he knew what else Zelena had stolen from the pink house. If he'd still had his heart in place, he
would've been seething by now.

Her breasts weren't the only secret she exposed to him that night; she divulged her plan. Where her physical endowments couldn't tempt him, her audacity did. She offered him a reset, a trip back through time that would enable them both to rewrite their lives. A second chance with Bae, she teased, and he was tempted. But a dim idea in the back of his mind lit up; he couldn't grasp it, but he'd learned long ago to trust his instincts, so he listened as the idea pushed forward: Bae had died a hero. Don't take that away from him.

He reached down inside himself, past the thick layer of selfishness, past the powerlust, past the loneliness, past the pain of abandonment, past the fear. At the root of his being he found a small light of goodness that still glowed, lived for Bae and Belle. He tapped into that light, and it with its power that he was able to resist her unholy offer.

Ironically, it was also with that power of good that he was able to drive himself into the witch's arms. With everything he had learned from her mother, he stroked her body; with the promise of returning to Belle, he kissed the witch, pouring passion—passion for freedom, rather than for a woman—into the effort. He took her by surprise, and she clung to him with her entire body as if he could save her from herself. He wrapped her leg around his waist, as if he would take her right there on the kitchen table amidst the boiled peas, and when her eyes closed and her leg encircled his waist, he stroked her—his hand moving not up her leg, but down, to her boot, to the dagger tucked into her boot.

She caught him and flung away from him. Screaming her betrayal, she sent him back to the cage. He'd sold himself—he'd cheated Belle—for nothing.

His master (she referred to herself as his "mistress," taking advantage of the double meaning of the word) was building a curse that, she claimed, would enable her to travel back in time to change her personal history. He tried to tell her she was wasting her time (crazy was how he would have preferred to put it, but she had a low tolerance for backtalk): from the very beginnings of magic, practitioners had attempted to find a formula that would transport them through time, just as they'd learned how to transport themselves through space, but none had succeeded, not even the few who had dedicated their entire lives to the search. They could alter a victim's senses or memories to make him believe he'd relocated to another point in time; they could un-animate a victim for days or months, then reanimate him, leaving him with no awareness of the time that had passed between. And one mage, one very powerful mage, had even created a curse that caused an entire town to be locked in time, changeless, for twenty-eight years. But to transport oneself through time in an effort to rewrite history? A waste of time to even try. He argued himself blue in the face—he argued until, insulted, she slapped him—he argued until, enraged, she threatened to kill his friends and family (he didn't bother to tell her he had none of the former and precious few of the latter) unless he help her. He shut his mouth then. She would find out for herself soon enough. He knew, once she admitted the truth, her fury would run out of control even for her and people would die, some of them possibly people he cared about.

He allowed her to believe he'd changed his opinion when she showed him her formula. He was impressed: he admitted that. But where hundreds had tried and failed, he just couldn't see that the impulsive, hotheaded witch could succeed.
At least, he hoped not. Even the Dark One had his limits when it came to evil, and tinkering with the past—challenging the Ancient Ones who planned every living being's life down to the last thread—was out of bounds.
6 April 2014

If Zelena had won her fight against Regina last night—if Regina had been humiliated and killed, or perhaps just killed—would it have been enough? Would Zelena have walked away from her vainglorious plan to rewrite her family’s history?

Rumplestiltskin tried to ask her this as she brought him his breakfast, but she merely sniffed. "I've succeeded in creating a spell that a hundred mages have tried and failed to create. Think about it, doll. If you were in my shoes—" she suddenly interrupted herself and squinted at him. "What a delicious turn of phrase. Just think: if you had only treated me right, back in the Enchanted Forest, I would have given you my silver slippers, you could have come here much, much sooner and with none of the hassle, you would have been reunited with your son—" she released a mock gasp. "Oh my, just think about it. You would have been reunited with him and none of the events of the past thirty years would have happened. You wouldn't have needed the curse. Storybrooke wouldn't exist. Regina would never have learned magic. You never would have encountered your daddy dearest again, you never would have had to kill yourself, Baelfire never would have had to trade his life for yours, and I never would have discovered the way to break the time barrier. So the fact that history is about to be made, as well as rewritten, is all down to you, isn't it? To you snubbing me—or would it be more accurate if I said, 'to you fearing me'? So the history you got is just simply all . . your . . fault." She folded her arms. "Why aren't you thanking me, Rumple? I'm fixing your mistakes. Why aren't you on your knees, thanking me for giving your son a second life?"

When he didn't respond, she huffed and walked away from him.

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4 May 2014

"She's having contractions."

He had gotten used to it by now: Zelena's sudden magical appearances in his cellar. He lifted his forehead from its resting place on his bent knee. "How do you know?"

"A little spell I put in her orange juice. The contractions are four minutes apart. Soon enough, they'll rush her to the hospital." Her eyes lit up like Christmas tree fairy lights. "It's time for you to make your contribution to the cause." She gestured to his wheel. "Spin, dearie. Spin as if your life depended on it."

He spun, his hands flashing, his magic pouring through them into the straw and converting the straw into gold. She conjured a receptacle to catch the gold threads. Sweat collected under his arms and on his brow, and his back ached and his fingers burned, but she'd given the command, so he spun until the plate was filled. "There, that will do." She entered his cage and retrieved the plate. "You said it yourself: spinning clears your mind, or should I say, your brain." She summoned her treasure chest of curse ingredients from its hiding place. With a soft wave of her hand, she shaped the thread into a solid-gold human brain and
added it to her chest. "There's just one more ingredient to collect." So self-assured she seemed, and surprisingly calm, considering she had come to the brink of changing history.

She showed him a design she'd sketched on a sheet of business stationery she'd stolen from his house (unmistakably his: linen paper embossed in gold with "Mr. Gold Pawnbroker and Antiquities Dealer"). She led him into the barn, tossed a hoe at him and ordered him to reproduce the design in the ground: a circle within a circle within a circle, a cross intersecting them. She allowed him to use magic to get the lines and angles perfect and equidistant: a flaw and the magic would not flow into the center as she intended, but rather wander haphazardly and dissipate. He understood then that her design served as a compass and that the spell required the full force of the magic emanating from the combination of courage, intelligence, resilience and innocence. When he was nearly finished with his digging, she placed trays at strategic points on the outermost circle, then lay her three treasures down, one in each tray: the gold "brain" at the North point, Regina's heart at the South, David's sword at the East.

Realization of the meaning of these objects and their placement came more slowly to him, since he'd never visited Oz and, after having read a book or two on the land, had lost interest in it, as it had no portals (but did have one very annoying charlatan who kept sending thieves to attempt to steal stuff from the Dark Castle—as Gold now mused, rather like overzealous fangirls and –boys who root through their favorite rock stars' garbage for souvenirs). By the time he'd completed his digging—and a fruitless nature-or-nurture argument with the witch, who insisted that by changing events she could change herself (and him)―he had recognized her design: she'd reproduced the Compass Table of Oz. Each of the four Witches of Oz held dominion and drew her powers from one of the four primary directions on a compass, and each Witch brought to the Table one of the elements of magic: Glinda of the South brought love; Locasta of the North brought wisdom; Evanora of the East brought courage; and Dorothy of the West brought innocence.

The combination of the powers of these compass points and the powers of the elements would produce the greatest of all magic—if it worked. The slightest misdirection of any one of the forces either would fizzle out all the other elements, like a wet stick of dynamite, or would blow the barn sky-high. Rumple would gladly have taken the risk of self-destruction by digging one of his lines a little crooked, but she had commanded perfection, so the dagger would allow nothing else. He perfected, he dug, he wondered just how this great power would produce a time portal, and though he argued with her about destiny, her confidence had gotten under his skin, and he had to wonder: what if she was right. What if she permitted him to choose his own point of entry? Would he go back to the moment he and Bae hung over the portal pit? Would he go back to the moment he held the sledgehammer in his grip, poised to destroy his own ankle? Or would he go back farther?

Was there some point at which he could have caused Malcolm to love him? For that was the root, he realized, of every decision he'd ever made in his interminably long life.

"We've got guests," Zelena growled. She transported them from the barn to the yard to confront Hook and Emma. The women butted heads—something about stealing Emma's powers and a kiss; he supposed at some point Zelena would fill him in on the details, if this little scheme worked. And then Zelena ordered him to toss Hook into a water tank and
drown him. It was one order he didn't mind carrying out. But, confoundedly, before he could
drown the leather-hided rat, Zelena swept him and herself way.

He barely had time to grumble before she started walking. "Delivery has begun," she
murmured. Like the dog on a magical leash that he'd become, he trailed along behind her as
she marched, dagger displayed for all to see as both a warning and a symbol of her victory,
into the hospital.

Gods, he hated hospitals. Terrible things, like the imprisonment of innocent women and the
nursing of pirates who should have been left bleeding on wet highways, happened here. With
a flick of Zelena's wrist, they magically broke through a squad of crossbow-armed Merry
Men.

And then Belle appeared in the corridor to confront the witch. He barely had time to notice
how scared and angry she was before Zelena sent her tumbling to the floor. He caught her—
he would have traded everything in his shop if Zelena had only left him here, let him carry
Belle to safety; he would have taken her home and let Snow and Charming and the rest of
them fend for themselves. But, though, by herself she clearly outmatched anyone here and he
had nothing more to do for her than trot along at her heels, the witch wouldn't release him.
Zelena wiped out Regina with a single magic blow and neutralized Charming and his shiny
new sword. There was no one else to stand in her way then. She snatched the baby from its
mother's arms. Another cloud of magic and he, she and the baby, like some dark family,
were walking up the steps of the farmhouse. He reached ahead to open the door for her.

"Why are you waiting? You have all your ingredients." He spoke through grit teeth.

She rolled her eyes. "Really, Rumple. When I said I was taking your brain, that was just a
figure of speech. I took just a sampling; I left most of your intelligence intact." She looked
him up and down. "Or so I thought."

She led him through the living room and down a hallway, where a grandfather clock
informed him of the time: half past eleven. Oh. She was waiting for noon, then. The two most
powerful hours for casting spells, especially those based in directional magic, were noon and
midnight, when the pull of magic was aligned with the pull of nature. He wondered just how
much of his brain she'd taken; he was awfully slow on the uptake today.

She led him to the kitchen, ordered him to sit and presented the baby to him to hold while she
put on the tea kettle. He would have rather she had asked him to hold her corset than to hold
this baby. As she clattered about, removing her coat, gathering her teapot and cups and tea
leaves and sugar bowl, he stared down at the baby.

Less than twenty minutes old. He shuddered. He'd seen some newborns, but that was long
ago and in a village far away, when the spinsters who raised him had been called upon to
assist with bringing new lives into the world. He'd been allowed to peek into the swaddling to
see the red, wrinkled faces with the eyes glued shut. Those babies had all been washed,
though, and the bloodied sheets and the afterbirth removed from the bedchambers before
he'd been ushered inside to have his peek. As a child, he had realized he was expected to
cherish these moments as awesome displays of the magic of nature, but in truth, he hadn't.
Instead, his eyes had taken in the exhaustion on the mothers' faces, the smell of blood that
still hung in the air, the dread in the fathers' eyes as they silently counted their children's heads and realized that the half-loaf of stale bread on the kitchen table and the spoonfuls of pottage in the hearth kettle would not be enough, not nearly enough.

Miracle of life. The true miracle, young Rumple had thought, would be if this newborn fought its way out of this hovel and into a better life.

Now, with a still blood-streaked newborn in his arms, Rumplestiltskin saw no miracle here. He saw a child that would live just long enough to serve as an ingredient in a crazy woman's spell. If the confluence of the elements didn't kill the child, the reversion in time would simply wink it out of existence.

"You look a natural."

He jerked his head up to find Zelena leaning against the counter and smiling at him.

"From the stories you tell about Bae, I gather you were a hands-on kind of father. Progressive, compared to the men of your time." She winked at him. "But we're going to change that—your time, I mean. As for your childrearing abilities, I do hope the change in venue won't affect them too much." She made her voice husky. "I plan on having lots of your children."

If he were capable of feeling anything, he would have had her throat in his grip by now. She sniffed at him and turned her back on him to prepare the tea. She knew she had nothing to fear from him; the dagger lay tucked into her waistband.

The clown patrol arrived just as the spell fired up. As they squared off, Regina against Zelena, David and Robin against a flying monkey, Hook and Emma against him, Rumple searched their faces. He found only fear, no welcome for himself. Where was Belle? The fact that she hadn't been included in the rescue party suggested to him that the rescue was intended for the baby only. Did they think they would kill him, with their handguns and swords? Hadn't they learned anything from living beside magic users? Between the two armies, Zelena's grand spell fizzled out.

Pale as ghosts, the fools brandished their steel and, in response to Zelena's command, he flung them against bales of hay and barn walls. "Get the dagger," he urged—practically begged—Emma and Hook (Hook! That was how desperate Rumple was. He'd rather Hook take the dagger than it remain in Zelena's possession). "Then the Dark One will be on your side." His word choice slipped by him unnoticed; only later did he realize he'd spoken as if there were a separation between himself and the cursed spirit that had occupied his soul for three hundred years. Having shared this brain with Bae too this past year had reminded him that his own small soul was buried in this body somewhere, still alive, if defeated and in hiding.

But the fools just gaped at him. What did they expect, that he'd give them a big hug, wave goodbye to Zelena and skip off with them as if he'd been playing House with the witch all along? "Do as I say or I will destroy you both. I have no choice."

They blinked at him stupidly. Hopeless. He sighed in exasperation as he tossed them around like cornhusk dolls. But then something changed for Regina, in Regina, and a new, white
magic came into her hands. With a single shove she drove Zelena to the dirt.

The dagger dropped to the dust.

Fools! They stood there watching Regina exchange hot-air quips with her sister, while all the power in the universe lay in the dust at their feet. Had they learned nothing? Had they forgotten the lesson of Cora already? Rumple stood stock still, not attracting notice, but with a flick of his wrist he summoned the dagger to him, to the lining of his jacket, and left a copy in its place.

Regina snapped the pendant from Zelena's neck, rendering her magicless. And then the fools gathered up the baby and walked away. They would have left the homicidal witch to her own devices if Rumple hadn't stepped in, ready to mete out justice in the extreme. The witch must not be left alive; why didn't they get that? All right, supposing they didn't give a damn about the torment she'd subjected him to; and it was clear they didn't, for no one showed the least concern—or even curiosity about him. No one asked if he was injured or needed a doctor. No one said, "We're glad you're alive" or "It's good to see you free again" or "Would you like to use my phone to call Belle" or "We're sorry for what the bitch did to you" or "Would you like a ride back to town?"

Or "We'll make sure the witch pays for killing Neal."

Walk away. They would just walk away, leaving her free to walk away too. And so he would kill her, before she could scheme, before she could gather resources (didn't they know from living with Regina that a mage always tucks away small packets of magic here and there, like a squirrel tucks away acorns?). He took her in his magic grip and would have strangled her—too quickly to satisfy justice, but he was anxious to act before she could. He would choke the life from her and it would be his turn to conjure nails, one for every torment she'd put him through, to seal her coffin.

But Regina, all whitely glowing over her sanctimonious conversion to Good, intervened, sweeping up the (fake) dagger and commanding him to play nice. He had to obey. He wanted them to think Regina had his dagger; their assumption that the mad dog was still leashed and under control would free him for awhile from the next would-be dagger thief. Let the next Cora/Zelena pursue a fake; the real dagger would be safely tucked away at home.

So he released Zelena. For the moment.

And he let Regina transport her to the jail, let the heroes climb into their pickup trucks and their VWs and leave him standing in the barn, alone. After all, now that one of them controlled him, they could ignore the Dark One until the next time they required information.

If he still had his heart, he might feel insulted, rejected, abandoned. He might even get angry at them, might even decide to turn his back on the lot of them. Let them fend for themselves when the next Big Bad struck; he would take his beloved—the only person who cared—and his grandson and find a way to get out of this town, with his magic intact, even if it took him years to figure out how.

Because no one would ever attack his family again. And no one would ever enslave him again.
He transported himself back to his shop to find Belle.
Looking back, Belle wonders if their fate had been sealed from the moment Rumple thrust his dagger through his own and Pan's bodies (she has to think of him as Pan, not Rumple's father; it's the only way she can accept the horrible reality of the man's intention to kill his entire bloodline). Or had there been a moment things could have changed in an entirely different direction—a moment when a single question or action could have released Rumple's heart from the ice that now surrounds it?

A single moment, a gesture of concern. In the seconds following Zelena's defeat and his rescue from her, what small gesture might have given Rumple to know he mattered to this community? In that abandoned barn, if, after she had picked up his dagger, Regina had given it back to him instead of making him a prisoner once again, if she had turned the handle around and without a word presented it to him, demonstrating her trust in his judgment, her respect for her former teacher, would that have been enough to show Rumple this town believed in him? Would he have then hesitated, turning the dagger around in his hands, savoring, after a full year of slavery, the sweet air of freedom? Would have slipped the dagger into his tattered suit jacket and, with a final dismissive sneer at Zelena, walked away?

A single question could have subtly acknowledged the fact that Rumple had spent a year in hell and have offered a subtexted apology from heroes who couldn't bring themselves to admit that they hadn't even tried—hadn't even discussed trying—to free him or bring him comfort while he was in Zelena's cage. Any of a number of questions could have given Rumple to know that people cared (or if not, at least realized he had a significant role to play in the community, as a bearer of knowledge):

"Are you hurt?"
"Are you hungry?"
"Are you cold?"
"Do you need a doctor?"
"Would you like to use my phone to call Belle?"
"Would you like a ride home?"
"I'm so sorry about Bae."
"We'll make sure she pays for what she's done."
"Can I help in any way?"
How about a simple
"We missed you."

Or
"Glad you're back."
Or maybe just an arm around his shoulder would have been enough to deter him from his course of vengeance, power-collecting, and coldblooded rejection of society.

Or if she could had gone with the heroes–she can handle herself in a fight; Mulan taught her, assessed her abilities, then taught her techniques to match so she could fight smart—if someone had aroused her so she could have gone to the barn with the heroes instead of leaving her to slumber in a hospital bed, she would have rushed to Rumple's side, would have grabbed his dagger before Regina did, would have immediately given it to him to prove to him she and this town trusted him to do the right thing. Could that have been enough to turn his heart around?

Despite the friendliness she puts on like a multicolored cloak, Belle hates this town. And right now, she's not too fond of herself.
When Zelena's pendant was taken from her, her magic snapped, and the spells she had created were undone, among them, the sleeping spell she'd placed on Belle.

Belle awoke to find herself in a hospital bed with a Candy Striper standing over her. "Hi," the teen greeted. "Would you like some water?"

But before Belle could nod, a commotion in the hallway drew their attention. People ran by so fast Belle couldn't identify them, but she thought she recognized a flash of steel. "Hey!" she shouted, struggling to sit up. Her head and joints ached from the spell she'd been under.

A blonde head poked in for just a second. "It's okay!" the savior shouted, and the Candy Striper automatically tried, unsuccessfully, to shush her. "Zelena's powerless and we've got the baby back!"

"Rumple?" Belle slid to her feet, unsteadily.

"Huh?" Emma's attention was focused once again on her comrades-in-arms and the babe in her father's arms.

"Where's Rumple?"

"Oh." Emma shrugged. "He's okay. I expect he'll come looking for you." She darted back out into the hallway, but as an afterthought grabbed the doorknob and leaned in again long enough to add, "We're safe. Regina's got his dagger."

"Regina?!"

Emma ran off without answering.

"Bring me my clothes," Belle demanded. Then she remembered she was talking to a pig-tailed kid and she softened the order with "Please."

As she was dressing, a puff of white smoke appeared before her. She hastily buttoned her blouse and reached out for the passenger inside the magic. "Rumple?"

"Sorry, no." A rich voice said smoothly. Regina materialized, smiling, the dagger in her grip. She stopped smiling as she sized Belle up. "What happened to you?"

"Zelena. Sleeping spell."

"Oh. Well, she won't bother you again. Or any of us." Regina grinned again.

"Where is she? And where's Rumple?"

"She's in jail, powerless. I suppose we'll have a trial and decide what to do with her. Personally, I want to see her given a second chance, now that she's had her magic taken away."

Belle growled, "What about Rumple? Why do you have his dagger?"

"He would have killed her. I had to stop him."
Belle scowled. "So now that you're a hero, you're taking over as his next master. Is that it?"

"Actually, no." Regina flipped the dagger around in her hand, handle out. "I'm giving it to you. He needs to be kept... under maintenance, shall we say, for now. After all she put him through, we need to watch him a while."

"Watch him?" Belle echoed, still scowling.

"For a few days, to make sure he's... himself. And I can think of no one better for that job than you." Regina offered her the dagger. "This power is safe with you. You won't abuse it."

Belle took the dagger but remained skeptical. "Knowing how I feel about him, you're trusting me to 'maintain' him."

"I'm doing my best to make amends, Belle."

Belle studied her and judging her to be sincere, nodded. Regina smiled in relief. "Now, shall I transport you somewhere? Where do you think he'd go first?"

"The shop. He'd go to the shop to look for me." Belle slid the dagger into her tote bag and straightened her shoulders, preparing to be overcome by magic.

"On your way, then. I'll make it a soft landing." Regina summoned her powers.

"Regina—thank you."
Hold Me Close

4 May 2014

He walked slowly around his shop, touching familiar objects. He'd come home.

He didn't expect a homecoming party; heroes don't celebrate the return of local villains, even if, for a few minutes, their goals had aligned. The town would just as soon he'd returned back to the Dark vault when they arrested Zelena: his disappearance would have solved a bit of a dilemma for them, in deciding whether to punish him for his villainy while under Zelena's control. In the end, they'd apparently decided by silent consent not to decide; once they'd captured Zelena, they simply walked away from him, leaving him alone in the barn. Their dismissal of him could be perceived as an act of cowardice; he did, after all, still have his magic, and even with Regina on their side, they couldn't have withstood another magic fight.

As they turned their backs on him, he snatched up his dagger and in its place in the dirt, he left a fake. With a small movement he drew Regina's attention to the fake, his own version of the pea-in-the-shell game, and Regina grabbed the dagger, throwing him a small smirk. She and the other heroes would believe he was now under their control; they would, of course, "manage" his behavior for his own good. The Dark One could not be trusted, especially after a year under Zelena's rule, whereas, apparently, the newly reformed Regina could be—could be depended upon to wield the Dark One wisely. Once she'd pocketed the fake dagger, she turned her attention back to Zelena. She needn't give a second thought to her new slave.

So he wasn't surprised the heroes had chosen to ignore him—doing nothing for him in his freedom, just as they'd done nothing for him in his captivity. No one, not even his son's beloved, had bothered to ask if he needed a doctor or a cup of water or a ride into town. Absorbed in themselves, their newborn, their new prisoner, not one of them had spared a word for him.

But deep down, the little boy in him had hoped for...something.

He stared into the mirror on the wall. He'd cleaned himself up before transporting himself here; even after all he'd been through, he still took pride in his appearance. His cheeks, always lean, had sunken; his skin, naturally leathery, had paled from months underground. The few strands of gray in his hair had become streaks. But the most noticeable change—and he would have to cover up this change before he reunited with Belle, lest he alarm her—was the death in his eyes.

He had to do something about that, or else he'd find himself drawn back to the vault. He needed fire.

The shopkeeper's bell above his door jangled and Belle threw herself into his arms. As he stroked her hair and kissed away her tears, a flame flickered in his belly. He was so tired, so hopeless: Cora, Hook, Pan and Zelena were just the beginning. As long as he remained bound to the dagger, he was vulnerable, and anyone he allowed near him was at risk. No one should have to pay with their lives for loving him.
He'd only just been freed. His physical and mental states were so deteriorated, he was fit company for no one, and after time interminable in the vault, his soul had all but rotted away. Holding Belle against his barely beating heart, he wondered if he should chase her away again, as he had so many times before, but Hook's attack upon her had proven to him it was too late. As far as his enemies were concerned, she was his and he, hers. He owed it to her to protect her, and he could only do that by keeping her close.

He tried to warn her—he had changed, but not as she hoped. "I will never comprehend why you continue to stand by my side." Besotted by hope, she wouldn't listen. Oh, how he hated betraying her, but his options left him no real choice: he could be the forgiving man she wished for, or he could continue on his course of killing off all who threatened his family, thereby sending an unmistakable message, and perhaps, the next would-be-Dark-One killer would leave Belle and Henry alone.

He doubted whether, given only those options, even the great hero Charming would have made a different choice. So, though he was hardly husband material, he asked her to marry him, in words as lovely as she was, because she deserved poetry and flowers and happy-ever-afters. He led her into believing he'd pledged his troth on the blade of his dagger, and then he'd given her the dagger, the seat of all his power and the symbol of his faith.

Except it was almost all a deception. Not a lie, he pleaded with himself; simply a failure to correct her misconceptions about the dagger. And if a deception is no better than a lie, didn't it take some of the wrong out of it, that it was for her protection? Didn't the truthfulness of his love set to rights the lie?

She'd seen his madness. She'd seen the sick state his imprisonments—the vault, the cage—had driven him to. Yet, perhaps because she'd been subjected to similar treatment at Regina's hands and had never surrendered, she couldn't see the death in his eyes. That would come later.

But she'd stand by him, he was as sure of it as he was sure that he needed her (that if he still had his heart, it would be filled with love for her—and someday, when they were free to leave this town and go someplace safer—not safe, for they would never be safe; Hook's pursuing him to Manhattan had proven that—he would reclaim his heart and they would run). They had, unwittingly perhaps, naively, certainly, pledged themselves to each other long ago. Now they would put that pledge in writing for the rest of the world to acknowledge. She would stand by him, and he would draw her closer and protect her with every resource at his disposal... as he should have done Bae.

He could never make things right, but he could achieve justice. And it would have to be him to pursue it. If he'd ever harbored, for the smallest moment, the illusion that the law would achieve justice for Bae, this day had proven that notion foolish. Just as he had always been, from the day three hundred years ago when Malcolm took him away from security and comfort and made a junior con man of him, Rumplestiltskin was solely responsible for his own welfare, his own protection. He was his own provider, his own teacher, his own nurturer, his own defender, his own law and his own avenging angel.

And so, moments after the proposal, his new fiancée had left the warmth of his arms to speak
to her father (yes, Rumple silently admitted, he should have gone with her; he should have tried to make amends with her father so that the marriage could start with a clean slate, but he had another duty to fulfill first, so he allowed Belle to talk herself into going to Moe alone). And once she had gone, he took his dagger, the real one, to the jail and he bought justice for Bae, at a very heavy cost.

"I don't lie," he'd once insisted to Charming.

But now, all that changed.

Standing in the jailhouse, trying to figure out what had happened to Zelena, the heroes turned to him, as they always did, for an educated guess. Regina turned upon him. "Unless you did something to her."

There was no time to craft words. He had to lie—for Belle's sake, he reminded himself. To protect Belle. So he broke his code; it was surprisingly easy, thanks to the scheme he'd set up with the fake dagger. With a plain "no" and an application of magic to the surveillance tape, he flat-out lied. Belle backed him up in the lie—he'd sunk to a new low, using a member of his family to sell a lie.

Superficially, it was easy; that night, when he walked Belle home and left her, bewildered and a little insulted, at her doorstep with no more than a kiss on the forehead, he found lies, even to Regina, didn't sit well in his gut.
4 May 2014

Things were going well with Roland, even better with Robin. Regina touched her swollen lips in remembrance of the afternoon as she stood on the porch, waving goodbye as her two men rode off in Friar Tuck's new Silverado. When the truck turned a corner and she lost sight of them, she walked back inside her house to clean up the remains of lunch, take-out from Mulan's new taqueria. She would have to take a bicarbonate of soda before bed tonight; Mexican food didn't sit well with her, but her boys loved it, so she ignored her stomach for their sake.

She touched her lips again. Things were going very well indeed.

Roland had sat in her lap this afternoon, the child telling her his favorite bedtime story, a rambling tale that had something to do with moon men waging war against dragons. As Roland shaped his hand into a dragon's mouth and roared, Regina caught herself remembering a certain patchwork dragon, and just for a second, she wondered if she'd made the right decision.

Now, as she tossed plates and silverware into the dishwasher, she found herself remembering Trajan's fascination with kitchen appliances, and again she wondered. Roland and Trajan had gotten along so well. . . . But Trajan was Zelena's child, and Zelena was this year's Public Enemy Number One in Storybrooke. They'd agreed—Emma, Belle and she—that the best place for Trajan was someplace else. They'd agreed.

She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and reached for her phone. "Dr. Hopper, it's Mayor—it's Regina Mills. Just curious: have you heard anything from the Hoffmans? . . . What about your contact at Protective Services? . . . Well, could you find out, please? . . . Now, please. Unless walking your dog is more important than the welfare of a child—yes. Call me back at this number. I . . . I'm no longer using the Mayor's office."

As she hung up, she dropped onto her couch to wait and think. What was she doing these days, now that she no longer had a town to run? She had money enough to be idle, but idleness was hardly in her nature. All her life, she'd worked towards something. She couldn't just sit around waiting for the next visit from her boys; she needed to be productive, needed to be out there, in the thick of things. With people.

Her phone rang and she snatched it up. "Hopper? . . . Oh. Hello, Chantelle. Yes, I'll be in tomorrow at ten for my fitting. . . . Yes. Thank you. Tomorrow." She hung up before her dressmaker could ramble on about what wonderful taste in clothes Madame Mills had, and what a perfect figure. Not that Regina didn't know all that already, and on any other day would enjoy the brown-nosing, but she had other matters on her mind right now.

Her phone rang again. "Hopper?"

"He's doing well, Regina. Adjusting nicely. His new brother has taught him to play football, and the Hoffmans bought him a bike. They've enrolled him in kindergarten. He's eating regular meals, he goes to bed at eight o'clock and sleeps through the night, he's even brushing his teeth without complaint. He's going to be fine."

"That's good news." Regina sucked in a breath. "All right, then. Keep me posted." She hung up, not certain if what she'd heard really felt like good news or not. She pattered upstairs in her stocking feet, wandered into the empty bedroom, fluffed a pillow or two, wandered into the bathroom and
took an Alka-Seltzer. Wandered to her own room and lay back on her four-poster bed, and threw an arm across her eyes and wondered what the hell to do with her life.

Emma ran into her office and grabbed her ringing phone. "Sheriff Swan... Oh, hi, Archie... Yeah, sure I'd like to know. He was a sweet kid... Uh-huh... That's good... Uh-huh... Yeah... A Red Sox game, huh? Cute... Well, that's good news. Glad he's getting along. Especially glad he has a family to raise him... Me? Doing fine. I was just out having a late lunch with Killian... Don't get nosy, Archie. I get enough of that from my parents... Yeah, I'm sure Belle will be glad to hear about Trajan. I'll give her a call later today, share the good news... Okay, Archie. Talk to you later."

Emma dropped into her leather swivel chair (an ergonomically correct chair, a birthday gift from her parents) and caught her breath. She was a little winded, truth be told, not from her run into the office to catch the phone, but from, well, some after-lunch snogging. She'd introduced Killian to the concept of breath mints, so of course he'd wanted to test them... She touched her swollen lips. Things were going pretty good with Killian. Not great yet—she found herself still remembering a certain jaunty grin that had always made her heart skip a beat, and as long as that memory could still produce that reaction, she knew wasn't completely ready to let go of Neal. Maybe she never would. But like Trajan, she couldn't let the death of a loved one hold her back from living. She had to move on.

She walked out of the office into the jail and crossed over to the windows to survey her town. She watched the school bus go by. Henry had been pestering her to let him register for school again, but she'd been holding back, holding on to New York and the happiness they'd found there. She wondered briefly, for the hundredth time, if going back to New York was the right thing. She planned to stay for her new brother's "coronation potluck," but then she and Henry would hit the road. Henry's best chance lay in New York, she was sure of it; Storybrooke was just too crazy. Still, if he'd had a say in the matter, Henry would probably choose to live here, with his other mom and his grandparents, even...

Even that one, walking down the street hand in hand with Belle. "Grandpa," Henry had called him, while David was "Gramps." Emma couldn't bring herself to use the man's real name; it was just too crazy. There he went, the most dangerous man in town, walking hand in hand with his librarian girlfriend. Walking into the ice cream parlor. That man was just another reason why Henry needed to grow up in New York.

Except... he didn't look so dangerous right now, holding hands like that. She'd seen that look before: on his son's face, when he'd promised to take her to Tallahassee. The look of a man in love.

That's when a man got really dangerous.
4 May 2014

Rumple smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes; realizing that, he distracted Belle with a flourish of his hands as she opened the door to her apartment to admit him. "For you, sweetheart." In his right hand he produced a bouquet of daisies, while his left offered a stack of magazines. At her small warning frown, he assured her, "No magic, just sleight of hand." He didn't mention that he'd learned such parlor tricks from his father, for the purpose of charming and distracting people while Malcolm picked their pockets. She still frowned a little, and he drew a little cross upon his chest. "I bought these at the pharmacy. With money. No deals, I promise."

She smiled then and stood aside, allowing him to enter as she accepted his gifts. Carrying them into the kitchenette, she said, "Thank you, Rumple. I'll put these in water." She sniffed the daisies before arranging them into a vase, which she then set on the counter. She stood back to admire them. "They're lovely." Then she rifled through the magazines and chuckled. "Modern Bride? Perfect Weddings?" She laughed aloud at the last issue in the stack. "Cosmo's Secrets for Pleasing a Man—and Yourself."

He blinked innocently. "How did that one get in there?"

She tucked that issue into her linen closet. "We'll just save that one for the wedding night." Turning to the stove, she stirred one pot and uncovered another. "Dinner's almost ready."

Since her tiny apartment had no dining room, she’d laid out a tablecloth across the coffee table in front of the couch. He set the makeshift dining table with silverware, napkins and glasses of iced tea, and she dished up plates of spaghetti and French bread toasted with cheese. She'd intentionally avoided the more traditional garlic bread; she anticipated some after-dinner kissing. They settled side by side on the couch to eat and chat about their day.

"Father agreed to walk me down the aisle," she reported.

He raised an eyebrow. "He's accepting of our getting married, then? And having the Dark One as a son-in-law?"

She cocked her head aside. "Well... let's say he came around, and I have every confidence that in a year or two, he'll give his approval."

"And how did this miracle come to pass?" He shot her the same warning frown she'd used on him earlier. "Belle... was there magic involved?"

"Rumple, you know I'm not magical."

"Oh, you're much more powerful than you take credit for, sweet one." He stroked her cheek. "One bat of those long eyelashes and a man is putty in your hands. One tear glistening on your rosy cheek will drive him to his knees, begging forgiveness, though he doesn't know what for."
She batted those eyelashes. "There may have been a tear or two involved, along with a forgiving hug. And a deal."

"A deal?"

She shrugged. "I learned from the best."

"Does this deal call for me to do anything?"

"Dinner once a month at our house. He promised to keep the conversation light, if you would."

"I can be charming." His voice automatically squeaked on the last word, an old habit he couldn't break. He reached over with his napkin to dab at a spot of sauce on her chin. "Well, perhaps not charming, but civil, anyway. I promise, no sword play, real or metaphorical, as long as he's courteous to me and respectful of our marriage."

"He agreed to leave the past in the past."

Rumple bowed his head. "Then I shall do the same."

Belle narrowed her eyes. "There's one more thing. This is my idea, not his."

"Yes?"

"In Avonlea, it's tradition for a groom to give his bride a gift on the night of the wedding."

"And vice versa?"

"Well." Belle blushed. "Her maidenhood is considered her gift to him."

"I see. Go on."

"The gift I'd like from you is—I'd like to you speak to him before the wedding. Meet for coffee." She drew in a breath, then released it and her words in a rush. "I want you to apologize for beating him up. And he's going to apologize to you for interfering in our relationship."

He looked down at his spaghetti. "Is he, now?"

"He is. It was a condition I placed on accepting his apology to me, for trying to erase my memory."

His mouth twitched. "You've become quite the dealmaker."

"Will you?"

"Is this another deal? I apologize to him and you'll forgive me for having attacked him?" But there's no bitterness in his voice, just a suggestion of hope.

"No, Rumple. I love you; my forgiveness is always yours, unconditionally. Just as I hope yours is for me."
He smiled genuinely then and kissed her palm. "I could never stay angry at you, sweetheart. Not even if you invited your father to move in with us." He raised a warning finger. "Now you before you get any ideas, that was just an extreme example."

"You'll meet with him, then?"

"For coffee tomorrow. Yes. And I'll apologize." He caught the doubt in her expression. "And I'll mean it. A permanent truce." He picked up his fork. "An apology may be called for, I agree. I should never have believed Regina when she claimed he caused your death."

"Thank you, Rumple." Wisely, she let the topic lay where it was. They ate in silence for a few minutes, until she broached another topic. "You know, that has me thinking... how do we know Zelena is really dead? I mean, if she had enough residual magic to destroy herself, maybe she had enough to fake having destroyed herself."

"You're safe from her." There was a coldness to his tone. "I promise you."

"Don't you mean we're safe from her?"

"Yes, of course. Let's not talk about her, please, Belle. I'd rather put all that behind us."

Her mouth flattened: she knew he'd never begin to heal unless he talked about his experiences of the past year. But how could she refuse when he'd asked her so sincerely—and when the topic brought such a haunted look to his eyes?

"Now," he interrupted her thoughts, "if we're going to marry in less than a week, we have some decisions to make right away. Who would you like to officiate, since justice of the peace is one profession the curse didn't assign to anyone? I suspect the local clergy would have some objections to marrying us."

She pondered. "In the Enchanted Forest, a queen or king could perform weddings." His face darkened, and she nodded. "I agree. I'm not too happy with the Charmings right now, and I certainly don't want Regina officiating at my wedding." She pondered some more, then brightened. "You know, we're a whole new thing here, Storybrooke is; part Enchanted Forest, part American, and part something undefinable. We can make our own rules. I'd like for someone we both like to officiate."

"I'd agree, but Henry's a bit young for that responsibility, wouldn't you say? And there's no one else in this town that fits your description."

She swatted at his arm. "Oh, come on, I'm sure there's someone else we both like."

He considered. "Josiah Dove?"

"Yes, but I was thinking someone with more of a leadership capacity, to make it official. I was thinking of Archie."

He smiled wryly. "If my bride wishes to be married by a cricket, who am I to say nay? I'll ask him tomorrow."

"Now let's talk about the ceremony." She pushed her plate away, her appetite forgotten as
she daydreamed. "I've always wanted an outdoor wedding, in the moonlight."

"Midnight." The word broke from him and he scowled briefly, remembering that natural magic is at its most potent at noon and at midnight—and that made him remember Zelena. He shook his head. "Sorry, darling. Bad memory. Go on. Outdoor in the moonlight. What else? A large audience, all in formal wear? A chamber choir? My bride deserves a wedding that would rival any royal's."

But they both lowered their gazes, as they realized what a mistake it would be to hold a large wedding. So few Storybrookers would be accepting of this union; most who came would only do so to gawk at the bride sacrificing herself to a demon. As for those few who knew better—the town's heroes—neither Belle nor Rumple felt like celebrating with them, considering their abandonment of him. It still galled Belle that even after Rumple had sacrificed himself to save the town from Pan, there had been no words of gratitude, no acknowledgement of his heroism. They hadn't even thrown him a funeral. She and Bae had had to say their goodbyes to him alone. She hadn't mentioned this failure on the part of the town leadership to Rumple; nothing good could come from informing him of it. But she suspected he suspected they'd either blown him off or even celebrated his loss.

Sometimes, Belle thought, humans could be damn disappointing.


His head jerked up and his eyes, widened, connected with hers. If he could feel, he thought, he'd be choked up right now. He nodded. "And Bae." He cleared his throat. "Let's talk about your ring." He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and brought out a jewelry box. "There are a good many rings in the shop, some of them quite special, including one that's rumored to have been forged by Hephaestus for Aphrodite. And then there's this." He set the box in her hand. "It can't compare with the Aphrodite stone, but..." He shrugged and waited as she opened the box.

She let the ring rest in her palm as she admired it: a simple white gold band with a pattern of roses entwined around a sizable diamond. "It's beautiful. You made this, didn't you?"

He nodded. "After our first hamburger date. I, uh, used magic to create it."

"This is the ring I want." She admired it some more before replacing it in the box and returning it to him. "And none other. Thank you, Rumple." She kissed him. "I think that's when I knew, too, that we'd get married someday."

He returned the box to his jacket. "I'm glad you like it. Glad you like me." He took her hands in his. "There's still time, if you have second thoughts—I did tell you once that I'm a difficult man to love, even harder to live with." He looked at her closely. "That's only worsened, Belle."

"I want to be at your side, to help you recover. Talk to Archie, Rumple; he's ready to help too; he's had a lot of experience counseling trauma victims. I can go with you, if you prefer, or you can go alone and tell him things that you'd be uncomfortable having anyone else hear. Please."
"I'm a very old soul, Belle. I've lived many lives and I've managed to survive. Zelena is just another bump in the road, soon to be forgotten."

"I understand, but Archie is a wonderful listener and a wise counselor—he doesn't judge—"

Rumple raised his hand in a stop gesture. "If I told the cricket half of what I've experienced in my lifetime, he'd run shrieking back to the Enchanted Forest and join the circus. I'll ask him to officiate at our wedding, but that's all. You'll have to take me as I am, sweetheart: a very old and battered soul who prefers to keep his secrets." He slipped his arms around her waist. "But not too old to protect his wife." He nuzzled her ear. "And not too old to learn Cosmo's secrets."

"Rumplestiltskin, you're trying to distract me so I'll forget—"

He whispered something sweetly naughty in her ear, then kissed her thoroughly. "What were you saying before I rudely interrupted you, darling?"

She rested her forehead against his shoulder. "I forgot."
All conversation ceased as Rumplestiltskin entered the crowded diner, and heads bent toward plates as he walked past the booths. This was as it always was, as it should be, when the most feared man in town entered any room. He would have been concerned had people greeted him warmly, as they did Belle, or worse, ignored him. The customers' reaction told him his reputation was still intact, despite his being away for a year (despite his being a witch's slave for a year). He stared straight ahead as he made his way towards the back booth, but from the corner of his eye, he assessed the restaurant: it was a complete duplicate of the original Granny's, just as every other building in town was; Snow's Curse had copied Regina's, right down to the half-an-apple-pie in the display case on the counter.

He'd found it strange that nothing about this town or its people apparently had changed under Snow's Curse. As he'd walked down Main Street from his shop, he'd felt a bit like a hamster on a wheel who'd suddenly become conscious of the outside world and so, desirous of escape, he was galloping faster and faster. He was going to break the wheel, though, break out of his cage and with his family he'd run far away from this trap of a town.

Bearing that in mind, Rumplestiltskin marched up to the booth closest to the exit. He'd be out of this town soon. Free. And that certainty enabled him to swallow his pride, greet his future father-in-law, and seat himself across the table. Ruby brought over his customary cup of black coffee without asking, handed him a menu, muttered, "The lunch special is the BLT," and backed away, positioning herself safely behind the counter, pretending to wipe it down.

"Mr. Gold, I'm here only because Belle asked me to," French began.

"We're in agreement then." Rumple cast the menu aside; he wasn't here to eat. "For Belle's sake."

French pondered a moment, then nodded. "For Belle's sake."

"This may smooth things over a bit." Rumple reached into his jacket pocket, brought out a rectangle of paper and slid it across the table.

French picked it up and read the writing on it. "What's this?"

"A check, Mr. French. Reimbursement for your medical expenses."

"That was three years ago," French murmured, still reading the check.

"And for that, I apologize. Along with—other things. Other wrongdoings." Rumple leaned back in the booth, adding a few more inches between himself and French. "I apologize for acting on information that I hadn't checked out first. I mistakenly believed I was taking revenge for the death of someone I loved, someone who you had beaten to death. So I was told."

"Belle?" Moe blanched. "Someone told you I—beat Belle to death?" At Rumplestiltskin's
nod, he sputtered, "I never would--! My daughter! My only child, all I had left after her mother died. She was precious to me. I would have given my life, my duchy, to protect her."

"Perhaps then you can understand how I felt when I was told you had ordered the monks to flog her to drive the demons out of her."

"Demons? No, I—no. I don't know how people think in the Dark Mountains, but in Avonlea, we believe demons run from angels like my Belle."

"I have learned since that my informant not only lied to me, but also was holding Belle prisoner, even as she was telling me that Belle had leapt from a tower to her death, to escape the whips." Rumple stirred his coffee to cool it, then set the spoon aside and focused on Moe. "Perhaps you can understand my rage when I heard this, my vow to seek justice for Belle. I don't apologize for my anger, but I do apologize for my gullibility. Especially considering the source of the information."

"I suppose, under the circumstances, I'd have..." Moe let the sentence trail off. He couldn't bring himself to say done the same, because he never would have dared to attack the Dark One, even to revenge Belle. "I accept your apology."

"As restitution, I'm returning the van. Mr. Dove is delivering it to your shop this afternoon. The loan is canceled."

"Thank you." Moe shook a packet of sugar before tearing it open and pouring it into his coffee. "I accept—thank you."

Rumplestiltskin lowered his voice, and Ruby had to come out from behind the counter and pretend to wipe down a nearby table in order to hear him. "Thank you for agreeing to participate in our wedding."

"I'm not in favor of it, but Belle's made her choice." He studied the pawnbroker as closely as he dared. "She swears to me you're kind to her."

"I love her. And she loves me, though, for the life of me, I don't know why. I'll keep her safe—I know I've failed in that regard, but from now on, her safety and welfare come first for me. I promise you that."

"And happy?" Moe fiddled with his spoon. "She says you make her happy. You'll put her happiness first—" Moe gulped. "Ahead of your own?"

"She will be my wife, Mr. French." Rumplestiltskin said no more; from what Belle had told him of her parents' marriage, he knew he didn't need to elaborate.

Moe nodded slowly, sipped his coffee. "That's how I felt about Colette." Sitting back, he sized up his now former enemy. "All right, then, I'm going to believe you. For her sake. If you ever need anything from me—I don't suppose a man like you ever would—"

"We'll ask," Rumplestiltskin finished for him. "I realize you must have doubts. Objections. But in time, I hope to dispel those objections. You're welcome to drop by or phone any time, to ease your mind. We're on the same side, Mr. French: Belle's."
French nodded, then blurted, "Sesame seeds."

"Pardon me?"

"She's allergic to sesame seeds. She tells me you do a lot of the cooking, so I thought I should tell you, in case she forgot to."

"I'll bear that in mind." He reached across the table, offering his open hand. "Thank you, Mr. French."

Moe shook his hand briefly. "Maybe you should call me Moe. Or Maurice."

"And you can call me Rumplestiltskin." He gave a small shrug. "I realize it's a mouthful, but the curse never gave Gold a first name."

"All right. Maybe we should talk about the wedding? I'd like to provide the flowers."

"We'd appreciate that. I'm sure whatever you choose will be lovely." Rumple rose and tossed a ten-dollar-bill onto the table. Ruby moved one table closer, her eyes traveling from her departing customer to that tip. "I'll call you tonight with directions to the cabin. Or if you like, Mr. Dove can pick you up; he'll be bringing Henry."

Moe speculated, "I guess I'm kind of a—what, step-great-grandfather-in-law, now?"

"It's a complicated world, Mr.—Maurice. I need to get back to work. Have a good afternoon."

Yeah." Moe fingered the check again, counting the zeros. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Regina." Belle glanced over her shoulder at the customer who'd fallen in line behind her. The pharmacy was unusually busy for a weekday at 2 p.m., well past the lunchtime crowd that would drop in for a quick purchase before heading off to the diner, yet too early for the after-school crowd dropping by for candy and sodas. Ahead in line were Ms. Ginger, whose red plastic basket contained canned cat food and a bag of litter; Marco, who was stocking up on matches, flashlight batteries and soup; and Dave (of Dave's Fish and Chips), who was purchasing cocoa packets, powdered milk, oatmeal, and batteries. "This morning's unexpected cold snap seems to have brought people out," Belle remarked.

"They're preparing for a heavy winter," Regina explained. "Power outages, water pipes bursting, that sort of thing. I'm stocking up too." She lifted her basket so Belle could see the canned goods, bottled water, batteries, matches and chocolate bars therein. "Is the heater in the library working properly?"

"So far. We haven't had any patrons today, though, except Mr. Marine, and he just photocopied some pages out of Chilton's."

"I'll be stopping by after I drop these off at home."

Ms. Ginger had received her change and strolled away, so the line moved forward.

"Do you have some books about business start-up?" Regina continued.

"We do. Are you starting a business, may I ask?"
"Considering it. I need something to occupy my time, and it occurs to me this town doesn't have a retail shop for professional women."

"That sounds like a good idea," Belle said. "As soon as I get back, I'll set some books aside for you."

"Thanks." They fell silent as Marco paid for his items and the line moved ahead another space. Then Regina glanced at the slip of paper in Belle's hand. "I hope no one in your household is ill."

"Huh? Oh." Belle glanced too at the slip. "Uh, no. This is, ah, for, uh, birth control. The Pill." The further she explained, the redder her face became. "Because I—we—we're getting married."

Regina smiled coolly. "Say no more. And congratulations. Or is it 'good luck' that one is supposed to wish the bride? I always forget."

"Thank you."

"If you need a gown, may I recommend my dressmaker, Chantelle? Of course, I'm sure you already have something picked out. You have a . . . distinct . . . fashion sense of your own."

"I have something picked out. Vintage."

"I must admire your sense of the practical, Ms. French. Not many young women would choose a second-hand wedding gown."

Belle tightened her jaw. "It was worn by Carole Lombard to a post-Oscars party in 1936, when she was nominated for Best Actress for My Man Godfrey." Actually, that was nowhere near true, and Belle was just as shocked as Regina was when the claim came out of her mouth. Why did she feel the need to justify her fashion choices to Regina?

"I see," Regina said smoothly. "Will it be a civil ceremony, as opposed to a church one? Rumple's had an ongoing squabble with clergy for as long as I can remember."

"Civil," Belle said, biting her lip so she wouldn't be tempted to say more. Then she couldn't help but smiling as she recalled Rumple's promise to be civil to her father.

"I understand you've invited Henry, but not Emma or her parents." There was puzzlement in the question and just a hint of insult; Belle could almost hear or me tacked on to the end.

"We want a private ceremony, very small and quiet."

"I see. Well, I'm sure it'll be lovely."

Belle fumbled for a different subject. "The temperature dropped very suddenly this morning, didn't it? Very unusual."

"Yes. Unusual."

"So. . . I guess Trajan is adjusting well in Augusta. Archie says he's started school and is learning to ride a bike."

"Yes. I'm pleased for him."

"Me too." Belle deliberated a moment, but as Dave was paying with a check and gumming up the progress of the customer line, she took a chance on asking a personal question—maybe just a little bit because Regina had nosed her way in on Belle's personal business. "He's such a likeable boy. I
imagine your house seems empty now without him, and with Henry living with Emma."

Regina answered sharply, "Henry lives two weeks out of the month with me." Then she eased back, perhaps remembering that later, she'd be asking Belle to help her conduct research for a marketing plan. "But yes, the house does seem quiet without Trajan, even though he was with me a short time."

Satisfied, Belle eased up a bit too. "Since you're coming by the library, I could set aside some books that Roland might like."

"Thank you."

"And we just got in *The Stepmother's Guide to Surviving and Thriving in a Blended Family.*"

Regina's eyes widened for a moment with surprise, then she smiled. "Yes, I think I'd like to read that."
The psychiatrist tried to rope him into therapy. "You were a prisoner of war for almost a year," he argued. "You were physically tortured." There was a question under the statement, but Rumple didn't deign to answer it, not even with a wince. "You were threatened repeatedly. You were used as a weapon against your family and friends. You were a—"

Rumplestiltskin held up a warning hand. "I know what I was. That's behind me now."

"It can't be. Your body might be healed, but the mind—"

"I'm marrying Belle tomorrow night. Will you officiate, or shall I raise your rent?"

"Mr. Gold." Hopper tried to take a reasonable tone. "I don't doubt your sincerity, and I certainly understand how, after all the instability you've experienced, you would want to hold on—"

"May I remind you, Doctor, Belle saved your life."

"The trauma must be dealt with before you can move on with your life. There are proven programs of treatment. I can assure you, you can feel better. Let me help. Two sessions a week. I have an opening day after tomorrow."

"No. Thank you."

"If it's a matter of money—" Archie chewed his lip. "No, of course not. Please, Mr. Gold, you need this. You're in no shape for such a life-altering decision as marriage. For Belle's sake, let—"

"It's for Belle's sake that we must marry quickly."

"Oh." Hopper reddened, stammered, "Well, attitudes toward. . .out-of-wedlock pregnancy—"

"Don't be daft." Rumplestiltskin's hands moved toward the center, seeking to rest upon a cane that he no longer carried. Recovering his poise, he folded his arms instead. "In case you haven't noticed, Doctor, I seem to have acquired a great many enemies, many of whom have figured out that the easiest way to attack me is through Belle. You may be surprised to learn this, but magic, even dark magic, is a great respecter of marriage. Once our vows are spoken, my magic will take her under its protection, so that even if I'm incapacitated, the magic will shield her. Besides, under my roof, she will be safe; not even the likes of Hook would dare enter my home."

"I see." The psychiatrist occupied himself with his pen and pad for a moment, buying time to think. "I want only the best for Belle, Mr. Gold. Just as you want to protect her life, I want to protect her heart. It's plain to see she's already pledged to you, but to give you and her your
best chance to succeed in this union, please, would you agree to enter into a therapy program
after your honeymoon? We can include her in some of the sessions, or not, however you feel
comfortable." When Rumplestiltskin hesitated, Hopper advanced. "I'll officiate at your
wedding if you'll agree to consider therapy. Just consider, that's all I'm asking."

Well, Hopper hadn't said how long the period of consideration had to last. Rumplestiltskin
gave a sharp nod.

As he turned to leave, Hopper slowed him with another question. "Mr. Gold. Will you be
coming to the coronation potluck this afternoon?"

"My fiancée wishes it," Rumple answered, walking out into the hallway. "So I'll be there."

"Good. That's—" Hopper didn't get to finish his attempt to praise Rumple for this show of
community spirit. Just as well: they both knew that would have been an inaccurate
assumption. Rumple would go not because he was feeling social, nor out of gratitude for the
heroes having freed him from Zelena; he would go only because Belle asked him to.

Missions accomplished. Satisfied, Rumple returned to the pawnshop and dashed off a quick
text to Belle to report his successes, then he resumed work, digging through his collection of
books for any reference to the containment and preservation of magic. It must be possible to
make magic portable into a world without it; after all, he'd found a way to introduce magic
to a magicless world. And figuring that out had taken him only a couple of centuries. Maybe
when he got a little closer to a solution, he could convince Belle of the wisdom of this project,
and then she could take over the book work, leaving him to experiment in his lab. With their
differing skills, they would make a most productive team: the Pierre and Marie Curie of
magic. Once she got involved in the work, she would come to appreciate magic as much as he
did, he was sure.

He had wondered if the absence of his heart would affect his ability to read other people, but
apparently it hadn't: he'd pressed just the right buttons with French (money and
protectiveness) and Hopper (obligation and protectiveness), and he hadn't had to cope with
his own emotions getting in the way. In fact, without the interference and inconvenience of
emotions, he could achieve his goals more efficiently, it seemed. His date with Belle last night
had proven that remembering emotions could be almost as effective as actually feeling them:
she had seemed convinced that his adoration and his passion for her were of the moment,
and his body had certainly reacted to her kisses in all the expected ways.

He could pull this off. He was convinced of that now. His study would proceed apace, without
the messiness of self-doubt or guilt to interfere, or his affections for Belle to distract; he
would find a way to preserve his power out there in the magicless world, and then he could
protect his family anywhere: his grandson, his wife, his future children. And of course
himself.

As he read, he drew his jacket tighter about him. Eventually he became aware of a decline in
temperature in the shop, and he left his books long enough to adjust the thermostat. How
inconvenient that winter apparently was attacking Maine early this year. He phoned Dove,
asking him to deliver a cord of wood to the pink house; as large as that house was, he needed
to maintain the fireplace in the bedroom to keep warm at night. That would change too, he
assured himself: when he escaped Storybrooke, he'd take Belle and Henry to Miami or Palm Springs for the winter. Or maybe he'd buy an uninhabited island in the Caribbean; that would be even better for keeping them safe.

An uninhabited island. Yes. He liked that idea very much.
Like a Baby

5 May 2014

Eyebrows shot up as the service bell above the entrance to Granny's Diner tinkled for the hundredth time that day—for behind the first entrant, Belle (no surprise; she'd promised to come), came the man who never attended social functions—and he came bearing a wrapped gift as well as a Tupperware bowl. He added the former to the gift table near the juke box and the latter to the wealth of entrees at the counter.

From his post at the punch bowl, Archie flashed Belle a thumbs-up, and Regina abandoned her lasagna-serving duties to wander over and greet the newcomers. The smirk on her lips suggested she had intentions of making some cutting remark, but as she crossed the room, a burst of laughter from Robin at some joke Little John was telling took the starch out of Regina. That laugh reminded her she was in a good place right now; she could afford to be generous with her old frenemy. En route to the doorside table at which Rumple was holding a chair for Belle, Regina paused at the punch bowl for two filled cups, and she brought these over to the new guests. "Glad you could make it, Belle." She offered the punch. "I hope you're hungry. I made plenty of lasagna."

Belle accepted the cup but before she could give her thanks, Henry interrupted, pointing past Rumple's shoulder. "Uh, Grandpa, look. What is that?" Heads turned to stare out the open door to the horizon, where a fiery beam stretched like an airport search light into the sky.

"That," said Rumple, "is a problem. That light is from Zelena's time portal. It's open."

And suddenly the party was momentarily suspended. "The jail," David snapped. He set a hand on his wife's shoulder briefly. "Stay here with the baby. I'll check this out. Gold, come with me." The prince ran out into the street. Rumple turned to follow at a more dignified pace.

Belle cast a quick glance back the diner before running out too, alongside Robin and Regina. "Where's Emma?" she panted, fearful now. "If Zelena's loose—"

"She's okay. She got upset with something the pirate said and stepped outside to cool off," Robin explained. Belle nodded, only slightly relieved; her mind flashed to the dagger, which she'd locked up in the library's safe. She'd assumed that would be a better hiding place than the pawnshop's wall safe, considering Smee had managed to open it (and, according to Dove, so had Cinderella): no one would suspect the library had need of a safe, overdue fines being only five cents per day (Belle could have told them, however, that Sleepy alone was shelling out fifty bucks a month for books he could never remember to return on time. Add to that the carelessness of the other dwarfs, and the library was taking in enough each year to buy a full set of encyclopedias).

Once inside the jail, the troop came to a staring halt. Both jail cells were empty, the bed linens in one rumpled; but the cell doors were firmly locked. Belle surmised, hoped that that Zelena had escaped through the time portal—and then she realized the foolishness of that hope. Zelena might be out of their hair and away from the dagger, but if she'd gone back in time, she could be doing irreparable harm.

Regina shot that theory down: without magic Zelena couldn't have left the jail. Then she turned her accusations and everyone's attention to Rumple. "Unless you did something to her."

For just a second, Belle's heart stopped. He'd promised. . . on his dagger, he'd promised. . . as she accepted his marriage proposal, he'd promised. . . .
To Belle's relief, Rumple flatly denied the accusation. There. She flashed a glare at Regina: Rumple doesn't lie. "Even if I wanted to," he went on, "Belle has my dagger. She would certainly curb any homicidal tendencies."

Before an argument could break out, David interrupted, bringing in the surveillance tape. As the heroes watched, a very vulnerable Zelena stood up against the jail cell wall. The tape sputtered, David cursed the Betamax player and slapped it, and when the tape straightened out, Zelena could be seen casting a curse upon herself—changing herself into porcelain that then shattered into dust. The dust swirled and blew away.

Shocked, Regina fished for an explanation. Belle ignored it; she was preoccupied with the flood of self-righteous anger (and relief) that washed over her when the tape irrefutably proved Rumple innocent. Maybe now they'd stop blaming him for everything evil. Trust him—no, they never would, but in their embarrassment, surely they would apologize. And if they apologized for this, surely one day they'd apologize for having left him in that damn cage for more than a year. Belle searched their faces for signs of contrition. She thought she found it in Robin's, but Regina was busy playing magic professor, and David merely stared down his nose at Rumple.

Rumple had the right to be offended, but he took the high road, offering the heroes advice, cautioning them to keep everyone clear of the portal. Belle raised her chin in pride. Tonight, when they were alone, she would tell him just how impressed she was by his display of restraint at this unfounded accusation.

He didn't trust Rumple, that was clear, but David reached for his phone. "I'll get the Street Department to erect a barrier around that thing, soon as I call Emma. The rest of you might as well go back to the party."

"You sure, sheriff?" Robin hesitated.

David shrugged. "The public needs to be informed, but the last thing we need is to cause a panic."

"Especially for Snow," Regina added, and David and Robin smiled at her in gratitude for her acknowledgement. "After everything Zelena put her and the baby through."

Belle sniffed. Yeah, Snow and the baby had suffered at Zelena's hands, and that needed to be recognized. But the mom and newborn weren't Zelena's only victims. Then Belle shook herself out mentally. Carrying a chip on her shoulder for Rumple's sake would do him no good and certainly would interfere with her attempts to encourage his recovery.

She reached for his hand. "Let's go back to the diner."

"I'll be along as soon as I reach Emma," David assured them, turning away from them to speak into the phone.

Regina straightened her shoulders. "Back to the party, then." The group moved more slowly this time, back the way they'd come. Regina made a brief announcement to the partiers: "Zelena has . . . extinguished herself. She's no longer a threat. David will be along shortly. He asked us to resume the festivities. Now, Ms. French, Gold, would you care for some punch?" Pasting on a smile, the queen poured out cups of punch.

"What do you mean, 'extinguished herself'?" Leroy belted out, but Ruby elbowed him in the gut. "What do you think it means, dope? Have some respect." She tilted her head in Henry's direction. Then she too pasted on a smile and called out above the murmurs, "Seconds on cake, anyone? Belle, you didn't get a piece. It's chocolate. Mr. Gold? We have ice cream to go with it."
Belle accepted a plate and set it on the table, but she didn't sit down when Rumple drew out a chair for her. "I'm going to go congratulate Snow—and reassure her."

She didn't ask him to accompany her to the Charmings' table; he was grateful for that. She understood that social functions had always been a strain for him, and after everything he'd suffered the past year, she wouldn't push him too far. He'd agreed to attend this ceremony for her sake; she appreciated that and would ask no more of him today. With a quick kiss to his cheek, she went off to pay their respects to Snow and meet the baby.

Regina lingered a little longer as Rumple seated himself. Briefly, he contemplated offering her the chair he'd intended for Belle, but on second thought, he saw no reason to fake such a nicety. Just four days ago, this woman had lorded his dagger over him: he owed her no courtesy.

"Perhaps I. . . was a bit hasty," she began. But that was as far she was willing to go with an apology. She changed the subject, setting his cup of punch before him. "I understand congratulations are in order for you, too."

He scowled but remained silent.

"For your engagement, I mean. The newspaper said you hadn't set the date yet, but that it would be soon."

"And private," he growled. "Very private."

She sniffed. "Well. I won't expect an invitation then. But congratulations just the same. You deserve some happiness, and so does she."

He stopped frowning. "Thank you."

They had nothing more to say to one another, so Regina returned to her lasagna pan and Rumple studiously avoided eye contact with anyone else. He was here; that was the best he could do today. He wanted no questions about his future or his immediate past; he wanted no congratulations for his engagement or his release from the witch. He kept his gaze fixed on the tabletop, and when Belle returned, he rose until she'd seated herself, then he spent the rest of the party chatting with her alone. It was the longest uninterrupted conversation the two of them had ever had in the diner.

David returned and took Snow aside for a private consultation; Ruby bounced the baby while they went out to the alley. When they returned and slid into the booth beside Henry, Snow appeared white-faced, and when she took the baby from Ruby, she held him close. Granny turned the jukebox on to a song that advised the listener to "shake it off, 'cause the haters gonna hate hate hate hate." Conversation resumed, cake and lasagna and punch and beer were consumed, and for the most part, Storybrooke seemed convinced the Wicked Witch was dead and they were safe once more.

After Regina, only Henry, Archie and Ruby came by the table to say a quick hello; only Henry was able to elicit a smile from Rumple. Then Emma, looking understandably pale, dashed in, and after speaking a few words to her parents and Henry, she kissed her brother's forehead and made her way to the counter for a whiskey. Another belt later, she was ready to play hostess again, though Belle noticed a continuing wonderment in her eyes. Apparently, Zelena's suicide had come as quite a shock to her. Emma made the rounds, accepting hugs, offering refills on the beer, laughing at the Merry Men's lame jokes. She finally made her way back toward the entrance, where Rumple and Belle sat.

Belle embraced her and congratulated her on becoming a sister. "Mom did all the hard work,"
Emma chuckled. "But aren't the results great? Can I offer you guys a beer?" Her voice dropped a bit. "Glad you could make it, Gold."

Belle noticed a softening of Rumple's features as he said a few words in response to Emma's greeting, and it gave her an idea: perhaps these two, who might have become in-laws, if not for Fate and Zelena, should have an opportunity to share their memories. Perhaps such a conversation could get them to lower their walls just enough to express their shared grief. When she strolled over to the punch bowl for refills, Belle presented Emma with an open-ended invitation to dinner. "Rumple is a gourmet cook; I'm sure he'd love to show off his skills. And if Henry doesn't like gourmet, we can always throw a hamburger on the grill."

Emma sounded doubtful but to be polite, she sort of accepted. "Sure. It would be good for Henry to get to know his grandfather better. We, uh, guess we'll be staying in Storybrooke, after all." She cast a glance toward Rumple. "There is something I'd like to ask Gold about. Something that happened to me and Hook today."

Belle's smile froze. "Oh. Well, then, I'll give you a call as soon as we get back from our honeymoon." She gave Emma a hug. "See you later, Emma."

From his table beside the entrance, Rumple watched the exchange between Belle and Emma with interest, though over the noise, he couldn't hear what was said; he had a pretty good idea, however, that it would somehow result in more work for him. But his memory won out over his disdain for being called to further service for the Charmings: a conversation with Emma could fill in some of the gaps in the story of Bae's adult years, so he would talk to her, make a deal with her if necessary, to learn more about his son.

Even more interesting to him was the exchange between Emma and her parents, as it seemed to involve a change of heart for Emma. He would tolerate continued contact with the Charmings if only to find out what had happened to get the savior so flustered and so huggy with Mom and Dad. Whatever Emma had decided, it seemed to make Henry exceedingly glad.

"I think it's going well, don't you?" Belle said as she returned to the table. It wasn't an idle question, Rumple understood. "It's okay." He really meant I'm okay. "I'll be glad to go home, though. Regina's lasagna is a highway to heartburn." He poked at the pepper flakes on his plate.

Belle giggled. "When we get home I'll mix you a bicarbonate." She emphasized home, and that prompted him to smile, as she knew it would.

"Home," he echoed. "You know, we haven't talked about that yet. If there's anything you want to change about the house—new curtains, new furniture, a paint job—just name it and it's done. Or if you don't like the house—"

"Excuse me. If I could have everyone's attention," David called out, and all conversation ceased. He made a nice little speech, ending with "We name him for a hero, someone who saved every one of us. We loved him and he loved back." There was a crack in his voice.

Snow picked up the speech. "People of Storybrooke, it is our great joy to introduce you to our son, Prince Neal." She glanced at Rumple, then turned her attention to Emma.

That wasn't his name, Rumple wanted to interrupt. But he supposed he would have to let that complaint go; Bae had made his choice of name long ago, and to deny it would be disrespectful as well as pointless. As soon he released the thought, a flood of memories
washed over Rumple, and the memory of emotions: surfacing above them all was the vision of a father in combat uniform holding his infant son for the first time, and promising to take care of him forever, and that infant reaching up to grasp the father's nose.

Belle blinked back tears and reached out for her fiance's hand, but found it otherwise engaged: Rumple was resting a finger along his nose and his eyes had closed. Belle withdrew her hand, giving him his privacy; if she touched him, she thought, he might lose his composure, and he'd be so embarrassed to be caught tearing up in public. Later, she would ask him how he felt about this decision of Snow's.

The party began to break up soon thereafter, as the gifts were all opened and Regina dished out the last of the lasagna and Snow handed over the baby to David for a diaper change. Belle granted Rumple the relief of being the first to leave. As they walked to the Cadillac, she hugged his arm. "Thank you, Rumple. I know that was hard."

He kissed the top of her head. "There will be more hard times to come, sweetheart. Thank you for being patient with me."

She fell silent, a little disturbed by his comment. They would marry tomorrow; what did he mean by "more hard times to come"? Shouldn't he be happy? Then she felt guilty for prescribing feelings for him. After all he'd been through, happiness, when it came, would be hard won. But it would come, she vowed. She'd make sure of that.

As he handed Belle into the Caddy, he felt an itch at the back of his neck. Something had changed, a shift in the lines of magic that crisscrossed this town. As he walked around to the driver's side, he took the opportunity to scan the street, then the horizon, sending out questioning pulses of magic, like sonar, and answers bounced back at him. Something magical was missing. He searched the horizon with his eyes and his magic, until he made his discovery: the beam of light that had signaled the opening of Zelena's portal had disappeared. His magic poked and prodded the other lines of magic, reading the signatures and sending him back indentifications: Regina's, Blue's, the other fairies'. Zelena's was gone, its last lingering traces completely wiped from the sky. He breathed more easily then.

Later, however, regret gnawed at him like a starved rat. What if, while that portal had been open, he had...
The Night the Stars Went Out

5 May 2014

Apparently, Emma and Hook had only been gone a few minutes—in this world. Or so said Snow, who had assumed she's merely gone off to the ladies' room to "powder [her] nose." Funny how traces of Mary Margaret lingered in the bold Queen Snow, just as traces of David popped up sometimes in the queen's consort.

Funny how a few minutes in, what appeared to others to be, a normal day could result in an earth-shaking, heart-rending change for another.

After what she'd witnessed in the Enchanted Forest—the apparent execution by fire of her own mother, followed by a most amazing, magical salvation, followed by the falling in eternal love of her parents—Emma now believed not only in magic, but also in Love, with a capital L. As she ran from the barn, leaving Hook to tend to their unexpected guest, she had but one goal in mind: to bind herself tightly to all her loved ones and never, ever leave them again. Whether that included Hook—Killian—she wasn't sure at this point, but at long, long last, she had a family, and now, she realized, she had a home.

She ran through the woods, through the park, through the center of town—years of chasing bail jumpers had given her stamina. She burst into the diner and threw herself into her parents' arms, startling but pleasing them when she announced that she was here to stay. She tried to explain what had happened to her—how she'd had an opportunity no child had ever had—and how she'd been offered a gift she'd found the strength to refuse. It would have been so easy, in those last moments in the Enchanted Forest as a shocked father had gripped her wrist and begged for information, to surrender her grief to him, spare them both, and Henry, from a lifetime of sorrow. Rumplestiltskin was as smart as he was magical: he could have found a way, perhaps, to change the future enough to rescue Neal without erasing everyone else's destinies. But when she'd looked into his panicked eyes and saw the love for Neal that mirrored her love for Henry, all she could think of was honor: what would best honor Neal's sacrifice? And when she remembered all Neal had done for Henry's sake, she knew the answer. So she'd made the right choice, because in the end, what it all boiled down to was respecting the sacrifices these two fathers, Rumplestiltskin and Neal, had made for their children.

And so she'd argued with the Dark One, tried to talk him out of using the information she'd provided him to change his son's fate, but even as she fought for the right words, she'd realized he'd already made his decision. That's how much he loved his son: enough to let him go.

He'd released her, allowed her to return to Storybrooke, allowed Neal's death to stand. As a parent, she could feel the depth of this sacrifice; killing himself to stop Pan had been huge for Rumplestiltskin, but allowing his son's death to occur so that the future could play out as it Fate meant it to, that was tremendous. She could almost admire the guy, except she was too overwhelmed with her own emotions to empathize with someone else.

She ran through the streets of her town, into her parents' arms. Bewildered, they stroked her hair and patted her back and listened her to jumbled explanation of what she'd just experienced, though the only part they understood was when she told them she would stay.

That was all right. They didn't have to understand her; they took her on faith, because they were family.

---------------------------------------------------------------
How quickly, how earth-shatteringly, heart-stoppingly quickly everything can go completely wrong, and with just one near-sighted decision. But of course everything would go wrong, when Ms. Swan was at the center of it.

The party had started to break up, the gifts having been opened and the pots having been scraped clean of every scap of food. A few people—mainly, the dwarfs, who apparently still considered themselves Queen Snow's Royal Guard, duty-bound to remain within earshot of Her Highness, her consort and the new princeling—he had, even though Granny had started watering down the beer an hour ago. "Innkeeper's Law," she was heard to mutter to Ruby. "If one of those boneheads gets picked up for DUI, I can be held responsible for not cutting their booze off sooner." Ruby had merely hummed nonchalantly, pretending to listen, though her attention was fixed, strangely enough, on the redhaired psychiatrist, who'd been cornered by Ms. Ginger (also well into her cups, though her drink of choice was wine spritzers). Ms. Ginger seemed to be unable to make up her mind as what she wanted from Hopper: she alternated between wheedling him into a Sunday dinner at her place and pulling out of him an official stamp of approval for her cat collection, though he was clearly a dog man.

Roland, curled up in Friar Tuck's lap, had nodded off hours ago, despite the racket, but when Robin shook him awake and suggested it was bedtime, the boy had wheedled one more boon—clever boy, he'd asked Regina instead of his father. "Can I have some rocky road before I have to go to bed? Pleeeeeeeease, Regina?"

Those dimples went straight to Regina's heart. "I need some fresh air anyway," she said apologetically.

"One small cone," Robin relented, lifting the boy onto his shoulders. "And then we'll come back to pick up your pans," he told Regina, "and say good night, and then," he added for Roland, "you're going straight to bed."

"Yes, sir." Clever boy, the display of courtesy went right to Robin's heart. Hand in hand, Regina and Robin, with Roland riding on his shoulders, ambled out into the evening and headed for Any Given Sundae. Regina gripped the edges of her coat as a blast of chilly wind hit them. "It's cold tonight! Are you sure you want ice cream?"

The boy nodded, the crisp air driving away the last cobwebs from his head. So fetch cones they did, Roland unwittingly having hit a guilty nerve in Regina, who had forbidden Henry from having sweets during his younger years. Roland got his rocky road, Regina got her fresh air, and on the way back to the diner, Robin got a few kisses. "Straight to bed, now, remember?" he warned Roland. "We're just going back to pick up the pans."

"I remember," Roland agreed, trotting along between them.

How special this was, so ordinary for most people but so special for Regina, to walk down the sidewalk with her love and her—she didn't know what to call him: Roland felt almost like a son now. He certainly acted like one, alternately charming her, obeying her, and playing her against Robin. Regina cemented this moment into her memory, alongside many, many others of the past year. Allowing Roland to swing her arm, she led her boys into the diner. "I'll just pop into the kitchen and grab my dishes." Robin and Roland slid into a booth so Roland could finish his ice cream as they waited.

Such a simple plan, Fate just had to gum it up, its instrument the savior. Emma waylaid Regina as she started for the back of the restaurant. "Regina, there's . . . something. . . .you should know," the savior sputtered.
Of course there was. Ms. Swan just couldn't bear to see a villain standing on the precipice of a happy ending, could she?

"I brought someone back from the past," Swan yammered on, as Regina prepared to inform Swan that as the (former) mayor, she wanted the sheriff to arrest herself for public drunkenness, for clearly she was making no sense. "This woman, and she still thinks of you as—"

"Evil," Regina supplied, and it all went to hell in a handbasket from there.

As she listened to a fantastical story about Hook and Swan's having been sucked into Zelena's portal, Regina watched out of the corner of her eye as a Robin rose slowly from a table and a word worse than any curse slipped from his lips, "Marian!"

For Regina, the party was over.
Her heart pounded so loudly she was certain her father could hear it as he presented her with a bouquet of white roses and hydrangeas. "You look beautiful," he said, but there was a question in his eyes. "Are you sure? It's not too late—"

She pursed her lips. "Papa, don't. After everything he and I have been through, don't you think we deserve our happiness?"

Moe hesitated, adjusting the ribbons on her bouquet to buy some time. "He's still the Dark One."

"No," she insisted. "He's not. He's my husband, and he's a changed man. Didn't you say so yourself after he apologized to you?"

Moe bit his lip and nodded.

"I want you to remember one thing: he surrendered his life to save mine. I have no doubt he'd do it again." She pressed a hand to her father's chest. "That's how much he loves me. Knowing that, how can you doubt him?"

Moe tried to smile as he linked her arm in his. "Then—I trust your judgment, my blossom, and I'll welcome him to the family."

"And we'll welcome you to ours," she said, gently reminding him that from this point forward, she had a new priority. They walked from Rumplestiltskin's cabin into the yard, where Archie, Henry, Dove and Rumple waited at the wishing well. She cast a quick glance at Archie, who was grinning as if he'd been the Cupid to make this match happen, then to Henry, who grinned too, then she glanced at her father, showing him with her smile that she had no uncertainty. At last she turned her eyes to her husband, and there they remained. Everyone else, and everything else, faded away.

She spoke her vows, and he spoke his. She assured him of her faith in him; he assured her of his trust in her, his willingness to let her continue to remake him. Their words were not traditional, nor were they poetry, but the words were theirs. They did not promise each other forever tonight; they'd done that long ago.

In less than ten minutes, the ceremony was over. It was a far cry from the state wedding she would have had if she had married Gaston, but she didn't miss the trappings of nobility at all; she only missed her mother.

Rumple bent his head and she perched on her high heels to kiss, and as Henry, Dove and Archie applauded, she linked her arm in Rumple's and they walked slowly back to the cabin. Their guests followed for a brief midnight supper before Dove drove them all back to Storybrooke, leaving the newlyweds alone in the big pink house.

"Well, darling?" She pressed her back to the door as she closed it behind them. Modest and aroused at the same time, she lay her hand upon his chest, toy ing with a button of his vest as she looked up at him through her eyelashes. "So..." she purred, "what shall we do, on our first night as newlyweds? Would you like to... watch television? Listen to the stereo? Play chess?"

"Many things." He watched her fingers pry the button from its hole. "I'd like to do many things, but first." His hands slid over hers, preventing her from opening another button. "Belle, there's
something I need to do, if you'll permit me." He took her hand and led her to the living room, a part of the house only she and the cleaning lady had ever entered. The few visitors—business acquaintances, not guests, for he'd never invited anyone to his home—who'd dropped by over the years had never gotten farther into the house than the foyer; not even Dove had ever entered the living room. This was where Rumple let down his hair after long hours of public Goldness. This was where he revealed himself, though the selection of books, music CDs, and DVDs he amused himself with. This was where photos of Belle were displayed, and a framed sketch of a teenage boy was given pride of place above the couch.

The curse had brought this sketch here and had hung it on the wall; while he was still under the curse, he'd spent many confused hours staring at it, trying to understand its significance. One of his first memories, after awakening from the curse, was the realization that this was a self-portrait drawn by a lonely boy whose father had locked him away from other people in order to protect him. A painful decision, one Bae had never understood—one Bae had taken to mean Rumple didn't trust him—but a necessary decision. As he settled Belle onto the couch, he glanced up at the sketch and regretted that Bae hadn't lived long enough to experience the painful decisions a father has to make to keep his child safe.

Belle folded her hands in her lap. Taking a cue from his serious expression, she understood the time for flirting had not yet arrived. "What is it, Rumple?"

He sat beside her, his hand on her knee. "Sweetheart, in the eyes of the world, you and I are now family. Everything that I have is yours. I went to the bank today to have your name added to everything: the shop, the house, the accounts, the rental properties, even the car. We'll spend some time tomorrow with my financial adviser; it's important that you know all about our assets and our sources of income, and all our expenditures as well. From now on, all decisions about our finances will be shared ones."

She went a little pale at this news, and he realized that she'd never fully realized the extent of his wealth. As a former noblewoman who'd lived in both extreme luxury and war-generated poverty, she knew the power and value of money, but perhaps because of his magic—and the careless way he'd tossed his spun gold around the Dark Castle—she'd never quite connected him and wealth. But that would have to change. In this world, money could get things done so much more easily than magic could.

"I know money isn't the most romantic of topics, and maybe it's insensitive for me to mention it on our wedding night, but you need to know everything that being married to me entails."

She nodded slowly, waiting, because his mood was growing even more serious.

"Belle, in the eyes of the world, we're family, but in the eyes of magic, we are not. Magic defines family by blood. A sorcerer's magic—even the Dark Curse—will protect the sorcerer's blood relatives. Do you... understand what I'm getting at?" She shook her head, and he looked down at his hands, which were glowing softly, and his voice thickened. "I wish Bae had allowed me to do this—what I'm about to ask you to do. If he had, he'd be alive today. But because I took on the curse after he was born, the genetic material he acquired from me was—" he snorted. "Let's just say he came from poor quality stock." He turned his eyes to hers, trying to impart through them the importance of what he was about to ask her to do. "Belle, Hook will never be able to harm you again, nor Regina or any of those who want to hurt me. My magic can protect you from attack, even if I'm not physically there. It will also mend small wounds, speed up recovery for common illnesses."

She frowned. "Prevent me from growing old naturally?"
"No, nor from dying at the time Destiny has determined for you to. Nor will it make a mage of you. It will be just a tiny speck of magic, a single drop among the millions in your system." He drew in a breath. "And when we leave the boundaries of Storybrooke and go out into a world where magic doesn't exist, the protection will cease. But as long as you're here, where you're most vulnerable, my magic will shield you. If you're willing."

She lowered her eyes in thought, and he watched closely as myriad emotions danced across her face.

"I know you have a... healthy dread of magic. This would be very, very little, I assure you. And it will be light magic; nothing at all like my curse. It will have no effect on your mind or your heart, only your body, and only to ward off harm from those who would do violence to you."

"Will it kill them?"

"No. It's a shield, not a weapon."

Her mouth tightened, and when she looked up at him, he thought he saw refusal in the flat line of her mouth. But she surprised him, as she sometimes did, whenever he thought her too good, too pure. "No more secret asylums?"

"No."

"No more gunshots? False memories? No one—not even my father—can steal my memories again?" Her eyes filled with alarm as she remembered all that people had done to her, to get to Rumple.

"No. No one. No matter how powerful, no matter how misguided their intentions."

"I can be free." She said, and excitement replaced the alarm. Then she realized something, and she touched his arm lightly. "Oh, Rumple, if only you could be free too."

His heart, if he still had it, would have leapt in his chest. It was the first indication he'd had that his plan to escape the dagger might not be entirely abhorrent to her, after all.

Her eyes and her voice were firm. "I want this."

He hugged her and kissed her forehead. "Sweetheart, I'm so relieved." Then he drew back. "Belle, this is blood magic."

"Ohhh." She understood then. "Literally. How do we—"

He summoned his dagger. "There has to be a small exchange of blood, with this." To demonstrate, he rested the blade against the palm of his hand. "Like this." He sliced the blade across his palm, making a shallow cut, barely an inch long. Beads of blood emerged in the opening of his skin.

"All magic," she recited.

" Comes with a price," he agreed.

"Such a small price for freedom. I won't even need stitches."

He chuckled humorlessly. "Just a Band-Aid." And with a flick of his finger, a box of Band-Aids appeared on the coffee table.

She offered him her palm. "Do it."
He didn't need to ask if she was sure. She didn't flinch or even close her eyes as he cut her palm. As a line of red filled the lifeline of her hand, she cocked her head. "The needles at the hospital hurt worse. I'm type A positive, by the way. Which type are you?"

"I don't know." With the dagger in between, he pressed his palm to hers, and their joined hands glowed with gold light. She'd felt his magic on her skin before (most recently, when he'd healed her gunshot wound; she grimaced at that memory), so she wasn't surprised by its warmth and its tingle, nor the gush of adrenaline that coursed up the veins of her wrist, her inner arm, and settled deep in her chest. Still, she gasped.

"Do you feel pain?" His free hand hovered over their two joined hands. "I can ease it."

"No. The opposite. I feel energized, like I've just drunk a Red Bull."

This time his chuckle was genuine. "It won't last." Already the light encircling their joined hands was dimming, and in another minute it extinguished altogether. He released her, and as she examined her wound, he sent the dagger back to its hiding place.

She showed him her hand. "It's stopped bleeding." Then she gasped, "Look! The cut is disappearing!"

"Magic." He showed her his healed palm. "It's already taking care of you. But remember, it can only fix small problems, so don't go diving off of tall ladders."

She stroked the shiny scar that had already formed on her lifeline. "So this is what freedom feels like."

"What does it feel like?"

"It tingles." Spontaneously she leaned forward and kissed him. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he said, "for allowing me to give you this protection."

"Now I have a gift for you." Her fingers plucked at his vest buttons again. "If you'll have it?"

He played innocent even as she pushed his vest open. "Ice cream?"

"Oh, no, my darling wizard. Sweet, yes, but not cold at all. Now, if you'll light a fire, I'll go change into your gift."

"Something you'll want to unwrap slowly."

Rumple built a fire as she changed into her white silk peignoir.

She was right: he did want to unwrap his gift slowly, one ribbon at a time, as the fire gained strength. They lay before the fireplace on a thick blanket on the floor and sipped wine and ate chocolate-dipped strawberries, and kisses became touches, and the pile of discarded garments grew. When his present was completely unwrapped, he showed her with his body just how much he loved her.

When he finally lay back in exhaustion, she tucked her head into the dip in his shoulder, and he conjured a second blanket for them to snuggle under. And then it was time to hope and dream as they made plans for the future: travel, a new house. Belle raised an eyebrow as she glanced over her shoulder at him. "Children?"

She held her breath. She'd worried about bringing up this subject. Considering his age, the loss of
Bae, and the seeming never-ending parade of enemies who would take him down if they could, she suspected he would be opposed to risking the introduction of a child. She could accept that, if it were his answer, but she'd rather it not be. "Someday," she added hastily, to assure him he would have time to grieve, time to heal, before she asked him to create a new life with her.

She waited for his answer. It came in the form of a smile and a kiss. "Someday," he agreed, and she sighed. It was enough of an answer for now; she'd press the subject no further tonight. Warily she rose, dragging the blanket from him as she stood, and he grumbled in response, rubbing his arms to chase away the chill. "The fire is lovely but the bed would be warmer." She reached down for him—pausing just a moment to glance at her new scar. "Come on, let's go upstairs."

She awoke before sunrise and reached for him, but the bed was empty. She called his name through the haze of sleep. "I'm here," he answered from across the bedroom. Dressed in black slacks and a blue shirt, he was seated in a leather armchair.

"Why are you so far away?"

He responded by coming to her, but he didn't lie down with her. He sat on the mattress, his back to the headrest. "Did you sleep well, sweetheart?"

She smiled saucily. "Let's be decadent and stay in bed all day."

"Still sleepy?" he teased.

"Take those clothes off and I'll show you how sleepy I am."

Their first night together as a married couple, their wedding night, and he couldn't bear to remain in bed with her after she fell asleep. It wasn't her; it was him. It was his guilt. He pondered this: with his heart out of his chest, he shouldn't be able to feel such complex emotions as guilt and shame, but yet there they were. After much consideration he concluded that he must be wrong: perhaps guilt and shame weren't emotions at all but rather ideas. Perhaps the mind examined the difference between what one should have done, or intended to do, and what actually was done, and if the latter came up short, the mind marked it as failure and, to push itself to improve next time, instigated guilt. He liked that explanation; it was logical. Better yet, it meant guilt could be managed simply by redefining the parameters for failure.

And then he looked over at Belle, lying there with pleasant dreams playing across her face—dreams of him? Probably. And the guilt came back, slapped him upside the head and told him his theory was bullshit.

He sat in a chair throughout the night and watched her and thought. He had married her with promises and proclamations of his reformation. They weren't lies, exactly; they just weren't true at this moment. Someday soon, they would be. He had made love to her, but it had been the memory of love he'd shared with her; it was real and genuine, but without his heart, the love he'd given her wasn't right now. He had convinced her otherwise; his memories of loving her were easy to relive.

As he watched her sleep, he decided that someday he'd tell her the truth about the dagger, but he would never tell her he'd married her and made love to her without feeling everything she did. When the opportunity arose for them to leave this town, he would reclaim his heart, and he would make tonight up to her. A second wedding, in Paris, perhaps, with a proper
honeymoon in Greece or Italy.

He would make everything right someday, give her the openness and honesty she thought he was giving her now, but first he had to protect her.
Been Out in the Night

6 May 2014

Emma wasn't comfortable with the everyday niceties. Give her a bail jumper to chase, or a giant's beanstalk to climb, or a Glock to shoot dragons with, and she was right in her element, but sit her down with a stranger and expect her to have a warm and friendly chat, no way. And so she turned Marian over to someone who was made for that sort of interaction: Ruby. Emma would've preferred handing over the job of Welcome Wagon lady to Snow, who had been born into the social graces, but with new-mom duties topped off with new-mayor duties, Snow had her hands more than full. When Emma popped into the diner to ask Ruby to go out to the Merry Men's camp with a basket of goodies for the only Merry Woman, the waitress seized the opportunity. On her order pad, she began jotting down "necessaries": "Jeans and boots and a jacket and tops. Underwear. Toiletries. Just a hint of make-up—a starter kit. Perfume. A cell phone. An iPod with a sampling of music. Magazines—"

"Holy crap, Rubes, you gonna clean out Clark's store for her? Just take a couple of 'welcome to the neighborhood' kinda things. We don't want to scare her off with a bunch of complicated electronics." But Emma was secretly pleased: Marian would have a cultural guide to this world, while Ruby would have a meaningful project and a companion to make up for the honeymoon absence of her friend Belle.

Feeling quite proud of herself, Emma settled into a booth to enjoy her after-school hot chocolate with Henry. They chatted about his first day back at school (making friends came so much easier for him now, after his experiences in New York), her adventures in time travel, their house-hunting plans; all the while they grinned at each other. Their lives were so full now, so right now, now that they had returned to who and where they were meant to be. As she listened to him detail the requirements for their new house, Emma was impressed with her son's maturity: over the past year he'd grown into a level-headed young man, the credit for which she would gladly share with New York. She wondered if Regina had noticed the change in Henry too. It was a great gift Regina had given them, that year in New York; Emma made a mental note to thank the queen for it.

"—have it written into the lease," Henry was saying. "For a discount on the rent, say, fifty a month, I'll mow his lawn twice a month. He provides the equipment. That way, I can mow our lawn too without us buying a mower. What do you think?"

"Hmm? Sorry, kid, my mind wandered. Mow whose lawn?"

"Grandpa's." Henry looked just a little annoyed. "I was saying, we should negotiate a deal with him: my lawn care services in exchange for a discount on the rent." He flashed a bit of a smirk. "I think he'll get a kick out of me making a deal with him. You know, 'chip off the old block.' Maybe I should charge him seventy-five. He's probably paying twice that for professional lawn care."

Emma blinked. "What makes you think Gold will be our landlord? We might rent from some—nah. You're right. There is no one else to rent from," Emma admitted.

Henry fiddled with his napkin for a moment as he selected his next words carefully. "Mom, I know how you and Mom and Gramps feel about him, but I was thinking, well, he's related to me, even if he isn't related to you. And he could tell me stories about when my dad was my age. . . ."

"You're thinking you want to spend some time with Gold."
"Yeah."

Emma gnawed on her lip. "I dunno, Henry. We, uh, we haven't had much of a chance to see what he's like now, after, well, we don't know what all Zelena did to him. And being locked up like that, for a whole year—it was a real small cage—" She didn't want to scare Henry too bad; after all, for all his maturity, he was still too young to hear that his grandfather had murdered his other mom's sister. Though she planned to have a conversation with Gold about her time in the Enchanted Forest, Emma wasn't ready to allow Henry any alone time with the . . . man? Imp? Whatever he was, because though he had sort of died, he clearly wasn't human, and though he had fathered a child, he clearly wasn't grandfatherly. Of course she saw the value in helping Henry to connect with his father through his grandfather, but just in the short time she'd known him, Gold had killed at least two people (yeah, even if they did deserve it), had tried to con a pregnant teen into relinquishing her baby (for who knows what purpose? Remembering what Zelena had kidnapped Baby Neal for, Emma shuddered.), had burned down a building with two people in it, had rigged an election, had beat two men (one of them her boyfriend) to a bloody pulp . . .

. . . And worst of all, most unforgivable of all, had attempted to kill a child—his own flesh and blood—just because he believed some superstition about a kid who would be his "undoing," whatever the hell that meant. No responsible mom would allow a whatever-the-hell-Gold-was anywhere near her kid, ever. Even if he was the kid's only living link to his dad.

Nope. Emma could handle Gold. She was a grown woman, street-wise and completely aware of the imp's tricks. She could talk to him, find out what she needed to about magic and time travel and fate . . . and how to know when someone is your destined-to-be-together True Love, even if he was a pirate in black leather. Emma could handle herself around Gold, just as she could any other con man. But Henry, for all his growing up this past year, and for all his 'Stiltskin blood, could still be conned . . . could still be hurt emotionally, even if Gold kept his word about that "undoing" crap.

Besides, from what she'd seen a few days back in the woods, when Gold had been howling like a madman, she wasn't so sure that Gold wasn't already "undone."

"Henry, I don't think it's a good idea for you to spend time with him alone just now. I mean, look at what all he's been through; he needs time to get over all that. And now he just got married; he's going to want time alone with Belle. You can understand that, can't you?" She cringed inside as she heard herself use that horrible phrase that parents relied upon when they themselves didn't quite understand. But she knew she was doing the right thing. Someday, when he was old enough to hear the whole truth about his grandfather, Henry would get it. Might continue to be pissed off, but he'd get it.

"But just a minute ago you were okay with me negotiating a lease with him." Henry's face darkened. "And you let me go to the wedding."

"Dr. Hopper and Mr. French were there to keep an eye on . . . things. Anyway, I'm not saying stay away from him entirely. I just mean, I should be with you. Or Gramps or Gramma."

She didn't add Regina to the list: she didn't want Henry caught in the middle of the Regina-Rumple feud. "For the time being," she finished lamely.

Henry fell silent, neither arguing (he was perceptive enough to know she'd only entrench herself deeper) nor agreeing (he'd inherited the Charming stubborn streak, along with his grandma's unfailing determination to save lost souls). But she could see his mind working, and she knew the extent of his patience. She'd seen it up close, when he'd refused to give up on her, before she'd become a believer. She had no doubt he'd obey her, but neither did she doubt he'd hide his time . . . and like a 'Stiltskin, watch for loopholes.
Regina tried, she really did, to accept Fate's (and Ms. Swan's) decision to rescue Marian from the past. She tried to see this sea change through Roland's eyes: how amazing to have his mother back! How wonderful to have a second chance to know her, to grow up in the security of her love! She tried to see this change through Robin's eyes (though she could see the confusion there): how blessed to have his helpmeet by his side again, the honored mother of his child. But when the peasant woman accused Regina of being a monster, the queen had to fight the urge to show her just how monstrous she could be.

Fought the urge, and won.

She'd been fighting the urges and winning day after day. She'd done the right thing time after time, even when her common sense told her that the right thing wasn't the smart thing (and certainly not the satisfying thing: how enjoyable it would have been to watch the giggly imp tear Zelena limb from magic limb). She'd been backing her nature into a corner and pounding it into submission, hour after hour, for a year now: hadn't she earned her happy ending? Wouldn't it have been smart for Fate to reward her efforts, to keep her traveling the straight and narrow road?

Yet, Robin made his decision. A confused, heart-broken decision: he chose Regina but he would honor his marriage vows.

So Regina made her choice. Apparently, no amount of soul-scrubbing could rid her of the stains villainy had left upon her, so why fight nature? The answer lay right here, in her safe. She opened the box and lifted out the Dark One's heart. Just two words spoken to the heart, and Regina's problem would be solved. She brought the heart close to her face and prepared to issue the command: Kill Marian.

He could do it so subtly no one would ever guess what had become of Marian. He could make the body and all traces of evidence just disappear. Gold had a knack for these things.

Except.

He also had a knack for getting his own back on people who attempted to manipulate him. She'd felt his wrath every time she'd crossed him; she still bore the wraith's mark on the palm of her hand.

She studied the heart as she pondered how she might pull this off without his ever finding out she was the one who issued the order. The heart was a living thing, she knew, fragile as a baby's tear, yet strong enough to bear up under the most horrific events life had to throw at it. She could feel the life force, unusually strong, in this heart as she held it gingerly in her branded palm. That force was older than the magic that laced through this heart; Rumple had always had an overwhelming need to survive. It was an important piece of information that an enemy (or a friend) should have about him, to understand his motives.

Regina frowned. She'd read somewhere that Rumplestiltskin had been the Dark One for at least two centuries before she was even born, and she knew for a fact that he'd committed acts that would give even the Evil Queen nightmares. So why was this heart dominated by healthy red? There were plenty of streaks of black, all right, but there was far too much red, an indicator of—no, it couldn't be goodness. Not in the Dark One. A good thought couldn't survive in that corrupted mind. Goodness wasn't pumping the lifeblood through this heart, which meant the driving force here—the force that was shielding a part of Rumplestiltskin from the Dark Curse—was love.

Well. Very interesting. She'd seen for herself the lengths Rumple had gone to, to reunite with his son. She'd seen the man sacrifice himself to save Baelfire and Belle (and, she had to admit, probably Henry), for crying out loud. So yeah, it shouldn't be surprising that love ruled his heart,
though evil still ruled his head.

She understood a thing or two about love, now.

She slipped the heart back into its box and the box back into the safe. She'd find an easier way to solve the Marian problem. She didn't want to cross a sorcerer in love.

She poured herself a glass of wine and sat staring into the remains of the fire Robin had built in the fireplace last night. She considered her resources; among them would be a solution.

Then she remembered that beam of light that had streaked across the sky tonight, and she laughed aloud. What would Zelena say if she knew that in her dying, she'd given her sister a gift that would ensure her happy ending?

Regina would get rid of Marian, in a way no one would in this time and town would ever learn about: she would reactivate the portal, go back in time and eliminate the problem by executing Marian, as she should have done originally.
He's backing up, his palms pushing air away from him, but the darkness encases him so that he can't see the direction from which the attack will come. Her laughter surrounds him, strips the skin from his bones. He calls out for help, and that's when he begins to realize this is just a dream: Rumplestiltskin never asks for help. He thinks he can hear, in the distance, Snow White and Prince Charming chattering to each other about flaky pie crust and toothpaste. He calls to them, first a demand, then a threat, then a bargain, then a sobbing plea, but they yammer on and nobody comes and he keeps backing up, backing up, still he can't tell where Zelena is; maybe she's everywhere. He trips on something and changes his direction, still backing up, and he looks down to see what he's tripped on: a casket rising from the ground. The casket shakes and the nails that hold the lid down pry themselves loose, then come flying at him, and as the casket lid pops open, the nails pound into him, into his bare feet, his waist, the palms of his hands. He is lifted by the force of their blow and thrown against a wall, and the nails drive themselves through his flesh and into the bricks, locking him in place. All the while Zelena laughs.

And this was what Rumplestiltskin dreamt on his wedding night. When he awoke, sweating and panting, he blinked up at the familiar ceiling-his bedroom's, not the cellar's. Carefully so as not to disturb her, he eased out of her embrace-his beloved's, not his captor's-and he planted his feet solidly on the cold wood floor. When his head stopped spinning, he raised himself slowly, easing up from the mattress just an inch at a time so he wouldn't awaken her, and when he was finally standing on his own two feet, he took a deep cleansing breath. He shivered as the night air hit his bare chest. Despite the darkness, he found his robe where he always kept it hung and his slippers where he always left them at the foot of the bed; he slipped them on and pattered his way to the bathroom. By the time he'd washed his face, he'd gained control of his breath. The floorboards squeaked as he made his way back to the bedroom. He paused to turn up the thermostat.

He stood over the bed, watching her sleep. Her first night as a wife; she was smiling in her sleep-and was that a shadow from the curtain, or was she blushing? He bent over to brush a strand of hair from her mouth.

"You'll choose ME! ME! ME!"

He shot up straight, looked around the room, wild-eyed. Impossible! And so it was, impossible; he'd killed Zelena. What he was hearing was just a memory. Refraining from touching his bride, he eased across the creaking floor to the rocking chair he kept beside the south-facing windows. He settled into it. From this vantage point, he could see the bed, the street, and the open door.

This was the wicked witch's last act of thievery: she'd stolen his wedding night from him.

Pressing his feet to the floor, he pushed the rocking chair back and forth. This was the wicked witch's legacy: she'd insinuated herself inextricably into his life. His immortal life.
"Mirror, mirror on the wall, show me who I want to kill most of all." It was an inelegant rhyme, but as usual, Regina was in too much of a hurry to craft poetry. As she waited for Sidney to retrieve the requested tidbit from the past, Regina fought off a shiver. Well, an unnatural late cold spell had settled upon the town; that was the cause of the goose bumps running along her arms. Of course it was.

When she opened her eyes, Sidney was ready. Through the mirror she watched a scene from the old days, a scene not too much different from an ordinary day in the Enchanted Forest: some loud-mouthed activist with a death wish was trying to rouse the rabble against the Evil Regal, but of course Her Majesty had caught wind of the plan and making an example of Maid Marian: "She dies tomorrow."

Ah, just another day in the realm. The mouthy peasant tried to psyche the queen out with some amateur psychoanalysis, something like "if you had love in your life you won't need to hurt other people." What a cartload of crap, as Ms. Swan would say. As the queen sashayed away, the peasant shouted at her, "You're a monster! You're a monster!" Couldn't Marian come up with anything original?

Regina was satisfied. She had the information she needed; she now knew the point in time to which she needed to travel to rid herself of... What was this, this cold lump suddenly forming in her gut? Her eyes were glued to the image reflected in the mirror—not the image of the inconsequential Snow White fan, but the image of the fashionably attired young queen practically licking her chops over the thought of Maid Marian's head on a spike. The lump in Regina's gut shifted and her throat tightened. She could hear Ms. Swan's voice in the back of her mind: What the hell?

The image in the mirror faded into mist, and then Sidney's eager-to-please puppy face reappeared. Had she seen all she wanted, he asked, but she couldn't hear him. Her blood was pounding in her ears, like sea waves battering rocks. What was this that she was feeling? She touched her enflamed cheek.

You are, a voice whispered. You are a monster. And her eyes burned as she recognized the voice as her own.

Did she desire anything else of him? Sidney wanted to know. She waved her hand and released him from the mirror, then she walked up the stairs and out of her family mausoleum, ignoring the genie's calls. She walked slowly back toward town, uncertain of her steps. She needed to gain control of her pounding heart before she could think clearly.

The loudmouthed dwarf, the one with the beard, was running up and down Moncton Avenue yelling like Chicken Little. Something about a snow monster attacking the town. Snow monster—where the hell did that come from? Not that it mattered. Snow monster, giant, wraith, who cares, leave them to the heroes, Regina had her own, internal, eternal war of darkness versus light to fight.

"They chased it into the forest!"

Still touching her burning cheek, Regina paused.

"It's attacking the Merry Men!"
Roland! Robin! Regina transported herself to the Merry Men's camp. Her beloved and his entire crew lay unconscious, scattered about the forest floor like so many corncob dolls after a storm. Roland lay in his father's arms, unharmed and awake. Swan and her pirate lay side by side in snow-somnolent. Only Marian, flat on her back, had somehow retained consciousness, and she was begging for help like the useless peasant she was.

Except.

Except she was also Roland's mother, and the boy was staring in horror at the snow monster.

Regina's thoughts were still scrambled, the boulder of shame still lodged in her belly, but none of this impeded her magic. She went onto auto-pilot, blasting Abominable from behind, and with a single burst of power, she dismantled the icy beast.

Roland now stared at her.

Marian clambered to her feet. "You saved me." But she sounded more bewildered than grateful. That was pretty close to how Regina felt, as well. The queen glanced down at her hands, still vibrating with magic, and that voice in her head—the one that sounded like her own—wondered Who the hell am I?

Roland gave Robin a shove, and the latter awoke, then sizing up the situation, scrambled to his feet.

What a stupid thing to do. If she'd just hung back a moment, the snow monster would have solved Regina's Marian problem once and for all, with no negative repercussions. And once the peasant was dispensed of, Regina could have rescued everyone else, and they'd have lauded her as their savior. Instead, she'd acted on some stupid instinct and saved Marian.

Who the hell am I? I'm a damn hero, that's who.
He'd done his duty by Bae. Finally, after centuries of failures. He could now bid his son goodbye.

He approached his son's new grave hesitantly, because he knew Bae would never have approved his method for achieving justice. "Neal Cassidy, beloved son," the stone said. He recognized the craftsmanship of the headstone as Marco's, but he wondered who had chosen the words: Emma, probably, or David. Bae wouldn't have liked the absence of the phrase "and loving father." If it had been Rumple to choose the inscription, that phrase would have been included, along with "defender of Storybrooke." But the name—he probably would have debated that with Emma, for though a man has a right to rename himself, Rumple believed that, had he lived, Bae would have resumed his birth name, because he'd come back around from the cynical thief who needed an alias to hide under, and in the last year of his life he'd picked up the mantle of Baelfire once more: a stout-hearted lad who would always do the right thing, even at risk to himself. Perhaps in the end, Rumple and Emma would have compromised and the stone would read

Baelfire
Neal Cassidy
Beloved son
Loving father
Hero

As he looked down at the polished stone, he wondered what Henry would think, coming here years from now, perhaps with his own children, to lay a Memorial Day wreath for the grandfather they'd come to know only through their father's and their grandmother's and their great-grandfather's memories.

If there were children—if the bloodline continued—Rumplestiltskin would make certain those children would have stories to connect them to Baelfire.

This was wrong. This was unnatural. A parent should never outlive his child. Although intellectually Rumple had come to accept that, as an immortal, he would outlive everyone he ever knew, that still didn't make it right.

The rest of the world believed that black magic was the inheritance of the Dark Curse, and it was, but there was a more terrible inheritance: the burden of never-ending life.

But he wouldn't bring his curse to his son's grave. He fought the blackness down and reached instead for hope. He pledged to Bae that he would take back his lie; he would place his dagger—and his freedom—in Belle's safekeeping, and he would live up to the promise he gave her last night: "And I vow to you, I will never forget the distance between what I was
and what I am." He would begin by confessing to her his deception. She would be furious—he deserved that. But she would forgive him and continue to love him and stand by his side—he didn't deserve that, but he would thank her for all of his days for the precious gift of her trust, and by giving her the dagger, he would finally demonstrate to them both how far he'd come.

As he stood and set his hand on the headstone as a pledge, he truly believed it possible. Someday, when he told the story of Baelfire's heroism to Henry's children, those children would say back to him, "Like you, Great-Grandpa. He was like you."

A man could have no higher aspiration.
Beneath her stunned exterior, some part of Emma cheered like a football fan who'd just witnessed a successful fourth-quarter hail-mary pass.

"She didn't say a word. She just stared up at that thing, then she looked down at me, and I was sure she would just stand there watching the monster stomp me into the ground, and sneer." The amazement hadn't left Marian's voice in the third telling of her rescue story. "She vanished, and I thought she was hiding somewhere, watching, but she appeared behind the monster and-"

"And she blasted it with her magic!" Roland finished, wiggling in his mother's lap as he imitated the queen's attack upon the snow monster.

"And she saved me," Marian added, kissing the top of the boy's head. "And all of us."

Emma motioned Hook aside. "Give me a few minutes before you come tagging along behind me, huh? I need to have a word with the not-so-evil queen."

"Are you quite sure, S-"

Before he could argue, Emma grabbed his coat collar, hauled him in for a shut-up kiss, then released him. "Does that feel sure to you, pirate?"

He touched his bruised lips. "Quite sure. But if you need me-"

"Yeah, I got your number." The sheriff walked away.

Sometimes having a love life was such an inconvenience to a savior.

The woman did not know when to leave well enough alone.

Ms. Swan pursued Regina to her (now former) office, where she had taken shelter from the Guilt Storm raging in her gut. Life was so much easier when she was the Evil Queen: she simply did whatever she wanted. And it was probably easier for the natural-born heroes: they simply did whatever Good told them to do. But when you were stuck in the middle. . . .

For some befuddling reason, Ms. Swan had gotten it stuck in her head that she and Regina needed to be friends. Maybe it was just the savior thing: leave no man or woman unsaved. Regina sank to the floor and did her best to ignore her. On the other side of the locked door, Ms. Swan prodded and pleaded, but finally gave up, but not before she said just the right phrase: happy endings.

As she seized Henry's storybook, the boulder in her gut broke apart and suddenly Regina could think again, and think brilliantly. Suddenly she had a plan that would fix everything, a plan that would rival Rumplestiltskin's Grand Land Without Magic Scheme.

Maybe Ms. Swan was good for something after all.
Never buy a pig in a poke.
Always look a gift horse in the mouth.

Rumplestiltskin had learned these lessons long before he learned how to read. As a child he'd had many an occasion to wish other people had: had they approached Malcolm's games with a little more wariness, it might have meant fewer beatings for inept but stubborn con man.

And yet, here he was, three hundred-plus years later, walking into an unlocked mansion (who the hell left a mansion unlocked?) in a secluded, wooded area that did not appear on the Storybrooke map—and Rumplestiltskin would know that better than anybody, since Gold owned more than ninety percent of the land in this county. His bride, teetering on her high heels (one of these days, they really must have a talk about her shoe sense. His ankle ached just watching her wobble.), marched in ahead of him, swinging the door wide open as if she were an owner here, or at least a welcome guest. Well, maybe she was. There had to be some explanation for this unoccupied, fully furnished (right down to the tea towels in the kitchen), appearing-out-of-nothing mansion.

Belle marched right in and made a beeline for the library—oh ho, so she'd been inside before. One of these days, they'd have to have a talk about this world's trespassing laws. But instead of pausing to admire the books, she opened the shutters, letting in the light (and in his mind he flashed back to another spring afternoon when she'd yanked open his curtains, fallen into his arms and made him fall into love). He should be warning her away from the windows, away from this house—every alarm in his practical body went had been going off ever since she explained how she'd found this place. He should have been sweeping her into his arms and into his car and out of impending pig-in-a-poke type danger, but instead, he was watching her tote bag swing from her arm as she walked very assuredly through the library to the windows.

As soon as she set that tote bag down, he was on it. With a snap of his fingers, he'd deanimated her just long enough to switch out the fake dagger in her bag for the real one in his jacket. His promise kept, he snapped his fingers, she began moving and talking again, and he began breathing again.

Except.

He recognized it the moment he saw it on the accent table. He should know it: he'd chased after it for two centuries, back in the Enchanted Forest, in the hope that with its immeasurable powers, he could open a portal to Bae. The Sorcerer's Magic Hat. The moment he saw it, his mouth went dry and his breath caught in his throat. Every Dark One before him, all thirty-two of them, had pursued the hat. Only four had come within its presence. Only one had actually opened the Hat.

And that one, staring down at the Hat now, saw his future flash before his eyes.
She was still too much a bride to remark upon his abilities, but as she lay sated in his arms, Belle peered at him through a curtain of hair. "That was—wow." Her head dropped in exhaustion against his shoulder.

He smiled.

She chattered a bit and he listened to her voice. She fell asleep in mid-sentence and he listened to her even breathing. She was happy, she was cared for, she was safe, for the moment. And soon, she would be forever, and so would he be. When her breathing deepened and she rolled away from him, he eased out of the bed (whose bed, he'd wondered, as Belle had led him to it after supper). He pattered over to the dressing table at which Belle had sat, just a few hours ago, brushing her hair, with him watching from the doorway.

Then he stopped himself. He sat on the bench, looking into the mirror. If he left this room tonight, there would be no turning back.

How much did he owe his new bride? His grandson? Himself? Was what he owed them worth risking the small bright light that remained alive in his soul?

If he were a hero, answered the voice inside his head, he wouldn't be asking this question. He would protect his family at any cost. But no one had ever accused him of bravery... not even Bae. For the first time in a long time, he asked himself what was the right thing—not the smart thing or the profitable thing or the safe thing—to do. The answer came in his own voice: "I pledge, Baelfire, I'll be that man you died for. Your heroism has shown me the way."

He walked into the library. Shoulders hunched, he stood over the accent table, and by the strength of the moonlight pouring through the opened curtains, he admired the Hat, compact in its box, harmless. Someone might mistake its contents for jewelry or a year's supply of snuff, certainly not a hat, and certainly not a hat containing a black hole for magic.

His skin grew clammy as he admired the box. He knew its dangers. He knew that with one slip, he could end up a prisoner of the Hat. He also knew that, in a very real way, he already was.

This Hat was danger. This Hat was torture. This Hat was all hope, all strength and all greed. This Hat was freedom forever. Rumplestiltskin was a very old, very wise soul, and he knew the price he would pay for the power of this Hat would be much higher than any his predecessors had paid.

If it controlled him.

But of course, that wasn't going to happen. He was too wise to be fooled again.

For Belle, for Henry, for any generations that may come. For himself, because he'd earned this, at the hands of Malcolm, Milah, Zoso, Hook, Cora, and by god, most certainly at the hands of Zelena. In love, he summoned his dagger, the real one, the one coated with the Innocent's tears, and he opened his imagination and the perfect plan sprung out, full-grown,
and with his dagger he opened his Hat.
We Come from an Ancient Place

8 May 2014

If Regina had watched the ten o'clock news, as she did faithfully when she was mayor, her first thought would have been that her town was under attack from a weather witch. Her second thought would have been that they all were in a lot of trouble. Bearing that thought in mind, she would have phoned Snow White to order that Henry (and the new little princeling) be taken to a secure place, and then she would have stormed into Gold's shop or his house or wherever the hell he was cuddling up these days with his snookie-ookums and she would have demanded he put the librarian down and get to work saving the town.

(How the hell did an unrepentant villain not only get away scot-free from all his crimes but also get to marry, and to a hero, to boot? How much did Gold pay the Author to get such a happy ending? Or more likely, what had he blackmailed the Author with?)

Taking immediate action to save her son, her would-have-been lover, and sweet little Roland, that was what Regina would have done, if she had watched the news. Instead, she had gone into full seclusion mode, shutting off her phone, darkening the windows, locking her door, sending a "don't bug me for a while" message via crow to her son. Then she'd shut herself up in the living room. As night fell, she polished off a bottle of Dal Forno and a box of Kleenex, and had fallen asleep, half on her couch, half on the floor, with Tristan und Isolde on repeat on her stereo.

early morning, 9 May 2014

"Everything's gone to hell in a handbasket," Emma griped, then winced as Whale poked her bare foot with a pointed thing. "Hey!" She jerked her foot away.

"Sorry, Sheriff. I'm testing for nerve damage," the doctor said. He poked around some more on that foot, then switched to the other, with the same result: Emma complained and jerked her foot. Whale straightened and wrote something onto a clipboard.

"First it's a hard freeze in the middle of May, then Regina's gone underground, then the power goes out all over town, then that iceberg blocking the highway, then I get trapped inside an ice mountain with a snow-making sorceress," the sheriff continued, talking both to her sort-of-boyfriend, who stood beside her bed, and her mother, whom they had on speaker phone.

"We'll get this under control, as soon as we convince Elsa we're not the enemy," Snow said.

"And find her sister," Hook added.

"Good news," Whale announced.

"We can use some," Snow answered. "How's Emma?"

"No permanent damage. Of course, I recommend she remain here overnight for—"

"No!" Emma interrupted.

Whale clicked his pen closed and dropped it into his breast pocket. "I had a feeling you'd say that. All right, then. Stay hydrated, inform me if any further symptoms appear, eat a—well, eat something more substantial than grilled cheese and fries—and try to get some rest. Though I know
I'm just talking to the air on that point."

Emma grabbed her phone and slid off the examining table. "Mom? I'm going back to work. See if we can track down this Anna." Without knocking she marched into the examining room next door, where her father was trying to comfort an alarmed Elsa, who was backing away from a stethoscope-armed emergency physician.

"How is she?" Emma barked, brushing past the doctor and going to Elsa's side. The latter visibly relaxed, and Emma softened her voice. "You hanging in there, Elsa?"

"I might find out if she would let me examine her," the physician complained.

"I'm uninjured," Elsa insisted. "The cold has no effect on me."

"Here," Emma said, leading Elsa to the examining table. "Sit up there. Let the doctor listen to your heart with that—it's called a stethoscope. It won't hurt."

"Is it magic?" Elsa fretted.

"No, just science," David assured her. "Anyone can use it." He grabbed the stethoscope, plugged the eartips into her ears and pressed the chestpiece to Elsa's skin. "Listen. You can hear your heart. The doctor's just going to make sure your heart's beating regularly."

"If it weren't, would I be standing here?" Elsa said dryly.

David chuckled as he returned the stethoscope to the physician. "You got a point there."

"Elsa, believe me, I was nervous too when I first came to this land. Especially when they brought me here." Hook neglected to mention the details of the occasion that had brought him to Storybrooke General for the first time. "But the sooner the doctor finishes with you, the sooner we can get back to looking for Anna. Besides, when it's all over, they give you a green jiggly dessert."

With another glance at Emma, who rubbed Elsa's back reassuringly, the Arandelle queen climbed up onto the examining table and placidly folded her hands. "Very well."

As the physician approached warily, Emma took her father aside. "Maybe you and Hook should go ahead with the investigation. I'll catch up soon as this is over and I can take her back to our place to rest."
Belle had been watching his foot jiggle all morning.

Despite this being only the third day of their honeymoon, Rumple had dressed in a full suit, as if he were going off to work. Belle couldn't fault him for that—whatever made him feel normal, that's what he should do, she told herself, though yesterday when she'd talked him into wearing jeans and a Partick Thistle FC sweatshirt for their afternoon hike in the forest, he'd looked so irresistible she'd cut the hike short (and had learned, the hard way, that forest floors were not the most comfortable surfaces for lovemaking).

This morning, after watching his foot jiggle all throughout breakfast and dishwashing and reading the morning papers, she'd finally relented. "Perhaps we should drop in at the shop for a few hours today, just to make sure things are all right."

His foot stopped jiggling. "Are you sure? This is our honeymoon. I wouldn't want to spoil it for you."

"An hour or two. Besides, I need to show you the new inventory spreadsheet I developed while you —" she suddenly broke off her sentence and shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"You can say it. We need to say it. While Zelena had me in her cage," he finished bitterly.

"Rumple, I think it would be a good idea if we talked to Archie. . . .After everything you've been through this past year, he could help. . . ."

"He's not a real psychiatrist; he's a cricket," Rumple stared hard at her. "You do know that, don't you, Belle? And before that, he was a pickpocket. I don't suppose he ever mentioned that, did he?"

"No, but—"

"So why would I want to expose my dark secrets to a thieving cricket?"

"Because he's done me a lot of good!" she blurted. Then she withdrew, realizing she'd revealed too much.

"I see. Have you been talking to him about us? About our arguments?"

"No! I mean, yes, I have talked to him about our relationship, and I told him we sometimes fight—"

"You've shared details of our private life with that fishwife?"

"No!" She leapt to her feet. "Rumplestiltskin, stop twisting my words. I've had weekly appointments with Dr. Hopper ever since I got out of Regina's asylum. You know that. And yes, I've shared all my worries with him, and when I thought you were in Neverland and I thought you'd never come back, he helped me work through my fears, and when I thought you were dead and we all got transported back to the Enchanted Forest, he helped Neal and me deal with all that. And while Zelena had you locked up and I feared every day for your sanity, he helped me cope. So don't you dare call him a cricket, and don't you even think about telling me I can't go to him for help any more, because I don't know what kind of state you'd have found me in, if he hadn't been there for me. I may not have been tortured like you were, but I was in that cage with you, every day
she owned you!"

Rumplestiltskin had fallen silent, his face a mask of horror. She dropped to her knees beside him, taking his hands in hers. "I'm sorry, Rumple. I didn't mean to dump all that on you. You have so much to cope with already; you don't need my problems too. But please, think about going to see Archie. At least once, with our without me, and if after that one session, you still say he can't help you, I'll drop the subject."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." He kissed her hands. "It didn't occur to me how much you suffered. I'm a selfish bastard. But then, you knew that long ago, didn't you?" He tried to smile wryly.

"Will you go to see him, just once?"

"Perhaps. Since he's done you so much good, he may be worth checking out." He sighed. "Now, let's go into town. A quick check of the shop—you know, with so many magical objects, it's a tempting place for some of the ne'er-do-wells in town. And then we'll get some ice cream and see a movie at the Bijou, eh?"

She allowed him to pull her to her feet.

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An hour later, the Golds were taking advantage of Belle's inventory spreadsheets to assess the damage that had been to the shop while they were away. For, as Rumple had seemed to sense, they'd been broken into.

Grim-faced, Belle checked off items in her spreadsheet as Rumple systematically examined the shop. "It seems the damage is minimal," Rumple finally calculated. "One nonfunctioning lock, though I can't tell how it was rendered so, and one stolen necklace." From his old index-card system, he produced a card containing a photo of a necklace, its description, its history and its value.

"We can get Clarence Bolter out here this afternoon to fix the lock," Belle said. "We should file a police report, then call the insurance company."

"With the lock and the necklace, the loss totals—"

But he didn't get to sum it up; the prince and the pirate burst in.

"Another day, another crisis," Belle muttered under her breath.

"Yeah, there's an emergency," David admitted.

Hook butted in, and that got Rumple's back up. After a snippy exchange that reminded Belle of the fistfights her father's pages used to get into back in the Avonlea days, David assumed the official stance, possibly saving Hook from being changed into a cockroach or something lower. He explained that Elsa was in search of her sister, whom she believed to be in town because of a necklace she'd seen in the shop window.

Belle produced the index card immediately. "Is that it?"

Too caught up in his own search, David didn't ask how it was that Belle happened to have just the right card at hand. After glancing at the photo on the card, he declared he now knew where Anna was and dashed out, Hook in tow.

"I hope they get Emma out in time," Belle fretted as the door banged shut.
"They will." Rumple refilled the card. "Now we know who took the necklace and why."

"Is that something you see with your magic?"

"It's how the story's written," he shrugged. "Heroes always win, and they're the heroes. While villains. . . ." Such bitterness was laced through his words that she stroked his arm to try to soothe him. He pulled away, retreating to the workroom. "I'll call the insurance company. Perhaps you'd run over to the Any Given Sundae, get us a pint? I could really use that ice cream right now."

Despite the circumstances, she had to smile. Any other man might turn to alcohol in such discouraging times, but her Rumple drowned his sorrows in Butter Brickle.

When he heard the service bell tinkle, Rumple sat down on his workbench and picked up a jack-in-the-box Dove had been repairing. Life had just taken on a nasty complication. If the prince was right, somewhere in town was the only person in the world besides him, the Sorcerer, and the Apprentice who knew what the Hat was and what it could do.

And who knew that Rumplestiltskin had pursued it.

He would have to move fast to complete his work before the do-gooders found Chatterbox Anna. Belle's and Henry's safety depended upon it. He was going to need an ally to keep the Arandelleans out of the way, while he prepared the Hat.
This was Regina's week with Henry. As soon as school let out, he'd ride his bike the ten blocks to her house (she still thought about it as their house, though he was a part-time resident), park the bike in the garage next to her Mercedes, gallop across the lawn (maybe testing his athleticism by leaping over the hedges), throw the front door open, yell, "Mom! I'm home," drop his backpack onto the console table in the foyer, gallop up the steps to the dining room and then to the kitchen, where she'd be waiting with iced tea and lemon tarts from the bakery. They'd talk about school, his friends, his progress with Game of War: Fire Age, and what they would have for dinner that night. After they'd gotten dinner started, they'd crash in the family room to watch some TV until the meal was ready. It was Leave It to Beaver and The Donna Reed Show and Ozzie and Harriet rolled into one; it was everything she'd ever wanted from family life, ever since she'd arrived in Storybrooke in 1983 and got Americanized from watching sitcoms. It was hard-won, however; this dreamt-of lifestyle with her son had come to Regina only recently, only after she'd chosen to follow the hero's path. Before that—well, let's not go there.

So Regina mixed a pitcher of iced tea and plated the lemon tarts and waited for that door to bang open. She'd prepared for his arrival, bringing in the cleaning service a day early to scour the mansion spotless; stocking the fridge with his favorites, along with nutritious foods; carefully refolding the clothes in his dresser to smooth out any wrinkles. In truth, Henry really didn't care about any of these things and would barely notice them, but she needed to fill her day somehow. Now that she was no longer mayor—and, thanks to the wealth the curse had bequeathed her, had no need to seek employment—she had a lot of time on her hands.

There was an expression she used to hear people say: "Get a life." She'd been thinking about that expression lately.

Three hours and twenty minutes 'til Henry. She wandered through her house, straightening picture frames, plumping cushions, rearranging flowers. She wandered out into the garden, hoping to find a weed her gardener had overlooked or a snail that needed crushing. She inspected her apple trees, admiring the shine on the skins of the heavy fruit. And then she heard voices, a man's and a woman's, laughing in the park across the street and she wandered over to her hedge to peek across, because she recognized those voices, and it was strange, very strange, to hear Gold laughing. In fact, in all these years in Storybrooke, she couldn't remember ever hearing him laugh. Snicker, yes; chuckle, on occasion; but never laugh.

She conjured a pair of binoculars so she could see exactly what was making her old mentor laugh. No, she wasn't being nosey; as a leader of this town, she needed to keep abreast of changes, particularly in the behavior of powerful people, and for Gold to laugh—after all Zelena had put him through, and while he was still in mourning, dressing head-to-toe in black (though, who'd notice? He'd always worn dark colors)—called for her attention. Besides, he should be at work, this time of day. So she peeked. Then she downright looked. And listened.

In the Henry Mills, Sr., Memorial Park (that was the proper name, as Regina frustratedly reminded people, but most folks referred to it as Moncton Park, after the street that bordered its southern edge), on a red-and-white checked blanket, Belle lay on her belly, kicking her feet in the air lazily as she read aloud. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the cover said. Beside her, stretched out flat on his back and barefoot, lay her husband, his eyes closed, though he'd open them occasionally to look up into her face. Behind them were a wicker basket and the remains of picnic (a baguette,
some kind of cheese, wine, grapes).

On the far end of the park, kids played on the swings and the merry-go-round, tweens played basketball and Archie walked Pongo, but here, on the side of the park closest to the Mills Mansion, only the Golds dared. Were the rest of the park players afraid to come within eyeshot of the Mills Mansion, or were they steering clear of the Golds? (Was Belle going by "Gold" now? Or were they using last names at all? According to the Mirror, 42% of the Enchanted Forest ex-pats had gone back to using their original names exclusively; 6% were using their Storybrooke names exclusively; 29% were using their original first names with their Storybrooke surnames, and the rest were still confused. An editorial in the Mirror claimed the name problem was just the tip of the confusion iceberg as, three years past the breaking of the curse, Storybrookers tried to sort out their identities, their families and their friends. "Emma Swan did us no favors," the editor wrote.)

So Ms French/Mrs. Gold or whoever she was calling herself these days was entertaining her hubby with a novel and he was laughing at the expected parts. The more she listened, though, the more Regina wondered if that laugh was genuine; his eyes weren't crinkling as they should be if he was really amused. Did Belle realize that he was just playing along (and if so, was she flattered)?

Regina squinted. There was something wrong with this picture. She'd had to beat down her inner demons with a heavy stick, day after day, for more than a year, to earn the happiness she had now, and yet, here lay Rumplestiltskin/Gold, still the Dark One, still a villain, enjoying the salad days of his marriage, lazing in the wealth the curse granted him. How come she had to change to get her reward and he didn't?

After the stab of envy passed—and she forced it out of her system quickly, remembering how envy had twisted her half-sister—Regina looked again, adjusting her binoculars so she could look closer. Yes, he was laughing—though it was a forced laugh. Yes, he was watching Belle with affection and admiration—but also with dark-ringed eyes. Deep lines creased his face now; bolts of gray shot through his brown hair. His skin hung loose and sallow on his emaciated frame. He'd gained a wife but lost a son. Maybe he'd paid a heavy enough price for the happiness he had now.

He reached up to brush away a strand of hair that had fallen into Belle's mouth, and impulsively she grasped his hand and kissed the palm. Regina noticed the bride wore dark circles under her eyes too, and the baby fat was gone from her cheeks. Regina had a vague memory of Belle spending a lot of time in the Forest befriending her would-have-been stepson, and another, clearer memory of Belle breaking down at Neal's funeral. That break down had mirrored the one Belle had suffered when Rumple killed himself. And then there was that nasty business with the secret asylum and the Dark Palace tower. . . .Okay. Mrs. French-Gold had paid a price too; maybe she deserved her happiness.

Regina felt a lightness in her chest, a faint smile stretching her lips. Maybe Rumple was still a villain; maybe not. He wasn't a hero, certainly, but maybe his time under Zelena had taken the villainy out of him and left him just a morally ambiguous, ethically confused man like most people. Let the Golds be happy. The one thing Regina had come to realize and accept in the past two years was that happiness was like water; you couldn't hold it in your hand. The best you could do was to freeze a moment in your memory.

She thought about the heart locked in her safe. Who was pure enough to control the heart of the Dark One? Not even Snow White could possess such power without it corrupting her. Belle might be a naif, but she wasn't a good choice for Heart Keeper either; she'd cave in rather than keep her husband in line. Besides, she already had the dagger. Maybe the heart was safest in the possession of someone who recognized villainy in all its permutations, someone who understood its root causes and false hopes, someone who'd been dark as pitch but had struggled her way back to
goodness and still struggled every day.

Maybe there should be a balance: innocent Belle holding the dagger while the ex-Evil Queen held the heart. That way, neither could dominate the Dark One. Maybe the heart and the dagger were exactly where they should be, for everyone to remain safe. Including the previous owner.

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A soft snore interrupted Belle's reading. She didn't mind the interruption in the least. She closed her book and shifted onto her side so she could watch Rumple sleep. In sleep his features told the truth. She rested her hand on his chest and waited to learn how he was really feeling. He'd been hiding himself from her; she'd expected that; he didn't want to upset her. She'd tried to tell him that nothing he could reveal would drive her away. She'd tried to prove, in every minute of their life together, that he could depend upon her to help him overcome. They weren't there yet. She would be patient, though. They'd get there: the fact that he'd given her his dagger was proof of his perfect trust in her, and she'd never, ever abuse that trust.

Not even if doing so would save him from his nightmares. She thought of the dagger, locked away in an iron box under a loose floorboard in their coat closet at home (any burglar who'd read his fair share of mysteries would think to look there—she was desperate to find a more secure hiding place). With the dagger she could order him to open up. She could push him into therapy. With the dagger she could facilitate the healing that clearly, would never happen without a dramatic catalyst. She could heal him, but she'd lose him in the process; he'd never forgive her for violating his trust.

Villains and heroes, good and evil. Hah. The people of this town may have come from fairy tales, but they were far too complex and their problems far too grave for simple tales. Belle watched a nightmare torment Rumple's exhausted face, and she wondered if, with the dagger, it would be possible to command him to have happy dreams. But no, a benign use of the dagger was still abuse of his trust. She shoved her curiosity about the dagger under the floorboards of her imagination.
11 May 2014

Something made the skin at the back of her neck prickle. Belle had learned long ago to pay attention to that prickle.

Maybe it was that his eyes were just a little too wide, or that he was talking a little faster than normal. Or maybe it was simply that the Dark One was offering for his wife to use his dagger on him, to force him to tell the truth to the crowd now standing in their shop—once again, for information, not a sale. When she thought about it later that night, after they'd gone to bed back in the pink house and he'd fallen into a fitful sleep, what bothered her most was that he'd not only encouraged her to use the dagger on him, and in front of a crowd, but that Hook had been standing less than a yard away.

Rumple trusted Belle implicitly, of course; he'd said so over and over, and he'd insisted on her keeping the dagger as proof of the total extent of his trust. With the dagger in her possession, she held much more than his life in her hands; she held his magic, a force strong enough to destroy the entire town. And having been under the complete control of a horrible, murderous witch just a short time ago, that Rumple would allow anyone else to even see the dagger, let alone for Hook to be permitted within arm's reach of it, was just unfathomable.

But Hook hadn't made a grab for it (though perhaps the pirate was satisfied just to know who had the dagger and where). The rest of the heroes had gaped as, reluctantly, Belle fulfilled Rumple's request: they saw for themselves the power of the dagger as Belle commanded the Dark One to tell the truth. What else might he have been commanded to do, they wondered; she could read the question in their eyes as she issued her order, and she felt small and ashamed. Were they imagining Rumple under her control, in the privacy of their home, with her flashing his dagger gleefully and demanding he take out the garbage?

Or were they imagining him on his knees to Zelena. . . .?

Belle's stomach churned. Just as soon as the little show was over, the heroes satisfied that he didn't know Anna of Arendelle and therefore couldn't direct their search, she turned away from the lot of them and shoved the horrible knife back into her bag, and she looped the bag over her shoulder, her hand tight on the straps, Hook caught in the corner of her eye. Had he made a single motion in her direction, she would have dove for the Smith & Wesson that Rumple kept in a drawer under the cash register. But Hook left peaceably with the others, and she made a mental note to relocate the dagger as soon as possible, to someplace he couldn't just walk right into.

There was something else too. . . As she leaned up on her elbow and watched his eyelids twitch under the force of a dream, Belle sought to pin the memory down. "My life had turned upside down," she recalled him informing the heroes. "Lost a son, gained a wife, so you might say, I've decided to turn over a new leaf."

At the time, Belle hadn't doubted him. In all the years she'd known him, she'd found the rumor to be true: Rumplestiltskin didn't lie. And here was Emma's "built-in lie detector" to back him up. So Belle had taken him at his word, too worried about that damned dagger to think about anything else. Now, though, she was having second thoughts. He'd made that confession, not to her or Archie, but to Emma, a stranger, and Hook.

Once again, making himself vulnerable in front of Hook.
She lay back down and stared at the ceiling. These moments of self-exposure, so uncharacteristic of him, were they signs he was ready to open up, to seek therapy?

Or were they, along with the bouts of insomnia, the nightmares, the loss of appetite, signs of a coming breakdown?

In the morning, after he'd gone off to the shop and she'd opened the library, she sneaked into her office and called Archie.
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There is a World

13 May 2014

It felt strangely satisfying, the way people had started turning to her as an expert on all things magical. In being brazenly honest with herself, Regina realized that this new reliance the townsfolk were developing on her had less to do with her skill and knowledge and more to do with her trustworthiness and willingness to share, for in the former two qualities, her former mentor still reigned supreme (he had, after all, about three hundred more years of study than she), but in the latter two qualities, she had come a long way, whereas Rumplestiltskin remained just as shut off from society as ever. His marriage hadn't humanized him much, and, when she was baldly honest with herself, Regina had to admit the town's conduct toward him—putting him out of mind during his year of captivity, then, when he was freed, treating him just the same as before, coming to him only when they needed information—probably had given Rumple no impetus to warm up to them. Sometimes, Regina felt just a tad bit guilty that she'd done nothing to reach out to him; after all, she probably understood him better than anyone, including his wife. But sometimes, she couldn't help but feel a tad bit smug; after all, she'd worked so hard to change, and had earned the right to be accepted in this community, whereas he'd never made an effort.

Most of the time, though, Regina was just too damn busy trying to protect the town from snow giants and save Marian's life and preserve her crumbling relationship with Robin and Roland and work with Henry to uncover the Author so she could win her own happy ending. Whenever she did spare a thought for her old mentor, it was quickly interrupted by some emergency.

Anyway, Rumple had always been a hermit. No reason to believe he felt any different now. If she tried to approach him to offer her sympathy or her support, he'd just curl his lip and make some snarky but well-phrased remark. He had a wife now, someone he seemed to trust; let the little librarian tend to his emotional needs. If he had any.

Meantime, it was really rather weird that the most evil of Regina's skills—the skill she had fought against Rumple's insistence that she learn—her ability to remove someone's heart, could be turned to the service of good.

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In the past few days, Emma had struggled just to squeeze in a couple of hours for a scarfed-down sandwich, a shower and some shut-eye. Every time she sat down to catch her breath, someone had another crisis for her to fix: the iceberg surrounding the entire town, the blackout, the Tiny-sized abominable snowman, Elsa's emotional breakdown, the missing person search, Henry's Project Mongoose, Regina's meltdown, a bunch of newcomers living in a camp at the edge of town, a woman turned into an icicle, the new sneak thief/town drunk, Hook's neediness. Add onto that overcrowded living conditions and a baby that cried every two hours, and it seemed the entire world had decided all at once to tap dance on Sheriff Swan's last nerve ( or was she still sheriff? She and David had never talked it over, just what his role should be now that she had returned to her job. They seemed more like equals at work, but deep down, she knew co-sheriffing wouldn't work. She dreaded having that conversation with her father, but someday, a situation would arise in which she would have to assert her authority over him. . . or order him into danger. She really needed to work this out with him someday soon.)

But then, if anyone deserved a moment of her time, it should be Henry, after all the weird crap he'd had to cope with in recent weeks. Not to mention the hovering presence of a would-be stepfather, just a short time after his real dad died, just a short time after Henry got to meet him. And with his
other mom apparently considering forming a second family, and a grandpa and grandma who were now so wrapped up in a new baby that they barely had time for him, and top all that off with an attack of puberty—Henry needed the full attention of the one stable adult in his life. Instead, since he wasn't getting it, he seemed poised to drift to the dark side, reaching out to his shifty grandfather. Oh, Henry really needed whatever time Emma could muster, but just when they seemed to steal a moment for themselves, some selfish jerk would come running in, shrieking, "We're under attack!"

Maybe she should have pursued Plan A: the return to New York. Life would have been much quieter.

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Ruby gave her an odd look as Belle ordered a hot tea to go. Examining her rather, for her, conservative outfit, the waitress surmised, "So it's true, what the newspaper said this morning: you're back at work already. Reopening the library."

Belle nodded enthusiastically as she lifted the cover on this morning's pastry offerings: bear claws (which everyone knew Granny had baked specially for Emma), chocolate-frosted white cake donuts (for Henry), and cinnamon rolls (a favorite of almost all the men in town). "Mmm," she drew in the aroma. "Wrap me up one of those rolls to go. Make it two. They smell heavenly."

Ruby winked at her. "Sure. You need to keep your caloric intake up, considering all that exercise you're getting." As she slipped two of the treats into a bag, Ruby scrutinized her friend once again, critically this time. "You look suspiciously well rested, for a newlywed." She leaned forward to whisper, "You know, Clark's pharmacy does carry Viagra."

Belle poked her tongue out and dropped a five dollar bill onto the counter. "Keep the change, Ruby. And for your information, if we needed anything from the pharmacy, it would be a 'Do Not Disturb' sign."

But as she walked to the library, swinging her tantalizing bag, the thought did cross her mind that she'd been sleeping unusually solidly ever since she married. She used to be such a light sleeper, but lately, an explosion in the downstairs living room wouldn't have wakened her. The rest of the well romanced, she thought.
I Heard the Captain's Voice

13 May 2014

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Alone in her mansion with, for the first time since she became a queen, nothing to do, Regina walked through her empty halls, her heels clacking forcefully as they always did, though today there was no one to hear them and tremble (or in Roland's case, hear them and come running in hopes of ice cream). Robin had remained behind in the forest today, assisting the Merry Men in rebuilding their shelters after last night's storm. Regina had offered to make the repairs magically, or better yet, move the Men into Storybrooke: Gold had plenty of vacant apartments, and she was certain she could persuade him to rent them at reasonable cost (in other words, free) to the Merry Men.

Certain. Absolutely. Certain she could persuade Gold to do anything she asked, because in the wall safe of her office she held the perfect persuader.

Just to check—for it was a remarkable bit of good fortune that had brought the perfect persuader here—she clacked into her office and opened her safe. She lifted down the jewelry box and raised the lid for just a peek. Yes, it was still there, still glowing. Amazing how much healthy red still competed for space with the corrupted black that dominated Rumplestiltskin's heart. And amazing how big it was. She would have guessed that it had shriveled up into a cinder by now, after all the wrongs he'd done. As she studied it, turning it over very gently (for she didn't want to alert him that she possessed it) in the velvet-lined box, she wondered how he'd managed to keep his heart alive at all: had he actually felt guilt, then, when he murdered and maimed and manipulated? If he had, he'd certainly never let the doubt show. Not in all the years she'd known him had he expressed the slightest shame or uncertainty; he was the most knowledgeable person she'd ever met (though not the wisest, when it came to his enemies) and he'd projected that in his speech, his facial expressions, his walk. She'd studied him and had copied his poise, until her powers bloomed full and she gained her own confidence.

She locked the heart back into her safe. She hadn't decided yet what to do with it. She was still struggling to make good choices, and sometimes she backslid, as her possession of the heart showed. When Emma and David had brought it to her, asking her to identify it (or as Emma had put it: "What the hell is this? Is it was I think it is? Did that bitch rip out Neal's heart after he died?") Regina had pretended to examine it—but she hadn't needed to. She could sense the magic laced through and radiating from that still-beating organ, and she recognized the magic's signature immediately as her former teacher's. But some impulse made her lie to the sheriffs: "It's a fake. A copy of a heart. I suppose Zelena conjured it just to freak you out. Her sick sense of humor. Where did you find it?"

"In the woods, in the grave where we found Neal's body," David said.

"Well, she took the trouble to bury him, at least. I suppose we should thank her for that. And apparently she wanted you to find the grave, or she would've made an effort to hide it. This," Regina hefted the heart, "was her little calling card, I suppose. It's an imitation; you don't need to let it disturb you." And to prove her point, she tossed the thing nonchalantly into a waste can—and then fished it out after Emma and David left.

If she were a pure hero now, she'd surrender it to the Charmings. To give them complete control over the Dark One would be the safest thing for this town. Or maybe she'd give it to Belle, who would never ever use it for evil. Definitely, she couldn't give it back to Rumple; that would be dangerous, even moreso now, since he had his son's death and his own enslavement to avenge.
But just for a little while longer, Regina would keep the heart. The temptation was just too strong: all that power, literally at her fingertips. If she were still the Evil Queen, she'd have started playing with her new toy right away. But she was neither hero nor villain now, just stuck somewhere in the middle, so she'd locked the heart away, a little insurance against a future need.

Cora would be climbing the walls right now, if she were still alive. "All that power, Regina! Use it, you foolish girl! Or if you don't have the nerve or the imagination, give me the heart and I'll show you how to wield its power!"

Well, Mother just wouldn't have understood what it was like to straddle the fence between good and evil. Poor mother; she'd never known the pride of looking into her child's admiration. Regina knew that pride: she'd seen it in both Henry's and Roland's faces—and Robin's. She wouldn't risk losing it, not even for unlimited access to the Dark One's power. She'd do the right thing, as soon as she got around to it.

Briefly, she speculated on how the heart had been taken from Rumple's chest. The protective spell that she'd placed on Henry's heart, she had learned from her old mentor, so she was quite certain he would have cast the same spell on his own heart, if only to protect himself from Cora. When you're the most powerful mage in the world, you must take precautions to protect yourself from the enemies creeping up behind you. She wondered how difficult the decision had been for Rumple, how long he'd deliberated, before he threw his dagger down to save his son, back in the Enchanted Forest. How must he have struggled, knowing Zelena would take the dagger, and knowing what Zelena was.

And here, apparently, he'd decided he had to hide his heart away so that no one could ever take it, as Zelena had taken the dagger. Regina wondered if he and Belle would decide to destroy the dagger too, now that it was in Belle's possession. Would he give up his magic to ensure he would never be enslaved again? To ensure that Belle wouldn't meet the same fate as Neal had? It would be a most interesting thing to watch for.

Or, on second thought, had there been another reason he'd ripped out his heart? The same reason, perhaps, that Cora had ripped out hers?

Either way, Regina could almost feel sorry for him.

She locked the heart back into her safe.
It Was Not Me

13 May 2014

"He didn't come with you? I kind of expected, since he attended the naming party. . . ." Archie peered out into the hallway as Belle entered his office and Pongo hauled himself out of his bed to greet her. She knelt, rubbing his ears and speaking to him softly, before she straightened.

"I didn't ask him yet. He doesn't know I'm here. I wanted to talk to you first."

"Would you care for a cup of coffee? Or tea?" He strolled over to the sink to fill two cups with water.

"Tea, please."

"Have a seat. Anywhere you like." He carried the cups to the microwave and set them inside, then set the timer.

She looked over the furniture: two armchairs, with a coffee table and a couch between. The chair farther from the entrance had a lamp table next to it, with a notebook and a cup of pens; clearly, that was Archie's preferred seat. The chair nearer the door felt too far away; she had intimate things to discuss, so she wanted closeness. She seated herself on the couch, at the end closer to Archie's chair, and she took off her sweater, laying it across the unoccupied end of the couch. The microwave dinged and he brought her a steaming cup on a tray loaded with packets of tea and sugar. She selected an orange pekoe and left the teabag in the cup to steep.

She jumped right in to her concerns. "It's nothing I can put my finger on. He's different. There's something off. . . . He's just as attentive and affectionate as before—"

"Before he died?"

She nodded. "Sounds bizarre to say that, doesn't it? I suppose, technically, he didn't die; he's immortal, so he couldn't have. Before he was taken into the vault. Maybe that's the best way to put it."

"But for you, and the rest of us, it was as if he'd died."

"Yeah. We talked about that, Neal and I did. How could he be dead when he's immortal? But we'd seen him vanish into nothingness, so it seemed like he was dead." She stirred sugar into her tea. "It felt like he was dead. All that time without him. I didn't believe it at first when David told me he thought Rumple was alive and being kept in a cage."

"And when you reunited with him, after more than a year?"

"It was a miracle," she grinned. "I mean, I'd seen him twice before that, but he was under her control, and I wasn't sure we'd ever get him back again. So when I came into the shop and found him standing behind the counter, just like before, it was the happiest moment of my life. And he hugged me and he proposed right on the spot."

"Tell me everything you remember about that moment. Everything he said." Archie began taking notes.

She frowned. "Well, first he kind of apologized for the things he'd done while she controlled him.
Not exactly apologized—he said he would never be able to understand how I could continue to stand by him after all he'd done. I said that was Zelena's fault, not his, and he said not all of it was her doing."

Archie stopped writing and listened intently.

"I said I loved him. And then I gave him the dagger. Regina had picked it up after the fight in the barn, and she gave it to me. She said if anyone could be trusted with it, it was me. But it's not right for anyone to control a person that way, is it? A person should be free to make his own decisions, even if he sometimes makes the wrong ones. So I returned the dagger to him. He didn't take it at first. He just asked me why I was giving it to him. I said I believed in him. He got this strange look on his face: surprise and a wince."

"A wince?"

"Almost as if it pained him."

"Pained him to take back control of his life?"

"That's what I thought."

"Or pained him that you trusted him that much?"

She fell silent for a moment and blew cooling air across her tea. But instead of drinking, she set the cup down. "I'm not sure now. It could have been either one."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, at first. And he didn't take the dagger. I said, 'You're a free man.' He didn't answer me, but he looked kind of bewildered. I asked him to promise me he wouldn't attack Zelena, and he agreed—"

"Did he? What did he say?"

"Well. . ." Her eyes darted back and forth as she searched her memory. "He took the dagger then, and that's when he proposed."

"So he didn't actually agree to leave Zelena alone, did he?"

"He took the dagger. That was—I thought that meant he agreed."

"How did he propose?"

Her face brightened. "He said, 'What you're giving me is more than I could ever give you.'"

"Interesting. And you took that to mean?"

"Well, freedom. I was giving him his autonomy back. And that was the greatest gift anyone could give him." She pondered a moment. "At least, that's what I thought he meant."

"Go on."

"He said, 'This means you trust me with all your heart, and I shall trust you with mine.' Then he gave the dagger back. I didn't catch on at first. Then he said, 'I am now and for all the future, yours. Will you marry me? '"
"A lovely proposal."

She brushed at her eyes with the back of her hand. "It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard."

"And then?"

"I said yes. I took the dagger back and I said yes and kissed him."

"And then?"

"We started talking about getting married. He wanted to have the wedding as soon as possible."

"Did you find that odd?"

"I suppose I was too excited. I just started talking about the wedding. But later, when I thought about it, it really didn't seem strange that he would propose so soon. Really, it wasn't soon at all. I'd lived in his castle nearly a year, and after Jefferson released me from the asylum, Rumple and I reunited immediately, and we were together most of the time after that."

"Except for several interruptions."

"Yeah. . . A few days after I got out of the asylum, we broke up for a short while. We'd been living together, and—maybe I pushed too hard. I wanted him to open up to me, and he wouldn't."

"What did you want him to open up about? His feelings for you?"

"No, he'd been pretty clear about that. He'd told me he loved me, many times. He was doing things behind my back, keeping secrets from me, and I wanted him to trust me enough to tell me what his plans were, and why. He did tell me, eventually, but I had to walk out on him first."

"That's a shame. And because he didn't share his plans with you, you took that to mean he didn't trust you."

"Or that what he was doing was something terrible. Which would have been even worse. It would've meant he was deceiving me."

"Which did it turn out to be?"

"It was... sort of in the middle."

"But you stayed with him, even after he revealed his plans to you."

"I loved him. And I thought we were making progress. He'd told me the deepest secret of his life. That showed me he trusted me, and that he wanted to include me in his life. But now I wonder if he only told me his secret because he was afraid I wouldn't come back."

"So, you sort of blackmailed him emotionally."

Her lips pursed. "You could take it that way."

"Is that how you take it, now?"

She nodded. "Except... it's not that simple."

"Human emotions never are. So after he shared his secret with you, you went back with him."
"Not entirely. That's when I lived in the apartment over the library. I started making a life for myself. I had a job, I was making friends, I was working on my relationship with my father, I was learning how to drive, how to adjust to this world. So we dated. With a whole lot of interruptions."

"Including rescuing me from Hook."

"Yeah. And Hook shot me, and I lost my memory, and I became Lacey." She rolled her eyes.

"And then there Neverland, and right after that, Rumplestiltskin killed his father and himself. Or so we all thought. Just how many dates did you two actually get to go on, anyway?"

She laughed harshly. "It was a running joke between us. 'We'd better not call this a date,' we'd say. 'Otherwise one of the Charmings or Regina will come running in and tell us another villain has arrived to threaten the town.' So we didn't call them dates. We called them 'conferences.' Not that that stopped the interruptions."

"So really, you had very little time to spend alone together, to get to know each other."

"We'd be alone in the castle for almost a year, with few interruptions."

"But after twenty-eight years of living under a curse, you'd changed. We all had. We're all different from the people we were in the Enchanted Forest."

She stared at the floor. "He said that, once. He said, 'What, in the hour you've known me?' It was a cruel thing to say, but I guess it was true."

"After twenty-eight years locked up in a basement, you had changed. After twenty-eight years of living in near seclusion as the most hated man in town, he had to have changed."

"Are you saying we shouldn't have married?"

"You know I'm not saying that. I'm asking you, why did you accept his proposal so quickly? Wouldn't it have been better to have waited a little?"

"I guess, after all we'd been through, all the separations and interruptions, I wanted to hold onto him tight. I thought marriage would keep us together."

"That's assuming you were together to begin with."

"It was rushed," she blurted. "You're right. And I knew it. I knew we should have waited, taken time for him to recover from his ordeal. Me too. I'd been through an ordeal too. We should have done this"—she waved her hand at the notepad—"first. Both of us. But we didn't; we needed each other too much, I guess. So now what do we do? Where do we go from here?"

Archie leaned back in his chair and picked up the notepad. "What do you want to accomplish, Belle."

"I want a real marriage."

"How is your marriage not real?"

"I want him to share his plans, his thoughts, his feelings with me, just as freely as he shares his home and his money. I want him to come to me when he's upset or afraid or depressed, give me a chance to help him. That's what a wife is supposed to be, isn't it, a helpmate? His best friend?" Her voice caught. "Just like he is mine."
"You share your plans and feelings with him. Your secrets."

"Yes."

"How old is Rumplestiltskin, Belle?"

"Why?"

"Humor me. You're his wife. Surely you know such basic facts about him. Where he was born. His birthday. His mother's name."

She shook her head. "He never talks about her. He's not sure of his age. His father never kept track of such things. He chose a day at random and we celebrate that as his birthday."

"Roughly, then, how old is he?"

"Uhm, about three hundred."

"Three hundred. He was married before."

"Yes. Milah. Until she ran off with Hook."

"And how long ago was that?"

"It would have been about . . . two hundred and sixty years or so."

"How many wives did he have after Milah?"

"None."

"How many servants lived in his castle, before you?"

"None."

"And you lived in his castle about a year, you said. So let's see: of the past three centuries, give or take a few decades, he spent two hundred and fifty-nine years living alone. I came to the Dark Castle, occasionally, before Blue changed me into a cricket. I never saw another person there. I understand Jefferson and Regina dropped in sometimes, but they aren't exactly the sort you share you confide in, are they? I remember he had a pet of sorts, for a little while; a dove that nested in a tree just outside the north tower. He fed the bird. I caught him talking to it once."

"So you're saying, I shouldn't have expected him to open up to me because he'd been alone for so long."

"I'm saying it's something to think about."

"But what about now? After what Zelena put him through—after his only son died—doesn't he need to talk about it? How else can he begin to heal?"

"I agree. I think ignoring a wound only makes it fester. And when the time comes that he's ready to talk, I'll be glad to listen and to offer anything I have to help him recover. But you have to realize, Belle, given what we know about his past—abandonment by the people he had a right to expect to trust, abuse at the hands of bullies, separation from his son—"

"And the curse."
"And the curse, centuries of isolation, and then Cora, Hook, Pan and Zelena, one right after the other, out to destroy him, to hurt you to get to him—Belle, you were the first good thing to happen to him centuries. It makes sense that he'd want to hang onto you, even if that meant a hasty marriage. And it makes sense that he'd have difficulty opening up, even to his helpmate." Archie crossed one knee over the other, settling back. "It may be a long, long time before you get the change in him that you want. If ever. Will you stay with him if he never becomes the sharing man you want him to be?"

"I promised him forever. I meant it. I won't stop loving him. But I won't stop fighting for him, either, and he needs this. He needs to heal."

"You said when you called me he's acting 'off.' What do you mean by that?"

"Not himself. He goes off by himself for hours at a time. When he comes home and I ask where he's been, he dodges the question."

"Solitude has always been a part of his nature."

"Yes, but this is different. There's a coldness to him now that wasn't there before."

"Coldness? Or anger?"

"Coldness. He doesn't care about anyone else, just me."

"The people he cared about got hurt. Maybe distancing himself from others is his way of protecting them."

"That's not it. He really doesn't care."

"Give me an example."

"Henry. Since he was freed, he hasn't asked once about Henry, hasn't gone to see him, hasn't called to find out if he's okay. I thought, because of their shared grief, they could help each other, but Rumple doesn't seem interested."

"Hmm."

"Or Emma. I mean, Emma was Neal's true love. He died in her arms. But Rumple hasn't looked in on her."

"And you? Does he treat you differently?"

"He talks to me about routine things. He asks how my day went, if I slept well, that sort of thing. He cooks for me sometimes, he helps with the housework, he tells me he loves me." She blushed. "He makes love to me, but there's a coldness to it. A detachment. Before, when he kissed me, it was sometimes passionately, like he couldn't get enough, and sometimes tenderly, like he thought he'd break me. But always there was something, some feeling behind it. And that's gone now. And in the middle of the night, sometimes I wake up and find him staring at the ceiling, or outside, sitting in the garden and just staring."

"Has he given any explanation? Have you asked him?"

"He just says, 'I love you, sweetheart.' No explanation. I used to feel so many emotions coming from him. Even when I didn't know what he was thinking, I had a pretty good idea what he was feeling. But not any more. He's walled them in."
"When he was a slave, he probably wasn't free to express what he was feeling."

"He needs to talk about what she did to him."

"I agree. The thing is, how? And without making threats you can't carry out, or offering deals—if he feels you're manipulating him, he'll stop trusting you."

"I suppose all that's left is to—be direct with him. Tell him I'm worried and I think therapy will help." She drew in a cleansing breath. "That therapy is necessary, for his health and the health of our marriage."

"No threats. No emotional blackmail."

"No threats."

Archie closed his notebook. "So when are you going to broach this subject with him?"

She shivered as she gathered up her sweater. "Soon."

"Good luck, Belle. My hopes are with you and him." As she stood, he and Pongo stood to escort her to the door. "Do you know the nickname Henry has for you and Rumplestiltskin?"

"Operation something or other?"

"Operation Rumbelle. He has every confidence in the two of you. I'm not sure what it means, but his motto for you two is 'Rumbelle is endgame.'"

Belle smiled as she stepped out into the hall. "I like that. 'Rumbelle is endgame.'"

"Take it to heart."
Sipping wine, staring idly into glowing embers in the fireplace, her stomach well satisfied with take-out from La Tandoor, Regina tucked her legs under her and snuggled against the arm of her couch. Robin, on his haunches on the floor, was rebuilding the fire, while upstairs Roland watched television in the guest—no, in his bedroom. It had been a quiet day, with no urgent calls from the Charmings and no out-of-realm visitors causing disturbances. She'd cleaned her kitchen, then gone over the city budget with Snow, then Robin had come by and they'd taken Roland for a picnic in the park. She could get used to this life. She deserved this life.

Well, she did wonder what she'd do with the rest of her life, now that she was no longer mayor. She needed something to keep her mind occupied. Maybe she'd start a business. Maybe a shop for professional clothes for women. She'd always had a sharp eye for fashion, and lord knows, the women here certainly needed guidance in that area. She would speak to Gold about it. But no rush. Let the man have some alone time with his bride. (Besides, as curious as she was to see how her old teacher was holding up after Zelena, she had a suspicion he might somehow hold her responsible. More rightly, he'd hold Cora responsible, but with Mother gone, Regina would have to do as the next best target.)

Of course, if he did give her any grief, she could put a quick end to it, very easily. Just a few words spoken into the imp's heart would settle him right down.

In a flight of fancy, Regina wondered which had more power over the Dark One: his heart or his dagger. What if, say, she stood on one end of Main Street with his heart in her grip, and Belle stood on the other, clutching his dagger, and they gave him a contradictory command at the same time? Which would he obey, or would he tear himself in pieces trying to do both? She chuckled low in her throat as she imagined the scene. But she'd never been subject to curiosity, never had time for experiments like her mentor had had, so she brushed the thought aside. She wouldn't really tease Rumple that way; it wouldn't be a heroic thing to do (besides, it would be utterly stupid. He would find a way to get even.)

And then she squirmed a little, because, as she'd begun to realize, being a hero meant thinking about other people's welfare even in times of peace. That meant no more pranks, not even against the villains. It also meant, more importantly, thinking of the greater good. She knew full well how corrupting power could be, even for the good guys; after all, she hadn't started out her career as a sorceress with the intention of hurting anyone. She'd only wanted to run away from Mother. But dabbling with magic just once, even with the best of intentions, had been enough to suck her in, and look where that had got her.

Maybe she'd been wrong to give Belle the dagger. Smart as the girl was, and as devoted to Rumple as she was, still, Belle was the curious type, an experimenter, like her hubby. Though hero and villain, those two were more alike than most people realized. And the girl had never had a taste of power, beyond the little she'd had over her servants when she was still a duchess. Ever since she'd pledged herself over to Rumple, she'd been the lowest of the low: a scullery maid, and then an asylum inmate (Regina shivered a little, remembering that. But there was no way she could make it up to Belle for those thirty years of confinement, so all they could do now was to try to put it all behind them. Get along and move on, for the sake of the town).

Regina had heard rumors—even at their closest, Rumple would never divulge anything of his past to her—that before stealing his predecessor's magic and title, Rumple had been a nobody too. A
shepherd or something, and lame, as Gold had been (until suddenly he wasn't—how did that happen? Why hadn't Gold healed himself as soon as he brought magic to Storybrooke? The man was full of mystery.) Rumor had it, Rumple had been not only an object of ridicule but also a target for bullies, beaten up by drunks, farm boys out to prove their strength, and bored soldiers looking to blow off a little steam. Was it any wonder, then, that as soon as he acquired magic, he'd thrown his new weight around some? Besides, he was the Dark One; by definition, he had to do evil things. At one time, Regina had admired him for it. His evil always demonstrated imagination and flair.

Yeah, the duchess-turned-scullery maid and the shepherd-turned-bully. Their attraction made sense. But as to Belle's possession of the dagger—maybe that hadn't been one of Regina's better ideas. A girl who'd never had power (beyond "pick up my socks" to a servant), suddenly controlling the ultimate killing machine—would Belle go hog-wild with the power, as her hubby had done at first? It would take a saint to resist that temptation. And Regina could imagine it starting out small and innocent, just as a test: "Dark One, I command you to wash the dishes" but quickly escalating: "Dark One, I command you to rescue puppies and fair maidens... Dark One, I command you to stop being the Dark One. Be a Prince Charming instead."

And if Belle caved in to temptation, how could anyone else resist? Regina gnawed at her lip. How could the formerly Evil Queen resist? A snowball of panic hit her in the gut. Would access to the Dark One's powers, via his heart, corrupt the formerly corrupted ex-queen, even worse than her own, lesser magic had?

Yet, didn't he need to be controlled by someone? Regina had seen the cage Zelena had kept him in: anyone subjected to such treatment would surely be mad for revenge. Add to that the insanity Rumple had borne up under during the year he carried his son's mind inside his own—no one could come out of that intact.

The fire now roaring, Robin settled himself on the couch, laying his head in her lap and grinning up at her. He toyed with her necklace. In a few minutes, his eyelids would lower sleepily and he'd toy with the buttons on her blouse instead. Before that happened, though, she needed to talk. Oh gods, it felt good to have someone to talk things out with! Someone who understood temptation and hunger and power. Someone who wouldn't judge.

"Robin."

"Hmm?" His eyelids were starting to droop. She grasped his wandering hand, preventing it from plundering her buttons.

"I need to tell you something. Something I need advice about."

His eyelids rose. "I'm listening." His attentiveness told her that he was flattered by her trust; even more, that he saw this as a step forward in their relationship. They were about to talk something over as a couple. "You can tell me anything."

"I know." She smiled, granting him her confidence. Then the smile faded. "Do you remember the heart that Emma found in Neal's grave, the one I said was fake?"

"Yes."

"It isn't."

"Who does it belong to, Regina?" His eyebrows shot up.
"Rumplestiltskin."

He sat up. "You control the Dark One."

"I could, yes. I haven't done anything with it. Yet."

"Wow." He ran his hand through his hair. "Wow. You control the Dark One. The things you could do... you could be the most powerful woman in the world, if you wanted to." He studied her closely. "Do you want to?"

"It's tempting," she admitted.

"Yeah. I imagine it would be. Regina, I'm impressed that you haven't done anything with it yet."

"Well, not that I haven't thought about it, but it occurs to me that my own powers have been temptation enough. How can I continue to do the right thing if I have all that potential just sitting in my safe, going to waste?"

"Yeah." He rested his elbows on his knees. "Let's think about this. On the one hand, if you control the Dark One, you could make the rest of us safe from him. Hell, you could make the rest of us safe from anyone. It's like having the world's most powerful guard dog on your leash."

"It is, at that."

"And you could order him to solve this town's problems. House the homeless. Heal the sick. Provide jobs for the poor. Educate every child. With his magic he could make this town—perfect." Robin frowned at her. "Why hasn't he, Regina? He's had that power for centuries, right? Why hasn't he used it to help people?"

She shrugged. "Because he's the Dark One. It's not in his nature. I suppose I should ask myself the same question. Why don't I solve the world's problems with my magic?"

"Why don't you?"

"It's not that I haven't thought about it, lately. Maybe I'm being overly philosophical, but I've begun to realize that what Rumple used to say is right. It really is a fundamental law that all magic comes with a price."

"Why should that stop you—or him—from, say, ending wars or curing diseases?"

"The price has to be commensurate with the expenditure of magic. Or as he used to say, you pay for what you get. I snap my fingers and cure cancer—"

"And a new disease suddenly pops up. I see. You end a war in one part of the world—"

"Another, just as bad, starts somewhere else."

"I see." He hung his head in thought. "Magic seems kind of pointless, then."

"It's why Rumple always made people pay for magical favors. Fortunately, most people think small: 'make me rich,' 'make me a king,' that sort of thing. So the price could be kept small—localized, you might say. 'Poof, you're a king, but your realm is an unpopulated island in the middle of an endless ocean.'"

"Still, if you control the Dark One, you can prevent him from doing nasty things." Robin ran his and across his chest in remembrance. "And he's a master of nastiness."
"And I could still use him to protect the town against attack. You know, there are a lot of people out there who would do us harm if they learned that fairies and wizards and sorceresses live here."

He nodded. "It's tempting, all right."

"But what I worry about is what it will do to me. The power I have now is perhaps a tenth, a twentieth, of what he has, and look how I struggle to stay on the right side."

"You're doing well." He kissed the palm of her hand. "I'm proud of you."

"But if I had access to his magic—" Regina lowered her gaze. "If I reverted back to my old self, I could lose you and Roland and Henry."

"You're a strong woman, Regina." There was a note of doubt in his voice, though. "But no one should make a slave of another person."

His words reminded her of what Zelena had done. "There's no way in the nine hells that I'd ever want to be like her. Not even to control the Dark One. Thank you, Robin. You hit the nail right on the head."

"Have you decided, then, what you'll do with the heart?"

Her eyes shone; she had her decision, and it was the right one, one Henry would be proud of. "I have. I don't know why Rumple buried his heart, but it's his heart, to do with as he wishes."

"Are you going to give it back to him?"

"No. He buried it for a reason. It should stay buried."

Robin lay back into her lap. "In the morning, then, we'll take it back."

She toyed with his hair. "Thank you, Robin. Talking to you makes everything clearer."
"You won't need that," Regina gestured to the shovel Robin was carrying.

He set the shovel aside on her porch and stepped inside the foyer to assist her with putting on her coat. "I forget sometimes about the magic," he explained, causing her to smile to herself: that he thought of her first as a woman and only second as a sorceress would have pissed her off a year ago —she would have singed him with a fireball to remind him of her powers—but right now, she found his comment flattering. His hands lingered on her shoulders as he secured her coat. "Bundle up, darling. It's a cold morning."

"The consequences of snow sorcery," she muttered. "Someone really should teach these ice princesses a little fire magic." They stepped out on the porch into the dawn, his arm about her shoulders. "If you don't mind, Robin, I'm going to transport us there. I'd like to get back to town before Ms. Fisher begins her morning shenanigans." Regina had learned the hard way to ask Robin's permission before transporting him with magic: the first time she'd done it, he'd lost his lunch and ruined her Louboutins. Not that Robin had any objections to magic: when she asked him about it, he'd said that the world was tough enough to get along in; people with skills and talents should use them. He'd scored extra points with her for that reply: he accepted her as is, magic and all.

Her magic carried them to the open and empty grave in the woods. Even though Baelire's body had been relocated to the city cemetery, this spot still felt like a place that ought to be approached with quiet reverence, for here a man had sacrificed himself to protect a town. During the year they'd spent in the Enchanted Forest, Regina hadn't spent all that much time with Baelfire—it was difficult talking to him, considering the long love-hate relationship she'd had with his father, and she was always a little nervous around her adopted son's birth father—but she'd observed him from a distance, and what she learned about him increased the respect with which she held his father (though she'd never admit that).

She knelt on one knee as Robin stood behind her, his hands folded. She opened her jewelry box and lifted out the heart, ready to release it into the grave, but then she hesitated. As the heart beat steadily and slowly in her palm, she reflected on her history with its owner. She wasn't sure how she felt about him these days. There was too much water under the bridge for her to forgive and forget Rumple's crimes against her—or vice versa. Yet there was too strong a bridge between them for her to take satisfaction in her sister's treatment of her old mentor. Would there ever come a time when they could talk without sneering at each other?

She turned the heart over, still surprised by amount of healthy red beneath the black blotches. Why had Rumple not hidden his heart away long ago? She could think of at least two occasions when someone had tried to kill him, and for a practitioner of the dark arts, removing a heart was a satisfying method of execution, as well as a dramatic warning to would-be attackers.

As she traced lines of red, she had her answer: Rumple had wanted to remain vulnerable. Despite evil that lived inside him like a parasite, he wanted to feel—fear, guilt, rage, disappointment, grief: these were the price he paid to be able to feel love.

"Should we, ah, say a few words?" Robin wondered.

Regina nodded. "To my old master: whatever made you remove your heart, may it change soon."
Her magic gently carried the heart to the grave's floor.

Centuries of practice had brought Rumplestiltskin to this point: he could force the smile right out of his eyes. And that was what he had to do now, as Belle dragged him by the hand away from his safely hidden Hat and to the sheriff's office, where the old Betamax finally proved to be good for something. Ms. Swan, encircled by her loving parents and her ally-in-magic, was gaping at two familiar faces on a videotape: her own, as a teenager, and the Ice Maid, as a fake foster mother.

If he were in his imp persona, he'd be giggling right now. He now possessed a key piece of information: he now had his leverage.

The heroes turned to him, of course, for answers about magic: how did Sarah Fisher come to Storybrooke, since neither Regina's nor Snow's curse had brought her? He didn't have to lie to them: he admitted he didn't know but would like to. (Logic dictated that someone more powerful than himself had created the portal that brought Ingrid here. That fact would have been a severe blow to the Dark One's professional pride, except he felt pretty certain that the more powerful sorcerer was at this moment locked up in Gold's safe—proving, at last, that Rumplestiltskin was the greatest mage of all time. Assuming, that is, that the Apprentice's master no longer walked the earth.)

As the heroes split up to search for Ingrid, the Arendelle queen insisted on trailing along with Belle to the library, to search records for some word of Anna. Unused to bluffing Belle plastered on a fake smile and escorted the queen to the stacks. On the walk over to the library, Belle considered her options—and decided she didn't have any. Being neither magical nor deceptive, Belle wouldn't be able to hide her secret much longer: her too-sympathetic heart would break at any minute, and her guilt would come tumbling out in a landslide. She had to fix the grievous error in judgment that had led to the Snow Queen's imprisonment of Anna. She had to free Anna, even if it meant facing the sorceress alone.

She fumbled an excuse to Elsa, bolted into the street and, skidding on her high heels, darted into the backroom of the pawnshop. She sorted through a rack of vintage clothing, certain that she would find exactly what she needed there: this shop, like the Dark Castle, had a mind of its own, bent toward its master's will, and whatever Belle wanted, that was Rumple's will. When the ballet slippers in her hand suddenly transformed into hiking boots and the Hell's Angels motorcycle jacket turned into a parka, Belle had to choke back a guilty sob. Already in her marriage she was withholding information from her husband and taking advantage of his magic to perpetuate a deception. She felt like a heel.

He appeared in the entranceway just as she was leaving on her rescue mission. He smiled at her softly; when she confessed to the fact that she needed to confront the Snow Queen to correct her own wrongdoing, his eyes twinkled. He couldn't imagine his Belle doing anything bad (burn their breakfast, yes. Bleach his silk shirts, sure. Break a teacup—he adored her mistakes, every one of them, and this one would surely make him chuckle just as the others had). She sank even lower in her self-esteem as she edged up on her confession. Her too-trusting husband. She was about to disillusion him. The honeymoon was over.

"I was hoping you would come with me."

He refused. The Snow Queen was too dangerous. He didn't want to tangle with her—and he certainly didn't want his magicless wife going up against her. Belle loved him all the more for his concern, and resented herself for the cowardice that kept her secret hemmed in. If she could bring
herself to tell him the truth, he'd understand and surely agree. But she wasn't quite the hero he and everyone else thought she was, for what would they think of her if they knew she'd sacrificed a friend for her own selfish ends?

**Oh crap. And things had been going so well.** He now had the leverage he needed to maneuver Ingrid into a deal that would clear a path for his and his family's escape from Storybrooke. Now he would have to play the domineering chauvinist, and he really didn't want to ever treat Belle that way. She deserved the best from him. But, short of putting a spell on her, he could think of no other way to prevent her from marching straight into death.

"I really, really didn't want to do this." She wasn't sure when the idea had hit her. Was it the moment she decided, in the library, that she had to confront the Snow Queen? Had she realized then that to free Anna, she would have to make a slave of Rumple? Or was this a spur-of-the-moment decision, born of the realization that Rumple could and would stop her from hunting down the enemy? Had his display of "wiser than thou" bossiness provoked her more than she would admit?

She removed the dagger from her tote bag.

His eyes widened. Hers narrowed in shame.

His blood chilled. She was controlling him, not with her tears or her charms but with his dagger. It didn't matter that the knife she held was a fake. Her intention was what mattered, and that was crystal clear. She had the power and the desire—he choked on that realization—the desire to force him to do her bidding. Belle, who trusted him, who'd fought for him, who'd borne up under all manner of insult and injury to stand by him. Even she, the purest soul he'd ever met. The incorruptible Belle, falling to the same level as every previous holder of the dagger. Just as Cora had, choosing power over his love. Belle owned him.

Anger bubbled up. Insult. Hurt. "I gave you that dagger because I trusted you, because I thought you would never want to control me." He could see she'd disappointed herself; nevertheless, she didn't release the dagger. If he couldn't shame her into backing down, he would have to pretend to obey her. She'd inadvertently driven him farther into his lies.

He'd expected too much of her. She was just a human, after all, though a very loving one. No one who'd possessed the dagger had been able to resist its siren call. Not even, legend said, the one who had created it: Merlin, whose blood and tears and life force had fashioned the dagger as a way of stopping the first Dark One, had fallen victim to its temptation, and only the Black Fairy had managed to pry it from his hands, nearly killing him in the battle. A century later, Merlin and an army of White Sorcerers had wrested the dagger back, but he whom Merlin entrusted with the guardianship had fallen victim to the dagger's lure. And so it had been, battle after battle, some on the grand universal scale, some on the most petty human scale, until at last the dagger came into Rumplestiltskin's possession, and he had owned it and himself for three hundred years, until he'd lost it in an act of trust to a woman he'd once loved. And now his history would repeat himself.

More than ever, Rumplestiltskin was convinced he had to free himself from this dagger as soon as possible, not only for what it could do to him, but what it was doing to Belle.

"Take me to the Snow Queen."

"What could you possibly want from the Snow Queen's cave?"

His features froze at her answer. "A hat. One that can strip a magical being of her powers."
She knew. He should have suspected: he thought he’d hidden away the most dangerous of his books, but there were still a great many she’d had access to in the shop, and all that time she’d been alone, fulfilling his role as knowledge keeper, she must have come across mention of the Hat more than once. Merlin’s other great invention had received a lot of speculative attention over the centuries, particularly from his predecessors: the Hat was the Dark Ones’ Holy Grail.

She knew. Maybe Destiny was offering him an opening to tell her his secrets. After just a taste of the temptations of the dagger—and that, just a fake—Belle would understand the necessity and the urgency of his plan. She would even offer to help: bringing an end to the Dark curse would be a blessing for everyone. There was no downside to it—except the method by which the Hat worked. She wouldn't begrudge him the magic; she would understand that magic was how he would keep himself and her safe from people like Hook. Without magic, they’d surely die at a revenge seeker's hands. She would understand that, wouldn't she? But the method... what he had to do to gather that magic into the Hat, and to have enough of it to draw upon for all the natural years of their lives—for, he realized in full what he would be giving up when he left the magical sphere of Storybrooke, and he was willing to pay the price of the surrender of his immortality to be a free and whole person again.

She knew about the Hat, and he had his opening. But he heard himself blurting, "Sounds like a remarkable object, almost too good to be true" and the lies spilled out of him again, more easily, more quickly than ever before. He couldn't meet her gaze as he lied to her—but for their own good, for everyone's good! He couldn't allow her to stop him, not when Destiny had dropped the keys to his cage into his lap, not when he was just days away from freedom.

"Why are you so invested in a girl you've never even met?"

"A hero always helps strangers." She sank farther into the quicksand. He'd handed her an opportunity to free herself from her secret—to regain his trust—but she took the easy way out. She didn't understand why. As soon as she rescued Anna, the truth would come out. Later, as she thought about this moment, she realized fear had corrupted everything about herself she took pride in, and she thought she understood her husband, who'd surrendered to fear so often, a little better. But that was much later.

Too late to save them.
Now You Don't See So Well

16 May 2014

Stabbed in the back by the last person she'd have guessed would betray her: her puppy-loyal Genie. And everyone else was yapping at her heels: Snow, who still had too much Mary Margaret in her to take the reins of the city; Swan, who, for some puzzling reason, seemed to have decided she and Regina should buddy up; Robin, who kept bouncing between his literally frozen marriage and his red-hot love affair.

As she was growing up, she'd been pushed into social alliances—not friendships, no, Cora had chosen which children Regina would entertain: they came to her, not she to them, for a queen, Cora said, is waited for and waited upon, never made to wait at another's door. These "play dates," as a modern mother would call them, were arranged by secretaries of the royal families to whom the children belonged—"belonged" being the operative word, for the little princes and princesses were as much pawns in political and economic games as the servants who changed their diapers and wiped their noses. The parents would decide, strategically, how long the children's "friendships" lasted—no longer than the connections were useful, for once the desired result had been achieved, the children's social calendars would be rewritten so that new "friendships" could be formed.

Regina had never had a friend. She wasn't sure she wanted one.

The one person she had trusted well enough to confide in, her father, had proven himself early on to be far too weak-willed to take her side in any dispute. As soon as she could literally stand, she'd had to stand on her own two feet, often fighting adults who were much more conniving, treacherous and powerful than she. Even as a young queen, she'd been subordinate, in status to her husband, in will to her mother, in deviousness to castle staff. Only when she'd begun to develop her magic had she gained a sense of security and self-confidence, and even then, she'd been secondary to her mentor. It took her victory over him—or what at the time, felt like victory—before she could see herself as his equal, and only then did she feel truly powerful.

Since moving to the light side, of course, her perspective on that victory had shifted. With the pangs of love striking at her heart, she had no choice but to feel ashamed of having captured and imprisoned her mentor's beloved. Today, as Robin once more showed himself to be a prisoner of his own ethics, Regina could understand how Rumple must have felt when she'd reported Belle dead.

"I was a real bitch in those days," she muttered at Robin's receding back. She'd made apologies to Belle, Henry and the Charmings; they were easy; their goodness pushed them toward forgiveness. It would be the other villains that she'd have a hard time apologizing to. Too bad Swan had slain Mal; Regina thought she could have brought herself to apologize to the dragon lady next. As for her old teacher, Regina doubted whether he would ever melt enough to listen to an apology.

If she did have a friend, Regina wondered, would this mountainous road to redemption be easier to walk—or harder?  

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If she weren't deep into the confusion and frustration of it, Emma might have seen the irony of the situation. She'd spent the first twenty-eight years of her life searching for a family, preferably her biological one, though she'd gladly have made her home with an adopted family, as long as they'd stick with her through thick and thin. Then one night, three years ago, a ten-year-old had shown up at her door, and all of a sudden, she had a full set: a son, a dad, a mom, and a baby daddy. Her trouble then had been in believing all these people really were her kin.
Now that she'd not only accepted her blood ties, but also had let them into her heart, she had more 
would-be family than she knew what to do with: a deranged and magical former foster mother who 
was determined to claim her as a replacement for a long lost sister, as apparently, foretold in some 
crazy ancient scroll, and bind her magically into a sisterhood with a third sorceress. Emma didn't 
understand Sarah Fisher's thinking, but then, clearly the woman was unstable. Sarah the Snow 
Queen made Zelena look like a poster girl for mental health. The more she saw of Sarah's power— 
quite artistic, really—the deeper Emma's dread. Supposing she and David managed to trap Sarah, 
how in the hell would they hold her? Their most knowledgeable magic user/ally, Regina, was 
befuddled by the freezing spell Sarah had cast on Marian; it seemed unlikely Regina would manage 
to devise a permanent entrapment spell, or better, a power-dampener, like that cuff Pan had built. 
The more she tried to get inside Sarah's head to figure out her next move, the more Emma's head 
ached. With her preferred confidante, Snow, preoccupied with mayorhood and motherhood, Emma 
was tempted to unburden her worries on Hook. He certainly seemed willing to listen and to support 
any plans she devised. As clever as he was, he might come up with a scheme himself. But to reveal 
her worries to him would require allowing him closer than she was ready for. She was still burning 
from the losses of all the other men she'd dared to love.
16 May 2014

A cold cavern, the sparse furniture coated in frost. A home fit for a snow queen. Belle tightened
the parka around her body as she searched for the Hat. She had no idea what it looked like, but she
would grab any hat she came upon and figure it out later. With the Hat she could strip the Snow
Queen of her magic, save Anna, save Elsa, save the town. And maybe, when she was free of her
horrible curse, Ingrid would be saved too, and surely all that was worth the price of a few lies and
misdirections.

Though nothing could be worth what she had done to her husband. She kept searching. There was
no going back now.

A voice called to her, familiar in pitch but strange in tone, artificial. She followed it to a covered
wall hanging, and when she removed the sheet, she found herself. Her image reflected in a mirror,
but not reflected: smiling, and she knew damn well she wasn't smiling. The mirror spoke to her, the
smile dropping into a sneer as she accused Belle of insensitivity, selfishness, cowardice, and then
the image attacked her love.

"You truly believe that's real?" The mirror cackled of the dagger.

She knew. She realized then she'd known all along he'd conned her in order to con the town. She
didn't know the purpose of his game, but it didn't matter. He hadn't married her for love; he'd
married her to use her.

But he came running in to warn her of Ingrid's arrival. He saw that the mirror had entranced her
and he broke the spell, not with magic or violence, but with a plea that she depend upon him, trust
him. "Look at me. Don't look in the mirror. Look at me." Wasn't that love?

Or was it more manipulation, drawing her away from self-discovery and into his control? She
sliced at his throat with the dagger. This isn't Belle, she told herself, or maybe it was the real Belle,
the fighter for truth, coming out.

He transported her back to the shop, still pleading with her, forgiving her for cutting him. "You
don't know what you're doing."

She started to challenge him on the validity of the dagger, but when she saw the gash across his
throat, the dagger became real enough, for the moment. A little closer and she would have killed
him. The spell broken, she dropped the dagger and dropped to her knees. "I hurt you. I'm so sorry,
Rumple."

"It's okay." Again, he forgave her. He loved her, she could hear that in his voice; he was worried
about her, she could see that in his eyes; he still thought the world of her, she could feel it in his
touch.

She explained about the mirror. "It said to me that the dagger you gave to me is fake."

For the second time, Destiny was handing him an opportunity. Telling her the truth could
mend the breach between them, or it could tear that breach into an insurmountable chasm.
For the second time, he failed them both. "I can assure you, nothing that mirror said is true."
She chose to believe him. She needed so much to have her confidant back, to have his reassurance that she wasn't the weakling the mirror had claimed her to be. His eyes told her without a glimmer of doubt she was still his hero. She confessed.

"You were only doing what you thought was right."

"Do you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you."

"I never should have kept a secret from you, especially since I know you would never keep one from me."

And for the third time, he ran from the opportunity to open himself to her.

"I love you, Rumple."

"I love you too." At least this was not a lie.

Ingrid had crossed a line. Useful as she might be to his plans, Ingrid had threatened his marriage, as Hook had; worse, she'd tampered with Belle's sanity. Still, because he had use for her, he granted her a second chance.

Brazenly he stared full-on into her Mirror of the Shattered Sight. The spell didn't affect him. He'd already faced and accepted the evil in him; his psyche, however bruised by his tormentors, was fully integrated. She understood then that she couldn't harm him, except through Belle, and his warning would be enough; she'd leave Belle alone. He made sure of that by allowing her to see the Hat—in his control, where he could turn it on her any time he chose.

The revelation served another purpose: in her reaction to the Hat, he saw that she was familiar with it, possibly had information about it that he didn't. He'd get it out of her, by Hook or by crook. It didn't matter which. He could wait a bit longer, now that they'd reached an understanding.

He had all the patience in the world.

Belle collected herself, came back to herself, under the freedom of forgiveness and the strength of love. She told Elsa what she knew of Anna and forewarned the heroes of the Spell of Shattered Sight. "If she casts it, its magic will make everyone in Storybrooke turn on one another."

"Except us," Emma included Elsa. "Her perfect family."

"And she showed us illustrations in a book, drawings of Ingrid, Helga and Gerda, and Emma looks a lot like Helga," Belle pondered as she plated the broccoli and cheese. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder to check the plates on the table—but not for what might be missing, but rather what might be there by accident.

She'd learned the hard way in the first week of his freedom that Rumple could no longer tolerate certain foods: mashed potatoes, oatmeal, white rice, grits, boiled peas and pot pies all
sent him directly to the bathroom, where he'd lose whatever lunch he'd managed to swallow. Carving knives provoked the same reaction; when their meal included turkey or ham, she had the grocer pre-cook and pre-slice the meat. "It's not unusual for PTSD victims to have flashbacks triggered by things that seem mundane to the rest of us," Archie had explained. "He may never be able to eat those foods again, or even tolerate having them on the dinner table. You'll just have to eliminate them from your menus. Think of it as an allergy of sorts, if that helps you understand."

"So Emma believes Ingrid is trying to replace her absent sisters with lookalike substitutes," Rumple surmised. He brought a basket of warm rolls to the table.

"Does that sound a bit farfetched? Do you think Emma's seen too many Hitchcock movies?"

"Sadly, I've seen it before: parents trying to replace their deceased children with lookalikes, going so far as to give the new child the same name as the deceased." He set the butter dish on the table, then withdrew her chair for her. His voice and his eyes dropped. "I've taken advantage of it."

She'd heard the story of how David had become a prince. She sat down, allowing him to push in her chair; his hands rested briefly on her shoulders. She thought he might be working himself up to confessing his role in David's story, but after a moment he merely brushed her hair back from her shoulders and walked around to his chair.

"So now we know what the Snow Queen wants," he said, seating himself.

"This Spell of Shattered Sight. Does it do what the books say it does, make people attack each other?"

He buttered a roll before answering. He chose his words carefully, to avoid alarming her. "There was a village once, in the Sunny Mountains."

"Where is that? I've never heard of the Sunny Mountains." She helped herself to a steak.

"They're now known as the Barren Mountains."

"I've heard of them. Not a soul lives in them," Belle said.

"Now. But once, there was a thriving village of two thousand, until the Spell of Shattered Sight was set loose upon them. The carnage lasted five days, until the last man alive, devastated by what he'd done to his neighbors, threw himself from a cliff. I didn't see the slaughter, but I saw the result. The spell is real, dearest, but I know how to protect you from it, and I will."

"Wouldn't it be smarter to stop Ingrid before she can cast it?"

"Yes, of course. And I'm sure Ms. Swan will succeed."

"Won't you help her?"

"She's the savior, dearest. Not me. Would you care for a roll?"
Emma had been had. Deceived. Screwed. Nothing made her feel more frustrated, more useless. More desirous of revenge. But as she watched the Snow Queen vanish before her eyes, she clenched her fists, fighting the urge to unleash her magic. She couldn't let Sarah Fisher—the Snow Queen—win.

Provoking her into blowing her cool had been just one strategy in Sarah's three-pronged psychological attack. She'd also tried to drive a wedge between Emma and the non-magical folk, especially Snow and David. They aren't your true family, Sarah had argued, because they aren't like you. To them, you're a freak. Something to be locked away. And then the third prong: there is a place you do belong. With me.

Though she wore handcuffs, Sarah was the trap setter, and Emma almost fell in. Belle had been the one to discover the bait: she'd identified the mirror the heroes thought they'd found as a fake. But her discovery had come late and by the time she and her hero friends had revealed the deception, Emma had blown a hole through the jailhouse (Did Rumple begrudge Belle her friends? She needed social interaction; how could he deny her her need, just because he didn't share it? It galled him, though, to see her running alongside the pirate. Of course, if she found out Rumple had been spending some quality time with Hook, she'd change her view of both of them.)

She led the ask. Save Emma, she begged; the Snow Queen is messing with her.

Well, it wasn't in his best interests (or Belle's, if she only knew) to block the Ice Maid, but neither was it in his interests to start a fight with his bride. He accompanied the heroes to the sheriff's office, where they witnessed Ms. Swan's breakdown—always a dangerous occurrence when a mage was at the center of the emotional storm. Poor Ms. Swan. He'd seen such crack ups happen with every new mage. He could talk her down, teach her control; he should, lest she accidentally harm Henry. But then she ran away and he decided he was better off with her distracted like this; it would keep her away from Hook, who might be tempted to spill the beans about the Hat.

More importantly, the Snow Queen's successes were his successes. Once the mayhem started, he could grab Henry and Belle and whisk them to safety beyond the town line. They would be grateful, and though Henry would grieve for the Charmings, at least Rumple could reassure him that Emma was alive and, more or less, well, in the bosom of her new family. Over time, Henry would stop asking about her.

There was a time, back in the Enchanted Forest, when Rumplestiltskin rather admired David, begrudgingly, and bore a soft spot for the kind Snow White. He could almost relate to her, orphaned young, victimized by Cora's greed. But those feelings—indeed, all feelings—no longer distracted him. Now when he thought of the Charmings at all, he remembered how they'd walked away from him, twice when he'd needed them.

At least, their ending would be quick. They'd probably die in each other's arms—strangling each other.

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An intelligent woman, Ingrid. She'd studied people as well as magic over her long years. She knew about the dagger; worse, she'd pieced together his plot, Hat and all. Cards on the table, then: she needed her magic ribbons so she could leash Emma and Elsa to her, and she offered the last piece of information he lacked, the deepest, darkest secret of the Hat: its activation required the crushed heart of someone who knew him before he became the Dark One.

He couldn't imagine a more delightful bit of news. And there was irony in it: Hook, who had set him on the path of evil by taking Milah, would set him free. Hook had stolen his first family, but now he would provide the means to a happy ending with his second.

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He hadn't planned on this. He'd fully intended to leave Ms. Swan to her own (and Ingrid's) devices; he'd had every confidence that with her strength and her will, she would pry herself loose from the Ice Maid eventually, probably hunt down the Golds in New York, to find Henry, and they'd welcome her into the Gold family. But she'd come to him, thrown herself upon his mercy (didn't she remember he'd never shown any?), begged him to take her magic away, when she should have been asking for lessons. So many had made the same error.

Her magic was huge, raw, undented by abuse. He could live upon it for years, beat down any enemy. She would do anything to rid herself of it, so how could he not accept her offer? And yet, as they stood in the Sorcerer's mansion with the Hat in the study, ready to solve all their problems, he had to tell her the truth. He answered every one of her questions with more honesty than he'd practiced in months. Was it his fault that she didn't ask the right questions?

He didn't feel sympathy for her, or concern, or fondness; he couldn't. He couldn't even dredge up the memory of any of those feelings, they were so far away in his past. But he found himself hesitating in taking advantage of this windfall. When he looked into her green eyes, he thought of Bae. If things had been different, if there hadn't been Charmings and Hook and ice sorceresses in between them, maybe she would have reached out to him in their common grief. Maybe he would have reached out to her, in his subtle, sneaky way. But alas, here they stood, and with the Ice Maid temporarily incapacitated and unable to interfere, Emma was moments away from permitting herself to become Hat fodder.

Rumple would miss her.

She spoke of the good he'd done, as evidence of his reformation. He almost stumbled then: someone had noticed what he'd gone through, when he'd assumed no one but Belle had. Perhaps someone had even cared, though she hadn't shown it. Too little, too late. But not quite: he didn't prod her to surrender to the Hat. Her power could do so much good for Belle and Henry... so much good for him. He craved that power, but he waited.

She raised Belle's name. There was great power over him in that name; did Emma sense it? "She believes you can change."

"And I love her for that, but I fear she's quite likely wrong." He'd never been more raw with her. Without his heart to get in the way, honesty came as easily as lying. "But you, Emma, you don't need to change because you do the right thing, always."

She heard the envy laced through his voice. She didn't hear the irony. He'd just informed her
that she need not give up her magic, but that wasn't what she heard. She turned toward the study. He turned away; he couldn't watch her surrender.

"Gold. Thank you."

"Of course. We have no choice." Still she didn't understand him: he was apologizing.

Outside, Hook was charging up to do his white-knight routine. Rumple sighed: dealing with Hook was so much simpler than dealing with Emma. He had no qualms about destroying the man who would have destroyed him and Belle. He bound Hook to the gate and watched the lights flicker in the mansion. Any minute now they'd go dark; Emma would be gone.

Except the electrical outbursts stopped. The lights steadied, shining brightly. Emma had changed her mind.

Half-relieved, Rumple swung on the gloating pirate. There were other magic users in town; they would fill the Hat for him. He wondered if he should pursue Regina, with her strong, well trained white magic. She couldn't do as much for him as Swan could have, but her contribution would go far. The thought passed as quickly as it had come. He couldn't ask himself why he'd dismissed it so readily. It never paid to scrutinize oneself too closely.

Instead he tore out Hook's heart.
Words Can Scare a Thought Away

19 May 2014

It wasn't like him to share his intentions with anyone else, and especially not his enemy, but Rumple had been feeling a pressure building in his chest all week until finally, as he sat with Hook on the dock, watching the Snow Queen's icebergs rise from the depths of the sea and form an insurmountable blockade, he unburdened himself. He'd only intended to give Hook marching orders; the less the pirate knew, the less he could fight back. But Rumple just couldn't shut up once he'd started. Capture the fairies, every one of them, in the Hat: that was all he intended to tell the captain, yet he needed to say more: "Doing so will infuse this hat with enough power to allow me to cleave myself from the dagger and leave this town with my powers intact." Why hadn't he shut up after he'd ordered Hook to capture the fairies? Never in his nearly four centuries of living had he been a blabbermouth; in fact, he'd had plenty of reasons to regret having withheld so much of himself from Bae and Belle. And to loosen his lips now, to Hook? Rumple shuddered as he thought back on what he'd done. It was so out of character. Perhaps it was a remnant of Zelena's little "tell me a story" game, or maybe he was simply nervous because discovering the Hat had been too fortuitous not to be a trap of some sort. He'd have to watch himself more carefully in the future.

As the library's front door swung open, Belle glanced up from the boards she'd been nailing onto the windows. Her mouth fell open as the shadow in the doorway moved forward and became the Blue Fairy, for none of the nuns had ever set foot in this institution. Sister Bernadette had once explained in an apologetic tone that the convent had a rather large library of its own, an eclectic mix of the religious, the secular and the magical. Belle had asked to be allowed to see this library someday, but Bernie had muttered something vague and turned away.

Now for the first time, Mother Superior had dropped in. "Welcome." Belle set aside her hammer and came away from the windows. She wasn't sure how to address her visitor; of all the Storybrookers, the fairy/nuns had seemed the least interested in resuming their Enchanted Forest personas. "We like who we've become," Bernie had explained. "Our faith has given us a sense of peace we didn't have before."

Belle put on her warmest smile. "Reverend Mother, why aren't you preparing the convent—"

Blue admitted, "I came to ask for your help."

"Of course. That's why I'm here."

"We need some things from your husband's shop."

Belle's smile froze. "Oh."

"We think we may have a counterspell to the Shattered Sight Curse. Sister Cecilia found it in our library, but it requires ingredients we don't have. I was hoping you would persuade your husband. . . ."

"Of course." The smile vanished. Rumple would be reluctant to surrender even the most plentiful of his magical supplies to the fairies, but if it would protect the town, surely he could be convinced. Belle squared her shoulders. If not, she'd just have to cut a deal.
Or better yet. . . . After all, he had said that everything he owned was now hers too, hadn't he? "Do you have a list?"

Silently Blue produced one from her cardigan pocket.

Belle looked it over. "Yes, we have these. Except the object from someone who's been exposed to the curse before."

"Anna was under the curse once. Elsa has a necklace that belongs to Anna; that will do. Right now she and Emma are using it with a locator spell to track Anna, but they promised to bring us the necklace by one o'clock. We estimate the curse will reach town at four o'clock."

"All right. I can provide the rest." Belle knew the shop's inventory and organization better than Rumple did now: she'd spent several months rearranging the shop and developing a spreadsheet from Rumple's handwritten index cards. "I'll go as soon as I finish boarding up the windows. Meet me back here at one o'clock."

"Thank you. And would you help us prepare the counterspell? We really could use your knowledge of local plants."

Instinctively Belle suspected Rumple would be unhappy to learn of her collaboration with fairies, despite the importance of the cause. But she was her own person; she would do what felt right to her, and they'd have to hash it out later. "I'll help. I've learned a lot about spells over the last two years."

"Thank you. We'll be working at Granny's." Blue touched her shoulder in gratitude before leaving again.

Belle finished covering the windows as she pondered what to say to Rumple. Finally a brainstorm hit her: she dialed Dove's number. "Josiah, I need a favor. I need you to take my husband out for lunch. La Tandoor. And please order the seven-course deluxe dinner for two. You can tell him it's a goodbye lunch, since we're leaving for New York tomorrow. That would be perfect. Thank you, Josiah. I'll explain later. Be sure you leave before noon."

As Belle began closing the library, she wondered how to catalog this bit of sleight of hand. She would never lie to Rumple, and besides, none of what she or Dove was about to tell him was untrue. Just, well, incomplete. She would call him now and tell him where she would be spending the rest of the day, and why. And she'd tell him tonight where she'd acquired the ingredients, as soon as the antidote was finished and the crisis averted. She promised herself she would.

The town, under the leadership of the Charmings and Regina, was hunkering down in preparation for the Spell of Shattered Sight. She'd been a queen a long time, and had been raised to command, so Regina had no qualms about barking instructions—until she arrived with Henry at the Merry Men's camp. It suddenly hit her that, for the first time, she had someone to lose if her decisions proved faulty. Three someones, in fact. She thought she had an inkling of what Snow must have felt when Regina had unleashed the Storybrooke Curse and the Charmings had had to scramble to protect their kingdom.

Their kingdom. Huh. It was the first time that phrase had ever popped into Regina's mind.

Now she was on the receiving end of a curse, she and the children she needed to protect. Destiny's revenge, was it? Or Destiny's wicked sense of humor? As she instructed the Merry Men to batten down the hatches, she decided that if they survived their own madness, she would apologize to the Charmings for the anxiety she'd subjected them to. If it had felt anything like what she was
experiencing now, it must've been Hell.

Emma left the emergency organizing to her parents, who were much better at rallying the folks than she would ever be. Her talent was in finding people, and though it was a long shot, that was what she and Elsa intended to do: find Anna, who they hoped would have a solution to the impending attack. Pouring a few drops of a locator potion onto Anna's necklace, Emma and Elsa set off across town as all around them, citizens gathered ropes, chains and padlocks—to restrain themselves when Ingrid's spell took them over and drove them to insane violence.

Emma glanced at the clock tower as they raced past it. Just ninety minutes 'til they had to get the necklace to the fairies. Oh, well. She'd worked under shorter deadlines.

Rumplestiltskin walked in through the front door of Granny's while his minion snuck in through the back. As soon as Rumple had found a way to pry Belle loose from the rescue research effort so he could remove her from the scene of the impending crime, Hook would rush in and capture every fairy in the joint in the Hat. It wouldn't be enough power for all Rumple's plans, but it would have to do, since he had failed to imprison Ms. Swan.

Rumple strolled in as if he owned the joint (he did), brushing past the busy and anxious nuns to greet Belle. "Hello, sweetheart. I had a nice goodbye lunch with Josiah, but it's nearly half past two. We really ought not wait. The curse is coming and we need to get you to safety."

"I'm sorry, I can't leave yet. This is too important. After we find the counterspell, yes, but not now."

"Of course," he replied smoothly. "I'll just wait here until you're ready to leave."

He was up to something, but Belle wasn't about to let herself be taken from her research by an argument that they could have more easily later, when it wouldn't matter any more. She nodded, granting her approval as he invited himself into the beehive, seating himself near the front door. Well, what harm would it do? She returned to her makeshift lab as he made himself comfortable.

"Is he going to stare at us all day?" Sister Bernie griped.

"Where's Emma with that necklace?" Sister Cecilia muttered.

The nuns worked frantically, speaking only when necessary, as if their conversation would reveal too much to the Dark One. Seventy minutes passed and the deadline was encroaching now, but everyone breathed in relief as Emma ran in and presented Blue with a velvet bag. "Anna's necklace," she panted.

Blue tipped the open bag over, spilling the contents into her palm. "Pebbles from the mine," she said bitterly.

"She tricked us," Emma moaned. She ran off to retrieve the necklace, despite Belle's warning: "It's too late."

From his place of unobtrusive observation near the door, Rumple mused at how rusty Blue had gotten over the decades. Why didn't she use her magic to find and fetch Elsa back? But since Blue hadn't thought of it, he wasn't about to suggest it and ruin the Snow Queen's lovely little scheme—the distraction he would need to finish his magic collecting, gather Belle and Henry, and high tail it out of town.

After finishing Hook off, of course.
He seized Belle's arm and steered her outside. "We can't waste any more time. We have to lock you in."

Heartbroken, she bade a hasty farewell to the nuns, whom she would never see again—who may not survive the night. She allowed Rumple to lock her into the shop alone, so that she couldn't hurt anyone, including him, when the curse overtook her. He promised he would come for her as soon as the curse passed, and then they would leave this torment behind and escape to New York. She settled herself in the workroom to wait out the night.

Hook arrived with the Hat as Rumple was sealing the shop with a protection spell. "Is it done?"

"You know, she truly loves you. You could have her forever, or all the power in the world. It's your choice." Clever pirate, bidding for one last, desperate ploy.

"I don't need to choose, thank you," Rumple snatched the Hat away. "I can and will have both."

And as the townsfolk closed themselves off from each other and their children, he hurried away to find Henry, but it was too late: the skies now were black with the curse. Immune himself to its darkness, Rumple stood in the street and watched the curse cloud encompass the town. He had to admit, it was an awesome sight, wickedly beautiful.
Rumplestiltskin could feel the power crackling in the curse as its cloud hovered over the west woods. Somewhere in that area lay the Merry Men's camp; briefly he wondered how they were faring and what precautions they had taken with Roland, but they were special favorites with Regina; she would have looked out for them. The hairs on his arms stood up as the cloud shifted eastward. The fairies' estimate of its arrival time had been too generous.

Quietly he passed under his protection spell and entered the shop. Behind the curtain he could hear Belle milling about, restless as she waited out the unknown. He wondered if she had waited out Regina's curse the same way; Belle had told him she'd been locked in one of the Dark Palace's towers for about ten months before Regina cast the curse and during that time she'd heard rumors of an impending curse from the guards, but had Regina warned her when the curse was on its way? Had Belle been given time to prepare herself emotionally, or had she watched from a window in horror the arrival of the black cloud, assuming the world was coming to an end?

This time at least she had been forewarned and knew as much as anyone else did about what to expect. This time she was comfortable and relatively safe in their own space. Rumple raised his left hand, calling forth his magic, channeling it through his wedding ring so it would be tinged with faith and love, then he sent the magic through the curtain and into the workroom. With a fond thought he cast a gentle sleeping spell. This time she would pass the time before the arrival of the curse in dreams of sunny valleys filled with daisies and a babbling brook whose cool water invited her to wade.

The service bell above the shop door tinkled. He turned to find Hook, as ordered, waiting for instructions. How handy this slave thing had proven to be. Find Henry, Rumple ordered; his mothers have hidden him away. Bring him to the town line tonight. Rumple would then whisk his little family to safety—at after killing Hook.

When Hook went out to do his bidding, Rumple left too, resealing the shop. As shouts, honking car horns and slamming doors greeted the arrival of the curse cloud, Rumple unlocked the basement door to the public library and made his way through the rubble and the ashes to a small, hidden room that, unbeknownst to Regina, her curse had built. Herein lay his secret library, containing the rarest and most dangerous of his magic books. He opened a case and began to pack them.

He'd stored the books safely into the Caddy's boot and he'd driven home to the pink house to pack his clothes. His watch informed him that an hour had passed since the cloud's arrival; his magic informed him that something in the magical environment was changing. His skin no longer prickled; his breath came easily now. He dropped Belle's suitcase beside his own in the foyer and yanked the front door open to peer out: the cloud was gone. The sun shone over the village just as happily as if no evil had filled its skies.

He stepped out onto his porch and grunted. Ingrid had failed. Whether her magic had fallen apart or been counteracted, he couldn't tell; he supposed he'd hear the story soon enough. It
didn't matter how; it only mattered that Storybrooke was alive and well and once again, in his way. He'd have to sneak his family out of town beneath the Charmings' nosey noses. Hook damn well had better have grabbed Henry.

Rumple tossed the suitcases in the Caddy and drove back to the shop, then summoned Hook. The pirate gloated as he reported his failure to capture Henry. Rumple would have crushed the smart ass' heart then and there except the famous Rumplestiltskin patience kicked in: Hook could still be useful for three more hours, until nightfall.

The damn pirate seemed oblivious to the danger he was in. He wanted a deal, he declared: "a dying wish." Did he think the Dark One a minion of Thanatos, then? "Leave Emma and the rest of Storybrooke be."

Rumple hesitated a half-second. Henry was better off with Emma, who would make sure he remembered his father as he grew up; Regina would have no information about Baelfire to pass on. So if Rumple and Belle couldn't raise Henry, Emma should. Besides, destroying the town would take a great deal of magic and serve little purpose now. "Emma and Storybrooke have nothing to fear from me as long as they stay out of my way," Rumple allowed. "But I can't make that same promise for the rest of the world." The implied threat served to remind Hook who still had the power around here. In truth, even with ten fairies and a powerful Apprentice tucked away in it, the Hat contained precious little magic; Rumple would use it only in emergencies.

He made a mental note to pack his cane in the truck. At least, he still had a powerful right arm.

He sent Hook away to while away the rest of the afternoon. Rumple had a bank account to close out yet, and properties to give Dove power of attorney over. As soon as he arrived in New York, he'd set up an account there to receive the monthly rent payments from Dove. And as a reward for loyal service, Rumple signed over the title to the pink house to Dove and the ownership of the shop to Henry. Once more, he congratulated himself on having had the foresight to remove his heart: had he not done so, the loss of Henry would be muddling his mind right now.

The boy would not forget his Grandpa Gold, of that Rumple was certain. And someday, he'd come looking for him with loads of questions about his lineage—and about magic.
"Tell me, captain," Rumple began in a conversational tone, "do you believe in heaven and hell?"

Narrowing his eyes, because he realized he was being led, Hook shrugged. "Never gave it much thought."

Rumple knew for a fact that was a lie. In seaport taverns he'd overheard the sailors of the Jolly Roger contemplate the prospects of an afterlife when they were deep into their cups; Hook had been as involved in the topic as any of them. He'd been raised in a God-fearing home (God-fearing, that is, on Sundays and whenever the vicar dropped in for brunch) and as an officer in His Majesty's Navy he'd stayed the course, as God fearing was considered the mark of a gentleman; in long, windless days out to sea, he'd argued staunchly for the faith of his fathers against the philosophies of competing believers. But it wasn't until his brother died that he called upon his God—cursed him roundly for a fool, in fact. Years later, after his Milah died, he'd changed his tone, praying over his rum for her safe journey to heaven—for he had some doubt about her eternal destination, considering her betrayal of her marriage vows, her abandonment of her son and her pirating ways after she'd come aboard the Jolly Roger. As he came to the bottom of his flask, he'd also prayed for an opportunity to avenge her murder.

All this Rumple already knew about Hook, from eavesdropping in taverns and from questioning the wenches who served food and drink there. So when he asked whether Hook believed in heaven, it was just to provoke anxiety. Ignoring Hook's feigned cavalier attitude, Rumple smiled thinly. "Perhaps you should give it some thought, in the time you have left."

He then produced Hook's heart with a snap of his fingers and gave it a little testing squeeze. It had been so long since he'd controlled a heart, but just like riding a bicycle (as they said in this world) it came back to him readily.

With a squeeze, Hook's tongue loosened and he informed Rumple about the new curse on the town line: anyone who crossed it could never return. Inwardly Rumple sighed: what, again? This town-line-block business was getting to be damn tiresome. It had temporarily prevented him from finding Bae in New York, it had robbed Belle of her memories, and now it was preventing his much-needed escape from the enemies of his past—not that he didn't expect to make new enemies in the outside world: a man with money and magic always would be hated—but out there he could lose himself, blend in, become just another ordinary member of the Most Despised Men in America Club.

Or maybe, a small voice in his head suggested, if he kept quiet and cautious, didn't throw his arms around, he and Belle could live an undisturbed and comfortable life in the Poconos.

As Hook babbled on about the town line, Rumple gave the problem some quick thought: he could remain in Storybrooke until he found a curse breaker. He had a few ideas already of where to start his research. But he dismissed the thought just as quickly: he had to get out of here. Every minute he remained was another minute at risk for the next Zelena. It nearly
killed him, though, to think of leaving Henry behind: it felt like a violation of his final obligation to Bae, that he wouldn't be around to protect Bae's flesh-and-blood, the last living memory of a loving boy who grew up to be a heroic man.

Once out there in the world, Rumple vowed, he would find a way to dissolve that curse and free Henry. But as for the places here that Rumple was leaving behind—Neal's grave, the shop, the cabin, even that awful pink monstrosity—he'd burn them into his memory and his heart, once he reclaimed it tomorrow, just before he activated the Hat and executed Hook.

"When the stars in the sky align with the stars in the Hat, I will finally do what I should have done so many years ago: I will crush your heart." A hint of annoyance leaked into his tone: self-annoyance for having allowed rage to cloud his usually clear thinking. If, that afternoon three hundred years ago when he'd confronted his wife and her lover on the deck of the pirate ship, he had killed Jones too, so much trouble could have been avoided. He would have sent the lovers off to heaven or hell in each other's arms, snatched up the magic bean and transported himself away before Smee had had time for a cry of "oh captain, my captain."

And by nightfall, Rumplestiltskin would have been reunited with his son. Poor, powerless and lame once again in a Land without Magic, but at least, reunited, finally fulfilling his promise to love and protect the boy.

If he had done that, there would be no curses, no Storybrooke. There would have been no Regina, for Cora never would have learned magic. David would have never left the farm, though his feckless brother probably would have run off to the city and died of drink or whoring. George would have remained a frustrated knight, until he got caught in some assassination plot. Snow would have been raised by two loving, dull-witted parents. Emma would never have been born, nor Henry. And Belle would have been married off to the highest bidder to bear heirs, if ogres didn't eat her first.

And Bae would have grown up a poor spinner's son in a nineteenth-century London hovel, illiterate, often hungry, often cold, but always, always loved.

Sometimes as he lay in his bed sleepless, Rumple wondered whether, if he'd known then how things would turn out, would he have killed Jones alongside Milah on that awful afternoon? In effect, would he have chosen Bae over Belle? He brushed the question aside as he awakened his wife from her magical nap to advise her to start packing.

While she did, he took Hook on a side trip to the Sorcerer's house to locate the Snow Queen's portal. He purposely ignored the open bedroom doorway through which the king-sized bed was visible, its linens freshly washed and neatly spread out by the bed's conscientious last occupants. The portal revealed, Rumple permitted himself to smile. Very shortly now, the Arendelle sisters would leave for home and he would be free of the threat of Anna's learning his identity and exposing his plans for the Hat.

After sending the pirate off on his mission to report the Sorcerer's invisible portal to Emma, Rumple, still clutching the heart, waited for the agreed-upon sign (well, "agreed-upon" was perhaps too generous a term; "commanded" would be more accurate) that Hook had found her and was ready to deliver the message, scripted by Rumple. The pawnbroker made himself comfortable, sitting atop the counter, as Hook had recently: he'd never sat upon the counter before and never would again, the act seeming to him so unseemly, but it was an
instinctive thing, a reclaiming of his territory. He felt awkward with his feet dangling above
the floor. He locked the door remotely, lest a Charming or Regina or Henry burst in on him
as he dictated to Hook what to say to Emma.

The chore over, he sent Hook's heart back to his safe, then dangled his feet a few minutes
more as he considered his earlier question to Hook: Do you believe in heaven and hell? Most
people would find it incongruent, but Rumplestiltskin was a believer in a higher power of
some sort—or perhaps "believer" was inaccurate; "knower" might be better, for he knew for
a certainty there was an afterlife, for the cursed, anyway, having spent a part of it in the Vault
of the Dark Ones. Someone, some judge and punisher, had sent him there. He had no doubt
someday he'd return, this time to finish out his sentence. In the meantime, it killed him to
realize that his spot in hell was being filled right now by his son. He'd heard a little about the
adult Neal's shady doings after coming to the Land without Magic; Emma had told Henry,
and Henry had told Rumple. Neal had committed crimes against society and against family,
but nothing, nothing anywhere near deserving of the punishment he was undergoing now.

Sometimes, as he lay in bed staring at the ceiling, Rumple thought about handing over the
dagger to Hook and inviting him to do his worst. If Rumple died—and the only way that
could happen in Storybrooke was if someone stabbed him with the dagger—he would take his
rightful place in the vault and Bae would be freed—whether to move on to heaven or
Valhalla or oblivion, Rumple had no idea, but certainly to a reward. Alas, he was certain
Hook would refuse the invitation; he had Emma to live for now. Rumple chuckled bitterly in
these moments: Where was Cora when she was needed? She wouldn't have hesitated trading
her immortal soul for earthly power.

He pushed these thought aside. This was not the time for second guesses; this was the time for
action. He still had something to pack. He transported himself to the woods, to the site of
Bae's first grave. He stood there a long moment with his hands clasped, then he said his last
goodbye. He spoke of regret, opportunities missed or passed by; he spoke of his guilt and
made no excuses, because there was no one here to run from him in disgust. He spoke of
shame, humiliation, temptation. He spoke of grief, then he spoke of forgiving and hope. And
last, when his voice was spent, he spoke of undying love. He knelt, pressed his palm to the
damp soil, imagined he was brushing a tear away from his infant son's cheek. Then he
crossed his hands over the grave, pushing the earth aside, and he raised up his heart.
Cupping it loosely in both hands, he blew magic across it, cleaning it of dust, but he couldn't
blow the blackness away.

"So that I'll never stop loving Belle and Henry and you," he vowed. "So that I'll never stop
feeling." He thrust his heart back into his chest and, as the force of overpowering emotions
struck him, fell flat on his back. He allowed his body to rest for a few minutes, just staring up
at the sky.

For some odd reason, he thought of Regina.
Mirror had told her the truth and her husband hadn't.

For how long? How far back did the lying go? How many lies? And which of his promises and declarations had been deceptions all along?

He'd rescued her, back in the early days of their acquaintance, from the Queens of Darkness, as he called them, by trading this magic mitt for her. She'd thought he had made a sacrifice, though not a great one, for her sake. She'd assumed from that noble gesture that he cared for her. And yet, here it was in her hand. He'd gone back after her rescue to steal it from the Queens. He'd sacrificed nothing.

This gauntlet, he'd said, could identify a person's greatest weakness, the thing that person loved most. All right then. She sat there on their cot a long time before she worked up the nerve, but she had to face the truth, even if it meant exposing his biggest lie. She brushed tears away with the back of her hand and issued her command: "Show me Rumplestiltskin's weakness."

The Camelot Gauntlet jerked in her grip. It didn't have far to pull her: she stood before the wall safe, breathing hard. "Oh gods," she moaned. Because it didn't matter really what the Gauntlet had led her to: it hadn't led her to herself.

She locked the front door and slumped behind it, crying hot tears until they became cold, and then crying until she had nothing left to feel. She glanced at her phone, thinking she should give him one last chance to explain.

To kiss her tears away, as he always did. To stutter excuses. To conjure more lies. To put her asleep again, slide her into the back seat of the Caddy and drive her to New York before she could demand an answer to her questions: what have you done? Why have you lied to me? Did you ever really love me?

She shut her phone off. She pushed herself to her feet, teetering on her high heels. She walked to the safe, spun the combination—she was his wife; she knew the combination. Inside were an envelope full of cash, their chipped cup, and a magically sealed glove box. Only she was pretty sure that wasn't a pair of gloves inside. The box obeyed her command to open: thanks to the bloodletting ritual on their wedding night, his magic recognized her as his blood kin. She didn't have to look to know what was inside the box.

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Rumple's footsteps slowed as he approached Regina's Mercedes. He still bore a measure of anger toward her, for imprisoning Belle and for having given his dagger to Belle instead of him, but he supposed he should also be grateful, because she cast the curse that brought him to Bae. A quick call to Dove had informed him what was going on here: to save Marian's life, Robin and Roland would cross the town line, freeing Marian of the remnants of magic, binding Robin to her again. Once again, Regina was losing the love she'd so longed for.

And deserved.

Rumple wished to express that to her, recognize her for her sacrifice. Offer her the reminder of an option that he knew she wouldn't take: let Marian die. Keep Robin. He wished to acknowledge all he'd been through with Regina, how he had watched her grow from a swaddled newborn into a queen and now, into an adult. He wished to leave her with a positive memory of him, and a message for Henry. So he picked up his pace, ignored the stares of the Merry Men lined up along the highway to bid their leader farewell, and he climbed into the Mercedes.
She didn't seem surprised. Her magic must've sensed his approach.

There had never been sentiment exchanged between them, or gratitude, and it was too late to start any of that now. They spoke of the technicalities of the new boundary curse; they traded philosophies about destiny. He allowed a shadow of emotion to peek through when he asked her to convey his goodbye to Henry, and again when he clasped her hand and wished her happiness. Then before she felt obligated to indulge in pride-protective snarking, he walked away.

Regina didn't watch him go. She didn't have to: her magic informed her of his leaving. She had more urgent matters to attend to. She raised her chin and climbed out of the car.

As Roland and Robin vanished behind the town line, she walked away from her hopes. Touching her lips, she cast a tiny spell on herself so that she was always remember Robin's face, his rough hands on her back, his mouth pressed against hers. She thought that Roland would soon forget her.

And as for herself, she'd always remember.
A Friend Made Enemy

20 May 2014

FREEDOM! So close he could feel it nosing against his hands, like a dog begging to be let off its leash. After three freaking hundred years of enslavement to that damn dagger—every waking moment (and most moments in his life had been wide awake: he was afraid what might happen to that damn dagger if he closed his eyes and lost track of it for a minute) he'd borne under its weight, carrying the power and the worry of it in the back of his mind, the front of his mind, and every space and brain cell in between. He'd managed for three centuries to keep it close, keep it his, and then, in just the past three years, he'd lost control of it three times, and all to women he'd had personal relationships with, twice to women he'd trusted and loved. Losing that control had cost him his son and his freedom.

No one must ever again have the opportunity to rule the Dark One. Even the purest hearted, even the kindest souled, even the lovingest would fall prey to the dagger's lure: Belle had proven that when she'd tried to command him with the (fake) dagger. No one could resist the temptation, and so, no one could be trusted. And the only way to ensure that was to render the dagger ineffective. Rumplestiltskin had to escape its range of influence by escaping the land of magic he'd created here—and yet, to protect himself and Belle against his enemies, he would have to retain magic. Some generous soul, by leaving the Hat out in a most conspicuous place, had made that possible: somebody, perhaps, who wanted him gone from Storybrooke, gone and unable to ever return. He'd be delighted to oblige.

Hook was taking his impending execution like a man, Rumple had to grant him that much, though he noticed the pirate's jaw clenching to fight back tears. In the clock tower at midnight they stood, facing off before Rumple opened the skylight. In a minute the last task would be finished. In a minute, Rumplestiltskin would open the Hat, let the powers within align with the powers in the heavens, toss the useless dagger away and let the Hat be electrified with magic. When the outburst had passed, the Hat would drift down into his waiting hand. He would then seal the Hat, tuck it into his jacket and, stepping over his enemy's body, walk down the spiral staircase and into the street, where the fully packed Caddy awaited. He would then phone Belle, telling her his last-minute business was concluded and she should wait for him on the porch of the house that now legally belonged to Dove, because New York couldn't wait a minute longer.

In a minute his life would begin anew. But first he had a life to end, a responsibility to ensure the safety of Belle and himself (and to preserve Bae's place as Henry's father: Emma must not be allowed to replace him with this oily adulterer).

He sent the Hat floating into the air, and when the two powers collided it burst into a shower of stars, raining magic down upon him, electrifying him. His body jerked under the onslaught. Emma and Snow burst into the tower, shouting; he cast an inanimate spell upon them. It would wear off before morning, leaving them unharmed although frustrated. He supposed they would mourn the pirate's death, just as they had mourned Bae's. Maybe they'd name the library after him. The disgust that thought filled him with gave him the strength to proceed with the heart crushing, pushing out of his mind the memory of a wee boy shouting,
"No, Papa, don't!"

He let Hook glance at his heart one last time before he began to squeeze—

The muscles in his hand locked up. "I don't understand. Why—"

"Because I commanded you to."

He spun to face Belle. Stunned speechless, he could only stare at the dagger in her hand. "Drop the heart. Now release everyone." He'd never seen her so angry, so hurt.

The power dissipated and the Hat shrunk back into its box.

She didn't understand. Of course, that was it, or she wouldn't be doing—

"And now you can take us to the town line, because we need to be alone for what comes next."

He should have told her, should have let her in on the plan; he could have convinced—

At the edge of town, he still believed he could win her over, his silver tongue, her devotion to him, she would understand, she would forgive, she would drop the dagger and fly into his arms. "Belle, what are you doing?"

She maneuvered him so he faced Storybrooke. "Finally facing the truth."

She loved him, he would understand and forgive, he didn't have the Hat now but they could still leave, they had money, they had each—

"Please put the dagger down and let me explain."

—Other. Didn't they? "No. It's my turn to talk." She reminded him about the time he'd relinquished power to rescue her from the Queens of Darkness, or so he had led her to believe. "I found that gauntlet today and that's when I finally realized that all the signs I'd been seeing were correct: you'd never give up power for me, Rumple. You never have; you never will. You told me that gauntlet would lead to someone's weakness, to the thing they loved the most. Well, you know where it led me, Rumple? To the real dagger. Your true love is your power."

He tried to argue, but she was beyond listening; his only hope now was if she wasn't beyond caring.

"I just wanted you. I wanted to be chosen."

He flashed back to a little boy begging his papa to choose him over magic—to two little boys whose papas didn't love them enough to choose them. He understood her.

"It's too late. Once I saw the man behind the beast. Now there's only the beast." She raised the dagger and commanded him gone from Storybrooke, from her, from Henry. He pleaded as his magic forced him backward. "I don't want to lose you."

"You already have." She turned her back on him.
The little abandoned boy cried out to her. The last words she heard her beloved say were
"Belle, please, I'm afraid."

He kept pleading as he stepped over the town line and suddenly, his right ankle collapsed and he fell to the asphalt. He kept pleading, reaching out for a woman he could no longer see, kept pleading until his voice gave out, until the cold night air seeped into his bones and his fingernails turned blue. He knew the rules of magic, yet he kept crying out to her in hope. Maybe, by the power of their True Love, a miracle—

By dawn his hope gave out like his ankle.

"I'm miserable."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, so's Gold."

"It does."

Maybe Regina hadn't gone completely over to the light side after all.
I Don't Know How These Cuts Heal

20 May 2014

Regina could recall with perfect clarity the last time she'd cried. She was eleven, and the stable keeper had just informed her that her beloved Galatea, upon whose broad back Regina had learned to ride at the age of four, had developed cancer and had to be put down. Regina had sunk into her father's comforting arms, with the stable keeper patting her back awkwardly and his son Daniel standing by, dangling Galatea's bridle. "I thought you'd like to keep this," the boy murmured; he'd polished the bridle to a high shine, its gold nameplate reflecting Regina's image as she accepted the memento.

Then Cora had sashayed in, her long skirts raised to ankle-length to protect them from the dirt. "What is this caterwauling? You--" she jutted her chin at the stable keeper and his son. "Dismissed." When they'd bowed and scrambled away, she spun on Regina and Henry. "Now. What is this about, so deserving of disturbing my peaceful walk in the garden and creating the mess you've made of your face?"

"Galatea is dead," Henry said softly. His eyes pleaded for understanding.

"Who?"

"Her pony."

"Oh. That." Cora sniffed. "I would have thought the king had died, for all that noise you were making, Regina. That pony was worthless. A farmer gave it to us on your first birthday in a vain attempt to curry favor. It was worth next to nothing then, already long in the tooth, and I'm surprised you got any use out of the animal. Now, if you must ride—and believe me, that unseemly activity will end as soon as you develop breasts—you should have an animal that befits our station in life."

"I don't want another horse. I love Galatea." But Regina's tears were drying even as she protested. There was a tall, young champion jumper that a neighboring duke had been showing around town. . . Still, Regina determined to mourn Galatea properly by accepting no other mount.

"Nonsense." Cora turned away. "You will stop that sobbing immediately. You are my flesh and blood, and you will show it by comporting yourself with dignity and strength. And then we shall talk about purchasing an animal deserving of carrying a future queen."

Henry clutched Regina tightly to his chest as Cora left the barn. "You are her flesh and blood, but you are mine as well, and you will always have my permission to grieve." He stroked her hair. "Because to grieve shows that you can love."

And Regina as she grew did have more occasions to love and to grieve, but her mother had taught her an indelible lesson that day: no one would ever catch her crying. And so, as she drove her Mercedes home from the Storybrooke line after sending her beloved and her almost-stepson across it, she tightened her jaw and raised her chin. Only after she'd locked her mansion door and had sunk onto her couch (Robin had sat here, just a few short hours ago, kissing her, toying with buttons on her blouse) with a snifter of brandy did she allow the facade to crumble. And yes, she cried, for the first time in twenty-four years, because Cora was not there to correct her and Henry was not there to smooth her hair and Daniel was not there to bring her mementos.
And Robin would never sit on this couch again to toy with her buttons.

Emma dropped onto her couch, propped her feet up on the coffee table (even though Mary Margaret usually swatted at her for putting her feet on the furniture) and slipped off her leather jacket. She smelled of rum and coke, but that was okay: Henry was asleep upstairs and her parents, watching TV with the baby asleep on David's lap, said nothing in complaint. It had been a rough week.

When Letterman ended his monologue and went to commercial, Mary Margaret reached over and patted Emma's knee. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I returned Killian's heart, commiserated with Regina, now maybe we'll get some peace and quiet." Emma yawned.

"How is Regina?"

"Hanging in there. About what you'd expect from the no-longer-evil queen."

Mary Margaret glanced at David. "We'll check on her in the morning."

"I wouldn't be surprised if she ends up going after him," David said.

"I would," Emma objected. "That would mean leaving Henry behind. Unless—"

"No," Mary Margaret interrupted. "Don't go there. She wouldn't take Henry away from us. No, she'll stay here. Robin may be her true love, but Henry is her son."

"Our son," Emma corrected. She closed her eyes. "I wouldn't be surprised if I get a midnight disturbance call from the ritzy part of town."

"What do you mean?"

"Gold Avenue."

"Belle and Gold?" David raised an eyebrow. "You don't think he'd hit her—?"

"No, of course not. But I wouldn't be surprised if there's some yelling and broken crockery in that house tonight. Belle's not going to back down this time."

Mary Margaret grinned crookedly. "Granny might just have a new guest at the inn."

"Anybody care to wager how long he'll be in the doghouse?" David offered.

"She's pretty mad," Mary Margaret speculated. "I'd say two weeks."

David pursed his lips. "She's such a soft-hearted person, though. I say she takes him back in a week or less."

Emma sniffed. "I say it's a full month before she takes him back—but there'll be plenty of make-up sex before then." Her mother swatted her and gasped, "Emma!"

"What? Guess you've never caught them making out in the shop." Emma snickered. "Old as he is, he's got a lot of stamina. Must be using magic. Or Viagra."

"Well, I wager there'll be a new little Gold by this time next year," Mary Margaret said sweetly.
David wondered, "Do you suppose it will have green scales?"

It was a long walk back to town, in the cold and the dark; Belle hadn't thought of that when she ordered him to transport her and himself to the town border. Truth be told, she hadn't thought at all in that moment, merely reacted to her hurt and her anger, and the shock (but not shock) of finding her husband in mid-kill.

And, as they landed on the asphalt just short of the orange line, the shock of hearing herself ending her very brief marriage with just a few words.

Her feet hurt. He'd always teased her about her high heels, half-teasing, really; he could see the damage they were causing to her feet and her back, but she'd stubbornly refused to switch to flats. It was something few people knew about her: she could be just as head-strong as he was, just as unwilling to admit when she was wrong.

Was she wrong when she promised him forever?

She paused in the town square. All the buildings, even Granny's, were dark and everyone had gone home for the night; she wouldn't have to face them. Yet. She stopped at the boarded-up entrance to the library. The apartment upstairs had remained unoccupied since she left it to move into the pink house (to begin—or rather, resume—living with Rumple). She would probably move back in, now. Though her name was on the deed and her clothes occupied the walk-in off the master bedroom and her books filled the downstairs den (which he'd converted from his office to a library for her, as a wedding gift), the pink house didn't feel like hers. They'd talked about selling it to buy something better fitted to her tastes—he didn't care, he claimed; he hadn't chosen the house; the curse had assigned it to him. Any house she chose would be fine with him, he'd said; and she knew he meant it. He could be surprisingly accommodating like that.

Well, but not about the things that really mattered.

She had no clothes in the apartment, no linens, no towels, no books. She'd have to spend tonight in the pink house. In the morning she would begin to box up her belongings and she'd ask Mr. Dove to deliver them to the apartment. He'd do it for her without question. He'd do anything for her, just as he would for Rumple. That Rumple inspired such loyalty was another fact few people knew, another reason she was—used to be—proud to be Mrs. Gold.

It would be easy to separate her belongings from his. They hadn't been married long enough for there to be a "theirs."

It was another two miles to the pink house, and her back was aching from the heels now, but she walked on. (How far is it from the border to the nearest town? She never thought to ask, even after they'd begun talking about visiting New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Rome, Sidney, Lisbon. In the days leading up to their wedding, they'd poured over the tourist books she'd bought for the town library; they'd made lists of sites to see and cuisines to taste. Or rather, come to think about it, she'd made the selections and he'd written them down in his tight, plain handwriting. "Anywhere you want, sweetheart," he'd promised. "For as long as you want." As a sorcerer, he had traveled worlds enough to satisfy his own curiosity. His enjoyment of the world would come from watching her discover it, he'd said.)

She stopped on the lawn leading up to the porch. His Cadillac was in the garage, parked next to her Honda. Hers—she selected it, she negotiated with the dealer, she's been making the payments on it from her own salary. His only involvement had been to drive her to the car lot. When the salesman rushed out with a fawning "Mr. Gold! How good to see you," he'd waved the man away. "Belle is your customer. Suck up to her. I'm just here for the coffee." He could be like that, trusting her
opinions (based on thorough research), keeping out of her way, respecting what was hers.

Except about the things that really mattered.

(Or. . .did he think of the magic as something that was his alone? Had he thought her opinions about the magic uninformed and intrusive—even disrespectful of his three hundred years of study and practice?)

She walked across the grass to the porch. The lawn was one of the few things she'd not have to worry about for a while. He mowed it on the weekend, and not with magic. He'd stripped down to his undershirt and a pair of paint-stained jeans she didn't realize he owned, and he'd yanked on the engine cord until the engine fired and he'd pushed the blasted machine in an ever-shrinking rectangle. He didn't seem to mind the way the neighbors gaped, then laughed behind their hands, nor the sweat stains that gathered under his arms, nor the dust that darkened his face. Before they'd married, he had a service maintain his lawn, and another clean the house, and another clean his laundry, but when she'd moved in, they'd decided it would be good for their marriage if they did these chores together. And so it had been. Odd as it may seem, she'd found the sight of her sweating husband pushing a lawn mower quite. . . stimulating.

The porch light was on and for a second, her heart leapt, but then she remembered the light was on a timer, just like the sprinkler system and the alarm system. She unlocked the door and entered, pausing in the foyer to kick off her shoes. She found her slippers lined up neatly just to the right of the door. She hadn't left them there; she'd pulled them off this morning as they were having breakfast and had left them under the kitchen table. He must have gathered them while she was in the shower, set them where she would want them after she'd removed her shoes.

She hung her coat on the coat rack, beside his black wool coat, with his leather gloves in the right pocket. His coat, which was here. Which he didn't have, on this cold night as he walked. . . however many miles in the dark. And at the foot of the coat rack was the umbrella stand, in which waited his cane. Which he also didn't have, though, as she saw, as he stepped backwards over the town line, he now needed. Storybrooke appeared on no map; despite the bus stop sign, no bus passed through, no strangers drove on that highway. A hitchhiker waiting on the town line for a lift would dry up and turn to dust before anyone would stop to offer a ride.

The wood floor was silent as she pattered into the living room to turn up the thermostat, then to the kitchen and put the kettle on. She reached into the cupboard for two cups, then remembered, and took down only one. There was a pot roast in the refrigerator, last night's leftovers (he loved her Yankee pot roast, and she loved his lemon meringue pie), but she wasn't hungry. She pattered back to the living room and stared down at the couch, at the lap robe they'd curled up under last night. His copy of The Tipping Point and her copy of Pride and Prejudice lay on the coffee table, ready to be picked up again. The day's newspapers (he subscribed to three) were still rolled up and lying on the lamp table. He used to read them in the mornings, but after they'd married, he'd taken to reading them at night, to devote his full attention at breakfast to her. He could be sweet like that.

She heard the heater kick on, the grandfather clock tick, the wind catch and swirl in the northeast corner of the house. In the back of her mind she listened for his footsteps on the porch, his key in the lock, his "Belle! Sweetheart, I'm home." She couldn't stand not hearing everything she should be hearing at this time of night. She clicked on the TV to Best of the Boston Symphony—then she flipped the channel to Gilligan's Island. Rumple had gotten her to start watching the symphony with him on Thursday nights; as his part of the bargain, she'd got him to watch The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. Though they'd pretended it was an imposition, neither of them had minded, really (they'd usually spend most of the evening kissing, anyway).
She hated Gilligan's Island. So did he.

The kettle whistled. She returned to the kitchen, prepared her cup exactly the way she liked it, leaned against the counter and waited for her tea to cool. He would be rooting through the fridge right now, gathering all the ingredients for supper, if he were here. If he were home. He was funny that way: he liked to have all the ingredients and all the utensils out on the counter before he started cooking. A methodical man, he was; she'd laughingly called him a "method cooker." He in turn called her "the Jackson Pollock of the kitchen." She'd learned to respect his perfectionist, scientific approach to food preparation; he'd learned to appreciate her inspired, artistic approach. Until today, she'd thought they were rubbing off on each other, a little.

She could hear the Skipper chewing Gilligan out in the living room. She turned on the radio to drown them out. Before she'd moved in, Rumple had liked to listen to the radio while he cooked. She'd tested him, that first morning of their marriage, by turning the radio on; she was surprised to find that instead of the classical station, he'd had the dial set to oldies rock. Then it occurred to her: "Yeah, rock is a Rumplestiltskin kind of thing, isn't it? Gold's a classical guy, but Mick Jagger, Jim Morrison—those leather gods are what Rumplestiltskin would prefer." Rumple had shrugged: "As the prince says, 'We are both.'" And then he'd let her change the station to Katy Perry. He could be generous that way.

Except about the things that really mattered. (Or had she been inflexible too? Insisting that he adopt her values, because they were the values of a hero? Asking him to give up three hundred years of leather godhood?)

Her lip quavered as she sipped her tea.

His car was in the garage. His cane and his coat were in the foyer. His newspapers and his book waited in the living room. His garment case, packed with three complete suits, hung on the closet door knob, ready to be grabbed and thrown into the Cadillac. At least, he had his phone, his wallet and his ATM card; he always carried those.

But for a town that wasn't on any map, wouldn't its bank and its phone service also fail to appear in the world's systems? She had to trust that she was wrong, that when he slid his card into a New York or Boston ATM, cash would slide back out. And that when he tried to call her to tell her he arrived safely, wherever he had gone, her phone would ring. And she'd answer. She swore she would.

But her phone didn't ring tonight. And in the morning, when she accessed their account online, she found no withdrawals had been made.

She wouldn't sleep in their bed tonight. She went into the master bedroom only long enough to gather her nightgown and clothes to wear tomorrow. Pointedly, she avoided looking at the pillows, which still bore indentations (and probably one or two of his gray hairs). She avoided looking at the framed photos on the wall: Henry, Neal, her, them.

She would have to tell Henry tomorrow. And Dove, who considered Gold a friend. And Snow and Emma and Charming (she couldn't keep from hearing Rumple's high-pitched, mocking exclamation: "Charming!"). And the bank, and the phone company, and the utilities company, and all the tenants who rented from Gold. Not that word wouldn't get around town faster than she could, but she did need to tell certain people herself. It was the right thing to do, face up to what she'd done. It was the hero thing to do.

She undressed in the bathroom, took a quick shower (last night, she'd sneak ed into the shower as he was lathering his hair). She dropped her flannel nightgown (the one he called her "granny
gown") over her head; she needn't worry whether it was a turn-off. Tonight, she needed to worry about staying warm (because he surely wasn't, limping along alone in the dark and the cold). She swallowed a couple of Sominex and crawled into the twin bed in one of the guest rooms (the room he'd decorated for Henry, not the one he'd decorated for Bae. Not that it mattered. Neither room had ever been used for its intended purpose.)
He awoke to find his cheek pressed against asphalt and gravel. As he struggled to push himself up with stiff joints and only one good leg, he reflected that in nearly four hundred years of living, he’d never fallen asleep on a road before. Nor had a woman ever kicked him out of his own home before. Not even Milah, whose temper flared hot enough that she could have done such a thing; no, it had been the woman he had considered the gentlest, most forgiving person he’d ever met.

Well, it wasn’t the first time he’d been fooled by a pretty woman, but it damn well would be the last.

He couldn’t walk more than a few paces at a time without burning pain lashing his ankle. Trotting a few yards at a time, he got off the road in fear of being struck by a car, until he remembered almost no cars ever came this way. He slowed then and inched his way into the woods in search of a fallen limb that would be sturdy enough to carry his weight, but not so heavy that he’d wear himself out carrying it. He had nothing but his bare hands to carve with—he had to remind himself of that, when he attempted to call forth his magic to bring down a tree branch. He searched the dense grass quite a long time before he found a limb of the right size. By then he was worn out, wet with dew and sweat, and he had to rest. He returned to the asphalt and lowered himself to it with a grunt.

He woke up again sometime around noon, judging by the position of the sun. He confirmed the time by checking his phone (and if his thumb happened to slip onto the "check voice mail" button, that was just an accident. Intellectually, he doubted if his phone could pick up a signal from a town walled off from the world by magic.)

His aching body told him he needed to get up, find food. And a bathroom. Leaning heavily on his new cane, he managed to scramble to his feet. He stood panting with the effort. Regina, who’d been out into the real world once, had informed him there was a diner a few miles down this highway; it was her first sight of the people of the real world, so she’d found it worth mentioning. Glaring down at his twisted ankle, he hoped her "few miles" estimate, taken from the luxury of the leather seat of a Mercedes, wasn't an understatement.

A few yards down the road and he realized his bladder couldn’t wait for civilization. He limped back into the woods and unzipped his trousers. Not that he hadn't relieved himself against a tree plenty of times before in his peasant days, but he hadn't been wearing a four-thousand dollar suit then.

After he'd finished his necessary business, he rested against the tree until his stomach reminded him it had been more than twenty-four hours since he'd last eaten. Well, he’d skipped plenty of meals in his peasant days, too. But no one would be coming along this direction, unless Belle. . . .He pushed away from the tree and set out again.

Damn Regina and her sense of distance. She'd never had to walk anywhere in her life. Five hours it took him before he came to the top of a hill that provided the view he was searching
for: a truck stop at the junction of this highway with another, actually traveled one. It was supptertime now for all the diesel jockeys passing through eastern Maine, and the diner's parking lot was packed with eighteen-wheelers, RVs, SUVs and a New York-bound Greyhound, if its destination sign was to be believed. His spirits lifted then: surely New York would make a suitable base from which to remake himself. He'd hop on, buy a ticket—

He checked his wallet. For a rich man, he carried relatively little cash. Hadn't needed to, until now. Maybe the diner would have an ATM. He hurried inside, relishing the tinkle of the overhead service bell, the heating, the aroma of coffee. He didn't even mind the incessant chatter and the mournful drawling voice on the jukebox imploring the listener to "play another somebody-done-somebody wrong song." He dropped onto a red vinyl stool at the counter—the only unoccupied seat—and with a glance at the plaid flanneled big guy seated to his right, he studied the laminated menu standing up between a sugar container and a paper-napkin dispenser.

"Start you off with a coffee, sugar?" A woman in a frilled apron came around from a table behind him and moved behind the counter, reaching for the pot even before he had a chance to reply. "Special today is the fried chicken with mashed potatoes and green beans." As she filled a white ceramic cup for him, she openly appraised him—the value of his suit, he knew, not his handsome face or fabulous physique—and her tone softened. She sweetened her pitch with a flirty smile. "But we've got a nice New York strip that'd be more to your liking, I suppose."

His eyes traveled swiftly down the menu before he set it back in its resting place. "I'll have scrambled eggs and toast." It was the cheapest thing on the menu.

"That comes with bacon or sausage, hash browns or grits."

He cast a furtive glance at his neighbors' plates, but no one else was eating from the breakfast menu, so he couldn't assess the extend of grease he'd likely encounter with those side dishes. He guessed, based on the photos in the menu, he'd have less trouble digesting the bacon and the grits.

"Back in a jiff," she assured him before turning her back on him to affix the order slip to the check wheel. She did indeed return quickly and tried to chat him up until another customer summoned her. If she had any idea that the suit on his back didn't reflect the current contents of his wallet, she'd leave him alone.

He asked for the nearest ATM; she informed him he could find it in the mini-mart at the end of the street where she lived, in Bath, the nearest town. "If you can wait another two hours, I can give you a lift." The way she stirred a spoon in his coffee suggested she'd be glad to give him much more.

He shook his head, explaining that he needed to catch the bus. She flirted a little longer, but with less enthusiasm; her current attempts were focused on the size of the tip he would leave.

He figured out that the term "greasy spoon" must have originated here when the waitress (he now knew her to be a thirty-one-year-old divorcee) brought his meal. He wolfed it down nonetheless, not because of his hunger, but because by then he'd learned from Irma which of his fellow customers was the bus driver, and that good fellow had finished his special and
was sipping the last of his coffee. When the driver stood up, so did Rumple, still stuffing toast in his mouth. As the driver called out, "Folks, we'll be leaving in five" to his passengers, Rumple counted out the seven-seventy-nine for the meal, leaving a twenty-one cent tip for the scowling Irma. The driver went out to the parking lot and Rumple scurried after him.

"Excuse me."

The driver paused on the steps leading into the bus.

"How much for a ticket to New York?"

"I don't normally pick up passengers here; this route originates from Bangor," the driver said. "So I can give you a discount. Eighty bucks."

Reddening, Rumple considered the offer. It would leave him with next to nothing for a meal and a hotel room once he arrived. "What's your next stop from here?"

The driver's eyes passed judgement on the worth of Rumple's clothes, then dropped to Rumple's side, looking for a suitcase, then they came up again and his face relaxed: he understood the situation now, or thought he did: his sympathetic expression indicated that he assumed Rumple had been robbed, possibly carjacked. "Portland. Twenty bucks."

Still red-faced, Rumple produced the twenty and the driver stepped aside to allow him onto the bus. Rumple reddened even further as he felt a hand on his elbow, holding him steady as he mounted the stairs.

He had a feeling a lot more of these embarrassments were yet to come.

He had a seat to himself: apparently, few Mainers were interested in visiting New York on a Wednesday afternoon. His cursed self provided him information about how to behave: don't make eye contact with anyone, ignore anyone who might start a conversation, and for gods' sake, don't open the wallet in front of anyone. His true self wouldn't have known these things: when he was human he could never have afforded public transport, and when he became the Dark One, magic provided it for him. It had been the second thing he'd learned how to do, drawing on the memories of the previous Dark Ones: how to flee. The first thing he'd learned had been how to kill.

He was leaning his forehead against the window, half-asleep and dreaming it was Belle's forehead he was pressed against, when the bus came to a stop and the driver pulled the door open and announced, "Portland." As Rumple brushed past him, he pointed west. "There's a Y about four blocks that way. Rooms aren't much but they're cheap." Pulling the door closed, he added, "Good luck, buddy."

No one had ever called him "buddy" before. He didn't know if he liked it or not.

With no other ideas and with darkness approaching, he sought out the Y, even though he had no idea what a Y was. He entered the lobby and, finding himself alone except for the desk attendant, approached. "I was told I could get a room for the night here."

The attendant instructed him to sign a guest register and pay the up front before he provided Rumple with a key. "One hundred eighty-six per week. First door on the right at the top of
the stairs. There's a coin-operated laundry at the end of the hall."

It was a humble room, decorated with a pair of old posters promoting a summer fitness program that had passed four years ago, a single straight chair, a twin bed, a drawerless nightstand with a ceramic lamp and a Bible on top; at the end of the hallway was a shared bathroom consisting of a stained sink, a shower and a toilet. He took advantage of both its services immediately. Then, because he had no fresh clothes to change into, he draped his hand-washed boxers over the radiator to dry, brushed off his suit as best he could with the flat of his hand and spread it out on the bed to smooth out the wrinkles, then sat on the chair nude and stared out the dusty window.

He checked the time on his phone, then powered it down after checking for non-existent messages. His power cord was on his nightstand at home, on the left side of their king-sized bed: Belle preferred to sleep on the right side, so she could wake up to the sunshine pouring through the windows. Which had worked out perfectly because he had always slept facing the door, in case of an intruder.

If he were home, he'd be closing up the shop now. He'd brush away the shop dust from his jacket, then climb into his Caddy, stopping to make a deposit at the bank and to pick up a bottle of wine or a bouquet, and he'd drive down Gold Avenue to his house at the end of the cul-de-sac, and he'd park in his heated garage, and he'd carry his gift inside through the door that led from the garage to the kitchen, where Belle would be waiting, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt (her work clothes dumped in the silhouette chair on her side of the bed; honestly, the way she treated her clothes—but he'd learned to keep his complaints to himself about that). She'd be filling the tea kettle, and he'd come up behind her, brush her hair off her shoulder and kiss her neck, then she'd turn in his arms and kiss his mouth, and before things got too interesting they’d decide what they wanted for dinner and they’d start cooking. Or sometimes, they’d allow things to get too interesting and they’d skip dinner altogether.

His stomach growled. Other parts of him stirred as well.

What a come-down. From a business owner with a fat wallet and a Cadillac and an affectionate wife to a middle-aged man with a bum ankle, sitting naked in a chair in a strange room.
The Weight that Drags Your Heart Down

21 May 2014

In the morning Belle skipped breakfast (breakfast was the meal he usually cooked, anyway; she liked to sleep in). Her stomach was clenched as she slid behind the wheel of her Honda and drove to the shop. She didn't want to go there, but Dove was waiting for Mr. Gold, so she parked in the alley and entered through the back door. The big man stood as she came in. "Good morning, Ms. Belle." His voice revealed his surprise. Over the year Rumple was imprisoned (and tortured and humiliated and totally controlled by the Wicked Bitch of the West), Belle and Dove came to know each other well, as they maintained the shop and the rental business together. But now that Zelena was no more (killed by Rumple, Belle was now sure of it), Gold had resumed his business and Belle, hers at the library, so Dove was surprised—and worried—to see her come in alone. He hovered over the worktable. "Should I—put on the kettle?"

She shook her head. "Sit down, please, Josiah." He drew out a chair for her (just as Rumple always did—so old fashioned, these men!) before he sat down on the workbench. He wanted to ask—she could see the question on his usually expressionless face—but he gave her time to select the right words, because he knew her that well.

And trusted her. Gods, he trusted her, like Henry did, like everyone here did.

"Josiah. . . last night, something happened." She fumbled between the information she knew he needed and her desire to keep her personal life private. "He. . .Rumple. . .he was about to kill Hook. I stopped him."

"Hook," Dove's voice grew hard. Belle knew what Dove thought of Hook; the big man had made his revulsion of the pirate no secret. In fact, more than once he'd offered to "pay that scurvy ocean jumper a visit" to remind him not to bother Ms. French again. Dove freely admitted he could not respect a bloke who would seek vengeance on another man by attacking that man's lady. Multiple times. Despite her heroic values, Belle had to agree with Dove. "What was the pirate going to do? Was he shooting at Henry this time?"

Belle dropped her gaze to a disassembled pocket watch on the workbench (Rumple had been struggling with this watch for days, trying to get it to run again). "Hook wasn't doing anything wrong. It had something to do with a spell. Rumple was crushing Hook's heart in order to cast a spell." She was not entirely certain of that; she'd come in as the spell was already in motion, and she was only assuming the heart was an ingredient for it. Whatever his reason—whether it was for a spell or revenge or to protect Belle—Rumple had no need to kill Hook, and certainly no right. He had to be stopped, she was sure of that. "Rumple won't be coming back."

"What do you mean?"

"I sent him away. Out of Storybrooke."

Dove stood up, started to object, then remembered his place; she was, after all, his employer and he regarded her highly. His mouth opened and closed.

"He won't be back, Josiah."

"No, I guess he won't." Josiah agreed; he'd heard about the current curse on the town line. He crossed behind her, set a hand briefly on her shoulder. "I'll fetch the ledger. It's rent collecting
"I think we can dispense with that, for now, at least."

Again, he started to argue, but she was his once and future boss. "Will you—what do you want me to do today, Mrs. Gold?"

She noticed the switch, wondered if it was a little dig at her: he'd always called her "Ms. Belle" before. But he was loyal to her, she knew that; he'd defend her and her actions to anyone who challenged them, just as he did for her husband. "Take the day off, Mr. Dove. Tomorrow we'll talk about what comes next."

He nodded. "Call me if you need me."

She nodded too, and he closed the back door behind him.

She called Emma and asked her to round up the city leaders and Henry, bring them to the shop. She contemplated asking them to meet in the library, her domain, but the library was still boarded up; besides, it seemed more appropriate that she face them here. Here was where they'd always come when they needed his help—or while he was imprisoned (tortured, humiliated, controlled by Zelena), where they'd come to seek her help. She'd found strength and power in this shop, too, just as he had; she'd found him in this shop, his touch on every object ("What's your favorite, of all these treasures?" she'd asked him once, and he'd brushed her hair back to whisper the answer in her ear, "The Mickey Mouse phone." For their chipped cup and Bae's shawl were, by that time, safe in the master bedroom of their pink house, where not even a pirate dare enter.)

They came at noon, on their lunch breaks (because, to her dismay, the town had already moved on with its life): the Nolans ("Charming!"), Henry, Regina, Emma. Leroy came too, because Belle called him; he was her supporter and would defend her decision, would even, awkwardly, offer her a shoulder to cry on after everyone had gone. And Hook. Belle gritted her teeth. He had no business being here; he was not a town leader and she certainly didn't invite him and she certainly didn't need a reminder of what her husband did last night that brought her to this decision. She stepped toward him with the intention of throwing him out, but then she noticed Emma was holding the pirate's hand and that made Belle even angrier, because she loved Bae and she couldn't stomach this betrayal any more than Rumple could have (not that Rumple talked all that much about it, but Belle could feel his eyes burn a hole through the pirate's leather jacket whenever Hook touched Emma. "It's not right," Belle had said in sympathy with him. "Of all the men for her choose. . . . If she knew half the things he's done. . . .That should be Bae holding her hand, not that smarmy bastard." Rumple had barely managed to get a single word out: "Zelena.")

And now the smarmy bastard was here, as if he belonged here, at the princess' side, at Henry's side, and Belle's fists clenched, and when he had the audacity—the stupidity—to thank her for saving his scurvy hide last night, she sank her fist right into his gut. Unfortunately, it was protected by leather and he merely blinked. Snow exclaimed, "Belle!" and Emma grabbed Belle's wrist, pushed her back.

"Is that why you called us here?" Emma growled.

"Out!" Belle shouted, wrestling herself free of the sheriff. "You! Get out! I'm not telling anyone anything until he's gone. He's not welcome here, ever! Get him out!"

Emma lay her hand on Hook's belly, soothingly, intimately, and Belle shook with rage as the
princess murmured something in the pirate's ear. "I guess you'd better go," Charming suggested, and Hook left. He didn't go far, though; he waited outside the pharmacy, watching through the pawn shop window (which Dove had washed and Belle and Rumple had decorated just last week).

"What's this about, Belle?" Charming demanded. As if he had a right to demand anything. He may have been a prince and a hero, but this was her husband's shop; he needed to show some respect. Only Leroy seemed to understand what was going on. He slid a protective arm around Belle's shoulders and guided her to the workroom. "What's wrong, little sister? This isn't like you."

As he seated Belle on the workbench, Snow shifted into gear, moving to the hot plate. "I'll put on some tea."

Regina bluntly asked the obvious: "Where's Gold?"

"Regina," Snow warned, "give her a minute."

Charming and Emma fetched some chairs and everyone took a seat, sitting for a moment in awkward silence until Regina clicked her tongue. "Oh, for crying out loud, let's speed this up." She snapped her fingers and a full tea service appeared on the worktable. Snow turned the hot plate off as Leroy distributed cups of tea, and after a few sips, Belle had calmed down sufficiently to address the group without preamble. "Rumple is gone."

"Gone? Like, to the lake?" Emma asked. "You're making him sleep in his cabin for a few nights?"

"Across the town line."

There was a moment of silent shock, then Charming murmured, "Belle!" and Snow said, "I knew you were mad, and you have every right to be, but—" and Henry blurted, "But if you cross the town line, you can't come back."

"I know," Belle admitted. "I knew that at the time I ordered him to cross the line."

"Boy," Leroy shook his head, "you sure must've been pissed off."

Snow stroked Belle's arm soothingly. "Oh, sweetie." And then she realized she said the wrong thing because Belle's eyes widened at the sweetie, so close to Rumple's pet name for her.

"Why?" Henry cried out. Apparently no one told him about Rumple's actions of last night. "But you love him!"

"I know you're mad, Belle, and you have a right to be; we all are; but—" Snow let her sentence drop.

"To stop him," Emma explained to Henry. "He was going to kill Killian."

"He hasn't been himself lately," Snow added. "He's been acting—"

"Dangerous, secretive, scheming," Charming provided. "I'd say that's pretty much like himself. It doesn't surprise me, what he did to Hook."

"But it surprises me," Snow said, "that you kicked him out. That's not like you, Belle. What happened?"

"He lied." Belle's thoughts drowned in emotion and she couldn't rescue them. "He tricked me. He switched the dagger, the one he proposed to me with, it was a fake, he gave it to me and he told me"
that meant he was mine now and forever. He promised me he wouldn't hurt Zelena, but he killed her, and then he took Hook's heart and started making him do these awful things, and he would have killed Hook too. Then the gauntlet." She started sobbing onto Snow's shoulder. "That was the last straw. The gauntlet reveals to you what a person's weakness is. I commanded it to show me Rumple's, and it led me to the real dagger."

Regina, who'd remained thoughtfully silent until now, inquired gently, "And that surprises you? Belle, I thought you knew him."

"You said you loved him," Henry complained. "Even the bad parts."

"But don't you see? The gauntlet shows you that person's greatest weakness—what they love the most."

Snow patted her shoulder. "And that wasn't you. It was magic."

"He's a dumb ass, Belle," Leroy grunted. "Choosing magic over you. He got what he deserved, if you ask me. You did right, little sister."

"He's a dangerous man," Charming agreed. "The town is better off without him."

"Are you sure about that?" Regina asked.

"You took the law into your own hands. Even criminals get a fair trial," Emma argued.

"Belle, you should have consulted us first," Snow said. "That decision was too big for one person to make. We would have convened a council. We would have given him a trial. And then, after finding him guilty, we would have decided on a just punishment. You wouldn't have had to bear this burden alone."

"Were you afraid?" Henry asked. "He wouldn't have hurt you. You're his true love."

"I was angry. Angrier than I've ever been," Belle admitted. "I wish I had let a jury handle it, but I wanted to see him hurt. I wanted him to feel the hurt I was feeling. I didn't mean for him to suffer, but I wanted to bring him to his knees."

"You did the right thing, sis," Leroy insisted.

"What's done is done," Snow sighed. "What we need to do now is pick up the pieces. We'll take care of you, Belle."

Regina rose and glared down at each of them. "You heroes are all bunch of fools." She walked out, slamming the door behind her.

Charming patted Belle's hand. "Don't let her bother you, Belle."

Emma nodded. "You did what you had to. Just wondering, though: who do we go to, now, when the next magic villain shows up?"
Who We Are

22-27 May 2014

Every ATM within a three-mile radius of the Y, he visited twice over the next twenty-four hours, and when every last one of them spit his card back out with an "invalid entry" message, he tried walking into a bank lobby. The teller frowned, muttered something about having never heard of Storybrooke, punched keys on his computer, called over a supervisor, who followed the same procedure, then smiled pleasantly. "Do you have an ID, sir?"

"ID?" He searched his curse memories but came up short.

"You know, driver's license, state ID, employee badge, something with a photo?"

He had no notion of what any of those items were, but he figured that was the wrong answer as far as the supervisor was concerned. "I, ah, was robbed yesterday. Mugger got my wallet, everything but my ATM card, which I had in my pocket."

"One moment, please." The supervisor called over a manager, then the two of them huddled in a corner to confer and peered at him from the corners of their eyes. Before they could ring for the security guard, Rumple slipped out, leaving his ATM card in their possession. It was useless anyway.

He found a Walgreen's, brightly lit but horribly expensive compared to Clark's pharmacy; muttering about the cost, he bought a wooden cane. It was an ugly thing; he'd buy something decent when he had money again.

He bought a newspaper (and was shocked at the price: an entire dollar, compared to the thirty cents the Storybrooke Mirror charged). He sat in a park, enjoying the sun and scouring the want ads for a job: there were openings for dishwashers, nurses and home health care attendants, but nothing suitable for a man who, until a few hours ago, owned a business and rental properties—and most of a town. He threw the newspaper away and strolled off, deciding to get acquainted with the area by walking through it. Periodically he'd check his voice mail. She would call soon; of that he had no doubt; and then they could begin researching how to break the new curse. It would be enjoyable, working together, she in the shop, he drawing upon his memories to guide her.

He wandered into a pawn shop, thinking to start a conversation, one professional to another, and if that went well, he'd casually ask about employment. But his plan derailed immediately when he saw the iron bars on the windows and the metal cage the clerk worked behind.

Never, never would Rumplestiltskin be put in a cage again, not even for the almighty dollar. He heard Zelena snickering in the back of his mind until he stood once again in the sunshine.

He passed by a public library, a rather boxy-looking, multi-story building with exceedingly tall windows. He felt sorry for the librarian who had to run up and down those stairs to fetch books. He felt even sorrier for her when he imagined her clinging precariously to a tall ladder to wash those windows. He wondered what she would say if he told her his wife had much prettier library to work in. He wondered if she had ever thrown her husband out. He didn't
go inside; he thought the shelves upon shelves of books would depress him.

He decided to think of something more optimistic. He returned to the park and, discovering his bench had been taken by a young, blonde woman and a little boy, he sat down on the grass, resting against a tree. From the corner of his eye, he watched the blonde woman fish a newspaper out of the trash barrel—no doubt the same newspaper he'd thrown away. Her son, a brown-eyed, brown-haired little guy of about four, complained of hunger. The woman promised him a meal later, and he fell silent, just staring at other kids playing on swings. Their clothing, Rumple noticed, was awfully dirty: how could she let herself go like that?

He decided to focus on something more productive. Drawing on his memories of the contents of those special magic books in the trunk of his car, he tried to imagine how the curse might be broken. He came up empty, but he didn't despair: he'd developed a tremendous patience when it came to magic.

As the sun started to set, a policewoman came by, eyed him but said nothing. He took that as a cue to move on. He struggled, stiff and sore, to his feet and walked back to the Y. As he passed the bench, he noticed the boy was asleep, his head cradled in his mom's lap.

He stopped at a fruit stand and bought a couple of peaches for his supper, then went back to his room and showered and washed his underwear in the sink. He sat on the bed naked, eating his peaches. He tried not to think about the steak dinner he'd expected to be enjoying in New York City tonight, with an obsequious waiter standing discreetly nearby, and a bejeweled brunette with bright blue eyes smiling at him, complimenting his new Armani tie (which she'd picked out on their shopping spree).

He hoped Belle would remember to eat something tonight. She tended to skip meals when she was upset.

This wasn't at all how or where he'd imagined beginning his life beyond Storybrooke.

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On his second day in the city, after another fruit-stand breakfast that left his stomach growling, he returned to the pawn shop that had made him shudder and, doing his best to ignore the cage—after all, he wasn't the one locked behind it—he pawned his cuff links and pocket watch. He snorted at the pawnbroker, who clearly had no knowledge of the value of twenty-four carat gold, but at least he was able to pay a week's room rent ($145 for a week in a single room, no kitchen, twin bed, shared bath. And Storybrooke had called him a greedy SOB.)

He walked around some more, watching for "help wanted" signs in shop windows. Only restaurants and mini-marts seemed to be hiring. He wondered how lawyers in this world found work; even though his "law degree" came from a curse, he did know a great deal about writing contracts. He broke down and went into the library, where he approached a young man shelving books and asked for material on careers in law. The youngster did just what Rumple had hoped he wouldn't: he directed him to a woman. A pretty, petite brunette—good gods, was that a qualification for librarians? He stared into her not-blue eyes and asked his question; she led him to some shelves and with a flick of her wrist presented him with a large tome called Occupational Outlook Handbook. There it was in the middle of the page: "All lawyers must have a law degree and must also typically pass a state's written bar exam." What was it with this world's obsession with paperwork?
As long as he was here, he might as well read the newspaper classifieds. . .and then the rest of
the paper; a man needed to keep up. And then WSJ; he'd missed it these past couple of days.
And Forbes, and GQ. . . .

The afternoon passed. At twilight his stomach growled embarrassingly loudly and he had to
walk out, stopping at a mini-mart to buy a box of crackers.

He tried to call Dove, then the Storybrooke Bank, but got a "this call cannot be completed as
dialed" message, though he knew damn well he'd dialed correctly. He even tried to call the
sheriff's office, the library and Granny's, all with the same result. That evening his battery
gave out.

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On the third day, he eased his way into a crowded fast-food restaurant, and when a customer got up
to go to the restroom, he slipped the man's club sandwich and chips into his pockets, then followed
a group out onto the street. He hated potato chips.

"Is there a way a man can make a few dollars, quickly?" He dared to ask an elderly gent
who'd just finished laps in the Y's pool.

The man thought a moment. "If you don't have AIDS, you could give blood." He explained
where to go.

The clerk at the Red Cross looked at him with false sympathy when he repeated the
swimmer's statement. "Sorry, no, we don't pay for blood donations. That's a myth. However,
if you'd still like to donate, I can give you a free baseball cap."

Embarrassed, he muttered, "Keep the hat. I'll donate." The clerk led him behind a white
screen, where a nurse asked for an ID; the whole process ground to a halt.

Noticing the condition of his suit, the clerk pressed a business card into his hand before
ushering him out the door. "It's just two blocks north of here, on Forest Avenue and
Cumberland. They open the doors at five, but you should get there before three. That's when
people start lining up."

He had no idea what she was talking about, nor who this group advertised on the card might
be. He didn't want to know. "Salvation Army." He'd had his fill of armies, back in the
Frontlands. He dropped the card into a trash can outside.

Each night he fell into bed exhausted. Each night he awoke in the middle of the night, either
shaking or hungry, sometimes both.

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On the fourth day a squash player told him about unemployment compensation. "Do you need ID
to apply for it?" He'd learned by then what to ask.

"Buddy, you got to have ID to blow your nose in this country. You aren't from around here,
are you?"

"Scotland." He thickened his accent to sound convincing.

"Don't they have driver's licenses in Scotland?"
"I was mugged."

"Oh." The squash player patted his shoulder. "Tough break, buddy." As an afterthought he reached into his fanny pack and produced a square of paper. "Here. Free Big Mac. Good luck, pal."

He didn't know what a Big Mac was, but as long as it was edible, that's all that mattered. He found the nearest MacDonald's and placed his order, laying on the accent heavily just in case Mr. McDonald was around and would take interest in a homeboy. Well, it was worth a try. People gave him a second look when they heard the accent—and these days, unkempt as he was, few people looked twice.

He swiped a half-drunk soda from an abandoned plate and enjoyed his first Big Mac. When he sat down at the little plastic table, the family seated behind him got up and left, the youngest in the group protesting, "Mama, that man stinks."

He had to force down the rest of the burger. He couldn't afford not to.

He spent the rest of the day waiting on a folding chair in a warehouse-like room, only to discover, when his number was called, the squash player was right. "I can't help you without any ID."

"I was mugged. How do I get an ID?"

"I dunno, for you foreign guys. The embassy, maybe?"

"But I've lived in Maine since 1983."

"Got your green card?"

He didn't know what that was, but he'd learned a lesson about allowing his ignorance to show. "I was mugged."

"Try the police."

He might not know much about city life, but his instincts told him there'd be nothing but trouble if he showed up at a police station in his present condition and admitted he had no ID, no money and no home. They'd start asking questions that he dare not answer.

On the fifth day, he fainted in the corridor outside his rented room. When he came to, he was face down in the smelly carpet and a pair of Air Jordans was stepping over him. Their owner didn't look down as he stepped and didn't look back as he continued down the hallway, dribbling a basketball.

That afternoon he picked a pocket. Even after three centuries, he still had the touch. He hid in a stall in the McDonald's restaurant to count his ill-gotten loot: nine dollars. He thought about claiming the owner's ID as his own, but without magic, he couldn't pass for a seventeen-year-old Latino, so after withdrawing the cash, he dropped the wallet and its various cards into a mailbox.

When he came out of the restaurant, his belly full of Happy Meal, he reflected that a week ago this night, he and Belle had dined on coq au vin.
I Was Told that I Would Feel Nothing

May-June 2014

Belle returned to the pink house one last time, to box up her belongings. Dove came in a U-Haul, as he did not so long ago, and he, along with her father and Leroy, helped her move. It took longer than she expected; she'd acquired quite a few new books, clothes and electronic toys since she moved in, most of them gifts from her husband. There were a few wedding gifts—a toaster from Leroy, a convection oven from Dove, a rocking chair from Archie and a blender from her father. She donated them to a fund for fire victims. She put the Cadillac in storage.

She moved back into her old apartment that night. She offered her movers pizza as thanks; they stood around her kitchen table and talked about the weather for a few minutes, then fell silent as they eat. They left soon after. She couldn't sleep that night, but she had plenty to occupy her, dusting and unpacking. At dawn she showered, then fell into her bed. She threw herself onto her stomach, clutching her pillow to compensate for the man she normally would be cuddling, and she managed to sleep a little. In the morning she bought groceries (avoiding the ice cream freezer, because ice cream was his weakness). When her apartment (not her home; it would be a long time before this apartment is a home) was finished, she attacked the library, cleaning every shelf and every corner. The work exhausted her and chewed up an entire week. She was then ready to reopen, six days and two nights a week, and she helped out at Games of Thrones when the library was closed, so that she was constantly busy. She didn't get her cable TV hooked up; she wouldn't be watching The NewsHour or The Best of the Boston Symphony any more.

Her father relaxed, admitted to her that he had doubts about Rumple all along (as if she didn't know). He was wise enough, though, not to press the issue. He talked about his plans for his shop and her plans for the library. He didn't ask about her plans for her love life. He started going to church and sometimes she accompanied him, though the nuns steered clear of them both.

Snow came by sometimes, and Ruby, but no one else. From the library windows she could see the park, where Archie walked Pongo and the Charmings strolled with Prince Neal and Emma and Hook had picnics. Henry joined the school baseball team; Dove reported that he came by the shop sometimes, but Dove didn't know enough about magic to answer the boy's questions, so Henry didn't drop in often. He never came to the library or her apartment. Someday she'd go to him, try to help him understand her decision; she loved him and she knew he still loved her. He was just angry.

Dove called: Regina asked to buy all of Rumple's spell books and potions. Rumple never put a price on any of the magical stuff, so Dove had no idea what to charge, or even if he should trust Regina with such power. Belle suggested he sell to Regina. Someone's got to be ready for when the next villain attacks.

A month came and went. The bank president invited her in to talk about her financial future. Although Dove now owned the pink house and Henry, the shop, Belle French was a rich woman. She shocked the banker by signing the convent over to the nuns as restitution and arranged for the rent money from all Gold's properties to be put into a special account which will provide some income for all those whom Rumple had injured over the centuries. "Are you sure?" the banker asked. "You'll be losing a huge amount of money. The rent money—that's enough to take care of you when you retire. Let me—"

"No."
"But if you got hurt and couldn't work, or if your father got sick—"

"Do as I say."

"Very well, Mrs.—err."

She signed the papers "Belle French Gold."

Leroy asked her—because Leroy was the only one brave enough—if she'd file for divorce. She reminded him that the only one family lawyer in town was gone now. Leroy argued back: in the Enchanted Forest, divorces were granted by the kings, so she could ask Snow to release her from her marriage. Belle fixed him with a stare: "Would you have me break a deal with Rumplestiltskin?" He shut his mouth.

But that wasn't the real reason she wouldn't divorce Rumple. Rumple would never even find out if she did file for divorce. Leroy realized that, too; his question was really a test. He knew then, as she did, she still loved Rumple. Forever.
June 2014

This was rock bottom. It had to be. He couldn't see how he could fall farther. On the tenth day he was asked to leave the Y—he couldn't bring himself to use the word "evicted"—as his time had run out and he couldn't cough up the bucks for another week. He had to pick three pockets, almost getting caught twice, before he acquired any cash, and that was only eleven dollars: people were carrying only debit, credit and ATM cards these days. The profit just wasn't worth the risk of getting caught. Although serving jail time would at least guarantee him meals, he would rather go hungry than let someone lock him up again.

He sat in his park (he was beginning to think of it as his), fighting to stay awake—a police officer would shake him if he drifted off—until ten when the park closed. Then he made a hideaway for himself behind a dumpster in the alley behind the Y.

On the second night of sleeping al fresco, he acquired a cardboard box that he flattened and it provided a sort of flooring, until on the third night a thunderstorm soaked it and he had to throw it away. It amazed him how fast he'd fallen, from a Cadillac and Armani and coq au vin to stolen leftovers in crowded fast-food restaurants and a hiding place behind a dumpster. He kept his mind occupied just searching for food, stray coins on the sidewalk, a dry place to sleep away from pests, police and muggers. When he thought of Belle now, she seemed so far away as to be in another world.

Sometimes he thought of her in stunned shock: not Belle, his Belle wouldn't have treated a rabid dog the way she had treated her husband that night. Could some magic user have impersonated her? But Cora was dead and the fairies were all in confinement. Only Regina could have and might have pulled such a stunt, yet the new and improved Regina would have handed him over to the Charmings for trial and the old, top-this Regina would have known better than to attack her master directly.

Sometimes he thought of Belle in longing, for her Yankee pot roast, for her teasing smile, for her comforting arms. He didn't linger on those thoughts.

Sometimes he thought of Belle in white-hot anger. All she had taken from him, and without giving him a chance to explain—she deserved punishment. Those thoughts were the best to dwell upon, because they made him get to his feet, seek food, ask questions and gather information, prepare to rise again so he could face her again, make her see she hadn't broken him.

On the fourth night of living outdoors—he couldn't quite say "on the streets"—he came upon a sort of half-tent under an overpass. He settled with his back against a lamppost and pretended to be admiring the view, but out of the corner of his eye, he watched for the camper to return. When nearly an hour passed and no one had shown up, he dared to approach the camp, ambling, stopping now and then to pretend to look at something on the ground, swinging out so that he approached the camp from an angle. Still no one popped up to interrupt his intrusion, so he "wandered" in, peeked around the canvas, which had been attached by clamps to a girder. He found a camp behind the canvas: rolled-up sleeping bags
behind a canvas curtain, a flashlight, some newspapers and magazines, a box of lawn bags, a
pile of clothes, dingy and frayed but folded neatly, a pot, some mugs and some sporks, a
stockpile of dented and expired cans of fruit and vegetables, and Sterno.

He wondered who lived here and for how long. The makeshift shelter was a far cry from the
big pink house, a much farther cry from the Dark Castle, but right now, it looked mighty
inviting. He thought about taking some of this stuff, but he figured that anyone who had to
live this way wasn't much better off than he was. If he was going to steal, it would be from
someone who could afford to replace the missing stuff. He let the canvas fall back into place
and wandered back to his lamppost. He must have nodded off, because when he opened his
eyes again it was to the sound of voices talking quietly. He dared to glance over his shoulder
toward the camp and discovered four people standing outside the canvas. They were heating
something in a pan over a can of Sterno.

One of the campers was a brown-haired boy of, perhaps, four or five. Rumple remembered
him from the park bench, a few days ago. The boy suddenly made eye contact with Rumple
and, though Rumple was a dozen yards away, the kid took a step back, grasped his mom's
jeans leg and stuck a thumb in his mouth. He continued to stare at Rumple, who edged back,
trying to reassure the child he had no ill intentions. Then the mom bent over the steaming
pot, filled a cup from it and seated herself on the concrete slope. She smiled and said
something, waving her hand across the cup to chase the steam away, and the boy sat down
beside her, also smiling. Rumple knew that smile: he'd seen it every night on Bae's face, back
in the Frontlands days. No matter what was or wasn't in the cook-pot, that smile would
appear every time Rumple called Bae in for supper.

The mom gathered a spoonful from the cup, blew on it to cool it, then directed the spoon to
her son's eagerly open mouth. She was blonde, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and
dressed in jeans and a man's flannel shirt that probably made her look smaller than she
actually was. Still, judging from her sunken cheeks Rumple wagered she hadn't had a
complete meal in a couple of months, maybe longer, and from the dark circles under her eyes,
she'd probably spent most of her recent nights sitting up, watching the dark for predators—
of the human kind. The blotchiness of her skin and the slope of her shoulders suggested she
was much older than the haunted look in her eyes indicated. She still feared, and that meant
she wasn't done with life yet, and she smiled at her son as he ate, and that meant she still had
hope. In the Frontlands days, Rumple had come across many who had lost the haunted look:
war wounded, disabled people, elderly who could no longer work, farmers driven from their
land by disasters natural and manmade; their eyes, which never made contact with another's,
reflected no emotion. Among the hopeless he'd found boys and girls in their teens, some of
whom had already grown hard from living on the streets or in the forest, some of whom had
failed to make a sufficient living from stealing and had started selling their bodies as well.

As Rumple watched the mom lift the cup to her boy's lips, he knew this child would never
join the ranks of the walking dead. She'd surrender him to the foster system before she'd
allow that to happen. And from the looks of things, they weren't too far away from that day.
Once fall rains came, and the first frosts. . . . And he knew from her smile that losing her son
would extinguish the light that burned in her.

He knew the feeling, exactly.
Brushing his sleeve against his eyes, he walked back to his alley hideaway.
"I see you're still wearing your wedding ring." Archie's bluntness threw Belle for a loop, until she figured out that was why he'd spoken to her so callously. This session was not meant to be a comforting one, as her other sessions with him had been. He would confront and challenge her, in order to get her to confront herself—and to fight back. She needed that, she realized; after coming down from her anger, she'd been rather mopey lately.

"It's only been a month," she mumbled, pushing the ring around on her finger.

Occupied with his notepad, Archie didn't look up at her. He'd already seated himself, without inviting her to sit, without offering her tea. Okay, then. Belle drew in a breath, dropped her hands to her sides and with a tight smile walked over to the sideboard and helped herself to the teapot.

"It's been a month." He echoed but edited her observation. "It was your choice, Belle. Why are you still wearing the ring? And his name?"

Her back to him, she doctored her tea with a liberal dose of sugar. "I suppose part of me isn't ready to let go."

"But he can't come back, even if you wanted him to."

She glanced over her shoulder. Hopper was now looking up at her. "I'll take it off when I'm ready. I suppose I'm stubborn. I used to say I'd never give up on him."

"So why did you?"

"I came to my senses. Saw him for what he really is." Gathering her cup, she seated herself in the chair across from him. She stirred her tea.

"Which is?"

"A liar. A con man. Even to me, the one person he should trust. His wife."

Archie continued to take notes. When he looked up at her, it was without sympathy; his tone suggested only scientific curiosity. If he had displayed sympathy, she would have broken into tears and then the session would get nowhere; they both knew that. "What excuse did he give you for his conduct? Just before you kicked him out of town, I mean."

"I didn't ask. It was pointless. He would have manipulated me, like he always does."

"Lied to you."

"Yes."

"Talked you out of your anger."

"Yes. It was my turn to talk, for a change."

"Because he'd done all the talking, before." They both knew that was an intentional misstatement, meant to provoke; Rumple's secretiveness had been a frequent topic of their therapy sessions.
She accepted the provocation and answered with irritation. "No. That was the problem, remember? He never discussed anything with me. He just jumped in and did whatever he wanted."

"Without asking your permission."

"I don't mean it that way."

"Without gaining your consent, then."

"Without even telling me what he was doing or why."

"Because, after 300 years of living alone, he wasn't used to sharing his plans or his feelings with anyone."

"He knew—I'd left him over his secrecy. He'd promised to start communicating with me."

"Communication is necessary in a marriage."

"Yes, and he, more than anyone, needs to open up. He makes such horrible decisions. If he would only talk to me."

"You'd tell him what's the right thing to do."

"I'd help him figure it out."

"Because you usually know what's right."

"Archie! Don't put words in my mouth."

"Because you wouldn't have put words in his. Belle, I'm trying to get you to see his point of view. You're right. He should have opened up. He should have asked you and other people for advice, because his judgment too often got him in trouble. He knew that: he was a smart man; surely he could see his choices had failed him. He should have asked for help."

"Yes, he should have."

"After a year of being locked up in a cage, and being under someone's total control, and being forced to attack people he didn't want to hurt, and living in a state of borderline insanity, he certainly did need help. Extensive therapy would have done him a world of good. But after 300 years of having no one to confide in, no one to trust, he didn't reach out to me or you. Maybe he didn't know how. Or maybe marriage was his idea of seeking help. But he didn't make you his helpmeet, as a wife is supposed to be."

"We should have figured things out together."

"So you exiled him."

"He would have continued to hurt people. He had to be stopped."

"He would have continued to hurt you by ignoring you, so you exiled him."

"He was going to kill Hook."

"So you exiled him. You didn't just stop him."

"He wouldn't have quit."
"Oh, so the dagger doesn't really control him, as we thought it did. You couldn't have made him leave Jones alone."

"He would have found a loophole. He always does."

"Yes, he always does. He's a--how did you put it? A chipped cup."

"He'll never change. I finally realized that."

"There's an old saying: men marry, hoping their wives will never change. Women marry, hoping their husbands will."

"This isn't a case of 'I want him to stop belching at the dinner table. ' He kills people."

"Yes. He had to be stopped."

"And the only way to stop him is to take away his magic."

"Whose counsel did you seek before you made this decision?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said he never discussed his plans with you. Who did you discuss this plan with, this monumental plan that not only ended your marriage but sent a man out into an unfamiliar world without money, a car, clothes, his cane? That's a huge decision, Belle. Did you talk it over with Queen Snow? Her husband? Regina, who knows more about dark magic than anyone here, now that Rumplestiltskin isn't here? Blue, who's known Rumple longer than anyone and would no doubt agree he has to be stopped?"

"You know why I couldn't talk to her! Archie, I did the right thing and you know it. He had to be stopped and he's too powerful to stop by normal means."

"So you stripped him of all his powers: magic and money. Where do you think he is now?"

"I don't know. I'm worried."

"You could find out. Emma could find him. Just to make sure. The nearest town is thirty miles from here. That's a long way for a lame man to walk."

"No, there's a cafe just a few miles away. Regina said so."

"How do you feel now about your decision?"

"It was necessary, to save the town."

"Was he planning on destroying it? Was he going to kill us? What was he going to do, Belle, after he killed Jones?"

"He was going to take me to New York."

"But after he killed the rest of us?"

"No. After the Snow Queen did. He was going to just stand by and let her kill them all: Mary Margaret, Emma, David, you."

"Why? Why wouldn't he stop her?"
"I don't know! I suppose to get them out of the way, so he could take Henry."

Archie nodded thoughtfully. "Any man who'd do such a thing has to be completely evil. And therefore unredeemable-and unforgiveable."

"Since he came back from Zelena, he's been different. Colder and harder. Even more secretive. I don't know what she did to him, besides keeping him in that cage, but it must have been awful."

"I saw the cage. It's still there, you know. Regina took Zelena's belongings from the house, but the cage is still there. I went inside and sat in it for about an hour. Made my skin crawl. I had to leave."

"We should have let him burn it down."

"Maybe it would have been a start; he needed years of therapy, though. Too late now." Archie crossed his legs. "So, Belle, when you held the dagger, you could have made him do anything, right? Why, instead of banishing him, didn't you command him to come to therapy? Or at least tell you what was going on in his mind?"

"He would have found a loophole. You know that, Archie."

"He would have tried," Hopper agreed. "But if we could have compelled him to open up just a little, we would have had information we could work with. Court-ordered therapy works about half the time. This might have been one of those times, because I suspect he knew that he needed help if he was going to save his marriage."

Belle toyed with her spoon. "I begged him to come for therapy. He wouldn't. I think he assumed you'd tell him the dark magic was destroying him, and you'd make him relinquish his power. He's addicted to magic; he can't give it up. The only way to help him is to remove him from it."

"And you know these things because you're a therapist."

"I know him."

"And you know there's no magic beyond the town line because you've seen it yourself. You've talked to people out there."

"Emma."

"Yes, Emma's traveled a great deal. Compared to the rest of us. Until she'd lived here about a year, she didn't believe in magic at all because she'd never seen it."

Belle had grown tired of having to explain herself. "What are you getting at, Archie? I thought you were going to help me."

"I hope I am. I think I'm getting you to say aloud what you've been worrying about. Go to Emma and ask her to find him. I'll look too. And you--you're a researcher. Let's just find out where he is, how he's surviving. Maybe he really is better off without magic. Maybe he's happier without power. Without the rest of us. Without his grandson and his wife."

"Isn't that what it takes to cure addiction, Archie? Going cold turkey?"

"For some. Usually we try less extreme therapies first."

"He didn't want to give it up. He had to be stopped."

"I suppose he has been. Do you wonder what it's like for him out there? What it's done to his body
and his mind, to go cold turkey? How about it, Belle? Will you call Emma, just to check up on him? Find out if he's getting better, away from the magic?" He looked hard at her. "If he's still alive?"

She blanched. "Don't say that."

"Why not? It's a possibility you have to consider."

She shook her head firmly. "No. He's a survivor. Living is the one thing he cares about more than magic. And he's smart. He's got back up on his feet again, I'm sure of it. He's okay."

"What would you do if he's not?"

"What can I do? No one can leave town."

"No. No one can come back if they leave."

"Are you saying I should go after him?"

"No, that would be a decision you should make only after careful thought. After talking it over with your friends and family. It would be a decision you can't change. You need to face the realities of your situation, if you're going to move on. But we may be jumping to conclusions. He may be fine. Let's find out. Shall we? And then we can begin to discuss next steps, like divorce."

"Divorce?"

"It would be a reasonable choice, if you decide not to follow him. If the marriage is beyond saving. Someday you may want to remarry. Or he may want to."

"He wouldn't do that. We're true loves. . . . Divorce. It sounds so cold."

"It sounds permanent, because it is. But if your marriage is truly finished, it's the honest thing to do. The only way you and he can move on. Will you call Emma?"

"Yeah. You're a hard taskmaster, Archie."

"You didn't come to me to be coddled. You came to sort things out. You're brave enough to face the truth, if you have all the facts."
He took a long, hard look in the mirror today and didn't at all like what he saw. Ironically, some graffiti artist who felt the need to make his mark in the world by etching his tag into the tarnished mirror of a park men's room had keyed in the appellation "king" (a crown dotting the "i") at just such a height that the word appeared directly above Rumple's head as he leaned across the sink to examine his face in the glass. That, more than the red, raw skin and the patchy gray beard that the mirror reflected back at him, gave Rumple the kick in the ass he needed; the tag reminded him that, for all intents and purposes, he had been a king for a brief time just a little over a year ago—and when he thought of the riches in his Storybrooke life that had made him so, his property, his money and his clout came as an afterthought. At the top of the list were his blossoming relationships with his grandson, his son and his true love.

Magic, he had to admit, came second on the list.

Now that the last traces of it had flushed out of his system, he was pretty sure he'd lost about two inches in height. He was scrannier than he'd been in the last three centuries, and grayer, both his hair and his skin; those changes he could blame on his current living conditions. But the loss of height, he surmised, was a physical manifestation of his psychological state. Without his magic and the protection and status it lent him, he was just a small, seemingly middle-aged man. As he scowled into the mirror, the face he saw was familiar, but one he'd assumed he'd never see again: that of Rumplestiltskin the beaten-down peasant who couldn't even look his own wife in the eye.

He sneered at that face. Where was the Dark One when he was needed? Rumple reached into the soul of his memory to summon Mr. Gold, or even the Trickster (had Malcolm been shocked when he learned that, after gaining power, his do-gooder little boy had far surpassed papa as a master con man? Could that explain some of Malcolm's irrational resentment?). Rumple stared hard into his own eyes, looking for Gold or the Imp, but he couldn't conjure either. He turned away ashamed and walked slowly back to his alley hideout.

As he walked through the playground, he spotted them again, the ponytailed mom and her brown-eyed kid at a merry-go-round; the tot was mounted on an iron seat molded to resemble the arm of an octopus. He slowed, then pretended to drink from a water fountain so he could watch them a few minutes, listen to them laugh as if, at any time they chose, they could stroll down the block to their air-conditioned home, click on the TV, wander over to the cookie jar for some snickerdoodles, then to the fridge for milk, and all the time they would still be laughing.

Rumple wondered if Henry as a small boy liked merry-go-rounds. Bae would have found them too sedate; he would have run to the jungle gym or the swings. Rumple gripped his cane tighter at the injustice of it all: Bae, who never had such luxuries as toys; Henry, who never had a papa to push a merry-go-round for him; and this boy, who wouldn't be going home to cookies and milk, who wouldn't be going home, period. Rumple walked off his anger by
dodging rush-hour traffic to return to his alley—along the way, appropriating another wallet.

Something gnawed at the edges of his imagination, something about the merry-go-round. . . . Hours later, the night air and a halfway decent meal, compliments of the pocket he picked, sharpened Rumple's wits. The thought took form: the octopus merry-go-round reminded him of Ursula the Sea Witch, and thinking of her reminded him (after recalling her attack upon Belle, back in the Enchanted Forest) of her acquaintance with Regina, who, if anyone could, might, between her magic and her experience, find a way to break the boundary curse.

In other words, Ursula could be the key to unlocking Storybrooke for Rumplestiltskin. And as a Vision had shown him three years ago, Ursula had come to this world—and, however she had come here, to a metropolis he now knew to be New York City, she wasn't at all happy about it. He saw her stumbling up the iron stairs of a run-down brownstone, burdened by the weight of a sack of groceries (and, apparently, her own dark thoughts). Nor, as the Vision had revealed, was her former partner-in-crime and current ex-pat, Cruella de Vil, who, though she sat in jewels and furs at a twenty-seat dining table, dined alone, except for her dark thoughts. Rumple had wondered at the time of the Vision if they remembered who they'd once been, the magic they'd once possessed; staring into the flame of an enchanted lighter, he'd grinned in satisfaction that his boast had come true: he'd won, and he'd done so alone (well, Regina might have had something to do with the victory, though she'd been ignorant of the puppet strings by which he'd controlled her).

Times and circumstances had changed. He was willing to admit that; he'd have to; Cruella and Ursula would throw his boast back into his face. Well, he was a big boy: he could take a little teasing, even own up to his failures (especially because the thought of trumping him would put the Queens of Darkness into an optimistic mood, rendering them receptive to his promise of a return to their former glory).

If he could get back inside, fill his pockets with the money that rightfully belonged to him, fill his body with magic, he would conjure Gold again. He could, subtly and slowly, win Belle back. He was certain of that: they were, after all, fated for each other.

Rumple thumbed the remaining bills in the pilfered wallet. He'd chosen his prey well: a single (at least, not wearing a wedding ring) lower-scale businessman (dressed in an off-the-rack suit) new to Portland (he walked much too slowly, causing pedestrian traffic jams, and he stopped too frequently, comparing a marked-up street map with the street signs) and just arrived in the big city (laden down with suitcases in each hand and a camera slung round his neck). Judging from the ill fit of his suit and the "I heart Maine" sticker on one of his J. C. Penney suitcases, the fellow was probably here for a convention as well as a little fun. When Mr. Businessman stopped at a Starbucks, set his suitcases down and dug his stuffed wallet out of his back pocket, he provided Rumple with all the encouragement a pickpocket needed. Mr. Businessman bought a coffee, then decided to continue on his journey before drinking it. Taking the Styrofoam cup in one hand, he pushed his wallet back into the pocket with the other, then picked up his suitcases, at first trying to carry them both with the same hand; he'd gone a few paces before his grip slipped and he had to set the suitcases down and figure out how to balance both the cup and a case in the same hand. Then Rumple had him. He didn't even have to bump into the guy.

As Rumple stood in line at the ticket window, his back ached from listing to the side, the
result of walking with an ill-fitting cane, and his belly begged for food and one of his teeth was loose. His left ankle ached in sympathy with its counterpart on the right. Yet he smiled to himself, his imagination soaked in hope for the first time in months. He rested against his cane but kept a hand in his jacket pocket, where the purloined cash hid. After all, there could be pickpockets hanging about this bus station.

It was his turn at the window now. "One for New York."

Ticket tucked safely in his pocket, he stood near the doors that led to the boarding area. The station was crowded, mainly with travelers, but from the condition of their clothes, he suspected the sleepers were homeless, just taking advantage of a public place open after dark.

He kept his eyes sharp. This was no place to daydream; he'd plan when he got onto the bus. In his other pocket he had the address to the New York Aquarium; in his memory he had a pair of dusty visions, gained one afternoon when he'd had nothing else to do in the shop and so he had scryed, using a lighter flame: having recently brought magic to Storybrooke, he'd simply wanted to exercise his Sight, after so many years dormant. The Visions had shown him something curious: two Enchanted Forest colleagues, the sea witch and the puppy slayer, were now living in this world, one in Brooklyn, one in Great Neck. Magicless, of course, but he'd had no doubt at the time he'd Seen them that they would be most delighted to regain their magic, even if it meant residing in his little town. He'd mentally filed the images away. Ursula and Cruella might come in handy someday. That time was now.

He'd been surprised to See them: the last time he'd encountered them, he'd led them into a trap and then abandoned them to become Chernabog feed. He wouldn't blame them a bit if they pulled the same trick on him; he deserved it. But he saw only two options for reclaiming his old life: he could continue to wait for a phone call from Belle, which he was still certain would have come eventually; she was stubborn as a centaur but after she calmed down, she usually listened to her heart, and she knew as well as he did that True Love meant for them to be together. He could wait for her, continue to pick pockets and sleep in alleys and knock on back doors until some restaurant or hotel or shop gave him a job without the coveted ID. Or maybe at the library he could learn how to acquire an ID without giving away too much of the truth of his background.

The second choice was to speed things up a bit with a Queens of Darkness vanguard. Send them into Storybrooke first, then as they amused and harassed and frightened the citizenry, he could sneak in behind, moving through the woods and the shadows in search of the Author, and put to the test Regina's theory of forcing the pen pusher to rewrite the story of the exiles of the Enchanted Forest.

If that didn't work, Rumple had a simpler, easier to execute Plan B: in a cloud of purple smoke he'd make a sudden appearance in the middle of Main Street and save the town from the Queens of Darkness. Maybe that wouldn't get him a guaranteed Happy Ever After, but at least the heroes would feel obligated to let him stay. Quietly and humbly, he'd retake his shop, his clothes, his car, his house, his life. Peacefully and productively, he'd weave himself into the community, as he never had before; through his philanthropy he'd win their hearts, through his generous dealings he'd win their trust, through his quiet wisdom he'd win their respect. And watching all this, Belle would gradually open her heart to him again. He
wouldn't screw it up this time.

But first, he had to sell himself to two women he'd betrayed. Why had he been such a bastard in those days? More importantly, why had he so recklessly burned bridges? Writers of history and elderly mages used to say of Rumplestiltskin the Dealer that he was the most learned, most forward-thinking of the Dark Ones, and he'd prided himself in his intricate planning even above his studious practice of his arts. So why had he gotten uncharacteristically careless during that year? True, he'd needed a distraction for the Chernabog so he could steal the Curse to End All Curses, but one Queen of Darkness would have been sufficient: he didn't have to throw Ursula and Cruella at the hell-bat too.

Sometimes, in the Enchanted Forest days, he'd allowed the Dark One too much leeway. In those times he'd dismayed even himself. That recklessness had reared its head again after his release from Zelena's cage. It was as if Rumplestiltskin had remained cowering in the cage while the Dark One rampaged around town. No more, though. When he regained his old life, he'd keep the Dark One at bay. And that was how he'd fashion a happy ending for himself: he'd be the kind of man his grandson would brag about and his wife would come running home to.

As the horizon lit up with city lights, Rumple sat up straight. His suit was no longer recognizable as a D & G, his cane was a Walgreen's store brand, his breath stank and he hadn't shaved in weeks. He wouldn't take New York by storm, with diamonds in his cufflinks and his lovely bride on arm, as he had originally planned.

But he had arrived.
JULY 2014

Emma drummed her fingers against her desk top. Only fifteen minutes had passed since she checked in with the sheriff's answering service; only ten minutes since she'd checked her emails. There had been not so much as a stray dog call all day. She sipped her coffee, then spat it out because it had gone cold. She didn't bother to refresh her mug.

It was only eleven a.m. Henry was at day camp. David was at the Marine Garage, giving the squad car a tune-up. Killian was at the pawnshop, combing through Gold's collection of magic books for the fifth time, in the desperate hope he'd find instructions he'd missed the other four times, a chant or spell or potion or whatever that would free the prisoners of the Sorcerer's Hat. He was there alone, Belle being occupied with storytime at the library; Belle had given him a duplicate key. Emma wondered what Gold would've thought of that, his beloved wife granting his mortal enemy free reign in his magic collection.

Emma opened this week's edition of the Storybrooke Mirror and skimmed through the Classifieds. She was apartment hunting, but she was also hoping to find a job that would be suited to Killian's skills and interests. Maybe something in the fishing industry. He needed a source of income; Emma had been paying his bills, and her salary wouldn't stretch that far. Equally important, he needed an occupation, something to take his mind off this obsession with freeing the fairies. Something to get him out of Emma's hair. She needed some breathing room, for cryin' out loud. Some time to think. This co-parenting thing with Regina; this my-parents-are-my-age-but-they're-trying-to-act-like-parents thing with David and Mary Margaret; this cold war between Henry and Belle, over what she'd done to Gold; and this knot of envy that had formed in Emma's gut when Neal was born, leaving the Nolans no time for their #1 child: Emma had a lot to work out. Now, while the community was quiet, was a good time to do that, if she could just get Killian to back off a bit. If she could just take a moment to grieve the man she still harbored a confused affection for, before she let go of him and moved on to a new romance.

Well, hell. Nothing else was going on; she might as well go out to lunch. She dialed a number: "Hey, Archie? Emma. Hey, you got lunch plans? No, not a date, more like, I dunno, like an interview, I guess? I was thinking, since you've big such a big help to Henry all these years, maybe you could help me figure some stuff out. How about if I bring a pizza over to your office in about an hour?"

Belle sighed in exasperation as her personal phone rang for the seventh time that day: "Demolition Man," the ring tone she'd programmed for Hook's calls. She picked up the phone, pausing for a moment, wishing the song was "Magic Man" instead. Where was he? Was he getting enough sleep? Was he eating healthy meals? Had he—

The phone continued to ring. "Yes, Hook?" Though her anger had abated and she no longer felt the need to punch him out, she still refused to call him Killian.

"I've got something I want you to translate—"

She chewed on a fingernail as she listened, and then she really did get angry: "That's a recipe for chicken soup, you idi—" She bit the insult in two. "Look, if you find something else, email it to me, okay? I'll read it when I have time. I'm in the middle of looking something up for Ms. Ginger
—no, I don't think cats are more important than fairies—sorry, Ms. Ginger—Hook! Just—email it to me, okay? I'll talk to you later." She set the phone down on her desk with a bit too much force. "Sorry, Ms. Ginger. Now, you were saying Tiger has been chewing on his tail? Let's go over to the 636's. We have Is Your Cat Crazy? No, no, I don't mean Tiger is crazy." She came around from behind her desk and tried to smile at her patron. "This way, Ms. Ginger. Yes, it's true the cat books are shelved next to the dog books. That's just how the Dewey Decimal System works. . . ."

Even as she escorted Ms. Ginger to the stacks, Belle glanced back over her shoulder at her cell phone, wishing for a call from Rumple. It was probably impossible—she'd dialed his number several times this week and got a "this call cannot be completed as dialed" message. If he tried to call—had he tried? How many times?—he'd probably have gotten the same message. Some disconnect between magic and technology, with magic winning out yet again.

But if he could call, or send a letter, an email; she'd tried that too, but no reply had come. . . Just so she'd know if he was okay, that's all. No, she wasn't thinking of taking him back; he couldn't come back, anyway. That bridge was burned. But just to hear his voice. Or someone's who could tell her he was getting enough to eat and overcoming his insomnia. She was a librarian, damn it; she couldn't stand not having access to answers.

Regina stood on her porch as the sun went down. She was looking off to the south; if she had asked herself why, she would have realized that instinctively she was watching for any movement or sound coming from that direction, because that was the direction Robin had taken when he and his son and his wife had walked out of Storybrooke. Impeccably dressed and coiffed as usual, for she still had a position to maintain in the community, even if she didn't know exactly what it was, she stood with her arms folded, giving small nods to the few neighbors who passed on the sidewalk or the street, on their way home from work (which she no longer had) to their families (which she also no longer had, except for Henry).

She needed to be busy. She'd spent her entire life working, focused on goals—the wrong ones, admittedly. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop," she'd heard somewhere, and she rather agreed. She thought again about starting a business, maybe opening that dress shop for professional women that she once considered. But in reality, she couldn't imagine herself behind a counter all day, like Gold. Briefly she wondered if that's what he was doing now, tending some shop counter somewhere. Not New York or Boston, but somewhere small; he'd lived all his years in villages and he was too old to change now.

Robin, though—Robin rolled with the punches. He'd willingly chosen New York, when he and Marian had discussed where they would head after leaving Storybrooke. There was a furnished condo just waiting to be occupied in a decent part of the city: Emma had given them a map and Belle had provided the keys. Regina wondered how Belle had managed to persuade Gold to give up the keys to Baelfire's apartment. It probably involved some sexual activity. Or maybe—Regina smiled—Belle had swiped the keys without telling Gold. The bookworm had proven she was capable of a little underhandedness now and then, like kicking her husband out of town.

Robin and Marian were as prepared as Regina, Belle and Emma could make them. Emma had come over for dinner one evening—with strained grace, Regina had welcomed Marian into her kitchen and had permitted her to help dish up the seven-course meal, cooked by La Tandoor—and as the Hood family (Regina gritted her teeth: she forced herself to think of Marian as "Mrs. Locksley") listened and took notes, Emma described life in the big city. Belle had dropped off a stack of travel books and DVDs, along with a CD called "The Stars Sing the Big Apple: Ten Renditions of 'New York, New York' by Your Favorite Celebrities (Including TV's 'Captain Kirk' and 'Sheldon Cooper')." Regina had provided them with plenty of cash, a job recommendation letter (signed "Regina Mills, Mayor of Storybrooke, ME"), cell phones and a suitcase of modern clothes.
The Locksleys were well prepared; they would land on their feet.

And now Regina had to get on with her life.

"Good evening, Madame Mayor," a passerby called out.

"Good evening," she nodded, not bothering to correct the error in the greeting. "Madame Mayor" felt right, after all these years; besides, she had been a good mayor, if you overlooked the circumvention of certain customary administrative procedures. Well, and she'd never actually held an election. . . .

"Mayor Mills," another passerby nodded hello.

Yes. Mayor Mills. Well, why not? Snow was fumbling about; a leader she was, but a city administrator, not at all. Nor did she want to be, she readily admitted. "What I really want to do is stay home with Neal," she had confessed. "When he starts school, I'll go back to teaching. That's what I love, not city council meetings and department head meetings and budget meetings and—"

Well, why not let Snow White Blanchard Nolan Charming have her happy ending? Regina fished her Iphone from her pocket and brought up her directory, pausing just a moment over the listing for Robin. Just a moment to look at his surprised but smiling face—this had been the first time he'd ever had his photo taken, but not the last; Regina had tons of photos of all three of her dear boys.

"Good evening, Regina," Archie called out. He raised a hand to wave, but forgot and raised the same hand in which he held Pongo's leash, and as the leash jerked, Pongo stopped short and yelped and Archie tripped over him. A flick of magic from Regina prevented master and pet from taking a nosedive into the sidewalk.

Oh yes, Storybrooke needed Mayor Mills. Regina phoned the City Clerk. "Say, Tom, what does the city charter say about mayoral elections?"
Just Across the River to the South Side

JULY 2014

He sought out Ursula first, the morning he arrived in New York. It took some questions of street vendors and three city buses, but he eventually made it to the aquarium and, after popping into the public restroom to wash in the sink, he located her just where the Sight had shown him she'd be. No great surprise: she was feeding the fish. What was a surprise, a pleasant one, was that she had retained her full memories, and despite his human appearance, she recognized the Dark One immediately—and laughed at him, in his reduced circumstances. He permitted her a moment of mockery: he needed her and, given his current appearance, he couldn't blame her for not realizing she needed him. Besides, after the trick he'd played on her and her compatriots back in the Enchanted Forest, he probably deserved her spite.

But his silver tongue still worked: he knew exactly what she wanted and what it would take for her to acquire it, and he promised it to her: a return of her powers and her singing voice and a crack at the Author who could guarantee her a happy ending. He had to do some fast talking: her life here had hardened her and his shabby clothes gave him no credibility. But he'd learned over the years that if a dealmaker knew what the customer truly wanted and offered it, success in negotiation was a foregone conclusion. She caved. She'd always been the more... reasonable of the Queens of Darkness, angry at her lot in life, but not bitter and melancholy, as Maleficent was, nor borderline insane, as Cruella was.

Recognizing he was not yet strong enough to confront his enemies, he needed to worm his way into her home and recuperate for a week or two before they launched their big venture. If he could keep her interested and distracted enough with conversation, she might not notice the passing of time, and then when darkness fell, he would have an excuse to invite himself into her home. So he roped her in with a display of largess, which he knew she, a former princess of the Deep, would feel compelled to repay with an even larger display of her own. Though she might be down on her luck (though not as far down as he had fallen—but he couldn't let her know that) and bearing a grudge against him, and as blunt and crude as any working-class big-city resident could be expected to be, she had been raised in a court, albeit an underwater one, and had been taught manners and hospitality. So he took her out for coffee—testing him, she led him to a horribly trendy and overpriced place that charged five bucks for eight ounces of ground beans and hot water. She raised a suspicious eyebrow when, after she ordered some ridiculously complicated concoction and a muffin (six bucks!), he ordered a bottle of plain water (three bucks). "Cutting back on caffeine." He didn't let her see the thinness of his smile or his wallet as he paid. His hand on her elbow, he moved as gracefully as he could while carrying his cane and his water in his free hand, and he steered her to a table, where he withdrew a chair for her.

She sniffed at him, then around a mouthful of muffin, grunted, "What the hell happened to you, Mr. 'Most Powerful Sorcerer in the World'? How'd you end up here, in this magic-forsaken dump, like that?" She jabbed her pinkie finger into his chest.

He had prepared for this question. It wasn't as though he could hide his circumstances. He
answered smoothly, "Obviously, my situation is somewhat altered from the last time we met, but this is temporary, I assure you, just as your own situation, clearly less than ideal, is soon to become a thing of the past, if you join with me."

"Join? You mean, if I let you use me again for Chernabog chum."

He shook his head sadly, lowering his eyes to the table. "I deserve that. I behaved despicably —"

"You made me steal a curse for you and then threw me to the hell-bat!"

"I did. I was... a horrible individual in those days, selfish—and, as I've learned, shortsighted. If I had known then what I know now—but isn't that true for all of us? Age and experience has brought insight, Ms. Fisher; I've learned, for example, that two heads are, as they say, better than one, and three are better; four are unbeatable. This world may be a dump, as you so aptly phrased it, but it does have a few lessons to teach us ex-patriots of the magical lands. One of those, which I hope to impress upon you, is the strength of teams."

"Uh huh. Wasn't it you that said," she raised her voice and a finger in the air to mimic him, 

"'I work alone and I always win'?"

"I've learned better. You have skills I can't come close to replicating, as do your former comrades-in-arms."

"Mal and Cruella," she murmured into her coffee. "What are you hinting at, Dark One? Cruella's here, but Mal—"

"Is in this world too, compliments of that same curse that you and they assisted me in appropriating." He chose to omit the details concerning the condition Maleficent was in at the moment; now was not the time to deliver discouraging information.

She squinted at him. "You cast it? You got here from that curse?"

He shook his head. "I lacked the main ingredient. But there was another who had it, along with the power and the will, and I... donated the instructions to her cause, you might say."

"Who?"

"An old acquaintance of yours, Her Highness Queen Regina."

Now Ursula growled. "Regina! That imposter!"

"I understand you had a brush-up or two with her in the past. As it happens, my current circumstances are in part due to her. It's my intention to take back what's mine—my wealth, my magic, my home." He almost added my wife, but he stopped himself in time. To reveal that there were people in this world whom he loved would be to make them vulnerable. Before she could get too nosey, he turned the conversation back to her, to work on her vulnerabilities. "And if you join with me, you'll regain all you've lost—and add to it. That is, if you wish it: but perhaps your old world is no longer enough? Perhaps you'd rather rule as queen here than serve as princess under water?"
"You're full of it, Rumplestiltskin."

"Oh, so this world is not enough either? Never mind, dear, you don't have to tell me your heart's desires. Telling them to the Author will suffice."

"And who is this Author you've been babbling about?"

"He—or she, as the case may be—has the unique ability to write our fates. With our combined powers of persuasion—yours, mine, Maleficent's and Cruella's—we will convince him, or her, to write much more favorable endings for us, endings that we have chosen for ourselves. " He leaned in, drawing her into his confidence and his enthusiasm. "Aren't you tired of living by someone else's rules? Of being buffeted by the winds of fate? Of having no control over the outcome of your efforts—control over your own life? Aren't you tired of being—" he waved his hand at her coveralls. "While the rest of the world—beings who are far inferior to you in ambition and intellect and imagination—climbs over you to get their happy endings, leaving you with scraps—with, with chum?"

She remained suspicious. "I never heard of this 'Author' before. How did you find out about him?"

He leaned back, pointedly glancing out the window, then at her cup. "It's getting late, and your coffee is cold and you've finished your muffin. Suppose we continue this conversation somewhere less public? Is your home nearby?"

And so he roped her in, despite her best efforts to keep her anger fueled. She took him back to her dingy one-bedroom apartment, where, with a little nudge, she provided dinner (a frozen pizza and generic beer), and he kept talking into the night until a subtle yawn from him prompted a blunt yawn from her, and when she finally climbed into her bed sometime after midnight, she was too tired to puzzle out how it was that he had weaseled a shower, a toothbrush, a t-shirt, a bathrobe and blanket out of her.

When she went off to work in the morning, he remained in her apartment, despite her better judgment; "temporarily short of funds," he even had the nerve to ask for a loan—"a good-faith investment in their plan" which would be repaid abundantly (he didn't say how). When she peeled out fifty bucks—her lunch money for the month—he then had the audacity to ask for a spare key, so that he could use the day productively, preparing for their journey to "the oasis of magic in this vast wasteland."

"Just what are you going to be doing while I earn your daily bread?" she growled.

"Fleshing out plans." Again, now was not the time for discouraging news: he wasn't about to tell her that before they could even begin to hunt for the Author, they'd have get past the boundary curse and the town leadership. He had a vague notion concerning a scroll that he'd seen in the Snow Queen's possession, and a Hatful of fairies, and a librarian who, when books failed her, usually turned to the Internet for answers. He needed some time to think, to sketch out his notions into ideas, and to gather information. "Beginning with gathering information about the second member of our team. May I also make use of your computer?"

"Fine." But from her tone, it really wasn't fine with her. "But I'll get it. You're not going into my bedroom." She brought the laptop into the kitchen and set it up for him on the formica
table. Clamping her hands onto her hips, she glared at him. "You've got my cell phone charger, my key, my money and my laptop. Good thing I don't have a car or you'd take that too. Anything else, Your Majesty?"

He grinned. "Your library card?"

If she had told her co-workers that she had taken a man home last night, given him money and a key and left him to his own devices in her apartment, they would have called her nine kinds of a fool—and then they would have demanded every juicy detail, not knowing, of course, because she kept to herself, that she didn't swing that way.

She preferred to date within her own species.

When she got home—bringing a bag of groceries, as per his request (he'd borrowed her recharger and once his phone was operational again, he'd called—no, phoned in his order, as if she were some pizza delivery driver)—he'd removed the stuff she usually kept on her dining table and filled the space with a road atlas, a stack of books and piles of paper he'd scribbled upon. He was now hunched over the laptop, with a cup of her Mint Chocolate Memories coffee (her special, expensive Sunday-mornings-only treat) and a plate of biscotti (that didn't come from her cupboard; he'd obviously developed a taste for Starbuck's last night) at his elbow. She snatched the plate and the cup away, relocating them to the head of the table so he couldn't bump them off. "If you had to have a snack, what the hell was wrong with the Safeway cookies I had in the cupboard?" She went looking for them, only to find the empty bag in the trash can.

As she unpacked the groceries, he called out to her, "Did you get the fresh salmon?"

"I got the damn salmon," she grumbled. "Enjoy your fancy fish while you have it, 'cause tomorrow we're going back to Captain Gorton's."

"And the lemon, basil, and dill? The olive oil?"

"Yes," she snapped, "I got everything you wanted, Your Majesty."

He stood and came into the kitchen with a placating smile. "Now, now, dear, I'm sure it's been a long day at work and you're tired, but believe me, the extra effort will be well worth it. Now, shoo," he flicked his magicless fingers at her. "Put your feet up and watch a little TV—or better yet, take a long hot bath, and by the time you're relaxed and rosy, I'll have a wonderful dinner ready for you. I did mention that I'm a gourmet cook, didn't I?"

"So you said." She dug the cash register receipt from the bag and flicked it at him in response to his condescending manner. "And I did mention to you, didn't I, that I make minimum wage and I can't afford salmon—" she slammed the package of fish onto the counter—"or biscotti, or—" she pointed at the clothes he was wearing—"to outfit you?"

"Merely jeans and a t-shirt, Ursula," he said humbly. "Second hand, from the Goodwill." He didn't mention the shoes, underwear and toiletries he'd also bought with her money.

"Oh." She picked up one of the books he'd checked out on her library card.

"And I've kept the receipts; you will be repaid in full, as soon as we arrive in Storybrooke
"What is this?" She pointed at the book. "Web Development for Dummies?" She dropped the book and peered at the laptop monitor, which had, luckily, gone into sleep mode. Before she could stab at the keyboard and wake the computer up, he took her by the shoulders and turned her around.

"I bought a bottle of lavender-scented bath oil," he announced. "You're going to love it. Lavender, even in this world, has nerve-soothing properties."

"You better not be making a porn site!" She spun on him, but he gently turned her around again, urging her toward the bathroom. "Are you making a porn site? Is that what you've been doing with my money? Eating biscotti and building a porn website?"

He nudged her from the kitchen. "I assure you, pornography is the farthest thing from my mind. I will show you what I've been doing on the Internet, but not just yet. It... isn't ready to be unveiled. Go. Enjoy your bath. Let me cook you a nutritious but delicious meal." He nudged her into the hallway. "Here, have something to read while you soak." He pressed a Forbes into her hand. "Relax. And an hour from now, you'll dine on salmon en croute, petit pois, and spears of asparagus." He gave her a small push toward the bathroom.

"I don't know what any of that crap is, except for the salmon, but it had better be good," she shouted over the running water. "'Cause it cost me two days' pay!" She poked her head out from the bathroom door. "What did you do all day, besides spending my money? When I come out, I expect to hear the plan, every speck of it."

Unwrapping the salmon, he sighed deeply. His idea, like the meal, was half-baked, but at least he had something to show her: a yellow Post-It strategically placed on the map of Maine and a newspaper clipping reporting an IRS investigation of the socialite Cruella Feinberg. It wasn't much, but that, along with a little charm and a good meal, would placate the witch.
Belle skipped church one Sunday and drove over to Regina's; she found the former queen looking as worn as she was. She exchanged no greetings; there was no point in pretending to be polite, after all that had gone between them. Regina didn't invite Belle in; they stood on her porch. "Have you heard from Rumple?"

"Why would he contact me?"

"I just hoped. . . thought that since you're magical. . . ."

"As I understand it, there is no magic on his side of the line."

"I've tried calling him," Belle admitted. "And emailing. His phone's been disconnected; email goes unread."

"I haven't been able to reach Robin either." With this, Regina was confessing she's tried.

"Isn't there a way?"

"What, like strap a message to one of Snow's bluebirds and hope it can find him in a world of seven billion people?"

"I was just hoping. . . ." Then Belle squared her shoulders. "You're not looking any better than I am."

"We've both lost our true loves. What did you expect?" But Belle wasn't ready to leave, despite Regina's snarkiness, so Regina broke down and invited her in, offered her coffee. Belle didn't like coffee but accepted it anyway.

"Maybe—" Belle began. "I got to thinking, you've known Rumple longer than any of us have."

"That's true."

"Maybe you could tell me about him, some stories from those days?"

Regina said slowly, "You want to. . . get to know him better. Understand him."

"Yes."

The queen had the grace to avoid stating the obvious: it's too late now. Besides, it was Emma's week with Henry and Regina was getting tired of having dinner alone. "I understand you're quite the cook, Belle."

She nodded. "Rumple taught me."

"Well, I'm not. I was going to order take-out. So why don't we see what's in my cupboards that you can make a meal from, and while you cook, I'll talk."

"It's a deal."

They walked into the kitchen. Regina waved her hand at the refrigerator. "Have at it. It's all yours."
She seated herself at the kitchen table to watch and sipped her coffee. "Belle. . .I'm not saying there is, but if there were a way to find out where he is, would you go to him?"

Belle twisted her wedding ring. "Yes. Would you go to be with Robin? Assuming he wasn't with Marian any more."

"And leave Henry? I'm afraid my future and Ms. Swan's are inextricably linked, at least until this current curse is broken."

"Then—do you think it's possible?"

"If it can be broken, Rumple could do it. A pity he's gone." She raised her hand in blocking gesture. "Don't ask. Yes, I've tried. Repeatedly."

Belle sighed and rooted through the cupboards and refrigerator. "It looks like I can make a tuna casserole. Not very gourmet, but at least you have all the ingredients."

"Cook away, then. I'll tell you about the first time I met 'Rumpleshtiltskin.'"

AUGUST 2014

"Mmph!" Belle stopped short, her hand falling from the bar as the door to the sheriff's office pulled open. She stepped back, the beverage holder in her other hand tilting dangerously. The person on the other side of the door reached out to steady the drink holder for her. "Thanks," Belle said, but it came out more like "fanks" past the paper bag she was carrying between her teeth.

"Here, let me," the exiting individual—Regina—sounded miffed, but she held the door open so that Belle could carry the bag in one hand and the drinks in the other.

Now Belle could speak clearly. "Thanks. And excuse me."

Regina nodded a greeting. "Good afternoon, Ms. French." The mayoral candidate stepped outside and allowed the door to close as soon as Belle was safely inside, negating any social necessity for further conversation. Not that Regina and Belle were not on speaking terms—they'd had lunch together three times in the past month (each time, at Regina's house, with Belle doing all the cooking, and each time, moving a just a little closer to forgiveness on Belle's part as Regina opened up with stories of Rumplestiltskin the Teacher), but neither woman was ready for their relationship to made public. People would presume Belle's visits to the former Evil Queen's home meant friendship, which the relationship was not and probably never would be; some of the more imaginative Storybrookers might even suspect a conspiracy of some sort, no doubt involving magic, and perhaps having to do with the upcoming election in November. Had the ex-Mrs. Gold (seen as frequently in her former husband's shop as in the library) been aiding the once-and-future-mayor with some magical trinkets that might influence the election? In return, perhaps, for assurance that Ms. Mills would keep the town's borders secure against the Dark One? Already hints of some sort of collusion on Regina's part were circulating, as fast as the library's five copies of Shades of Grey, the assumption being that the exile of Mr. Gold could not have happened if Regina didn't wish it so.

Balancing the drinks and the paper bag, Belle glanced over her shoulder, watching Regina march off to City Hall. She thought she'd detected a flicker of sadness in Regina's otherwise businesslike expression. It wouldn't be the first time: when she'd arrived at the mansion for their most recent lunch together, Belle had spotted a Pop!Robin Hood on the accent table in the foyer, and when she asked about it, Regina had admitted the toy had been Roland's, forgotten in the rush to get Marian over the town line to safety. "I was thinking of mailing it to him," Regina had confessed.
Belle had agreed, "I'm sure he'd be glad to have it." She left unspoken, though both women understood it, the rest of her sentence: and Robin would be glad to hear from you.

Watching Regina rush down Main Street, Belle recognized the signs that Regina was trying to hide: a slump in her shoulders, a dullness in her eyes. Belle recognized these signs because she saw them every morning, looking back at her in the mirror.

"Hey," Emma greeted, bringing her feet down from the desktop to the floor. She gave Belle a polite welcoming glance that grew into a genuine grin as she spotted the offerings in Belle's hands. "Is that—" She drew in a deep breath, pulling in the aroma coming from the bag. "Barbeque ribs from that place on Bayview? The one with the flying pig on the window?"

"Mm-hmm." Belle set the bag and the drinks onto the sheriff's desk. She withdrew a Styrofoam container from the bag, opened it, and waved a hand over the food to encourage the aroma to circulate. "St. Louis style ribs, half a rack." She retrieved a cylindrical container from the bag, then threw the bag away. "And a side of slaw." From her pocket she extracted two wrapped packages of cutlery and napkins. "Thought you might like a break from grilled cheese."

Emma sat back down, opening the cutlery. "Oh, man," she moaned. "Killian and I've been wanting to try this place ever since it opened last week." She removed the lids from the drinks. "Pull up a chair." She arranged the Styrofoam container so that it was in easy reach of both sides of the desk. "Wait a minute." She set her hands into her lap. "Is this a bribe?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then." She used a plastic knife to slice the slab in half, then promptly attacked her half, ignoring the blob of sauce that slid down her chin and onto her blouse. She moaned again and rolled her eyes. "Whatever you're bribing me for, this is worth it."

Belle scooped out the contents of the round container into two evenly divided hills of coleslaw, then forked up a bite. She patted her mouth with a napkin before explaining, "I came to ask you to look for someone."

"Gold."

"Yeah. I want to know where he is——"

"And if he's okay." Still holding onto the ribs with one hand, Emma took a bite of coleslaw with the other. "Mmm. Yeah. Totally worth it. Well, I can't make any promises; it's a big planet, and without a Social Security Number or driver's license or credit cards, he'll be harder to trace. I guess his phone doesn't work?"

Belle shook her head.

"You tried calling him, then." Emma sighed thoughtfully, then attacked her ribs again. "And got, what, 'cannot be completed as dialed'?

"Yeah."

"That's what Regina got too." At Belle's puzzled frown, Emma added, "When she tried to call Robin. You're not the only one asking me to trace a missing person today." She tilted her head toward the door, reminding Belle of Emma's earlier visitor. "But you are the only one to bring me a decent bribe."

"Oh? What did Regina offer?"
"A cup of coffee."

Belle giggled, then grew serious. "Emma, I understand what I'm asking here. You probably don't feel so kindly disposed toward Rumple right now, considering he tried to trap you in that Sorcerer's Hat."

Emma clicked her tongue. "Weird. That's what it was. I mean, Gold always seems so sure of himself, so—he's got every move planned out. But when he tried to get me to go in that room, he was like halfway telling me not to do it at the same time he was telling me it would solve my problems."

"I think he's conflicted." Belle lowered her head, as if ashamed, as if sharing responsibility for her then-husband's actions. "Sometimes."

"Not about Killian. No hesitation there: he would've crushed Killian's heart."

"Yeah. I'm afraid so."

"And he would've taken Henry, while the Snow Queen killed off the rest of us."

"Yeah." Belle's voice dropped so low as to be barely a whisper. She pushed her share of the meal away, hardly touched.

"But I get it. You're conflicted too."

"I just need to know if he's safe." Belle couldn't meet Emma's gaze. "If he's alive."

"You wouldn't try to bring him back here, would you." It really wasn't a question.

"No. To tell you the truth, I don't know what comes next. Sometimes I think if I knew where he was, I'd go after him."

"And the other times?"

"I think if I caught up with him, I'd strangle him."

Emma chuckled.

"Or I might do nothing. Just... have peace of mind so I can..." She fiddled with her wedding ring. "You know. But until I know he's okay, I won't be ready for that."

"That's pretty obvious, when you can't even say the word 'divorce.'" Emma took another bite of coleslaw. "I'm not sure what I'd do if I ran into him, either. If it was up to me, I'd burn his ass with a big old fireball, but he's Henry's grandfather..." She fixed Belle with a frown. "Henry doesn't know that Gold planned to let us die and take him. Or that Gold tried to kill him, before the Neverland thing. Henry shouldn't ever know those things."

Belle nodded. "I agree."

Emma sighed in exasperation. "I just don't get him. Gold, I mean. One minute he's risking his own life to save everybody from Pan, the next, he's gonna leave us all to die while he kidnaps Henry and lies to you."

"I think there are two voices in his head, and one of them is a gentle, shy man, and the other..." Belle picked at her fingernails, seeking relief from the tension. But she reminded herself this was Emma she was talking to, and Emma seemed to understand Regina's evil side, so perhaps she could..."
understand Rumplestiltskin's. Belle folded her hands in her lap and looked across at Emma. "The other is the Dark One, an agency all its own, with its own thoughts and desires and powers, and sometimes the Dark One takes control. I think, most of the time, Rumple is able to stop him, but sometimes, he's too powerful. And sometimes, Rumple lets him take control."

"A devil. Gold's possessed, you're saying."

"Something like that."

"Devils can be exorcised. Right?"

"Can they? In Avonlea, that's what they used to believe. Even my father did. That demons could be chased out by beating the possessed person with whips, to near death."

Emma blanched. "I think... I think it's gotta be better than that, more humane. I mean, the way to fight evil is with good, right?"

Belle shook her head slowly. "Ever since I met Rumple, I've been searching for the answer. The few books that address the Dark Curse say there's no way to destroy the Dark One. All you can do is to transfer it from one host to another."

"And, knowing that, you married him anyway?"

"He is more than that. More than the cursed spirit. There's a deep, abiding goodness in Rumple. I guess I hoped I could help him make that goodness grow, so he could fight the curse. For a while I thought, if love could change Regina and Hook, it could—but then she made him her slave, and after that, he gave up and let the Dark One take over. So he could survive."

Emma reached across the desk to offer a Kleenex. She busied herself with cleaning up after their meal, to give Belle time to regain her composure. When her voice was steady again, Belle made a formal request. "Sheriff Swan, my husband, Rumplestiltskin, is missing. Will you try to find him, please?"

"I'll do my best, Belle."

"I dunno." Emma spoke in a hushed tone, because upstairs in the loft Henry was asleep and across the floor, Neal and Snow were asleep. She sat at the kitchen counter across from her father, with two untouched cups of cocoa between them. "As a sheriff, I'm obligated to do everything I can to find a missing person, but as a mom—I'm not sure I want to."

"I think your direction is clear," David answered. "You have to do what's right."

"He said something like that to me. Gold did, the night he tried to lure me into that Sorcerer's Hat. He said, 'You always do the right thing.' 'You don't need to change,' he said. And then he said a really weird thing; he said, 'We don't have a choice.' Maybe he meant the Dark One had control of him, like Belle said."

"That doesn't excuse him, though. Maybe she acted in haste, and maybe we could have found another way to stop him—take his powers away, or block them, like with those wristbands of Pan's. But what Belle did, when she banished him, it's been good for this town. Good for Henry," he added firmly, setting a reassuring hand on Emma's.

"She's not trying to bring him back. If I find him, she's not even sure if she'll try to contact him. At this point, she just wants to know he's alive." Emma finally sipped her cocoa, now gone cold; she made a face at it and pushed the cup away. "I know the right thing is for me to do everything I can
to find him for her, then let her decide what she wants to do, as long as she doesn't bring him back here. It's right for me to protect this town from him."

"And you're the only one in town with the skills set to track down a missing person in the outside world. I could try, but." David shrugged. "If it was a matter of finding a guy lost in the forest, I'm your man. But the world out there—you're Belle's only hope. Don't agonize over it, Emma. You know what the right thing is, and you'll do it, just as any hero would."

"Yeah, but is the right thing the good thing? Suppose I find him and Belle goes after him, and he decides to get even with her for banishing him? If she's right about this demon possession idea, he might be even more dangerous now than he was before Zelena got to him."

"We'll talk to Belle about it, when we give her your report. Your mother can be very persuasive; if Belle seems inclined to chase after Rumplestiltskin, maybe we can offer another idea. I know you, Emma: if you don't do everything possible to locate him for her, you won't be able to live with yourself."

"And what about Robin? Suppose I find a way for Regina to talk to him?"

"Why would that be bad news?"

"Regina will fall in love all over again. She'll want to go after him, and she if she leaves, she can't come back."

David understood now. "Henry."

"Yeah. Much as I hate to admit it, he needs her."

"She needs him just as much. She knows that. Whatever she decides about Robin, she's going to find a way to stay in Henry's life. I'm sure of it. And I don't know him all that well, but I'd bet Robin would understand that. After all, he's got a child, too. He won't want to come between Henry and Regina. They'll work it out, if they're meant to be together. That's one thing I'm sure of in this world, Emma, or any other: if a couple's meant to be together, they'll find each other."

"Every other family has a motto like 'United we stand' or 'Death before dishonor.'" Emma grinned impishly. "We get 'I'll always find you.'"

"Might be lame," David agreed, "but aren't you glad it's ours, all things considered?"
"You've been using my hairbrush again! I better not find out you've been using my razor too. And how many times do I have to tell you: the toilet seat goes DOWN!"

He'd never had any of these complaints from his previous housemate.

He tried, he really did, to make himself useful as a houseguest. Although most of his time was spent hunched over the computer—he wouldn't tell her specifically what he was doing, just "laying the groundwork" for his grand plan—he did clean the apartment and cook and wash dishes. His brief time as a husband had given him an appreciation for the domestic arts, performed in the ordinary way, with his wife working beside him, joking, flirting, touching. Belle had entirely changed his view of vacuuming.

Ten days passed. Two weeks. He was grateful to have a roof over his head and regular meals, but his back ached from sleeping on the couch and his ankle ached from clumping up and down the iron stairs to her apartment, and he longed for his suits and his cologne and his antique dining set and his wife's voice. Every once in a while, when the apartment was silent, he would remember how close he'd come to becoming one of them, the homeless. Then he would shake it off; soon enough he'd have his life back, almost as it was before. Except for Bae, who would never come home again, and except for Zelena's laugh, which still followed him everywhere.

Her paycheck strained to the breaking point by the need to feed a second mouth, Ursula put them on a low-income (and, Rumple noticed, though he dared not complain, low-nutrition) diet, dependent upon peanut butter, ramen, refried beans and rice. He should be grateful, but gods, he missed the fresh fruits and vegetables he used to dine upon in Storybrooke. Jumping around as he'd been between Big Macs (when he could steal them), the Ursula Plan and days with nothing at all to eat, he was beginning to develop some embarrassing digestive problems. When he got back home, the second thing he'd do, after apologizing profusely to Belle, would be to buy groceries.

Ursula was nearing the end of her patience (and her reheatable noodles) before partner #2 was ripe for the picking. A small item buried in the "New York Region" section of the Times reported that Cruella Feinberg had filed for divorce from her husband Ross, this coming on the heels of an IRS investigation of the Feinbergs’ tax filings for the past five years. Rumplestiltskin smiled into his store-brand mac and cheese as he perused the article. Cruella never was one to hang on to relationships, once she'd finished using someone. It might be said that her only significant relationship had been with her sometime-partners in crime, Ursula and Maleficent.

The day got even better. Shortly after Ursula stomped home (complaining about his having consumed the last bowl of ramen) he finally received the emailed message that would set his plan in motion. He stared a long time at the message, ignoring Ursula's griping: "Dear Professor Aurum, I see from your web page that you are an expert on many ancient languages, including Old and Middle Urudan. Well, I realize this may sound funny, coming
from a small-town librarian (we're so small you won't even find us on a road map or Wikipedia) but I recently came across a scroll that I think is written in Old Urudan. Rare, I know, and that's why we're so curious about it, and I think you might find it interesting too. I mean, it might be a recipe for chicken soup for all we know, but the fact that it's written in a language over a thousand years old makes it a find all by itself, wouldn't you agree? Anyway, I was hoping you could make time in your schedule—I can see from your CV how busy you are, all those conference papers and books, wow! If I scanned it in—it's in amazingly good shape, for how old it must be (or maybe not. Maybe someone in modern times was trying to teach himself Urudan and maybe it's just 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' or something, wouldn't that be a kick?). I could pay you for your time, if you could translate it for us. I could mail you a check. Just let me know, would you please? You're the only expert on Old Urudan that I can find, and that was after almost three months of googling! Please would you let me know either way if you can do this for us? Our whole town would be grateful. Sincerely, Belle French."

His heart clenched. Belle. The message sounded so much like her, the chatty warmth, the humor, the enthusiasm, that he could almost smell her perfume through the sea witch's laptop. The first words he'd had from her in two months. Belle French. Not Belle Gold. They'd talked about her name change, shortly before the wedding. She had wanted to hyphenate her name, as a way of strengthening the weak connection with her father; Rumple hadn't argued. His ring on finger would be evidence enough to the community where her affections lay; her daily presence in the pink house would show everyone she was on Rumplestiltskin's side. For two weeks she'd worn his ring and his name and had walked and slept by his side. For two weeks and one day, Belle French-Gold had existed. Now she had shucked off that identity like a snake shedding its skin, left it behind, useless and forgotten.

He tried to excuse that. She had a temper—few people knew that—slow to heat, yes, but one it had enflamed, burning hot, then quickly dying. People like Regina and the Charmings were probably fanning the flames, but when he came to her again, he could redirect that fire, convert it to flames of ardor.

He had to believe that. Or else had no reason to move forward. No reason for anything.

He spent two hours crafting a thirty-word reply, impersonal, professionally curious. He would look at the scroll, he said, and, depending on its length, complexity and legibility, consider translating it at no charge, perhaps in exchange for permission to use the document in the book he was writing. "Best wishes"—he wanted to write "yours"—"Alexander U. Aurum, PhD."

Her reply came instantly: "Dear Professor Aurum, Thank you, thank you so much! Attached is a scanned copy of the chicken soup recipe or whatever. It's quite short as you can see, I hope it won't take too much of your time and that you'll find it interesting. Yes of course you may use it in your book. Thank you again and I'll be waiting with baited breath! Sincerely, Belle."

As anxious as he was to get the ball rolling, he made her wait three days for the translation; he had to make it look difficult, to be convincing. Besides, Cruella wasn't quite ready for her indoctrination into the grand plan. He already knew the translation, of course; he'd
memorized it just as soon as he'd memorized the spell to open the Sorcerer's Hat. He translated the words into English but explained that for the command to be effective, it would have to be spoken aloud in Old Urudan; he wrote out the pronunciation phonetically. "For, this seems to be an enchantment—the Urus were big believers in the supernatural, you see, and their political leaders were practitioners of the magical arts, akin to your Native American shamans. If you wish to enact the spell, I'm afraid you're out of luck, unless you happen to possess a certain object that, according to modern thinking, was purely mythological: a special hat created by the Sorcerer of Sorcerers, Merlin. (As a side note, the Urus traded heavily with the Anglo-Saxons, who as you may know were great seafarers, and in fact King Uru IX married a Saxon princess, sight unseen it's said—sort of a mail-order-bride arrangement. The Urus learned about the legends of Arthur from her.)

"Although giving the spell a trial run is not possible, I hope you will enjoy the translation just the same. In the original it's quite poetic. At least, you have a good story to tell, and not just a recipe for chicken soup (though that might have been more practical). Best wishes, A. Aurum."

Finished, he sat back and watched, but there was no immediate reply. Really, he told himself, he shouldn't expect one so soon. It was late and the library would be closed now, and that was where Belle answered her email. They hadn't been married long enough for him to carry out his promise to her to have wi-fi connected in their home and the shop. He did have an email account, one that he had created right after Belle reopened the library; he'd used it now and then to buy and sell antiques. Computers had not become a part of his daily life, the way they were for Emma and Henry; he went to the library to check his email only when he had a deal going.

He smiled as hope struck like a lightning bolt. What if Belle. . . . He sat up straight again and brought up Yahoo. "Yahoo. What a ridiculous name for a business," he muttered; he'd made the same complaint every time he'd signed in. He typed in his user name: mrgoldantiquities. He typed in his password—he had to retype it because he inverted some characters in his haste. What if Belle. . . . His hands shook just a little as he opened his in-box. He had twenty-two emails, most of them advertisements concerning estate sales.

He sat back again, his hopes washed out in the rainstorm of reality. Not a single message from bookwormbelle.

Well. Obviously she was still angry. She'd never been one to bear a grudge, but maybe his deceptions had hurt her more deeply than he realized. He closed the laptop, cinched the belt on his bathrobe and pattered into the kitchen. The rattling of bottles in the door of the fridge as he yanked it open attracted Ursula's attention, even though she was watching TV in the living room. "Keep your paws off my beer! I've only got one left and I'm gonna need that before the week's over."

He sighed and closed the refrigerator.

As long as she had the computer on, might as well try one more time. Belle clicked on the "new message" command.

"To: mr. goldantiquities
From: bookwormbelle

Dear Rumple,

I understand if you're angry and that's why you haven't answered any of my emails, but please, please, just one sentence to let me know you're all right. I still care very much about you, and I need to know you're okay. Please?

Belle"

She attached a "read receipt" request to the message, then pressed "send." And waited. And waited.

Long after the light in Ursula's bedroom went out, Rumple was still surfing the Internet. What he was doing, he had to admit, was a waste of time; he knew better, but he couldn't help himself. Briefly, he wondered if what he was doing would classify as an Internet addiction, or more likely, electronic stalking. So what, he decided. There wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that he'd find what he was looking for, but if there was just a snowflake of a chance, he'd try. So he Googled and Yahooed and Binged phrase after phrase: "Storybrooke, Maine," "Storybrooke Chamber of Commerce," "Storybrooke Mirror," "Storybrooke Public Library," "Granny's Diner," "Mayor Regina Mills," "Henry Mills," "Sheriff Emma Swan," "Belle Gold," "Belle French."

His fingers tapped out a message to Belle, a jumped up mess of pleading, arguing, understanding and longing, but he deleted it before he clicked "send." He deleted it and rewrote it, then deleted that one. What he had to say to her needed to be said in person. She needed to read his face, not his words, to see how sincere he was, how sorry. But in the meantime, he just wanted to check on her from a distance, to make sure she was all right. She had a tendency to skip meals when she was upset, and he didn't trust her father or anyone else in Storybrooke to monitor her health.

He Googled, Yahooed and Binged until his eyes crusted over, and of course he found nothing to give him hope. As far as the World Wide Web was concerned, Storybrooke didn't exist. His brain had won that argument, but his heart would not admit defeat. Maybe he couldn't connect with her electronically, but soon enough, he would see her again. It was meant to be. They were true loves.

"We're ready to travel," he announced to Ursula. "As soon as we pick up the second member of the team. She will be ready for our offer tomorrow morning." He hadn't needed Scrying for that bit of information, just the headlines in today's newspaper.

Here was where Ursula, otherwise useless, would prove helpful: Cruella trusted her, as she trusted no one else. She could keep the unpredictable puppy slayer in line. And Cruella, with her sad tale of an abusive childhood, might be the key that unlocked Storybrooke for them: Emma could never refuse a heartfelt plea from a formerly abused child.

Closing the lid on the laptop, he allowed himself a moment to visualize his reunion with Belle. If he trod carefully, if he proved to her that he'd changed, if he'd reveal to her the deepest concerns of his heart, she would forgive him. They were true loves; she had never denied that, and after finally acknowledging it, he had committed himself to her, for the rest of their
lives. There could be no one else for either of them; apart, there could be only loneliness and incompleteness.

And if the Author could be persuaded to clear a path to happiness for them, Rumple was certain she would take him back, and never regret it. Once, just two months ago, he had happiness lying in his lap: love, magic, money. Yet the darkness in him craved more. Well, he had learned his lesson out there in the cruel world: he would appreciate what Storybrooke provided him, and be content, and make Belle so; and if his enemies allowed it, he'd make peace with them, and if they attacked, he would protect what was his with magic, but he would resist unnecessary force. Then Belle would be proud to call herself Mrs. Gold, and Henry would come back to apprentice with his grandpa again, for real this time.

He shrugged out of his bathrobe (provided by Ursula).

"Good gods, Gold, put some damn clothes on!" the sea witch barked, slamming her bedroom door.

Noticing a draft in his nether regions, he glanced down. Oh. Yeah. He'd forgotten why he was wearing the robe. He trotted off to the shower.

He awoke to a harsh flash of light. Groaning, he sat up, and something small and fuzzy dropped away from him. Ursula giggled, pounding away at the laptop keyboard. "There! Now I'm even for your little strip tease yesterday." When his eyes adjusted to the dark room, he saw she had brought up her Facebook page, and prominently displayed as the latest entry was a photo of him, in his natty bathrobe, asleep on her couch, mouth open, drooling—and a teddy bear tucked under his arm.

He kicked the bear, now fallen to the floor. "Very funny. Now take it down, because if anyone from Storybrooke saw that photo—"

"Yeah, yeah," she complained, pounding at the keyboard. "It was fun while it lasted. But I'll just keep that pic on my phone, in case at some point I need leverage."
"Hey Mom!" Henry twisted his body around, pushed himself up by his hands propped against her desk, and landed in a seating position atop the desk, his legs crossed, all in one move. The kid was becoming quite the acrobat, under the tutelage of an athletic grandfather.

"Hey Henry." Emma closed her laptop. "How was school?"

"Oh, you know." He shrugged. "Same old, same old." But he shared a secret smile with her as they both reflected on the past, when time was frozen in Storybrooke and every class really was the same as the one before.

Now things were changing: kids were gaining height, advancing in grades, winning sports games, forming friendships and crushes, getting into fights and trouble, making plans for the future in full expectation that there would be one. The town leaders, however, had called meeting after meeting (with mayoral candidate Regina at front and center, right beside David and Mary Margaret, as if she'd always belong there) to discuss what a future could look like for the citizens who could never leave the town they lived in, unless. . . .And here the parents of high-schoolers wrung their hands and dared to speak the horrible words, "If they leave, they can never come back."

It wasn't just a campaign opportunity when Regina made that problem the first and strongest plank of her platform: she vowed to do everything in her power to bring an end to that boundary curse. "Our loved ones must be free to travel, to explore, to go out into the world to make their fortunes—and return to us safely." For once, the citizenry realized, this wasn't just another empty promise by a politician: Regina, as much as anyone, had a need for the boundary curse to break.

"I was wondering if I could spend the weekend at Mom's," Henry said. "I know it's your week with me, but she's been experimenting, you know, to break the boundary curse, and I'd like to help. Grandpa Gold taught me a little bit about potions." He added the last bit gently; this would be news to Emma, and not necessarily welcome news.

"I see." At first Emma's voice went hard. "So he taught you magic without getting my permission first."

"It wasn't like that. It was for Operation Mongoose. He caught me reading a book about potions one day, and he took it away from me, but he said it was to be expected I'd be curious, so if I had any questions, I could come to him. And so I did. I had a lot of questions." Henry grinned mischievously.

"Every other kid gets curious about sex," Emma muttered. "Mine gets curious about magic. All right, Henry. I suppose it's time you learned, and not get thrown into the deep end like I did. But Regina and I are gonna confer on everything before she teaches it to you, got that?"

"How much harm can I do, anyway, when I don't have any powers myself? All I can do is, like, wash test tubes and stuff, like I do in chem lab at school."

"Yeah, how much harm? Famous last words." Emma glanced down at the yellow legal pad parked next to her laptop. "Henry, there's something I should tell you, but I don't want to get your hopes up. I want you to listen to me real close, and understand what I'm saying before I tell you some news. All right?"
Henry's voice crept up. "You and Hook aren't getting married, are you?"

"No! And I told you not to call him that. His name is Killian."

"Killian," Henry repeated dutifully, as though he were memorizing it.

"Now listen. I know you liked Robin and Roland."

"Check. And so does Mom. It might even be true love. That's one reason we have to break this boundary curse, so they can be together and see if they can make it work."

"Maybe. Regina will have to decide that, if the boundary curse gets broken—and if I can find a way for her to talk to Robin."

Henry hopped off her desk so he could face her full-on. "Really?" he whooped. "You're working on the phone problem? That's totally cool, Mom. For you to do that for Mom."

"I may not be able to solve it, so don't get too excited yet. The thing for you to think about is, what if Robin and Regina start talking and it turns out there is no way to break the boundary curse?"

"Then Mom will have to choose between Robin and me," Henry sobered. "I get it. I've thought about that."

"It will have to be her decision. I know it won't be easy for her. She loves you so much."

"You know what I think, Mom? I don't think Love or Fate or whatever would be that cruel, to make a mother choose between her kid and her true love. I think something will happen. We'll break the curse or something. It has to." He peered down at the legal pad. "Do you have a lead?"

"Now don't get your hopes up—and for cryin' out loud, don't tell Regina, because if this doesn't pan out—"

"You've got a lead, don't you?" He picked up the notepad. "Your handwriting is horrible, Mom. Does this say 'robinoflocksely gmail'?"

"When I have something definite," she snatched the notepad away, "you'll be the second to know. Now there's something else. I went round and round with myself about telling you this, but I learned my lesson the last time about keeping information from you—"

"You're looking for Grandpa, too, aren't you?" His eyes lit up.

"Not with the intention of bringing him back. Or allowing you to go see him. He's done some things that prove he's not trustworthy—"

"Trying to kill Hoo—Killian. I heard Grandma and Gramps talking about it. And the Hat. I get it, Mom. I know you're worried."

"Someday, just a few short years from now, you'll be a man, and I won't be able to stop you. But by then, maybe he won't be able to corrupt you, either."

"He's not the man you think he is," Henry objected. "I mean, he is, he's the Dark One, but he loves me, I'm sure of it, and he wouldn't try to hurt me."

"Oh, Henry, if you knew half of what he's done—I know he's your grandfather and you want to believe the best of him, but I don't want him around you. Not even if you grow up to be twice as big as he is."
"If you find him, are you gonna let me talk to him?"

"I don't know, Henry." She tapped her fingers on the legal pad. "I don't—wouldn't it be hard on you, if you started talking to him on the phone, or Skype, but not ever be able to see him again because of the curse?"

"Maybe you should let me find that out for myself." Henry leaned forward. "He is my grandfather. All I have left of my dad. When I found you, I had to run away to Boston to see you. Mom wouldn't have let me see you otherwise. What if I hadn't done that, Mom? What if I'd obeyed her?"

Emma's mouth flattened. "I just don't know, Henry. A phone call, maybe, but no personal visits. . . ."

"We may not be able to break the boundary curse," Henry pointed out. "Which would make this whole argument moot. If the curse doesn't break, you should let me call him whenever I want. Once I turn eighteen and it's my decision, I'm going to. I know he's screwed up his life; I won't let him screw up mine. But I think you're worrying for nothing. He wouldn't want to hurt me." He blinked hard. "Because I'm all he's got of my dad, too."

Ruby asked (because Ruby could be insensitive sometimes) if Rumple somehow showed up again, would she take him back? Belle didn't have to think about it; she already had, hundreds of times. "I was wrong to banish him from the town without giving him a chance to defend himself. He may have had good reasons for what he did. We were wrong, as a community, to assume that once Zelena released him, he didn't need anything else from us. To assume that because he acted like he was okay, that he was. How could we think that? The man died to save us from Pan, and then he was resurrected from who-knows-where—from Hell for all we know—and immediately became Zelena's slave, and was made to live in a cage for an entire year, and forced to threaten the people he loved, and all that time, he carried his son's sentience inside his own mind, keeping him alive and making himself insane. Did anyone besides me try to rescue him? And when he was finally free, after a year—did anyone offer help? Did anyone even walk over and ask if he needed a doctor or a hot meal? Damn it, did anyone even offer him a ride home? And when he got home, did anyone stop by to say 'Welcome back' or 'We're glad you're alive' or 'We're sorry about your son'? Just me and Dove. Not a single one of the heroes in this town. Not even Archie. And then we expect him to—what, take a quick shower, change his suit and go back to work in his shop, ready to come up with the answers for the next magic attack? We were wrong, Ruby, unfair, unjust, unmerciful, every one of us.

"But especially me, because I'd vowed to love him, all of him, through sickness and health, and because I lived with him, and I knew he was in pain, but I let him hide it from me. I let him distract me with wedding plans and honeymoon promises. I acted like a giddy little girl instead of a wife. And when he didn't do what I expected him to, instead of asking why, instead of supporting him, I threw him out. So when you ask would I take him back, I say I'm the one who should go to him, and give him the chance I denied him, and honor my vows. If I only knew how to find him."

"Oh, Belle, you poor girl," Ruby tried to comfort her. "You have to let him go. He couldn't come back even if you wanted him to."

"I could go to him."

Ruby's mouth fell open. "Tell me you aren't really thinking about leaving Storybrooke."

"He's out there somewhere, I don't know where, I don't even know if he's hurt—"

"Belle," Ruby said gently, touching her hand, "remember, he's about three hundred years old. He
fended for himself all that time before he met you. He'll be fine."

"I miss him so much it hurts."

"I know you do, but it'll get better. I've been there; I lost my lover, too. The hurt never goes away, but it does get better. I promise."

"If I could just talk to him—"

"If you leave Storybrooke, you can't come back. Your father, your library—you'd never see them again. Henry. . . the library is important to this town, Belle. That's because of you. If you leave, it'll get boarded up again."

"There are libraries out there."

"There are also seven billion people. How are you going to find him, if Emma can't?"

"We'll find him. And then—I don't know."

Three months. Belle filled her life with researching the books she'd found in the trunk of the Cadillac, but it wasn't enough. Her guilt ate away at her. She resumed seeing Archie once a week, sharing her pain with him. She began to sleep through the night; she resumed her experiments in cooking and gained a few pounds. She became less lonely.

But the ache didn't go away.

"True Love is something you're stuck with," Regina shrugged. "You just have to deal with it. You may find someone else to love, if you're damn lucky, but you'll always miss him." Belle knew Regina spoke from experience; Belle had read Henry's storybook, so she knew about Daniel. "If it's any comfort, he's feeling it too. And believe me, I know Rumple: you left him, but he hasn't left you."

"Do you think he's changed?" Belle asked.

"How could he not? Look, he dedicated his life to finding his son, and then his son died. After two really screwed-up relationships, he trusted you enough to marry you, and then you kicked him to the curb. For three hundred years, he put his faith in magic, and now he's out there where there isn't any. So yes, he has to have changed. For the better? Your guess is as good as mine." Regina sipped her coffee. "His track record doesn't bode well."

"I believe he can change. I believe he's a good man," Belle persisted. Then she bit her fingernail.

"Did you change for him, Belle?"

"What do you mean?" But she realized Regina was on to something.

"Isn't that what a relationship is supposed to be? Each one takes a step forward, so that they can grow together." Regina shrugged. "So I've heard." In a mumble she added, "Not that I had enough time with Robin to test that theory."

Three months. Regina filled her life with magic experiments, campaigning (though she really needn't bother; she was running unopposed), remodeling her house, starting a dress shop. She had to take on a partner to handle the customer service and marketing aspects; she had a keen sense of stylish, yet practical fashions for a professional, but the sucking-up required to attract and keep customers just churned her stomach, so she hired Rapunzel for that distasteful work.
She started taking two glasses of wine each night with dinner, to help her unwind so she could sleep. And each night when she slid between the satin sheets, she stared across the bedroom to her dresser, where photos of Roland and Robin smiled at her. Under her pillow she wrapped her hand around a funny-looking toy fox dressed in a pointed cap. ("I never wore such a foppish thing as that," Robin had laughed when Roland had shown him the gift from Regina. "One gust of wind, one sprinkle of rain and the useless thing would fall apart." "What did you wear, Papa, when you were Robin Hood?" The man had looked offended. "I hope that I still am Robin Hood, even if I dress in modern clothes. But in Sherwood Forest, I wore a hood. Which is why," he picked up Roland and tickled his belly, "why they called me—" "Robin Hood!")

Belle still woke up in the middle of the night, crying.

Three months and her fingernails were chewed to the quick. Henry finally got over his anger and came to her bringing cookies he baked himself. "Do you miss him? 'Cause I do."

"I miss him. Every day," she said hollowly. "Every minute of every day."

One evening as she locked the library, Belle was met by two people who understood her loneliness. "Good evening, Belle," Regina always began their encounters this way, rather stiff and formal, until conversation and food warmed her mood.

"Good evening, Regina. Hi, Henry. I just closed up, but if you need some books for that science fair project—"

Henry shook his head. "It's finished. We're here because three heads are better than one."

"And perhaps thirteen heads working together would be even better. We three and the fairies," Regina added. "Belle, since we share a common goal, suppose we pool our resources?"

The dimples in Belle's cheeks appeared. "You're talking about breaking the curse on the town line."

"Yup. Mom's got the magic, you've got the books, and me, I own the shop, so why not put them together?" Henry piped up.

"That sounds like a good idea, Henry," Belle agreed. "As it happens, Rumple has a sort of laboratory for magic experiments in the basement. All of the containers are marked with symbols. I've figured out most of them, but as his former student—"

"I may be able to identify the rest," Regina finished. "If you'll allow me in your house?"

Belle shook her head. "It's not my house any more, so I'll need to call the present owner, but I'm sure he won't mind, especially when we tell him what it's for. Mr. Dove is very fond of Rumple."

Regina raised an eyebrow but merely said, "Let's get to work, then."

"Tonight," Henry added. "My homework's done, Mom doesn't have any public appearances to make, and you just closed the library, so why not now?"

Belle thought about it for a moment. There was a big difference between a little girl-talk with Regina over lunch and working side by side with her in magic experiments. Besides, Rumple would plotz if he knew anyone else, especially Regina, had been permitted into his basement. Not even Belle had gone down there.

Belle reached for her phone. "All right, we'll give it a try and see how it goes. I'm calling Mr. Dove."

"And I'll order a pizza," Henry reached for his phone.

Having no one she needed to call, Regina simply crossed her arms and looked out at Main Street, at the going-home traffic. Main Street, Maine, where workers were hurrying home to their husbands, wives, kids and dogs. Main Street, Maine, where a few lone wolves like Whale were wandering over to Granny's so they didn't have to dine alone.

Main Street, Maine, where Princess Emma Swan and her boyfriend Hook Jones were locking up the sheriff's office, then linking arms to stroll over to the yellow car. Going off to the Hog Shack for barbecue, then to the Bijou for a movie, Emma had told Henry. How nice. The corner of Regina's lip elevated. How cute they looked, all cuddled up as they walked.

Somebody should take Hook down.

A corner of Regina's heart wished Rumple hadn't made the classic villains' mistake of pre-crime yakking. Instead of boasting about his plan to the victim, he should have got on with it. (Maybe some part of him didn't want to kill Hook? Naaaah.) And it had nothing to do with envy. Really. If her anger were coming from a place of envy, she could have busted up the Captain Swan romance with her magic tied behind her back. There were a dozen nonmagical ways she could set Hook up to fail with Emma. Regina had a right to be pissed at the pirate; after all, he'd stabbed her in the back by turning her over to Mendell.

Regina felt a stab of guilt in her gradually recovering black heart; Emma was happy, and that she deserved it. After all, she'd suffered the death of a lover, just like Regina had, and she deserved a second chance at romance, just like Regina had been given—before Bitch Fate had snatched it from her. But as for what Hook deserved—Hook, who'd committed plenty of crimes and gotten off without so much as a day in jail?

How was it fair that Regina, after more than a year of reformation, after sacrificing her relationship with Henry so that she could stop Pan's curse, had been punished yet again by having her true love taken from her, and yet Hook's fate included evenings at the Hog Shack with a princess? How could that be remotely fair?

Tapping her fingers against her folded arms, Regina glared into the twilight, and finishing her phone call, Belle noticed. Belle followed the agitated stare across the street to the sheriff's office, where the only yellow Beetle in town was parked.

Where Hook was opening the driver's door and holding Emma's elbow as she slid behind the wheel. Where Emma smiled up at him and said something and the two of them laughed and Hook kissed her on the lips. Hook, who had slapped Belle into unconsciousness. Who had connived with Cora and Regina to steal Rumple's dagger and who would have eagerly become an accessory to murder, if Cora had gotten her way. Hook, who had stolen Bae's baby blanket just to thwart Rumple's plan to cross the town line to find Bae. Hook, who had stolen Milah away from Bae and Rumple. Hook, who had shot Belle to force her across the town line so she would forget her love and herself. And how had Hook been punished for any of his crimes? Had he even struggled to change, as Regina had? He'd simply linked his arm in Emma's and voila, the Charmings had accepted him into the clan. He'd simply driven a boat to Neverland and they'd hailed him as a hero. And his remorse? A "sorry?" to Belle.

Belle folded her arms and tapped her fingers.
Henry pocketed his phone and smiled brightly. "Hope everybody likes pepperoni."
Ironically, Ursula, the minimum-wage fish feeder, was the richest of the three. Cruella was just as destitute as Gold, except for her car (which he wagered she could get anywhere from $40 to $50 grand for—if the IRS didn’t catch her first). Her jewelry, her clothes, her house, her furniture, everything was gone. The IRS would have confiscated her car too except she had it hidden—she knew she was being investigated. That left the once-most-powerful Dark One and the animal controller dependent upon the Sea Witch, who wiped out her bank account and pawned her aquarium and computer (leaving the negotiations to Rumple—he not only knew the true value of goods, even odds and ends kinds of things like her seashell collection, but he could also stare long and hard enough at any pawnbroker to make that dealer quake as he/she opened the cash register) to finance their short trip to Maine.

She bitched about selling off her household for their benefit, but somehow over the past few weeks she’d come to trust him, maybe respect him, maybe even like him a little, in her own odd way, so she did what had to be done. He’d painted such a rosy picture of the future that she couldn’t help needing to prove him right. After their dealings in the pawn district, Rumple cooked them a decent meal and ordered them to bed early—Cruella on a blanket on the floor, and she was still huffing in indignation (“Last night I slept in a Monarch V spring bed—3,000 springs! $50,000! And now I’m reduced to a flea-infested carpet!” To which Ursula responded, “One more crack like that and you’ll be sleeping on the fire escape.”) when Rumple flopped over on the couch and stuffed his pillow over his head to drown her out.

When he roused them in the morning, pre-dawn, he grumbled as he served them scrambled eggs: "Mrs. Feinberg, you snore. I shall never share sleeping quarters with you again."

"Hell," she jutted out her chin, "would freeze over first, before I’d sleep with you, Dark One. You moan in your sleep. 'Belle, oohh Belle.' Who is she, anyway?"

"Don't you remember, Cru?" Ursula giggled around a mouthful of toast. "That's the name of his cleaning woman."

"She's not a cleaning—" he started to snap, then regained his poise. The less they knew about Belle, the better. "My personal affairs are no concern—"

"Oh, an 'affair,' is it?" Cruella purred. "And quite a long-term one, as I recall; she's the one we appropriated from the Dark Castle, is she not, Urie?"

"The same. Puny little thing. I would have thought he'd worn her out long before now."

"Or sent her shrieking into the abyss, the first time he stripped off and revealed his... shortcomings."

"Dearies." Shoving the skillet aside, Rumple placed his hands flat on the kitchen table and leaned forward to glare at each woman in turn. "Have you forgotten what happens to those
"Who insult the Dark One?"

"You're not the Dark One yet, dearie. Not until we cross over that town line and into the
land of magic," Cruella smirked. "And even then, you'll still need us to torture the Author
for you. Because all these years of soft living in this world have left you, I think, delicate and
queasy of stomach."

Ursula laughed into her coffee. "Guess that makes him the Slightly Cranky One."

He swung on her next, smiling sweetly. "Did I mention to you, Princess of the Sea, that an old
mutual acquaintance of ours resides in Storybrooke? Someone you'll be delighted to see
again. And someone who owes you a debt that I—as I proved today at the pawnshop—have
the powers of persuasion to collect upon."

She was all attention now. "Oh yeah? Who?"

His lips formed the word even before he voiced it: "Hook."

She dropped her fork and her face hardened. "Oh is he."

"He is. As it happens, he owes me a debt as well—a debt so heavy only his life would suffice
for payment. However, gentleman that I am, I shall permit you the first whack."

"Lady that I am, I'll leave something for you to entertain yourself with." She shoved
Cruella's plate at her. "Shovel it in, sister. We've got places to go."

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"Let me drive. I know the way."

"No one sits in this seat but me." Cruella waved her hand at him. "In fact, I don't want you
in the front at all. Sit in the back."

He found himself thinking he was better off sitting in the back, where he couldn't see the
street, because from the angry honks of passing cars, he figured Cruella must be all over the
road. He lurched from side to side, grabbing at anything solid to keep from falling over, and
he was glad he'd been the one to do the cooking this morning, because if Ursula, with her
"more grease! More grease!" philosophy of cooking, had fried the eggs, he'd have left them
behind in New York—spattered all over the highway.

She insisted on blaring the radio and singing along—flat and off-tempo—as she swung the
vehicle from lane to lane, apparently undecided as to whether she was driving in the States
(right lane) or England (left lane). Her song selections ranged from the goofy ("I'm a Looking
over a Four-Leaf Clover") to the nonsensical ("Does the Spearmint Lose its Flavor on the
Bedpost Overnight," "Yes, We Have No Bananas"). He tried to get her attention, first by
clearing his throat politely, then by calling, then by bellowing her name. She simply cranked
up the volume each time. If he had his magic, he'd change her into a banana. Of course, if he
had his magic, he wouldn't need her or her stupid car at all.

This was going to be the longest five-hour drive of his life.

The Zimmer jerked to a stop at a two-pump dump outside of Stamford. As Ursula and
Cruella unwrapped themselves from the vehicle, he rolled down a window to suck in a cleansing breath. "Make yourself useful, Dark One. Fill her up." Ursula tossed him three tens before wandering off with Cruella for the restroom. He had to laugh, though, as he watched Cruella lift her coat to knee length as she walked so she could avoid dirtying it against oil puddles and stacks of mud-crusted tires.

He slid out and seized the handle of the gas pump. "I used to travel in a cushioned carriage drawn by magic," he muttered, shoving the nozzle into the tank. "Or just snap my fingers and go. I used to drive a Cadillac. Now I'm a pump jockey for a tax evader."

Cruella poked her head out from the restroom and called to him. "Say, boy, be sure to wash the windows too."

"Gods above and below," he muttered, jiggling the pump handle. "If I survive this trip, my first act of magic will be to make her wash my car—with her toothbrush."

While he was checking the air pressure in the tires, the women ambled out of the restroom and into the store; they returned to the car with a case of Red Bull (Ursula's purchase) and an entire display box—thirty packages—of string cheese. "A little snack for the road," Cruella announced, settling the box in the cup holder between the driver's and the passenger's seats. "Help yourself, Rumple."

"How very generous of you," he said dryly. He inspected the expiration date stamped onto the side of the box. "These snacks are two months past their expiration date."

"That's how we got them at half-price." Cruella ripped one open with her teeth, spat the wrapping out her window, dangled the cheese from her lower lip like a cigarette and cranked up the radio. "Oh tiptoe through the tulips with me!"

Ursula, clever girl, figured out the solution to Cruella's singing. She twisted in her seat to look back at Rumple and asked in a quiet voice, "So who is she, Rumple? The woman who tamed the Dark One?"

Immediately Cruella stopped singing and snapped off the radio. One eyebrow raised, she watched him through the mirror as he squirmed.

There was no point in pretending. "What you need to know about her, dearie, is that she's the Dark One's wife. She is more precious to me than all my power and all my wealth put together. Any insult to her, however slight, is an insult to me, requiring immediate and harsh retribution, and any threat to her will be answered in kind. Let it be known, I will defend her with my life."

"No need to go off half-cocked. Just askin'."

"Just steer clear of anyone under five feet three. That includes children."

"Ooooh, is there a mini-Rumple toddling around?" Ursula gushed.

"Perhaps an entire litter?" Cruella guessed.

"Never you mind, dearies. Just keep your mouths shut, your ears open and your newfound
magic to yourselves. I want you out and about: restaurants, parks, Miners Day picnics, church socials. Listen close for any mention of books, authors or magic quills. Take note of who said it and where, then report back to me. I'll take it from there."

"And why would we want to obey you? The last time we did, we were nearly devoured by a hell-bat."

"Surely you wouldn't deny us a little fun, after thirty years of living as ordinary drudges."

"Raise any suspicions and Regina and her lapdogs will have you out on your arses before you can so much as flick a tentacle. Do as I say and we'll all get everything we deserve." His patience had stretched like a wad of dried-out Silly Putty. He sat back in the car seat. "And leave that ridiculous music off."

"Poor Rummie," Cruella clicked her tongue. "Is 'Making Whoopie' too bawdy for your pristine ears?"

"Now we know why he's so cranky all the time."

"I'll just sing, then." Cruella threw her head back. "'I ain't got nobody and nobody cares —""

"Sorry, Rum." Ursula turned the radio on again. "Lesser of two evils, and my ears are starting to bleed."

"Lose the battle, win the war," he mumbled, sliding back from the front seat as far as possible. He distracted himself contemplating the finer points of his Plan A (truth be known, he really didn't have a Plan B).

Into hour four of their journey, without any provocation, Cruella snapped the radio off. "We should be getting close, shouldn't we, Rummie? What landmarks should we watch for, to let us know when we arrive?"

"There's a 'Welcome to Storybrooke' sign just inside the city limits." He failed to mention that neither the sign nor the city limits would be visible to outsiders. They’d discover that for themselves soon enough, and when they did, he'd explain then. By then they would have invested too much time in the journey to turn around. He hoped.

Another hour passed. It wouldn't be long now.

"Do you really think this is possible?" Ursula leaned out the window to search the horizon. "An author who can write us anything we want?"

Rumple was fully aware that Cruella had adjusted her rear view mirror slightly so she could check on him. He rested his head against the door and closed his eyes. Satisfied he was asleep, Cruella answered in a hushed voice, "Does it matter? If the Author doesn't pan out, we'll have our magic back-and we'll have him."

With his eyes closed, Rumple couldn't be sure, but he had a sneaking suspicion she had gestured at him.
They told themselves they were happy. Certainly, the town had grown quiet (for Emma, read: BORING) ever since the demise of Zelena and the banishment of the Dark One. Everyone returned to former pursuits, with the addition of continuing research into the Hat, in the hope of releasing the fairies from its confines. What were they experiencing in there, Hook kept asking; Belle could find no answer in the books. So little had been written about the Hat, and no one who had been sucked into it had ever returned. Regina hadn't even heard of the Hat. "I'm sure he kept these books from me," she muttered when Belle brought her the small stack of books. There was no need to define he. "He made me listen to him lecture about the history of magic, so I've heard the Merlin legends, but frankly, I didn't pay much attention. I was in a hurry to get to the good stuff."

They told themselves they were happy, and the general populace was: they didn't have to deal with Mr. Gold on rent day any more. The silent Dove, though scary enough in his great size, never threatened lawsuits or bodily harm when payments were late or short. He simply charged 5% interest per week. Yet he never failed to collect; stubbornly, he would insist to anyone who challenged him that Mr. Gold had trusted him with this responsibility and he would carry it out until Mr. Gold returned (he always punctuated the latter phrase with a fixed stare, so no one dared correct him).

Those who had known Mr. Gold on a more personal level—well, only Belle and Regina could truly make that claim—or who had depended upon him for information (or in Emma's case, a little verbal sparring from time to time) had mixed feelings. Even David admitted that every now and then, he kinda halfway missed the old geezer; their relationship, though it could never be mistaken for friendship, had at times been, well, almost social. When her father confessed this to her, Emma had a small confession of her own: she'd made it a point to walk past the pawnshop every day on her patrol. "Protecting Henry's interests," she'd lied to herself, "and keeping an eye on those dangerous materials in the shop" but the truth was, she kinda halfway expected to see him standing behind the counter.

And if a week passed without the adults wondering about him (no one would use the term missing him except Belle), Henry reminded them. Like Dove, he too was certain Grandpa Gold would come strolling down Main Street any day now, chin high, gait strong, as though he still owned the town; Henry was still young enough to believe in his grandparents (and Snow and David, as immediate beneficiaries of that blind optimism, were hesitant to dissuade him, though they did point out on frequent occasion Gold had committed some serious crimes). "He deserves a second chance," Henry would answer, looking meaningfully at each of them, for none of them was without sin, but especially his two mothers, who had granted each other that forgiveness. "He'll be back, and maybe if we treated him like he belongs, he'd act that way. I mean, we all started out with the same problem, didn't we? A parent that died or. . . you know." He glanced at Emma; he wouldn't use the word abandoned.

"Yes, but Henry, we tried to be understanding with him," Snow said gently. "He set himself against us. It was his choice to do the horrible things he did. I know you love him because of your father, but. . . ."

"Anyway, he can't come back. No one who leaves can come back," David pointed out.

"He will. He'll find a way." Henry's eyes clouded. "He found a way to get here in the first place, didn't he?"
"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Emma said. "Now, go wash up. You and me and Killian are going out for ice cream."

"Yes, ma'am." But as he turned away, his expression reminded them he'd matured past the age of successful bribery by ice cream.

The town now had another reason to celebrate, and two background heroes were elevated to prominence: Hook and Belle had discovered a spell to open the Hat and free the fairies. "Actually, it was this professor I contacted by email—" Belle started to protest when the Charmings hugged her and the dwarfs shook her hand profusely. Her modesty was ignored, and when Regina successfully cast the spell and released the fairies, she too was feted in a party at Granny's.

They told themselves they were happy, all of them, quiet and safe, and certainly everyone was relieved to have their community restored to (almost) wholeness. But Mother Superior Blue didn't smile when Granny toasted her, yet she wouldn't deny them their celebration by explaining her discomfort. Hook wandered off by himself, pressed down by guilt over his role in imprisoning the fairies. Henry and Regina, absorbed in thoughts of Operation Mongoose, were quieter than usual. And though Belle smiled and ate cake, every now and then she glanced down at her left hand and her smile faded. Emma found herself in a role she had no taste or talent for: the life of the party. She was almost relieved when a loud, unidentifiable sound broke through the chatter and the music: someone was disturbing the peace. Now that was a task she was born to tackle. The sound—a combination of a metallic rattle and a lion's roar—cut through the sudden silence, and Emma rushed out into the street to find a huge thing—the body of a hairy human, the horns of a devil, the wings of a bat and eyes like lantern lights—perched on the clock tower. Snow, Hook, Regina and Belle came running up beside Emma. Working together (this magic collaboration was getting easier; Emma and Regina didn't need to speak to coordinate their efforts), the magic users sent the hell-bat into a spin before it turned tail.

Regina prohibited a victory celebration, however; the hell-bat would return as soon as it cleared its head. As the heroes split up to do their homework on the creature, Emma and Regina retreated to City Hall to look concoct a plan of action. They'd barely stepped in—hadn't even removed their coats—when Regina's phone rang. Amazed, she identified the caller for Emma: "The Sea Witch!"

"The Sea Witch!"

"Before Emma could remark that that name had no meaning to her, the call grew even more perplexing. Regina set the phone on speaker so Emma could listen to the fast- and smooth-talking Ursula ask to be permitted into town, so that they, like the Evil Queen, could have a fresh start. "We've changed," Ursula vowed; Regina rolled her eyes. "Please let us in."

"A smirk and a snark forming on her lips, Regina almost offered the Queen of the Sea a one-way ticket on the Titanic when the rattle-roar reverberated from Main Street, shaking City Hall. Apparently Ursula and her pal could hear the roar over the phone, because Ms. Chicken of the Sea inquired ever-so-innocently, "Is one of those problems a hell-bat with beady eyes and devil horns?"

"When she professed to having first-hand knowledge of how to fight the hell-bat successfully that she'd be willing to impart for admission into town, Emma was hooked, and Regina relented.

Now came the tricky part. Ursula had to plant an idea, but in such a way that the heroes thought it their own. "In between heart-wrenching sobs into his beer, Rumple said something about a protection spell around the town that prevents outsiders from entering."

"Oh, did he?" Regina would give nothing away.

"Through his blubbing, he said something about a scroll that a sorceress had once used to pass through that barrier. The pity was, he didn't have it; you did, and there was no way in hell you'd
ever let him have it. But seeing as it's us, your old friends—and we've paid three times over for every mistake we made. All we're asking is chance to start over, and with that scroll, you can give us that chance."

Regina had doubts about the scroll, which she did have in her crypt, but which seemed to be nothing more than caveman writing, but she didn't voice them: as long as the heroes got a solution to the bat infestation, she figured there was no harm, no foul in offering a trade that might fail anyway. She made the deal.

"Your charming visitor is a former resident of the Bald Mountain. He's one of a kind, the last of a species called the Chernabog."

Great: did Ursula study under Rumplestiltskin the Amateur Historian too? "I don't need the history lesson," Regina interrupted. "Just get to the point."

"He's hungry, and what he eats is the soul, and the body, of whoever has the greatest potential for evil. Feed him and you'll be rid of him. He'll go back to sleep for another fifty years."

"That's your solution? A human sacrifice? That's the best you've got?" Regina hung up.

That light bulb in Emma's head had remained turned on: if the creature could be tricked into crossing the town line, it would cease to exist. She allowed Regina just a minute to fret before ushering her off to the Bug and flooring the gas pedal. With the Chernabog riding atop, Emma swerved and swayed the Bug in a vain attempt to pry it loose, but as the orange town line loomed ahead, Regina made the logical sacrifice: it wanted her but wouldn't hesitate to go through Emma if necessary, so Regina made that action unnecessary by transporting herself to the border and inviting an attack. To her shock, the Chernabog ignored the tasty dark morsel to remain plastered to the Bug, slashing at glass and steel in order to reach Emma.

Emma slammed on her brakes just short of the border. Thank the gods, in the Land-Not-Supposed-to-Have-Magic-But-Now-Enchanted, the laws of physics still applied: inertia sent the hell-bat somersaulting over the border, where the magicless Real World snuffed it out as the Savior, the Mayor and the newly arrived Charmings watched in delight.

Just beyond the border, blind to the action happening inside, two Queens of Darkness awaited the enactment of a promise.

And then the arguments began. Regina had made a deal; she insisted on honoring it, despite the Charmings' equally vociferous instance that Ursula and Cruella not be allowed into Storybrooke; when Emma sided with Regina, the ayes had it. "If I deserve a second chance, so do they." Regina echoed the statement Henry had made just an hour ago, in support of his grandfather. Of course, she wasn't thinking of that when she sent the scroll sailing across the border.

As a 1920s gangster car rolled over the orange line and its fur-warmed driver twiddled her fingers at the heroes in greeting and reassurance, Regina gritted her teeth. This hero business, with its obligations of promise-keeping and honesty, was sometimes more than she'd bargained for. She took comfort in the knowledge that compared to her own and Ms. Swan's, the magical powers of these newcomers were strictly amateur.

Inertia, Emma found, applies to human psychology as well as physics: the longer one is inactive, the more natural laziness feels. Her phone ringing on the nightstand failed to arouse her from a dreamless sleep; Hook had to reach over her to pick up the phone, and even after he'd held a brief conversation with the caller he still had to nudge her awake. "Luv, it's Granny" got no result. "Sheriff, report of a D & D" got her to pry an eye open. Hook then pressed the phone against her
ear so she could hear a highly aggravated Granny: "Emma! Ursula and Cruella were in here tonight for about two hours. They got Whale drunk—"

"Lemme guess. He saw two unmanned women and wandered over with a bottle of tequila, thinking he'd be sure to get lucky with at least one of them, if not both," Emma yawned.

"It was scotch, but you're right about everything else."

"Did he drive home drunk?"

"No, I got Sneezy to drive him."

"They cause any damage, break anything?"

"No."

"Get into a fight?"

"No."

"Skip out on the bill?"

"No."

"What're you calling for, then? They're all over eighteen, and there's no law against threesomes."

"It's what they were talking about while they were drinking that you ought to know. They were asking him a lot of questions about people in town, like who they used to be in the Enchanted Forest, who has magic, and they were particularly interested in knowing who had close ties with Gold."

Both eyes flew open. "What did Whale tell them?"

"He told them about Neal, and him being dead. He started to tell them about Belle and the breakup, but that's when a pitcher of ice water slipped out of my hand and over his head. And then I yelled at Sneezy to take him home. I don't think they found out much."

Emma sighed. "Smart thinking. Thanks, Granny." She glanced at the clock on her phone, deliberated a minute, then muttered, "Better to be safe than sleeping." She dialed a number. "Belle? Sorry to wake you, but there's something you need to know. Ursula and Cruella have been asking questions about you, about your relationship with Gold. Nothing to be alarmed about, but to be on the safe side, David and I'll check in on you when we make our daily rounds. And if you see anything suspicious—"

"I'll call." Belle sounded wide awake now. "Those two have used me before to get to Rumple. Of course it's pointless now, but maybe they don't realize that yet. I might get my father to come and stay with me a few days. And Emma... I have Rumple's gun. Maybe you'd teach me how to use it?"

"We'll need to get you licensed first, but yeah." Emma felt a twinge of guilt for not having checked in on Belle more often. Belle had been through a hell of a lot of crap for most of her adult life, according to the bits Emma had pieced together about her over the years. Now if the Trouble Twins were going to give her grief, too, just because she used to be married to Gold, she could use a little support. "You got any idea why they'd be asking about you? I mean, they told Regina and me that they'd run into Gold in New York, so they know he's not here."
Belle's voice grew faint. "They've seen him?"

"Yeah, they said they did." Emma gnawed on her lip. She hadn't meant to tell Belle this piece of news just yet, until she could check it out. There was no reason to trust the witches, except how else would they have found out about Storybrooke, if not from someone who'd been here? "In New York City. I'll be checking into their story tomorrow, let you know what I find out." She neglected to mention the seedy bar that Ursula claimed to have met Gold in, or the miserable drunken state she claimed to have left him in.

"Thank you, Emma. I'll call my father to come over tonight, just in case. And just in case, I have a potion I keep beside my bed. It's supposed to transform an attacker into a toad. Rumple made it for me, right after he got back from—from Zelena. He called the potion 'Bitch Be Gone.'"

Emma chuckled, but sadly, remembering the cage. "Okay, Belle, I'll drop by on my rounds tomorrow. You gonna stay at your apartment or go to your dad's?"

"Here. I don't want to be out on the street tonight."

"Okay. Call—"

"If there's trouble. Thanks, Emma."

Emma hung up but continued to gnaw her lip. "I should've kept a closer eye on her. All the crap that's been done to her over the years—"

Hook reddened, then so did Emma, remembering he'd been the cause of some of that crap. "I'm sorry, I truly am. It was cowardly of me to attack her to get to him."

"You're not that man any more."

"No, I'm not. And I'll do whatever I can to help her, if she's in danger from Ursula and Cruella. I'll be at the library most of the day tomorrow." He smiled sadly too, and Emma was proud of him, because he really did feel regret. "And I don't need a gun. I'm already armed and dangerous—but, I assure you, only to the wicked."

Emma made a small sound of agreement as she slid back under the blankets. "I know. I'm glad you're on our side."

True to her word, the library and its apartment were added to the 7 a.m., 7 p.m. and 1 a.m. rounds. Emma also hired five of the dwarfs (omitting the noisy Sneezy and the narcoleptic Sleepy) as temporary deputies to make rounds of the entire town and report back any suspicious activity. Belle and her father came in to apply for gun licenses and Emma escorted them to the firing range for some practice. Emma didn't know French all that well; other than the rumors that his business continued to struggle, despite his daughter's having invested heavily in it, Moe had kept to himself. Emma hadn't exchanged two words with him, once the court had dismissed the assault charges against Gold. As she instructed them in the use of a Ruger Single-Six and Gold's PPK, Emma observed the relationship between father and daughter. She'd heard it was strained to breaking when Belle started living with Gold, but had improved recently, enough that French had sanctioned Belle and Gold's wedding. The big man did look upon his daughter with genuine concern, despite the stiffness in their conversation. Apparently, Gold's banishment had helped but not healed the breach. Emma figured that would change over the next few days. Nothing like sharing a small apartment to warm up the adult child-parent relationship.

As they finished their lesson, both Frenches seemed more relaxed and confident, and they even
chatted about picking up some steaks on their way home. Emma had hope for them. Maybe some
good would come of this invasion by the Trouble Twins. Belle surely needed some comfort right
now.

Moe and Belle parted ways with Emma after their hour-long lesson, and they were chatting easily
about inconsequential matters—the best topic for an easy chat—as they climbed into the Game of
Thorns van. Moe tread softly, avoiding the subject of Rumplestiltskin, but his quick sideways
glomerances as he drove let Belle know he was curious. When she had first banished Rumple, she had
come to Moe at his house, standing, refusing his offer of tea, staying only long enough to deliver
the news emotionlessly and without attempts to justify her actions. She had come by a week later
for a brief visit, assuring him she was all right, but avoiding any additional personal information,
and since then, she'd gone to church with him pretty regularly and they'd taken Sunday dinner
together. Moe could see for himself she was managing alone, and he didn't interfere with that.
She'd told him she was receiving counseling from Hopper, and she seemed to be keeping herself
together, so Moe assumed the therapy was enough. If she needed him, he'd told her that first day
after the banishment, he'd be there for her. Now she was reaching out, and he was happy to help. If
she wanted to talk about her marriage, he'd listen, and he'd learned his lesson: he'd keep his
opinions to himself.

Belle realized that, and she showed him her appreciation by chatting about the weather, the new
merry-go-round in the park, the flower shop. Not Rumple; she wasn't ready to talk to him about
Rumple. She thought if she did, she would start to cry, and then her loneliness would consume her,
and she would be tempted to confess her fantasy about running off to find him. Sitting still while
Emma searched New York City records for reports of a middle-aged, middle-sized man with a
slight Scottish accent was rather difficult. How difficult could it be, to just jump in the Caddy and
drive around New York? Pawnshops, that's where she'd search; there couldn't be that many in New
York, could there?

So she kept the conversation light as she and Moe cruised the grocery aisles for steak and potatoes
and pie for their supper. They spent some time deliberating over the steaks; she preferred filet,
which she'd acquired a taste for, during her time with Rumple, but Moe liked ribeye. They finally
selected a package of each. They rolled the shopping cart up to the cashier's stand and as Moe
loaded the conveyer belt, Belle reached for her purse—and yelped.

"What is it, petal?" Moe immediately scanned the store for signs of a threat, but Belle drew his
attention to the cart. "My purse. It's gone."

The cashier stopped ringing up groceries and called for security, while Moe retraced their steps in
the hope that the purse had simply fallen from the cart. Belle borrowed the store phone to call the
sheriff's office. Within five minutes the squad car, its siren silent in hope of catching the purse-
snatcher still in the store, arrived and David leapt out. "Did you see anyone nearby you while you
were shopping? Did anyone bump into you, or speak to you, or drop something that attracted your
attention?"

"No. Nobody."

Between him and the security guard, they searched the entire store and its parking lot, to no avail.
"We'll scan through the security film," the store manager promised.

"What did the purse look like, and what was in it?" David opened his pocket notebook and clicked
his pen.

"It was a Kate Spade tote, white and black floral design. It's recognizable; no one else in town
owns one. I had my phone, my gun, some makeup, and my wallet: an ATM card, about sixty dollars."

"Your keys?"

"No, those are in my pocket."

"Anything else?"

Belle thought it over. "Well, my comb, some Certs, a hanky, a couple of pens, a little notebook with my shopping list written in it. That's about it."

"No jewelry?" he glanced meaningfully at her left hand.

"No jewelry. I keep that in a safe at home."

"We'll check the Dumpsters in the area. A lot of times, a purse snatcher will take the money and the phone and throw everything else out. If your gun was licensed, we should be able to trace it if it gets used in any additional crimes. You should notify the bank and the phone company."

"Will do." Belle sighed. "Has there been a rash of purse-snatching, pocket-picking or the like?"

"No. The only recent trouble we've had has been graffiti and traffic tickets." David touched her elbow sympathetically. "You gonna be okay?"

She nodded. "My dad's with me. His gun is in the glove compartment. Who do you think it was?"

"I hate to say it, but maybe someone down on their luck and knows Gold was the richest man in town, or someone who can't make the rent or has a bone to pick with Gold." He pocketed his notebook and pen. "I'll search the neighborhood. If anything else happens—"

"I'll call." Belle frowned as turned to Moe. "Sorry, Dad, guess we'll have settle for what's in the cupboard tonight."

"I can start a tab for you, ma'am," the store manager said.

She shook her head. "No, Rumple never bought anything on tick, and neither will I. Especially not for something I really don't need. Thanks anyway."

The manager touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Gold."

Moe started to correct the woman, but Belle shot him a warning look. "Let's go home, Dad. I have spaghetti in the cupboard. We'll have steaks on Sunday."

Moe wrapped an arm around her shoulders and walked her to the van.

A knock at the door interrupted their cooking. Not that Belle minded; Moe's idea of cooking was to chop everything up and dump it into a skillet. Besides, cooking with a partner made her think of Rumple, and that made her wonder if he was eating well, getting enough sleep. . . . Moe insisted on going to the door himself, lest the visitor turn out to be someone nasty. "It's Deputy Nolan," Moe reported back. "And he's carrying a purse."

"Your purse," David corrected, entering. He set the tote bag onto the kitchen counter. "There doesn't seem to be anything missing."

Wiping her hands on a towel, Belle walked around to the counter and inspected the contents.
"Phone, wallet, money, make up, gun, ATM card, comb, hanky, notebook, pens, oops, parking ticket I forgot about. I'll take care of that this afternoon. Sorry. Looks like every—except the photos. I had several photos in my wallet; now they're gone. Why would someone leave the money but take my photos?"

"Someone who wanted information, not cash," David said. "What were the pictures of?"

"Just family," Belle shrugged. "Wedding pictures, mostly."

"Hmm. Well, give me a call if anything comes up."
The five-hour drive was tedious, between Cruella's singing and the women catching up on their magicless lives. Cruella's constant "darling" this and "darling" that especially got on his nerves, and when they insisted on pulling into a fast-food joint in some inkblot of a town, he practically gagged on the stench of greasy fried chicken, but he ordered a salad, then tuned them out and plotted the details of his plan. The women would persuade Regina and Emma to permit them entry to the town, with a little help from the nasty creature Regina had accidentally let loose when she freed the fairies from the Hat. Once in, they would gather information and trust, then sneak back in the evening for him, to bring him across the line. He would hide in his cabin, and once they had located the Author, they'd secure their happy endings.

The women were pissed when they arrived at the town border, demarcated by an Armani tie tied to a tree branch. He'd withheld some pertinent information about Storybrooke, but wisely so: the unpleasant details of his plan should be revealed only when necessary, so as not to scare his teammates off. "In for a penny, in for a pound" was a cliche for a good reason: having come this far, the team was unlikely to back out. That didn't mean, however, that they wouldn't express their annoyance—perhaps even renege on the deal. Cruella drew her handgun on him; Ursula kicked his cane out from under him, toppling him. He got to his knees—and decided, with a gun in his face, to remain there. It, uh, may not have helped that they remembered that on an earlier meeting, he'd left them at the mercy of a Chernabog.

All right, they saw his physical and moral weaknesses; now he had to rely on his mental faculties. He gave them enough truth to win them over. Yes, he admitted, he'd been banished. Yes, getting into Storybrooke would be a challenge, but he had a solid plan that relied not only on the town leaders' belief in innate goodness and the lasting strength of reformation, but also in their fear. The restoration of their magic lay mere yards away. They agreed to at least attempt those yards.

Whether they would come back for him... He brought up Regina's number on his cell phone and let Ursula, the more even-tempered of the two, do the talking.

Spurred by Ursula's promise of a solution to the current problem of a Chernabog attack, and, he suspected, a little guilt over having been granted a second chance by the heroes, when others hadn't, Regina let Ursula and Cruella in.

The Snow Queen's scroll in hand, Ursula slid back into the Zimmer, her former house guest apparently forgotten, now that she had magic within her reach. Cruella, however, paused with her red high heel perched on the running board, to blow a jaunty kiss over her shoulder at the man hiding in the bushes.

"I'll expect you back here at sundown." He gritted his teeth.

"You may expect us when and if we choose to come back for you." Cruella adjusted her furs across her shoulders. "If it's convenient for us, or if we get bored in this one-horse town and
need a playmate." She eased down behind the steering wheel. "Enjoy your afternoon, darling." She tossed something at his feet. "In case you get hungry."

After the Zimmer roared across the town line and vanished into magic, he picked up the bag she'd tossed at him. It contained a half-eaten drumstick.

He sniffed it delicately, then settled down with his back to a tree and deprived the drumstick of the remainder of its meat. If there was one thing he'd learned in Portland, it was to never pass up a chance to eat.

"You could have at least left me a napkin," he grumbled.

He waited. His stomach growling, his ankle aching, he stood on the town line and waited. Night fell. Crickets chirped. The moon rose. Trees rustled. A distant dog (or was it a wolf? Red?) howled. Cruella's classic roadster did not come for him.

He lowered himself gingerly at the roots of a tree and waited some more, wrapping his now-unrecognizable D & G suit jacket about him and clutching his Walgreens cane. His head drooped and eventually his chin dropped to his chest. His eyelids slid shut. The wind teased his hair like a lover's fingers and he was certain he heard an Australian-accented whisper in his ear: "Rummmmple. Rummmmple. You've never changed, have you, darling?"

He heard a crow caw (Regina?) and his eyes snapped open before he realized he'd fallen asleep. Alerted now, he drew in a cleansing breath and wiped the crust from the corners of his eyes. It wasn't that he was afraid—he'd lived much of his life in the woods, and he'd learned early on how to distinguish animals' "all's well" night calls from "intruder alerts." It wasn't anything in these woods that disturbed him, but rather, what wasn't in these woods: the white Zimmer bearing his two would-have-been partners in crime. Worry and hunger, one indistinguishable from the other, clawed at his gut. To shake off his nerves, he stood up, stretched, walked back to the road. Without street lights and with only a waning moon, he had to depend upon the tapping of his cane to inform him when he'd left natural ground and crossed into asphalt. He stopped then, setting the cane in front of him and letting it support a share of his weight. A passerby, had there been one, would have assumed this shabby gent had wandered out from a nearby house for a breath of fresh air, nothing more. He waited.

After some time he removed his phone from his pocket and checked the time: 10:28. He stared in the direction in which he knew Storybrooke lay, though the road for as far west as he could see appeared no more occupied that the road stretching east.

He wondered what would happen if he started walking west. Would he be able to pass over the town line or would an invisible wall prevent him? Would magic send him somewhere else? Or—and this was the theory he favored—would he pass over the line, walk right through town and out the other end without seeing or hearing any sign of Storybrooke? As a sort of scientist of magic (though he'd never use that word in front of Whale), he had theorized that the souped-up protection spells placed around objects to make them invisible and untouchable worked by sending those objects into another dimension. He'd come by that theory after idly flipping through the pages of the stacks of comic books Henry had brought to the shop to sell. "I don't read 'em any more," Henry had said, struggling to control his maturing vocal chords. "And I could use some extra money, now that I've got two Mother's
Day gifts to buy."

But if an alternate dimension wasn't the case—if instead the protection spell placed intruders in a sensory-blocked bubble, giving them the illusion of an empty highway—maybe a former mage who crossed the town line would receive a return of his magic.

Rumple decided to test the theory. It wasn't like he had anything else to do tonight. Even if he gave up on Sea Bitch and Dog Breath (which he wasn't ready to do; maybe Regina had them under scrutiny or Emma had detained them for questioning or, more likely, they'd found the Rabbit Hole and were drinking Storybrooke dry), the night was too dark for him to safely walk to Irma's truckstop café. Besides, Irma might be on shift tonight.

So he stepped forward. When he was in arm's length of the necktie he'd attached to a branch, he stretched his cane straight out. Nothing happened. He brought the cane back to the asphalt and inched his damaged foot forward... forward... forward... . .He probably looked ridiculous, his leg stretched out to its fullest like that. He felt none of the signs of returning magic, no tingling, no rising body heat. He poked his arm through.

His pants leg vibrated.

He froze, then withdrew, and the vibration stopped. Testing his leg and his arm, he found no damage, so he stepped across the line again. Again, his pants vibrated. Or more accurately, his pants pocket. He figured it out then: someone was calling him.

He drew his leg back to the east side of the line. The vibration stopped, and when he took his phone from his pocket and checked for messages, there were none. His heart beat a little faster as he surmised that the phone call had come from the west side of the line. Catching his breath, he crossed completely over the line and stopped, waiting for magic to strike him, or strike him down, or transport him somewhere, but all that happened was that his phone rang again, with its standard tune, not—his heart sank a little—"Every Little Thing She Does is Magic" (Belle's) or "Rock Steady" (Dove's) or "I've Got a Thing about Seeing My Grandson Grow Old" (Henry's) or "The Bitch is Back" (Regina's). There was no one else he had a ring tone for; there were very few people who ever called him.

He glanced at the number. He didn't recognize it. Cruella? He'd memorized Ursula's number. He'd guessed at a lot of things that might happen when he crossed the line, but—a phone call? An ordinary phone call, probably from some tenant begging for an extension on the rent, or a telemarketer. He set the phone against his ear. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end was breathless with anxiety. "Mr. Gold? Archie Hopper here. Please—we need your help. They've kidnapped Henry."

Every muscle in his body tightened. He already knew who "they" were. "Where are they?"

"Standing in the middle of Main Street, across from the library. Half the town is out here, standing on the sidewalk in front of the hardware store. Emma and Regina are talking to them; Regina's got fireballs ready to throw, but she doesn't dare because she might hit Henry."

"What do they want?"
"Your dagger. They want Belle to bring them your dagger. They say as soon as they've got you under their thumb, they're going to send you house to house, ringing doorbells and ripping heads off until the Author reveals himself."

Rumple froze. He could visualize the scene: the hardware store was directly across the street from the library at Second and Main. If Ursula and Cruella had come to see Belle, that meant Belle had probably moved back in to her old apartment. The witches, then, would be facing the library, their backs to Archie. He had to be sure. "Can they see you? Hear you?"

"No, I'm behind them. I'm sure they don't know I'm here. You have an idea?"

"First, you got to get a message to Belle. She must not give those women my dagger."

"Why not? It's useless, isn't it? You're outside Storybrooke; the magic can't reach you."

Rumple attempted to summon his magic, but nothing came. Hopper was right: he was still outside Storybrooke. "They have Henry; that's enough. They'll use him to force me to come back, and if they do—"

"It's Zelena all over again," Archie said glumly.

"Or worse. Zelena was only after me and Regina. These women—who knows what they want, but to them, setting an entire town on fire and eviscerating the citizenry is just another Saturday night's entertainment."

"Yeah. They already overturned Clark's Maserati with a flick of Ursula's, uh, tails."

"Imagine what they could do if they control the Dark One."

"I'd rather not. Right, I'll text Belle and warn her about the dagger. But what about Henry?"

"In your text, ask Belle what she did with the Hat. The Sorcerer's Hat. She probably put it in the shop somewhere." Or worse, destroyed it in anger. But that Hat was their best hope now.

"Okay. I'm putting you on hold while I text her."

The modern world, in which one carried out warfare by electronics instead of fireballs. Rumple ignored the pain in his ankle and pressed the phone tighter to his ear, as if that would make Hopper hurry. A few minutes passed with crickets and his own breathing the only sounds. Then at last Hopper was back. "Mr. Gold? She said okay, she won't let them have the dagger. She said the Hat is in a locked cabinet in the backroom of your shop."

"Go." Rumple didn't have to explain where or why. "But keep me on the line."

He could hear panting and rapid footfalls. Fortunately, Hopper only had to go to the end of the block; the pawnshop was at the corner of Main and Third. He heard a rattling, then a frustrated grunt. "Gold! The door's locked."

Of course it was. "Go to the back door."

More footfalls, more rattling. "It's locked too."
"Yes. Hopper, don't freak out on me, all right? You're going to backslide into your former life."

"You want me to break the window."

"No, that'll set the alarm off and the witches will hear you. You're going to cast your first spell."

"Ooooh." Hopper sucked in a breath. "All right. I'm ready."

"Repeat these words, slowly and clearly: ianua aperit, Rumplestiltskin iusserit."

Archie echoed him, word for word. "It opened! I'm inside!"

"The light switch is on your left. Now turn left; there's a highboy in the corner."

"I see it. Do you have a spell to open its locks?"

"Of course. Scrinium aperit, Rumplestiltskin iusserit."

"It's open."

"The Hat looks like a round wooden box with studs around it."

"Got it."

"Now look on the bottom shelf of the highboy. Do you see a rack of wands?"

"Yes. There are six wands."

"Take the black one. It's the strongest. Since you don't have the dagger, you'll need a wand to cast the spell. Go out to the street. You're going to come up behind the witches, as quietly as you can, then set the box down behind them. On my say, you're going to open that box with a command, but first, you're going to shout at Emma and Regina to run behind the library. Tell them Rumple said so."

"No! Mr. Gold, I've heard what that Hat does. Henry—"

"Will be fine. It has no effect on non-magic users. When you shout your warning, the witches will be distracted. That's when you can grab Henry and get him out of their way."

"How do I activate the Hat?"

"This is the most important part. You must pronounce the words clearly and in the exact order I give you. Any deviation from the wording could result in total failure, or in releasing the contents of the Hat."

"The contents? But Regina did that—"

"No, not all of it. Now go, set the Hat down as close to the witches as you can get, wave the wand in a circle counterclockwise over the box."

"Are you sure?"
"Do it."

Archie was more a behind-the-scenes kind of guy, even in his youth, when his primary occupation had been fencing objects his parents had stolen. What Rumple was now asking him to do was hero work, but the candidates for that were all too well known to the villains; their movements would be noticed and responded to with quick and violent action. Though Ursula's and Cruella's magical talents were limited, they were dangerous nonetheless, not above hurting children. There was no time for pep talks; Archie would have to find the courage in himself without any encouragement. Sneakiness was the primary skill required here; fortunately, Archie had picked enough pockets in his youth to remember how to sneak up behind people.

Rumple listened intently to a rapid heartbeat: apparently Hopper had slipped his phone into his shirt pocket. There was no other sound, then suddenly there was a shout, muffled to Rumple by fabric: "Emma! Regina! Run! Get behind the library! Run! DO IT!"

A moment later Archie came back onto the phone. "The spell!"

Agonizingly slowly, Rumple pronounced and Archie repeated each word of the fifty-word spell. There was another long pause, then a breathy laugh. "I did it! They're trapped in the Hat and Henry—"

In the background a boy shouted and behind him adult voices cheered. Rumple tried to shout too, to be heard: "Archie! What's happening?"

"—okay! Everyone, everything's okay! Mr. Gold, where are you?"

He deliberated for a moment. If they found out where he was, they'd figure out his connection to Cruella and Ursula and they'd turn against him. But if they knew he stood just outside Storybrooke, perhaps on grateful impulse one of them—Belle or Archie or Emma—would let him in.

"Mr. Gold?"

"I'm at the town line, eastern side."

"Okay. I'll call you back later!"

The phone clicked off. Rumple resumed walking. It was pointless; he could walk until he came up to the Pacific Ocean and never reach Storybrooke, but he needed to release nervous energy. He walked west, then he told himself that was a waste of time and he turned around to walk back toward the town line. He carried his phone in his palm and waited.

By his calculations, nearly an hour passed before his phone rang again, its tone being the Cat Stevens song "I've Got a Thing about Seeing My Grandson Grow Old."

Rumple practically hit himself in the face in his urgency to answer. "Henry?"

"Yeah! Grandpa? I'm okay! Thank you! Archie told us what you did. How? I mean, I've tried to call you, like, fifteen times and never got through. How come this time, just when we needed you most, Archie was able to call you?"
"Fate, maybe? Listen, lad, are you injured in any way? Because if you are, your Mom Emma has healing talents. If you'll put her on the phone—"

"No, I'm fine. Tore the knee of my pants, but that's all. Grandpa, we've been talking—me and Archie, we're trying to talk the rest of 'em into allowing you to come back. Do you want to, Grandpa? Would you want to come back to Storybrooke?"

Rumple licked his lips, his heart leaping. "I would. I'd like that a lot, Henry."


"Henry? Wait! Henry!"
If the Door is Open, It Isn't Theft

AUGUST 2014

A car horn—the old-fashioned "ooo-gah" toned horn—blared from Second Street just below Belle's bedroom window. It wasn't a polite, get-out-of-the-street-you-stray-dog toot; it was a lay-on-the-horn blare, and just under it was a female voice shouting, "Belle! Belle Gold! Get down here, now!" A huskier, richly accented voice underlined the urgency: "Unless you want your grandson to become puppy chow!" To emphasize the point, a pair of canines barked in harmony.

Belle shot out of bed, reaching with one hand for her robe at the foot of the bed and with the other, Gold's PPK from under the pillow. She stuffed her feet into her slippers and shouted for Moe before dashing to the window and shoving the curtains apart. She stood to the side, out of range, but peered down. Headlights from a classic car clashed with streetlights to brighten the dark street like a Broadway stage. At the edges of the darkness, people, some in pajamas, were emerging from their homes. In the spotlight stood three figures, easily identifiable in the light: Cruella, flanked by barking dobermans; Ursula, with her tentacles ensnaring and choking a prisoner; and that prisoner, Henry, in a white t-shirt and sweatpants.

"Belle Gold! Front and center, if you please!" the accented voice barked.

"Dad!" Belle shouted over her shoulder. She raised the window. "What are you doing? Let Henry go!" Two possibilities entered her mind: they either wanted her to remove the protection spell so they could enter and pilfer Gold's shop, or they wanted what so many others before them had attempted to steal: the dagger.

Moe ran in to the bedroom, stubbing his toe on the way and cursing. "What the hell?"

"Ursula and Cruella. They have Henry."

"Mrs. Gold! You will bring us your husband's dagger immediately. You will lay it down on the hood of my car, gently, and then you'll back away. Do this and your grandson—or whatever the hell he is to you—lives."

"Don't do it," Ursula added, "and he dies."

On Belle's nightstand, her phone began to buzz. She threw it a dirty look and returned her attention to the street.

Moe hadn't really gotten to know Henry all that well. They'd spent a little time together on the night of the wedding, but hadn't chatted much before or since. Belle had planned to bring them together, probably at a picnic or around the TV on some big sports night; she knew Henry to be as big a baseball fan as Moe. She had hoped they would bond, but the quick breakdown of her marriage had derailed those plans. But even though he hadn't grown close to Henry, and even though he was never much of a fighter, she thought Moe would surely want to take action. Instead, he turned on his heel and headed back to the living room. "Where are you going?" she cried out after him, and then she felt ashamed for the thoughts of shame she was feeling. Her father was no warrior, but he wouldn't leave a child in danger. In a moment he was back at the window, positioning himself on the other side. He motioned, indicating she should raise her gun. It was then she noticed that he'd fetched his Ruger. "You have a clear shot at Cruella. Take her down. That'll distract Ursula long enough to—"
Another voice from the street interrupted Moe. "Ursula! My dad and I both have guns aimed at your back. Release Henry or I swear, we'll drop you where you stand."

"Emma," Belle identified the voice. She caught a flash of light reflecting off of blonde hair; the sheriff was standing in front of the hardware store, directly across Main Street from the library. Belle couldn't see David and for a moment, wondered if Emma was bluffing, until she heard him add his warning: "Drop your gun, Cruella."

Belle's phone continued to buzz.

"You seem to fail to notice one significant fact, darlings," Cruella chuckled. "My friend here has your boy squeezed like a tube of cheap toothpaste. If you should startle her—if you should so much as make her sneeze—that grip she has around his throat will pop his head right off."

"And then we feed him to my friend's ravenous dogs," Ursula added. "So back off, Jack!"

"Belle, you need to see this." Moe nudged his daughter and held her cell phone up for her to see. "DO NOT GIVE THEM THE DAGGER! DO NOT GIVE THEM THE DAGGER!" the text read. A second message came on the heels of the first: "Rumple is helping us. He has a plan. WHERE IS THE SOCRER'S HAT? ANSR PLEASE! ARCHIE."

"Rumple!" Belle exclaimed.

Moe cocked his head at her. "What did you say?"

"It seems we've reached an impasse." Cruella didn't sound the least bit worried, however. "Or have we? Ursula, dear, how many tentacles do you have?"

"Four, Cru." The sea witch wiggled her two free appendages. "It only takes two to hold a ninety-pound boy."

"A hundred and ten pounds." Henry squirmed and bit down into the tentacle wrapped about his neck, but Ursula merely laughed.

Belle set her gun on the window sill and typed frantically into her phone.

"Tough as an old tire, isn't she, lad?" Cruella shrugged. "Bite and scratch to your heart's content; Urie won't feel a thing through that thick hide."

"So this is the thanks I get for permitting you into my town." She may have been clad in silk pajamas and Gucci bedroom slippers, but Regina stood straight and fierce as she walked into the lamplight. Her lip curled as she balanced a fireball in her palm.

"Not another step, Regina," Ursula warned, and Henry sputtered as the tentacle around his neck tightened. Regina stopped, juggling the fireball, locking eyes with Ursula. The dogs barked and strained, but held in place as Cruella drawled, "Staaaay, my loves, not yet. Soon, but not yet."

"Okay, let's take stock, shall we?" Regina invited. "You have a highly skilled firefighter standing in front of you. You have two Glocks at your backs."

"A Sig-Sauer P226," Emma corrected, "but yeah. Aimed at the broad of your back, Ursula."

"I've got the Glock," David said. "And you, Cruella."

Moe shouted out from the window, "And we've got you from the front."
"But I've got your son."

Cruella knelt, speaking to her dogs and pointing. When she stood again, she folded her arms as though bored. "And my darlings have Granny in their sights. Do you know how fast a hungry Doberman can run? Would you like to find out?" She snapped her fingers and the growling dogs lowered their heads and inched forward.

"Not as fast we can take them out." But Emma's voice shook as she shifted toward the villains' front, sticking in the shadows.

"Emma. . . " David sounded doubtful.

"Your magic, Ms. Swan. Must I always remind you?" Regina clicked her tongue. "Torpedo the dogs and I'll immobilize Ursula." She raised her glowing hands.

"Mom!" Henry gurgled as the tentacle tightened.

"Ooh, look, he's turning blue, Regina. Pacific blue, I'd say. What you'd find in the depths off Oahu in the winter." Ursula still had her eyes fixed on Regina's. "Isn't that a lovely shade, Cruella?"

"Lovely. How many minutes will he last like that, dear Ursula?"

"Oh, he's rather small, so it's hard to say—"

"EMMA! REGINA! RUN!" A shrill shriek split the conversation.

"What—" Regina looked for the voice, dropping her hands.

"Run! Get behind the library!"

"Archie?"

"RUN! DO IT!" White as a ghost, the psychiatrist edged into the lamplight. He shook all over and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, but he kept inching forward, with something small clutched to his chest.

Emma was too far away from him to see what he held, but Regina wasn't, and her eyes bugged. "Emma! Run! NOW!" She set off for the library, as directed, and the crowd that had formed along the opposite side of the street gasped and backed off; if whatever Archie held scared Regina, they wanted no part of it. Even David lowered his gun and grabbing Granny by the elbow, urging her to lower her crossbow, he propelled them behind the hardware store.

"What's he got there?" Ursula demanded, then she cocked her head. "What the hell—aren't you that bug that used to flit around the Dark Castle?"

"Henry, can you hear me?" Archie sounded like he'd drop in a faint any minute now, and in fact he did drop to one knee, but he brought that protected object away from his chest and set it on the ground.

"I can hear you, Archie," the boy gasped for breath.

"Just as soon as you feel her loosen her grip, I want you to run, okay? Run behind the library. Your moms will take care of you. Okay?"

"Will do, Archie."
"What do you think you're doing?" Ursula seemed puzzled as she watched Hopper push a small round box forward on the concrete. Beside her, Cruella snapped her fingers at her dogs and centered their concentration on Archie. "Oh, look, Cruella, he has a gift for us. A jewelry box, from the look of it. Are you asking to make a trade, bug?"

Archie reached into his jacket and when he withdrew his hand again, it was filled with something long and narrow. Archie drew circles in the air above the box, and he murmured foreign words.

"I don't like this," Cruella snarled. "I don't like it at all. Darlings, sic!"

The Dobermans lunged forward and Archie, with a gasp, fell backwards onto his butt, but he continued his murmuring and wand-waving, and now Cruella snapped her fingers and the Dobermans flew at Archie. He threw his wand-wielding arm across his face, and the headlights of the Zimmer reflected off it, and Ursula yelped, "It's a fairy wand! Grab it!"

As the dogs leapt at Archie, he slashed blindly with the wand. Seeing their opportunity, Ursula released Henry and threw out her tentacles toward Archie as Cruella ran forward, teetering on her heels. From above a gunshot rang out, pinged against steel, and one of the headlights went dark. And then a streak of red lightning and a streak of white lightning bolted through the night, the former engulfing the dogs; as they yipped, they were converted into calico kittens which turned tail and ran under Moe's van, parked along Second Street. The white bolt engulfed Henry, raised him ten feet off the ground, lured him forward, then brought him gently to the sidewalk beside the library, where Emma encircled him in her arms.

And Archie, splayed on the concrete, kept waving the wand and muttering, until the box sprung open, sparks of light flying from it like fireworks, and a long, conical hat emerged, floating suspended in air, tiny stars dancing along its outer edges. Archie seized the Hat, held it like a rifle, and gasping over and over, "Please work please work please work," he pointed the open end at the villains.

There was a flash of light, two shrieks, then a miniature cyclone, which seemed to Emma very similar to the opening of a portal (which she had become quite an expert about), dragged Ursula and Cruella forward, arms and tentacles waving helplessly, heels sparking against the concrete.

"Regina! You can't let this happen—you owe us!" Ursula shouted, but Regina turned her back very deliberately and sought Henry. Cruella produced something from her coat and waved it in the air. "Regina! I have the scroll! A deal—the scroll for——" she shrieked as her feet disappeared into the void. Regina spun around, threw a lasso of magic around Cruella and hauled on it like a one-woman tug-of-war. "Emma, help me! She has the—"

Suddenly the Queens of Darkness were gone and the Hat submerged itself into the box again.

Regina's magic lasso shriveled. She stared in dismay at the closed Hat box.

Archie blinked as he clutched the Hat box. No one noticed him, so he was free to admit it was tears he was blinking away.

The spectators cheered. With a deep, mutual sigh, David and Leroy shooed them off the sidewalk. "All over, folks. Go home now. You can see it all on Youtube tomorrow," the dwarf growled.

David reached for his phone. "I'll let Snow know he's okay. Leroy, call Marine's, have them tow Cruella's car away. Street's got to be clear so people can go to work in the morning." He sounded suddenly exhausted.
Arm wrapped around Henry's shoulders, Emma led him out into the streetlight so she could inspect his injuries. "Brui...
The trio walked down the street toward Granny's, with the Frenches following. Nobody noticed where Archie went. "I might have kinda snuck out after I was supposed to be in bed," Henry admitted. "I heard Pongo whining in the backyard and I thought he was hurt."

"Well, fortunately, Cruella's power was unique. The next time you hear Pongo whine, you can be sure it's Pongo," Regina assured him.

Henry was deep into his third dish of ice cream—butter brickle, Belle observed: his grandfather's favorite. She jabbed a straw into her Cherry Coke as she watched him, sharing a booth with his two moms, and Hook and David. She saw other marks of his lineage in him: large brown eyes that cut right through any wards a person tried to erect; a balance of world-wisdom and innocent vulnerability in those eyes, like his grandfather.

A tap on her shoulder made her spin around. Archie stood there, sweating, his hair wild. He seemed to realize what a disturbing picture he made, because he reached across her for a glass of water, gulped it down, then straightened his sweater vest and smoothed down his hair. "Sorry, Belle, could I see you outside, please? There's something I need to tell you, and the others."

"What did you mean, 'Rumple is helping us'?"

"I'll tell you outside."

"All right." She slid down from the counter stool and, abandoning her Coke, eased through the crowd into the warm night. She walked away from the diner toward a table near the gate, and seated herself there. From the position of the moon, she determined the time to be close to midnight.

"What's up, Archie?" Emma was asking as she and her family trailed out onto the lawn and sat down with Belle. Even Snow had come out for this impromptu party, leaving Baby Neal in the care of Astrid.

The psychiatrist cleared his throat and looked around, ascertaining that no one else was in earshot: just the Charming clan, Henry, Hook, Regina and Belle. Archie gave Henry a long look, then glanced at Regina, then Emma, then Henry again. The psychiatrist seemed to be deliberating, but then he made up his mind. "There's a decision that needs to be made tonight, an important one, and as the town leaders, you'll need to make it. But before you do, I need to tell you a story about a phone call I made tonight."
Rumple stood staring down at his cell phone, willing it to ring again. He scrolled through his directory, searching for Henry's number, when the phone vibrated again and in surprise he nearly dropped it. He let go of his cane to catch the phone, and that movement caused him to lose his balance and stumble, and he nearly dropped the phone a second time before he got everything under control and limped over to a steady himself against a tree. "Henry?" he panted into the mouthpiece, though a second later, his brain registered the fact that the ring tone wasn't the grandson song.

"Mr. Gold? It's me, Archie."

Rumple could hear a faint drawing in of breath, a summoning of courage, before the caller explained, "Mr. Gold, I'm here with several people: Henry, Emma, Regina, Mary Margaret and David, Killian Jones—" there was a slight pause—"and Belle."

"May I—" he started to ask if he could speak to his wife.

But Archie continued, "We're here at the town line. I know you can't see us, but we can see you."

"This is ridiculous," Regina's sharp voice could be heard in the background. "Get to the point, Hopper. It's past midnight and Henry's got to get to bed."

"Mr. Gold? I asked everyone to come out here, instead of deliberating in Granny's—"

"Over beer and curly fries, like civilized people," Hook could be heard quipping.

"—because it seemed more fair to you, that we at least see you before we tell you our decision. I know it's traditional for the accused to be able to face his accusers, but the magic makes that impossible, so this will have to do."

"Grandpa, can you hear me?"

Rumple practically shouted into the phone. "Yes! Yes, Henry, I hear you. What's going on?"

"I told 'em you should be allowed back in. You know, back into Storybrooke. We didn't get the scroll back, but we're going to find a curse breaker! I know we will. Grandpa, did you know Cruella's coat is made from real dog skins? Gross!"

"Mr. Gold, before we go any further, you need to know we no longer have the Snow Queen's scroll. That was lost when Cruella went into the Hat. But some of our people have been working on a counter-spell to break down this barrier, and they're making progress."

"Regina? Archie, let me talk to her."

"I can hear you, Gold," Regina said dryly.
"Mr. Gold, I have you on speaker phone. Is that okay with you? I think some of the people here may have questions for you, and I think you ought to hear from their own mouths how they voted on Henry's proposition."

"It's all right, Dr. Hopper." He adjusted his tie and stood straighter against the tree. Though it was pointless, he searched the horizon, hoping uselessly that he might catch a glimpse of her. It would have to be enough that she could see him. He wished he hadn't spent the biggest part of the day out on this highway, without a comb or a razor. "Belle, can you see me?"

Her voice, cautious, came through after a long hesitation. "I can see you."

Rumple—she didn't say Rumple. That was a bad sign.

"Belle, I want you to know I love you and I miss you, and I'm sorry. Please let me come home." She didn't answer. "Belle? Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you."

"Belle, I can help. Let me help. I can work with you to break down this barrier. Even on this side, even without my books and my magic, I have a headful of information, a lifetime of experiments, you know that. Regina, you know that. Regina!"

"Yes?" the queen responded.

"Remember that time you accidently cast a blinding spell on me? Your second year of studying magic. Spell lasted three days. I couldn't see a thing. Remember? But we continued to work in the lab. You were my eyes and my hands then. Didn't I guide you then? Wasn't I still able to instruct you?"

"I remember."

"We can do that again. Belle, all the times we worked together—you with the books, me in the lab. We can do this again. We can break the barrier together, all of us, you and Regina and Henry and Emma and me. Can't we at least try?"

"I have one question for you, Rumple," Belle said, and she watched his eyes widen and his lips part, ready to smile.

"Anything, sweetheart."

"Tell me the truth, the entire truth."

"Of course."

"When you decided to try to return to Storybrooke, if you had gotten in, what would you have done?"

His face froze, but his shoulders crumpled. "I would have searched for the Author."

"The truth, Rumple. You promised."

"I would have forced him to write a happy ending for you and me and Henry."
There was silence on both sides of the phone. He hung his head, realizing his answer, though an honest one, was the wrong one.

"It's... been decided." That was all Belle said. He thought her voice trembled—tears? Worry? Anger? Only three words; not enough to tell what she was feeling. A passive voice sentence—not "I decided" or "we." He'd play those three words over and over in his mind in the days to come.

Belle couldn't look at him as she made her pronouncement. She turned to the side, staring at her empty hands; Snow's arm wrapped around her shoulders in encouragement. She'd made her decision less than an hour ago, her anger at his endangerment of the town—and especially his own wife and grandson,—her indignation at his arrogant assumption that he could trick and manipulate and lie and shove his way back in here all came to a peak, and equally peaked, her certainty. Now, an hour later, now that she could see him—see his shabby clothes, his stick-thin body, his face expressing his heartbreak at the same time his eyes expressed hope—doubt crept in, right up until he answered her question. She couldn't allow him to manipulate her again with his desperate, hopeful eyes. Henry could have died for Rumplestiltskin's selfishness. He hadn't changed: he wouldn't have asked or begged for a chance to start over, to prove himself an honest, caring man; he would have forced the Author to write a happy ending—a guaranteed, unearned happy ending. Won by bullying. She had to do the hard thing and fight her own heart.

He raised his chin, resisted the urge to lick his lips. They were watching, judging. "Dr. Hopper? You said Henry had a proposition. Tell me about this proposition."

"Contingent upon us breaking the barrier, of course. An unconditional admission back into Storybrooke. That was his proposal. Henry argued that you'd earned it tonight."

Mary Margaret added, "We do appreciate the fact that Henry might not be alive—"

"None of us would be," Henry butted in. "If Belle had given them the dagger, they were gonna use it to make you tear the town apart until the Author came out and did what they told him to."

"But how did they get here in the first place?" Emma snapped. "It was you who told them about Storybrooke, wasn't it? They said as much. Said they found you drunk off your ass in some dive in New York—"

"Which clearly was a lie, because lo and behold, there you are, just a half-dozen yards from us," Hook pointed out. "I see no car, so obviously you came with them. Or are you going to try to tell us you walked here from New York?"

"No." Now Rumple licked his lips. "I—yes. I came with them. They left me here."

"Why?" Snow puzzled. "Did you find out what they intended to do, and then parted ways with them?"

"Don't tell us you tried to talk them out of wreaking havoc and they threw you out of the car," Regina said. "Because I know you better than that, dearie. You've never talked a villain out of malicious behavior in your entire life. You take too much pleasure in watching it
He tried to think rapidly of a believable lie or, at least, a less damaging way of telling the truth, but his mind was a blank. All he could think of was that Belle was there, a few yards away, watching. Crying? Cursing?

He lowered his head in defeat. "It was part of the plan. I knew you'd never let Ursula and Cruella enter if I were with them. They were supposed to come back for me tonight."

"Why didn't you hide in the trunk of the car?" David made it sound like the most logical decision in the world.

He held out his cane for them to see. "Climbing in and out of trunks is quite difficult for me these days."

"Grandpa, are you lame again? Why?" (Why, Rumple wondered, was Henry the only one to express dismay at that news?)

"A daily dose of magic kept my ankle in good working order. I no longer have that, out here."

"I'm sorry, Rumple." His heart leaped: this was Belle speaking. What was she sorry about: his lameness or his being on the outside? She repeated with a sense of finality, "I'm sorry."

Archie summarized, "So Henry made his proposal. There was a lot of discussion—that's why it took so long for us to come out here. A counter-proposal was made."

"Who? Who made the counter-proposal?" Did she speak up for him? Did she try to make a deal for him?

"It doesn't matter. The original proposal wasn't getting enough support, so one of us suggested amending it: you would be allowed back in if you agreed to wear the magic-dampening cuffs."

Pan's cuffs. Rumple bit the inside of his cheek to keep his anger corralled. Pan would have loved that: a victory from the grave against the man who had killed him—who had stopped him from destroying Storybrooke. Twice now he'd protected this town: did they remember? Didn't that count for something?

"How long?" he barked.

"It doesn't matter any—"

"How long?" Would he have agreed to those conditions? He will never have the chance to find out.

"Forever," Snow answered. "Or as long as you'd remain in Storybrooke."

"But it's a moot point." Hopper sounded so disappointed—defeated. Had it been his counter-proposal, an attempt, so characteristic of him, to mediate between factions? How had the argument gone down? Rumple could easily imagine Henry and Belle on one side, Hook and
Regina on the other, but where would the Charmings have stood? "That proposal was rejected. It was decided to discontinue attempts to bring down the barrier, for the safety of the community."

"It's like you said once, if we let word get out there's magic here, we'll have tour buses running up and down Main Street," David said. So now Rumple knew how Charming had voted.

Rumple swallowed hard. "So... what's left?" His question was met with silence. "All right then. Suppose I—"

"No, Rumple, no deals."

His blood chilled as he recognized Belle's voice.

"Belle? What are you saying?"

"I'm sorry, Rumple. The answer is no. You're not coming back." Now he could hear it, the reason for the tremor in her voice, and it wasn't sadness. "I think you should know: everyone discussed it, but they left the final decision up to me."

Now it was his turn to tremble. "Belle? What are—Belle? Don't you want me back?"

"Go back to New York, Rumple. Or wherever else you've been living. I don't believe for a minute that business about them finding you in a seedy bar. You never even set foot in the Rabbit Hole, except to find Lacey."

"Belle, let's talk about this. Please. If you're not ready to take me back, I can understand that. I can wait. As long as it takes; as long as you need to make up your mind. I did before, remember? But let's work together to take down the barrier, and then if you're not ready for me to come back, I won't. I give you my word. Take down the barrier so Regina and Robin can be together. Take it down so the kids of Storybrooke can go out into the world and have full lives. We were wrong, Regina, when we first created the curse and we shut Storybrooke off from the rest of the world. You see that now, don't you? Henry deserves a life beyond this fake one the curse built. Belle, please. If we work together, you'll see I've changed—"

"You haven't changed!" Belle shouted. He could imagine her throwing her head back, her eyes blazing, her finger jabbing in his direction as if she were jabbing at his chest. "You haven't changed! Don't—do not continue to lie to me, Rumplestiltskin. Who brought those witches here? Who had some scheme to terrorize the town until the Author came out of hiding, huh? Who would have sacrificed everyone, including Henry, to force the Author to rewrite history? And it's so typically you, Rumple! Thinking you have to bully or cheat your way into getting what you want, throwing your magic around, changing people into snails or rats if they don't obey you! When all along, the answer was in front of you!" He heard angry sobs in her voice as she paused to catch her breath.

"Please, Belle—That wasn't—terrorizing wasn't—"

"Right in front of you. You had a family that loved you. A home. All the gold you could want. You even had a friend or two, and a place in the community, if you just would have tried. All
you had to do was to treat people decently. Stop being a liar and a con-man. Stop being—"

"Me," he finished for her.

"No!"

"Be more like Charming." His voice leaped an octave on the name. "Or Hook—Maybe you want me to be like that weasel, who hits and shoots women because he's too cowardly to—"

"That's enough, Gold!" Emma interrupted. "We discussed what you did—all of it—and we decided and we stand by that decision, end of story. You're not going to try to blame someone else for this. You brought those women here. Henry almost died because of you. We have nothing more to say."

"Belle, don't leave me here—"

"I'm sorry, Rumple. It's been decided."

"But—we're true loves. We need each other."

"I guess," she sucked in a breath, "just because you love someone doesn't mean they're good for you. We aren't, Rumple; we weren't good for each other. I lost my way when I fell in love with you, and you lost any motivation to change. You didn't have to, with me to run interference for you. Our marriage—I was such a fool, I thought it was real, but it was just another part of your plan to con the people of Storybrooke. Goodbye, Rumple. I hope you'll be okay. I'm sure you will be. I love you, I always will, but we can't be together."

He heard the clack of her heels through the phone's speaker. Everything grew quiet, except for the growl of a car engine coming to life.

"Belle?" He didn't care that Charming and Hook could see him. He fell back against the tree, letting it support his entire weight as he lowered his head to the tears.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gold." Bless his heart, Archie really did sound sorry. "I had hopes for a much better outcome. I hope, when you get to where you're going, you'll call me, or write. I think I can help you."

"Phones don't work between Storybrooke and the outside world," Regina reminded him, in such a matter-of-fact tone that Rumple knew she was covering up her own emotions. "And maybe you haven't noticed, Dr. Hopper, but there's never been a letter exchanged in the Storybrooke Post Office. If you want to communicate with Gold, you'd better have his email address."

"Grandpa." This must be awful for Henry, being stuck in the middle like this. He sounded now, not like Prince Charming's teenage grandson, but like the lost ten-year-old that had climbed onto a bus to find his mother. "I'm sorry. I did my best. Don't be mad at me."

"No, Henry, I'd never be mad at you. Don't you be mad at me. No matter what, we're family."

"Someday I'm going to come find you. I'll keep working on breaking that spell, even if I have
to do it alone. I promise you, I'm going to come find you."

In the background Emma's voice tugged at her son. "Henry, it's time to go."

"I won't be far, Henry. Portland or New York, I don't know. Not far. If I can find a way—"

Charming said sternly, "Henry, let's go."

"Grandpa!" Henry's voice and footsteps receded. "Don't be mad at her either—she's just upset. She doesn't know what she did."

"No, I'm not mad, I couldn't be mad!"—he heard a second car engine roar—"at Belle. Not ever."

"Don't forget me, Grandpa!"

"Mr. Gold? I'm going to say goodnight now. I really do hope you'll try to get in touch with me. I think—I think if we work on it, together—therapy over the Internet can be successful—I think, over time, if we work hard, we can turn this around."

"Come back? You think you can persuade her to let me come back?"

"In time, with therapy," Hopper said slowly, "I think you can. Good luck, Mr. Gold."

"Wait! Hopper, I—I don't want to ask, but when she banished me, I had nothing with me and that hasn't changed." Perhaps Hopper could see through the darkness the shabbiness of Rumple's clothes, the absence of a car.

"I understand."

Something came sailing over the town line. Rumple picked it up and inspected it: a wallet, devoid of personal effects but containing seventy dollars and a business card.

"Mr. Gold? All my contact information is on that card: phone, address, email. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

"You'll look out for her, of course?"

"Of course. And you too, if you'll let me. I have to go now, Mr. Gold. My battery's about to expire. Goodbye and good luck."

"Thank you." The line was disconnected.

Just in case. . . she'd changed her mind before, hadn't she? When she left the Dark Castle to buy straw and he expected she wouldn't return. . . Just in case, he settled against the tree to wait.

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At dawn, exhausted, cold and in need of a bathroom, he slowly, stiffly walked away. At least this time, he had a few dollars. He supposed he would go back to Portland, for lack of anything better. After all, that was where he'd told Henry he would be waiting.

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Irma was tending the counter at the Bib 'n' Tucker as he limped in, just in time for the lunch
crowd. He seated himself at the seat he could almost call his, and he ignored Irma's "Back again? Pee-yew, you been sleepin' in a damn sewer?"

"Scrambled eggs, wheat toast, grits and coffee" was his only reply. To reassure her—it had become habit by now, to reassure doubtful restaurant employees of his solvency—he set a ten-dollar bill on the counter. She brought him a cup of coffee and turned in his order, then very deliberately sauntered down to the opposite end of the counter to chat up a half-asleep driver.

Rumple ran his hand through his matted hair. Then, feeling a constriction of his throat, he scurried off to the restroom. He locked himself in a stall and let the tears come.

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He took a bus back to Portland. He considered going elsewhere, in search of a better job market, but it wouldn't make a difference: the same problems would follow him anywhere. He knows of nowhere else to go. New York was too fast, too loud and too confusing for a man who had spent the entire three centuries of his existence in villages of under five hundred souls. He bought another week at the Y with the bit he had left from Ursula and Archie, then, though it was only two in the afternoon, he crawled under the sheets, pulled the blanket over his ears to drown out the street noise, and slept.

He slept through the next day too, getting up only to answer the call of nature; he couldn't face the outside world again. On the third day, he couldn't sleep any more, and his pinched stomach drove him back to the street. He bought a bowl of soup in a deli and crusted it with saltines, lingering over his meal until the soup had gone cold, simply because he couldn't think of anything else to do. As he stared through the plate glass window out into the street, he tried to produce an idea: planning had been his long suit, but now he couldn't even devise a plan to get through the rest of the day. His brain had abandoned him, just as the witches had.

He watched the passersby on the sidewalk: shoppers with plastic bags, business people in tailored suits, blue- and pink-collar workers waiting for buses. Across the street in the park daddies pushed their little girls in swings and young men tossed Frisbees to dogs and briefcase carriers bought hot dogs from street vendors and lovers, old and young, picnicked on blankets. A person of indeterminate age and gender, face hidden by a wide-brimmed hat, played guitar and received reward for it in the open guitar case. And a blonde-haired mom and her brown-haired little boy sat on a bench, as motionless as he was, watching life go on around them.

He sat in the deli until sundown. He knew the servers and the bussers were glaring at him. He knew it was impolite to take up space in an establishment without buying something more; he'll, he'd thrown browsers out of his shop. But he was past caring.

At sundown, though, the diners at the table adjacent to his—Bangoreans on their way to Florida—left to resume their journey ("Well, sweetheart, we best hit the road," the old man said, and Rumple's heart broke; and the old woman said, "Do you want me to drive this next stretch, dear?" and his heart broke again). The old couple left (the husband holding the door open for his wife) and the staff weren't looking so Rumple wrapped the remains of the husband's roast beef sandwich into a napkin and slipped it into his pocket, and ate the wife's untouched pickle, and went back to his alley, ashamed.
In the morning he decided to get a grip. There had to be a job out there somewhere that
didn't require ID or a degree. He walked over to the library to read the newspapers. He
cought his attention wandering to the public computers instead. Had Ms. French sent a
follow-up message to Prof. Aurum? Any word at all from her would be most welcome.

Had Belle sent a message to Rumple, begging him to come home? Or just asking if he was
okay?

Rumple forced his eyes back to the Classifieds. Truck drivers wanted, drive the big rigs. CDL
required. Daycare attendants wanted. Degree in child development preferred. Motel maids,
experience required.

Five minutes on the computer. Just to check his email. What if she'd wired him money? Or
he could email the Storybrooke Bank, if he could remember the president's email address.

What if she was sorry?

Twenty emails, mostly spam. None from Belle. None from Henry, none from Archie, none
from Regina or Emma or Snow or Dove, not even from a tenant. None from Belle.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being watched, he googled "how to make
fake ID." He got plenty of hits—then someone walked behind him and he didn't dare open
any of the links. He went back to googling "Belle French" and "Storybrooke."

"I'm sorry, sir." The librarians always called him "sir." Didn't they know he was homeless?
He was no "sir." This one looked rather tired, as if it had been a long day for her too. "We're
closing."

"Thank you." He gathered his cane and a fistful of notes he'd taken from the newspaper, and
he made his way back to his alley.

He sat there in the dark, ignoring his aching ankle, ignoring his whining belly. His mind was
too full to notice his body's needs anyway. Belle. Henry wanted him back, Henry still loved
him, but not Belle. She'd left no room for interpretation. She hated and feared him. She
didn't even want to communicate with him from a distance. As far as she was concerned,
there was no such thing as a safe distance from her former husband.

So be it. Someday she'd wake up and realize what she'd thrown away. Those ridiculous
novels she'd mooned over all her life had left her thinking maidens married knights in
shining armor, not scaly-skinned imps; true love led inevitably to happy endings; a kiss could
transform a frog into a prince. Someday she'd realize that love, like any aspect of life, was an
endeavor, but well worth the work. Someday—Someday she'd miss him, as wretchedly as he
missed her now. And then he'd tell her a thing or two—like he needed her, his life was empty
without her, he was sorry and he was wrong. But she'd been wrong too.
Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine

AUGUST 2014

"Good morning, Belle."

Belle almost dropped her keys. She swung around the library door to face Regina. "Oh! You startled me. I didn't hear you walk up."

"I suppose we'll all be on tenterhooks for a while. It was." Regina cleared her throat. "Sorry. Got a bit of a cold coming on. It was a nerve-wracking experience." She needn't explain what she meant.

"Yes, it was." Belle pushed the door open and invited Regina in. "Archie showed tremendous bravery, don't you think? And Henry as well."

"Yes, they did. Very brave." Regina looked around at the shelves as Belle turned the lights on.

"Is there something I can do for you, Regina?"

"I'd like your notes. From your research on the boundary spell."

"Oh!" Belle set her tote bag on the counter and clicked her computer on. "Why? We all agreed the research would be discontinued."

"Let's say, for old time's sake." Regina stood so still, so unruffled, so expectant of compliance that even if Belle hadn't read her history, she would recognize this woman as a royal. But then, Belle had been raised in nobility, if not royalty, and she'd learned early on that even those who were used to being instantly obeyed were, in the end, just people ("Can't tell a king from a pig farmer when their pants are down," Maurice used to say). Belle didn't kowtow.

"Let's not." She busied herself with turning the public computers on. "I have fifteen first-graders coming in at ten o'clock, so unless you have anything else...?"

"I was serious, Belle." Regina gave her a quizzical look that presumed Belle must have gone deaf. "I'd like your research notes, along with the key to Gold's basement."

"We agreed—the town agreed—Snow, Emma, David, me and you—that the research would come to an end, at least for the present time. 'Necessary for the protection of the community,' I believe David said, and you agreed."

Regina knelt down, bending at the knees, to pick up a DVD that had fallen out of the book drop. She rose again, slowly and gracefully, left the DVD on the circulation counter, and straightened her pencil skirt. Every movement screamed "I'm a queen" and "I'm to be reckoned with."

"Thank you," Belle said, without sincerity.

"Yes, we agreed, but that was just a little show for Rumplestiltskin's sake, as far as I'm concerned. And it succeeded: he left. He won't be back. We can resume our work. We're in no danger of his crossing our line."

"No one told me it was a show." Belle ran the rescued DVD under the barcode scanner to check it in, then set it on a cart behind the circulation desk. "For me, it was very real. And, I'd wager, for everyone else but you."
Regina actually appeared surprised. "But surely you realize, with the scroll gone, we're back to where we've been the past three decades. We're stuck here, all of us, including the kids who've grown up and are ready to start their lives in the world."

"Then call another meeting of the town leaders." Belle turned her back on Regina to begin weeding books. "Or better yet, a town meeting. If they change their minds about the barrier, you can have my notes, but I wasn't exaggerating when I said I'm through with that particular project. I won't be responsible for another attack on the town, even one instigated by my ex-husband." She glanced up at the clock. "Those kids will be coming in an hour and I really do have a lot to do. So if you'll excuse me?"

"All I'm asking for is the notes and the key to the basement. You can keep your morals." Regina narrowed her eyes. "Belle, if you ever want to become a leader, you need to act like one, starting now. Sometimes that means telling a small untruth to get rid of a dangerous situation. Sometimes that means putting aside your personal grievances for the sake of others."

"Don't lecture me about making the personal political. This is about Robin. I get that. If we could make another scroll so we could control access to Storybrooke, I'd be willing to help with that, but I won't help you take the barrier down. If you want to retract your vote, then be honest and upfront about it, and if the town leaders insist I hand over my notes, I will. But not before."

"All right." Regina gathered up her purse. "I can manage without those notes. It'll just slow me down, that's all. If you change your mind, you have my number."

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Emma clattered down the stairs from the loft. Behind the room divider that split off her parents' bedroom from the kitchen, she could hear them talking and hear the baby snuffling as he was being fed. It should feel good: a homely start to a peaceful day, with all the villains either imprisoned, banished or converted. Should be a nice quiet day after a rough night, but she knew she had a lot of work to do. Not as sheriff, but as mother.

Henry glanced up from his chem textbook. He held it on his lap as he sat at the kitchen counter, shoveling cereal into his mouth. Normally she'd correct him for that: he was a sloppy eater and already he'd dribbled milk onto the book. But now was not the time to chew him out. Now was the time for incredible patience—not really a forte for Emma.

"Hey, kid, do you feel okay?"

Henry very deliberately resumed his studying and eating.

"You don't have to go to school today if you're not up to it. We could—go to a movie, just decompress. Or go to the park and talk. Take a boat ride. Killian could borrow Leroy's sailboat. We could—"

"I'm going to school."

"Well, you don't have to. After what you went through last night, your teachers would und—"

"I want to go to school. I want to do something normal."

"Oh." She sat down beside him and folded her hands. "How about if I pick you up at noon and we'll get some lunch—"

"I just want to have a normal day, okay?"

"I know you're mad at me about Gold, but you've got to understand, we did what was best for the
whole town. Someday you'll see that. If he brought people like those witches in, that just shows he's still a selfish, dangerous person. We let him in and he's going to hurt someone—"

"How do you know that?" Henry swung toward her so fast his book fell off his lap and milk sloshed in his bowl. "How do you know what he did or didn't do? Did you ask him? Did you even ask him?"

"Henry, he lies. We can't believe—"

"You didn't even talk to him. I was there. I heard it all. I heard everything everyone said. None of you even gave him a chance. What if you were wrong, Mom? What if you found out that he didn't know what Ursula and Cruella were going to do?"

"It doesn't matter. He brought them in, knowing who they were and what they were capable of, and it was a plan to muscle his way back into town so he could find the Author and torture him until he got exactly what he wanted. And believe me, Henry, Gold's happy ending doesn't include anything good for this town. He'd have us all groveling at his feet, or worse. He gets what he wants by pushing and shoving people, by—by setting fires and kidnapping innocent people and casting curses and changing people he doesn't like into rats. Henry, if his plans with the Snow Queen had worked out, everyone in this town would be dead except me and you, and I'd be trapped in that Hat, and he'd be holding you prisoner."

"I don't want to hear any more!" Henry slid off his chair, grabbed his bookbag and slammed out the door.

Emma followed him down the stairs to the street. "Come back. We need to talk about this."

Henry leapt onto the school bus. "I thought you were heroes! What makes you think you know everything?"

She watched the bus pull away. With a long sigh, she returned to the apartment to clean up the kitchen.

His chem book lay open and soggy on the floor.

---------------------------------------------

Belle let herself in to the pink house. Despite her instance, and the bank president's, that this house belonged to him now, Dove hadn't moved in or talked to a realtor about selling the house; he hadn't even changed the locks. One morning as she drove past on her way to shop for groceries, she'd discovered him at the house, trimming the trees.

When she asked him why he hadn't taken any action to make use of his house, he'd shaken his head. "It doesn't feel right."

"But the house is yours. He wanted you to have it," she'd replied. "And as long as it remains unoccupied, it's a temptation for vandals. Besides, it's so big, and so beautiful, it deserves to be lived in, if not by you, then by a family, maybe."

"Nobody could afford the taxes," he'd said ruefully.

"Well, we can do something about that. As long as you own the house, the taxes are automatically paid out of Rumple's bank account. We can arrange with the bank for that to continue under another owner."

"That's very generous of you, Mrs.—"
She'd avoided the implied question in his incomplete term of address. "I've asked you a dozen times to call me Belle. I wish you would."

"That doesn't seem right either." He gathered the discarded brush into a wheelbarrow. "You're still my boss."

"All right. Well, then, call me Ms French." She'd bent to pick up some smaller branches that had fallen.

Oh how times had changed.

Now, as she stood in the foyer, the front door standing open behind her, letting the sunshine in, she decided to call George Spencer. As much as she despised and distrusted him, he was the only attorney in town, now. She imagined her dealings with him would be short: a form to submit to the court, to grant her a legal name change. She'd been Belle French-Gold such a short time, it wouldn't be difficult.

And another form to begin the divorce proceedings. That would be difficult. She wondered how the court would handle it if Rumple refused to sign the papers—or if Emma couldn't find him. Would they declare him missing and grant the divorce on grounds of desertion?

She closed the door behind her, and instantly she felt sucked in—dragged back into the past. His coat, still hanging on the hook. His umbrella in the stand by the front door. The paintings and furnishings that had belonged to him long before she re-entered his life. In the living room, his CDs and DVDs, newspapers and magazines and books. Upstairs, his clothes, the bed he'd slept in for years while she was trapped in Regina's secret asylum. He'd once admitted to Belle that after the Storybrooke curse broke for him, before he'd learned she was alive, he mourned her anew. He regretted deeply that in all the time she'd lived in the Dark Castle with him, he'd never had her portrait painted. Not that he hadn't considered it, but had he done so, it would have been a confession of his love for her.

She now supposed that "regret" had been a lie too. Why hadn't he come after her, after he'd thrown her out? At least to check on her. Why had he believed Regina when the queen told him Belle was dead? He was a smart man; he should have known better. He could have thrown some gold around to gather information. He could have learned her whereabouts, come for her.

Such a liar. And now his latest stunt just proved he was as conniving and deceiving as ever. He hadn't changed one iota, unless it was to grow even more selfish and controlling. He'd placed Henry's life at risk, and hers, and the entire town's, with his stupid plot to sneak back into Storybrooke, regain his magic, force people to do his bidding. His arrogant assumption he could control Ursula and Cruella proved his time out there hadn't taught him an ounce of humility. He deserved to remain right where he was, wherever that was.

As for Mrs. French-Gold, it was time to move on. As she walked through the house, she phoned Spencer's office to make an appointment, then she phoned Archie for the same purpose. Those tasks completed, she climbed the stairs, filling her mind with vague images of the future so she wouldn't fall prey to the memories of happier times when she'd climbed these stairs, hand in hand with her husband. At the top of the stairs she didn't allow herself to pause; she tightened her chin and marched on, into the master bedroom. She ignored the bed and the photos on the wall. She went directly to the painting of the Infinite Forest, pushed the painting back and opened the safe hidden there. She removed the teacup. She didn't allow herself to hesitate. It was time, it was past time, he'd lied to her over and over, he'd endangered them all, he'd never loved her or trusted her or believed in their union. She'd been some silly girl who'd been fascinated by the mystery of him and had created some fantasy image of "the man behind the beast." She in her own
arrogance had stupidly assumed she could love him into goodness. Just another naïve novel reader. He’d been right about one thing: her books had addled her judgment. Never again.

She examined the chipped cup. She wasn't sure what to do with it: smashing it would be childish, but she had to dispose of it somewhere, put it out of her life so the memory of it wouldn't follow her. And what about her wedding ring? Briefly she thought about pawning it, but there was just one pawnshop in town—she had to laugh at that. Besides, everyone in town recognized that ring; no one would buy it or accept it as a gift.

From the closet she produced a shoe box, and she set the cup inside it, then she removed her wedding ring—she didn't allow herself to yank it off; that would be an act of anger, showing she hadn't healed. She had to do this calmly, as an act of releasing herself from her vows. She set the ring in the box beside the cup. There. She wasn't his any more. Nor was she her father's, nor did she belong to the people of Avonlea, as she once did. Her fate from this point forward was truly hers to choose. That business about an omnipotent Author was all a crock; someday Regina would figure that out. Each person had only herself to blame or credit for how her life turned out. And now Belle French had only herself to answer to.

Or maybe she shouldn't call herself French any more. That was another person. Belle French had been a child who thought as a child and spoke as a child, in dreams and absolutes. She would give it some thought; perhaps she'd choose a new name.

The box under her arm, she walked down the stairs, back through the house, the clacking of her heels the only sound. Stupid shoes. They were the fashion of a child too, she could see that now, a child playing dress-up. It was time for an end to the shoes and the short skirts and the tight blouses, the clothes of a doll. It was time to dress as a grown-up.

Setting the box on the floorboard of her Honda, she removed her shoes and dropped them beside the box. Then she drove over to Modern Fashions and bought herself a new wardrobe, sturdy and comfortable and practical, yet colorful. She left on the last outfit she'd tried on, black slacks, a black top, a pink jacket with three-quarters sleeves, and a pair of leather flats. She offered her former outfit to the clerk. "Please donate these somewhere. Or discard them. I don't care."

And while she was on a roll, she walked down to the end of the next block, not to her usual hairdresser's, who would protest any change in hairstyle, but to a Supercuts, and she sat down in the swivel chair and ordered the surprised stylist to cut the thick mane to chin length. When she stood up again and shook the loose hairs from her head, she felt much lighter.

She knew now what to do with the remainders of her old life. She drove to the park, walked past the playground to the lake, and without ceremony she tossed her shoes one at a time into the water, and then the cup, and finally the ring. She didn't stay to watch what became of them all. She was a working woman; she had things to do.

And when her beloved came into her dreams that night, she woke herself up and read Women's Worth: Finding Your Financial Confidence until she fell back asleep, dreamless.

SEPTEMBER 2014

"Oh, ah, good morning, Madame Mayor," Archie sputtered as a hand reached past him to dive into the fruit bin. He stepped aside politely to allow her access to the bags of oranges. He glanced into her cart, then reddened and glanced away again, because there were things in her cart that a gentleman ought to pretend he can't see.

"Morning." Her nose was red and her voice, scratchy.
"Are you—pardon me, but you sound like you've come down with a cold."

"Astute observation, Doctor. Hence the oranges and the Nyquil in my cart." She tossed the bag into the cart. "Too much handshaking on the campaign trail. Hasn't anyone here heard of Purell?"

He chuckled hesitantly, uncertain whether she'd made a joke. "Well, I hope you'll feel better soon. By the way, I heard from my friend at CPS yesterday. She had some news about Trajan."

"Really?" Regina paused in mid-reach for a bag of lemons. "How's he doing with the Hoffmans?"

"Not well, unfortunately. It seems he's been getting into fights at school and with his foster brother." Archie pushed his glasses up his nose. "It seems he's been trying to force other children to do his will. He tells them—ahem—that he has magic and will turn them into toads if they don't obey him."

Regina gnawed at her lip. "Hmm. What are the Hoffmans doing about that?"

"They put him in therapy." Archie broke eye contact with her. "The therapist has been treating him for delusions."

"Oh." Regina reddened. "That's... that's not a good idea."

"No, it isn't."

"Should I... do something? Send them an email or something? Can't you do something?"

Archie shook his head. "My friend has told them it's not unusual for a small child to have a rich fantasy life, particularly when he's suffered a great loss, but... ."

"He's on the same path as Henry was."

Archie dared to touch her arm in a gesture of support. "But your relationship with Henry now is wonderful."

Regina reached into her purse for a handkerchief as a sneeze came on. "Keep me posted, Doctor. Even if there's nothing we can do." She glanced behind her as Henry trotted up, carrying a case of sodas, which he set in her cart.

"Hey, Dr. Hopper."

"Hey, Henry. How are you?"

"Not bad. And yourself?"

"Not bad." Regina was looking the other way, so the two males allowed a secret smile to pass between them. "See you the mayoral Q and A tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Archie said. "Good luck, Madame Mayor."

"Thank you, citizen." Regina brightened. As the psychiatrist moved away, Regina whispered to Henry, "Now if we hurry, we can finish our shopping, run home, have some dinner, and still work in a little lab time before we need to get over to City Hall."

Henry winked. "Operation Termite continues."
SEPTEMBER 2014

A couple of years ago, before Cora and Hook arrived in Storybrooke, Rumple read a book about death, one of the two forces stronger than magic. The book described five stages of coping with death: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This morning as he recalled that book, he reflected that homelessness and death have a lot in common. He figured that in coping with his condition, he was hovering between stages one and two. As hungry as he was, he wondered if he would survive long enough to get to stage three, which had always been his long suit.

As for coping with the deaths of Bae and his marriage, he was definitely in stage one.

So he was thinking as he eased himself down to the concrete in his alley and tried to sleep. Between the street lights, laughter from a bar down the block, some sort of animal rooting through the nearby dumpster, and his aching ankle, he counted himself lucky to finally drift into a half-state of oblivion. He was having a strange dream in which Belle, in the silver silk nighty she'd bought as his birthday present, reached out to him from their king-sized bed. He in his blue silk pajama bottoms, his hair wet from the shower, limped into the bedroom and leaned against the open door, just watching her. She wiggled her fingers at him, urging him forward, so, leaning on his tree limb, he approached, feasting his eyes on her soft green skin. He sat down on the edge of the bed, let his makeshift cane fall to the floor, and scooted towards her, but as his lips met hers, she suddenly pushed him away and from the ceiling iron bars dropped, slamming into the floor, forming a cage all around him. He leapt to his feet, ignoring the shooting pains in his ankle, and grasped the bars of the cage, yanking to bring them down. In the doorway, Belle cleaned her fingernails with the point of his dagger and laughed, and her laugh sounded exactly like Zelena’s.

"Hey, bub, you all right?"

His eyes flew open and he scooted backwards, trying to escape the dark form hovering over him. His hand sought his cane, but came up short.

"Here." The dark form pressed the smooth wood into his hand. "This what you lookin' for?"

He swallowed.

"You need a drink? Me too."

Rumple's eyes adjusted to the darkness and now he could make out a face, bearded, and eyes framed by long, curly dark hair. The figure was dressed in stained jeans, Doc Martens and a Marvin Martian t-shirt with a hole over the left pectoral. "You don't happen to have a bottle, do ya?"

He shook his head.
"Me neither." Marvin, as Rumple was coming to think of him, seated himself on a garbage can. He studied Rumple. "Bum a cigarette off you?"

Rumple shook his head again.

Marvin grunted. "Can't talk? You got the DT's that bad?"

"I can talk. What is 'the DTs'?"

"If you don't know, then you don't got 'em. I figured you did, the way you was shakin'.""Nightmare," Rumple said briefly.

"Yeah. I get them too." Marvin examined the area around Rumple. "You got anything to eat?"

Rumple hesitated; he had an orange he'd swiped from a grocery store yesterday, intending it for breakfast. But Marvin appeared to have the advantage of five or six inches and three hundred eighty years, so an orange wasn't worth fighting over. Rumple relinquished it.

"No, I meant, it looks like it's been a while since you ate. I was gonna—listen, some of us got a place across from Oxford Street Garden. You know where that is? It's just about six blocks from here."

"A place? A house?"

"Naw, more like—a bridge. But every Tuesday and Thursday morning, a couple of social workers show up at the Garden and hand out breakfasts and juice." Marvin grinned. "Tomorrow's Thursday. And if you're hungry tonight, we usually have a couple of cans of something on hand."

"I'm hungry." He stared at the concrete as he admitted it.

Marvin stepped backwards into the lamplight. Rumple could see now his skin was tough as leather but he didn't appear to be more than twenty. "There's six of us: a old couple, a English guy, a girl and her kid, and me. They call me Shaggy. You know, after Scooby Do, 'cause I used to have a dog that was part Great Dane."

He didn't know what Shaggy was referring to, but he returned the greeting. "I'm—" he couldn't say "Mr. Gold"; that would sound pretentious, and he couldn't afford to be snobby when food was on the line. He couldn't call himself "Gold," either: there was nothing gold about him right now. "They call me Rumple."

"I get it," Shaggy chuckled. "'Cause your suit's, like, rumpled."

Using a garbage can for support, Rumple got to his feet. "Lead on, Shaggy."

It seemed like a long walk. Shaggy kept talking, but Rumple had no idea what the boy's real intention might be. If robbery was the intention, Shaggy would be in for disappointment. Rumple took reassurance in the memory of taking a pirate down with just a cane and his own strong right arm.
When Shaggy paused for breath, Rumple managed to get a word in. "What happened to your dog?"

"What, Scooby?" Shaggy scowled. "Never mind. Now, over here is one of those vegetarian restaurants. Catch 'em at delivery time on Mondays, they usually have some stale bread and bruised fruit and stuff they're throwing out to make room for incoming. They'd just as soon give it to one of us as toss it in the Dumpster for the rats." He grinned. "We're a lot easier to get rid of."

As they walked through the Garden, which Rumple recognized as the park he'd spent many a long afternoon killing time in, Shaggy was pointing out features of the neighborhood, as if he were a tour guide. When they passed out of the park, they took a sharp left turn and headed under an interstate overpass, and then another turn and they came upon a bit of canvas hung from the concrete overhead, and a group of people gathered around two pots heating over cans of Sterno. Rumple recognized the canvas camp, and he recognized the young blonde woman stirring one of the pots, and the brown-haired kid leaning against her knee.

The group looked up as Shaggy greeted them with a simple "Hey. This is Rumple. He's hungry."

The shortest of the men stopped stirring the other pot and stood up, offering his hand. He held himself as if he were a six-footer. "We have sufficient resources tonight. You're welcome, Rumple." He spoke in a poor imitation of an upscale English accent. "I'm Harridge. You may call me Harry." He pointed his spoon at his campmates. "Fred and Foggy." These were the elderly couple Shaggy had mentioned; Fred was bald, bespectacled and lacking a right arm. The woman beside him was much dirtier than he was, and she bounced a Cookie Monster doll on her lap. Rumple would later deduce that she was probably suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's.

"Jill and the brightest boy you'll ever meet, her son, Sam."

The blonde woman beamed at Harridge. Her son roused himself from drowsiness to ask, "Why?"

"Why what, Sammo?" Shaggy plopped down beside him, and Rumple wondered if Sam belonged to Shaggy too, but there seemed to be no interest between Shaggy and Jill.

"Why are you Rumple?"

Rumple shrugged and took the question as an invitation to be seated. "Maybe because I have a lot of wrinkles."

Sam studied him in the dim light offered by street lamps. "Yeah." He turned his attention to the cup his mother presented him.

They allowed him to join them for a slice of fried Spam, a cup of coffee and some frank talk. "You're new at this, aren't you? Get rid of that suit while it's still worth selling. Take it to the Goodwill Thrift Store and trade it for jeans and a sweatshirt and a hat. Trade those shoes for boots and wool socks. At least two pairs," Harridge suggested.
"And a sleeping bag and a bedroll. They're uncomfortable to haul around all day, but believe me, it's better than sleeping on the concrete," Jill added.

"You gonna live here with us?" Sam asked around a mouthful of potted meat.

Harridge continued, "Watch out for your feet, don't sleep in your boots, change your socks and wash your feet every day. The feet are the first to go, and you already have problems."

Fred didn't talk; he just ate and blew his nose. He seemed to have a lot of allergies.

When he'd finished the Spam, Rumple brushed his hands against his pants legs and stood up. "Thanks. Guess I'd better be going. It's late."

"You can stay with us," Harridge decided. "If you don't have any place else."

"Oh, no, I'm not like you. I mean—" Rumple sputtered.

"Yeah," Fred said slowly. "We know what you mean."

"If you ever do get to be 'like us,'" Harridge drew air quotes, "you can come back. Provided you contribute something."

"Everybody needs to be somewhere," Shaggy quipped. "Might as well be here, now, huh, Rumple?"

Ashamed, Rumple clutched his cane tightly and limped back to his alley.

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When he was about eleven or twelve years old (he never knew his true age; his father hadn't been present at his birth and his mother had died in childbirth), he stole a suit of boy's clothes from a wash line and substituted them for his own rough woolens. He bided his time, watching workers of various classes go in and out of a castle, until at midday, perhaps two hours after the noon meal had been served, the castle fell quiet. He'd been watching the castle for several days, so he knew the patterns of the household: this was naptime for all who lived within and without, even the liverymen and the dishwashers. He would have about an hour before the staff roused themselves. He sneaked in through the kitchen.

He hadn't come to steal, not even food, though pies cooling on the counter and a pitcher of buttermilk recently brought up from the icehouse tempted him almost beyond endurance. He had come for two reasons: to satisfy his curiosity and to test his acting ability. He'd been studying this large, mobile household for a long time, watching their mannerisms, their interactions, their roles, and memorizing their accents. He thought perhaps he could blend in for a few days, pretend to be just another of the many lads who worked in the gardens, if he kept his eyes lowered and stayed away from others his age who could call him out as an intruder. Just a few days, so he could experience life among his betters. They'd catch him soon enough, but in the meantime, he'd eat well and sleep in a bed of straw every night, and when they did catch on, since he was small enough to pass for eight or nine years, they wouldn't call the sheriff on him. They'd probably just box his ears and shoo him away. Meantime, what he would learn from them would be worth the price of temporary ear damage.
He'd managed to live on the grounds, tending the garden, sleeping in a loft, eating leftovers and failed cooking experiments from the kitchen, for two months. Another boy had figured him out on the first day, but had kept his mouth shut about it, in the fear that he himself would somehow be blamed; Rumple befriended him by bringing him sweets that he'd charmed from the cooks. This was his first real friend. On the third day, the overseer of the gardens stared long and hard at him, but he'd kept right on working, working hard, working expertly, thanks to lessons from the spinner sisters, so the overseer shrugged and from that point on ignored him. By the fourth day, the cooks had singled him out, referring to him as "Rumple" and "good lad," because he always brought them the best from the garden (unlike the other lads, who tended to hide the best produce for their own consumption). He cleaned his feet and washed his hands and the produce at the pump before coming inside. His palate, the cooks discovered, was infallible; if Rumple liked a dish, the king would too, and so no one questioned how he'd come to the castle.

On the third month, a squad of soldiers arrived, seeking supplies and bringing news: war was coming. Rumple decided then it was time to return home to the spinner sisters. Unlike the older garden lads, he had no interest in serving in the king's army.

A taste for the finer things in life was one of the lessons he'd learned from that adventure; adaptability was another, an instinct for when to move on.

When he awoke in his alley hideaway to a pack of snarling dogs salivating in his face, he decided now was one of those times. He grabbed his bundle of clothes and, keeping his back to the wall, inched away from the pack. The dogs immediately attacked his small food supply. Stepping out onto the street, he looked up into the sky and determined from the position of the moon that dawn was four hours off yet. A light rain was falling. He needed a safe, dry place to sleep.

He remembered the makeshift camp, under the overpass in the park. "Everybody needs to be somewhere," Shaggy had said. Maybe they would allow him a space under the canvas for the night. "Provided you contribute something," Harridge had said. He searched his clothing roll and his pockets as he approached the camp.

"Halt, who goes there?" followed by a giggle, then footfalls, then an outstretched hand. "Hey, uhm, Rumple, right? It's me, Shaggy. Or should I say 'Soggy.'"

He smiled at the small joke. Shaggy smelled of sweat and something sweet. "It's raining," Rumple hinted.

"So it is."

"Where I was staying, there's no roof," Rumple hinted further.

"Must be rough."

Shaggy was making him work for it, so he did, swallowing his pride as a drop of rain ran from his hair into his ear. "You said if I needed a place, as long as I contributed something —" He produced a pack of matches from his pocket.

Shaggy snatched them up. "Exactly the right price. Come on in. Everyone else is asleep. It
"Was my turn to keep watch." He led Rumple into the camp, to a pot bubbling over a Sterno portable stove. "You like vegetable soup?"

Rumple nodded. Right now, he liked anything. Shaggy dipped a coffee mug into the pot and brought it up again, steaming and dripping. "Mug's clean. Harry is a fanatic about that. Hope you're not allergic to dishwashing, 'cause you'll be doing plenty of that if you hang around."

"Washed a few in my time." Rumple blew into the mug to cool the soup down.

Shaggy eyed Rumple's clothes bundle. "You don't have a blanket."

"No."

"We don't have any spares, but it's a hot night. You won't need one. Tomorrow's Tuesday; you can ask for one then."

Rumple frowned; he couldn't remember the significance of Tuesday, but he wouldn't admit that. He distracted himself by continuing to blow on his cup. The soup, though watery, smelled good and his stomach growled.

Shaggy pointed to two dark lumps stretched out across a blanket. "Another hour or so, it'll be Fred's turn for guard duty. You want to sit with me until then?"

Panic swept over him: was he not to be allowed to sleep here? His eyes must have widened, because Shaggy caught on. "Naw, man, I mean, keep me awake. I got a nice buzz on, you know? Makes me sleepy."

Following Shaggy's lead, he seated himself near the Sterno stove. Small as it was, it didn't put off much heat, but somehow it provided comfort.

"What are we watching for?" Rumple asked. "Stray dogs?"

Shaggy giggled again. "Hey, you aren't as new at this as you look. Yeah, dogs—they'll come in groups, wanting the food. And cops, obvious reasons. And people like us, except not willing to share." He raised an eyebrow, challenging Rumple to argue over the "like us" phrase.

"Yeah." Rumple managed a sip of the soup, though it burned his tongue. He thought about that phrase a long moment, then let it sink in. He supposed he was one of them now. He tightened his mouth.

A small flame bounced in the dark, lighting up Shaggy's bearded face and closed eyes. He was holding one of Rumple's matches to the tip of a hand-rolled cigarette. He drew in a lungful, held his breath, then released it as he shook the flame out. The smell of something sickly sweet wafted over to Rumple, canceling out the smell of the soup. Rumple wanted to ask how Shaggy had found the money to buy marijuana and why he hadn't used that money for a night at the Y or a good meal. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut, however; the fewer questions he asked, the fewer other people could ask of him. They sat in silence, Rumple sipping the soup and looking out into the night while Shaggy half-slept.

"Oh hello." Fred didn't seem disturbed in the least to find a newcomer in the camp. He
yawned, stretched, scratched and served himself some soup before settling down between Shaggy and Rumple.

"Hello," Rumple acknowledged.

"Fred, this Rumple. From the other night, remember? He's staying a while." Shaggy stood up and pinched out his joint. He crossed behind Fred and said in a low voice, "Fred's not much of a conversationalist, you know what I mean? But he takes care of business, and that's a good quality in a person, y'know? I'm going to bed. When you're ready, you can sleep over there, Rum."

Soon after, Rumple retired to his appointed patch of concrete. He figured it would be difficult getting to sleep with these strangers and their strange smells and strange sleeping sounds grouped around him, but it was surprisingly easy. Maybe it was the steady patter of rain that relaxed him. He didn't trust these people, of course not; he slept with his clothes roll as a pillow, protected from theft. Trust was an emotional baggage that had dropped from him when the Shadow hauled him out of Neverland.
"What's that saying? 'A leopard can't change its spots'? I don't know why anyone would expect anything different from Rumplestiltskin," Granny griped as she poured Emma's coffee.

"Well, it's over and done with. Let's move on," Emma said curtly, and Granny took the latter statement for what it really was: a suggestion that she move on to another topic. With a small grunt Granny poured coffee for Regina. "Everybody's in a grump today," she mumbled as she checked her order pad. "Two grilled cheese with chili fries for you, a chef's salad for the mayor."

"Not the mayor yet, Mrs. Lucas; the election isn't until November." Regina poured cream into her coffee. "But thank you for that vote of confidence. And I'd like my dressing on the side."

Granny wrote that down before moving to the cook's window.

Now that there was no one within earshot, Emma leaned forward. "After what those witches did to him, I think Henry needs to talk to someone. You know, a therapist. I mean, look at what the poor kid's been through: Greg and Tamara, Neverland, Zelena, now these witches. Not to mention that reset curse of yours, his dad dying, Gold stabbing Pan in the middle of the street and then dying and then rising from the grave—"

"I agree. He's had a great deal to deal with."

"The problem is, there's only one therapist in town."

"You have a problem with Dr. Hopper?"

"I do now." Emma sipped her coffee. "I don't think it can be good for Henry to spend time with Archie right now, after the stand Archie took on letting Gold into town. You know what I mean?"

Regina nodded. "I think so. Hopper might encourage Henry to hang on to false hopes of bringing his grandfather back."

Emma winced at the word grandfather, as Regina knew she would. Allies they might be, even supporters, but Regina still enjoyed prickling the savior when the opportunity arose. "As far as I'm concerned, Henry has one grandfather, a damn good one, and any fantasies he might get about communicating with Gold will get in the way of that."

"Worse, Henry might get ideas about hopping a bus and running off to New York or wherever it is Gold's gone."

"Yeah. Henry's a great kid, but he still sees life through rose-colored glasses. He needs to see Gold for who he really is, and then he can let go. I'm sorry, I hate to take that innocence away from him, but that man is dangerous. Henry could have died that night."

"You're right. Gold brought Cruella and Ursula here, and Gold never does anything without a plan. I'm sure he didn't know they'd try to steal his dagger, but he knew how unstable Cruella is, how dangerous they both are. He certainly knew they'd threaten any and all of us to access the Author. Yes." Regina blew across her coffee cup. "He's responsible for everything that happened. Putting his wife and grandson at risk—that's not the kind of man who should be influencing an impressionable teen."
Emma cocked an eyebrow at her, wondering at the delight Regina seemed to be taking in Gold's downfall. Maybe Regina thought that Storybrooke still lumped her and Gold together, and the kidnapping would remind the town just how different they were, how far Regina had come—and how far Gold hadn't. But at least they were in agreement that the fragile ties between Gold and Henry had to be cut, even if it meant removing Henry from Hopper's client roster. "Yeah, well, who else can I take him to? I can't exactly schedule out-of-town appointments for him."

Regina fell silent as Granny delivered their lunches, but once the restauranteur had departed, she continued, "When I . . . when Rumplestiltskin and I fashioned the Storybrooke Curse to fit my needs, it was his idea to erect a magical barrier between us and the rest of the world. No travel, no communication between the two. I hadn't even thought about that. I was in such a hurry to get here and so worried about you taking everything away from me that I didn't give much thought to our place in the world out there. It was Rumple that said the savior wouldn't be the only threat: there are seven billion people out there who would come beating down our doors if they learned what we have here. At the time, I believed him, and I thought I certainly didn't want my sheep to be wandering out of their pen. " She spooned up her dressing and drizzled it over her salad. "But as I've gotten older, I've come to realize it doesn't have to be all or nothing. Our children deserve a chance to choose for themselves between home and the world; the barrier denies them that. I think there has to be another way, a way we can come and go without allowing the rest of the world in."

"That's a tall order."

Regina poked at her salad. "Every sorcerer in history said the same thing about my curse. If one escape scroll can be created, why not a second, but on a bigger scale?"

Chewing on grilled cheese, Emma studied Regina a moment. "You're off your feed."

"Just because I don't 'chow down' like a cowhand at a chuck wagon doesn't mean I have any less appetite than usual. I was raised a royal, Ms. Swan; etiquette is an important part of that lifestyle."

"Glad I wasn't." Emma grinned around a long string of cheese stretching from the sandwich in her hand to her clenched teeth. "Taffeta and curtseys and which gloves to wear to the fall ball seems like a waste of time to me. Life is like a grilled cheese sandwich." She turned her sandwich over in her hand to admire it. "Kinda dry and crunchy on the outside, but full of chewy gooey goodness on the inside. That royal etiquette stuff just gets in the way of enjoying it."

"Hmph." Regina delicately bit into her salad.

Emma grew serious again. "Listen, Regina. . . .I've been debating about whether to tell you this, considering we don't have the scroll any more."

"Let's hear it," Regina prompted smoothly.

"You might end up wanting to punch me in the face after you hear this, but you ought to hear it."

"I'm a big girl, Ms. Swan. I assure you, I can take whatever disappointment you can dish out."

Releasing her sandwich to its plate, Emma reached into her jeans pocket. She slid a sheet torn from a Big Chief tablet across the table. "I think Robin's set up an email account."

"Robinoflocksely at gmail." In this world, Robin Hood is quite a legend. I imagine thousands of his fans pay tribute to him by taking his name, or some version of it, for their email accounts, their personalized license plates, their pets."
"I wrote to him. He wrote back. Several times."

Regina stopped in mid-forkful. "Yes?"

"I asked him if he was the same Robin who went camping in eastern Maine this past spring. He said yes."

"Okay. . . ."

"He said he and his friends were camping along the Stroudwater River. He said the water was too warm for good fishing but his son caught a small bass. . . . His son Roland."

Regina's lower lip jerked. "And. . . . did you tell him who you were?"

Emma nodded. "And I asked if he'd want to hear from you."

Regina fought to raise a carefree smile but failed. "Don't leave me in suspense."

"He does. I didn't give him your email address, though. Thought I should check with you first." Emma watched Regina for a reaction. "Since we don't have the scroll, you might be better off if you didn't. Maybe it would be better to move on."

Regina folded and refolded the napkin in her lap as she considered. "Did he—how's Roland?"

"Roland's fine. Had a little trouble getting used to the noise and the traffic, but between TV and video games, he's decided he likes New York." Emma popped a chili fry into her mouth. "Now about what you didn't ask: he said Marian recovered completely. They're comfortable in Neal's old apartment."

"Oh." Regina picked up her fork and poked at her salad again.

"Regina, my BS detector was going off while I was reading that. There's something he wasn't telling me."

"Maybe it doesn't matter. They're married, they have a child together, and even if that wasn't so, he can't come back here and I can't leave."

"You could, if you didn't intend to come back."

"I won't leave Henry, so unless you and your parents and your boyfriend have plans of packing a U-Haul and moving to Queens, Storybrooke is stuck with me. Besides, I have an election to win."

"Remind me who's running against you, again?"

"No one. Nevertheless, I want to win this time, really win."

"The other elections? I've always wondered about that. A mayor's term of office is usually, what? Three years? So you must've had—"

"I suppose you could say my term of office was thirty years." Regina bit into a cucumber slice.

"Oh."

"Ms. Swan, that slip of paper?"

Emma picked up the Big Chief sheet. "This one?"
"I'd like to have it."

Emma grinned as she slid it over. "Gonna write to him, aren't you?"

"That's a personal matter, Ms. Swan. And I may not have decided yet." Smoothly, Regina changed the subject. "You're quite the technophile. Tell me: we can access the Internet here. We can send and receive email. You've done it, Belle's done it, Archie communicates with his colleagues on the outside all the time by email. But we can't call out and apparently, no one can call in. Why? Don't computers and phones use the same technology?"

Emma shrugged. "I'm more of a user than an engineer, but I think so. Here's my best guess. When was that curse written, the one that created Storybrooke?"

"Well, that's hard to say; time in the Enchanted Forest operates differently. And only Rumplestiltskin was a stickler for keeping track of things like dates and failed experiments. But I'd say the original curse was written, oh, a hundred years before we came to this world. It was considered a failure. The mage who wrote it went insane trying to cast it. His ingredients list missed a few things. Then Rumple acquired it, spent decades tweaking it, then it was stolen from him and sold to the Black Fairy. She kept it in a cavern guarded by Chernabogs, until Rumple stole it back from her. Or I should say, Cruella and Ursula and Maleficent stole it back for him, just before he stabbed them in the back and left them to die."

"No wonder they screwed him over. Just desserts."

"Yes, I finally figured out something he has yet to: what goes around, comes around."

"What you stab in the back will come back to bite you in the ass." Emma grinned into her sandwich.

"To put it crudely."

"What did he charge you for the curse? Must've been a fortune."

Regina tilted her head, remembering. "Come to think of it, he didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't charge me. Although he did give it to me with one condition: I had to swear I would cast it. As it turned out, he wanted the curse to be cast just as much as I did. He couldn't cast it himself, though, because he couldn't provide the final ingredient: the heart of the thing the caster loved the most. I assumed at the time that he didn't have anything he loved, nothing with a heart in it, anyway. I didn't know then about Belle. I hung onto that curse nearly a year before I worked myself up to enough of a rage to cast it. By then I knew about Belle, and I was a bit worried she would interfere. Soft-hearted little creature that she is, if she had known what Rumple and I had been working on all those years. . . . And the longer she lived in the Dark Castle, the more I saw him soften up. I was afraid I would lose him to her, and I needed him to stay strong, stay committed, which seemed unlikely to happen as he was falling in love with her. When I'd talk to him about the curse, he'd hem and haw, and that told me he was beginning to think he'd rather stay in the Enchanted Forest with her than come to Storybrooke with the rest of us. Powerful as I am, I can't compete with him in terms of experience; he could have stopped me, if he'd chosen to."

"Does that have something to do with why you had Belle locked up in the hospital basement for thirty years?"

"I had to separate them somehow, didn't I?" Regina spread her hands. "Voila. Here we are. Now,
"Okay, so the curse is ages old. That kinda blows my theory out of the water. I was thinking that if the curse was written, like, a few years before you came here, in the 1980's or '70s, that would explain it: you would've known about telephones, but not personal computers."

"Actually, you may be on to something there. The curse had a built-in self-adapting feature. Since no one from the Enchanted Forest had ever seen the Land without Magic, we didn't know what to expect, so Rumple wrote into the curse that as soon as we arrived here, the curse would reshape itself to fit this world. So again, voila. We have a Storybrooke with cars, electricity, hospitals, phones—everything that existed in this world in 1983."

"And the curse's defense mechanism built protections against the outside world, so no one out there could see Storybrooke if they drove past it or flew over it, and no one could call in, or send snail mail."

"Correct. And the curse was written to be adaptable, so that we could keep up with the rest of the world in innovations in medicine, technology and so forth, but Rumple and I may have forgotten to tell the curse to modify itself against incursion from modern communications. And when Snow recast the curse that brought us back here after Zelena toyed with us, she made no modifications to it. We were in a bit of hurry."

"Rain, sleet and gloom of night might not stop the mail from getting through, but the post office wasn't counting on a curse."

Regina chuckled. She glanced down at the Big Chief slip. "'Robinoflocksley.' I really must talk to him about that. With a username like that, he'll get all sorts of spam."

Emma sniffed. "Like yours is any better, 'thehonorablereginamills at Hotmail."

They fell silent until their lunches were finished and Granny had cleared the table.

"Are you going to do it? Write to him?"

Regina folded the slip carefully and placed it in her purse. "I suppose I am."

-----------------------------------------------

His moms may have pulled him out of his weekly therapy sessions with Archie, but they hadn't expressly forbidden him from dropping in on his old friend after school. Besides, if anyone asked, Henry had a good excuse to coming to Hopper's office: he needed information for a report for the new "Career Exploration" elective he and a bunch of other kids were taking this year. Now that students actually had some options to consider—now that they could actually grow and learn and choose a future for themselves—school administrators had decided they'd better be prepared, even though nobody knew how in the hell that future would happen. Well, in truth, they knew, but they didn't want to say it out loud: any day now, the first of last May's high school graduates would get up the gumption to kiss mom and dad goodbye and drive over that orange line. Forever.

So casting a cautious look over both shoulders, Henry ran up the back stairs to the second floor of the Professional Building. He didn't dare go in the front way; that entrance faced Granny's, and people who knew him were always coming in and out of Granny's. The back way faced Marine Garage, where only three people worked—and none of them had any truck with Mayor-to-Be-Again Mills. Henry skipped steps, getting to the top in record time, and ducked inside, panting as he rested his back against the closed door. Just in case anyone in the second-floor offices popped out as he was approaching, he sauntered all the way down the hall, past the optometrist's office, past Doc Miner's OB/GYN clinic, to the dentist's office at the front-facing end of the building. If
anyone asked, he could always say he'd come for his annual checkup. But no one exited any of the offices, so he hurried back to the one at the back side of the building and pressed his ear against the door. He heard Archie talking, so he hesitated; he knew Archie had had a lot of business since Mom broke the curse.

"Sit. Sit! If you want this treat, you're going to have to—that's a good boy."

Henry raised an eyebrow, then chuckled. He opened the door and entered without knocking to find Archie standing over a confused Dalmatian lying on the dog-bed. Archie swung around. "Oh, Henry. Hi. How are you?"

"Do you have any appointments this afternoon, Archie?"

"Not until five o'clock."

Henry sat down on the couch and shook his head. "My moms have got me going to the guidance counselor at school. They don't want me coming here for sessions any more."

"I know. Well, ah, that's... nice... Jill Jacks is a very nice person," Archie sounded doubtful.

Henry tapped his head. "Except she's kinda addle-brained."

"Well, she was involved in a skiing accident and suffered a major concussion. Took quite a spill, so I heard, and never fully recovered."

"Archie, you know how she got her job? She was the only applicant who knew the difference between Dr. Spock and Mr. Spock." Henry sighed. "You know all about me, Archie. You care about me. You're the one I want to talk to."

"And I would like to continue our sessions. I'll talk to Emma again. Maybe after she's had some time to cool down—most of her anger seems to be focused on my stance toward you having a relationship with Mr. Gold."

Henry shrugged his backpack off and settled in to the couch. "They think I'm at Grace's. She's covering for me, but I have to be home by five."

"Well, Henry," Archie strolled over to his mini-fridge, "you don't want to disobey your mothers. But if we talk about neutral things, like school or sports, I'm sure they wouldn't object." Archie took out two bottles of orange juice from the fridge.

Henry poised his hands for a catch and Archie tossed a bottle at him. "School's okay. We're learning 'life skills' in the career prep class."

"That's good. Things like how to balance a checkbook, how to change a tire?" Hopper pulled the cap off his bottle and settled into his easy chair.

"Yeah, and how to balance work and family. Speaking of family: Do you have my grandfather's email address?"

"You... get right down to it, don't you? I believe I do." Archie couldn't help it: his eyes cut over to the Rolodex on his desk, giving away his secret. He quickly returned his attention to Henry, but it was too late. "I believe it's on his business card, so that I could contact him regarding my rental of this office. But, Henry, your mothers made it quite clear they don't want him to have any contact with you."
"Archie, he's the only one I can talk to about my father."

"Emma's a forthright—"

"She doesn't lie to me, but she only knew my dad a short while. Grandpa Gold knew him when he was my age, and before. It makes a difference."

Archie nodded. "It makes a difference. Let me think about it, Henry."

"Don't I have a right to talk to my own grandfather?"

"Yes, but your mothers have a right to decide what's best for you right now. I need to think about this."


"Henry... are you doing all right, after what happened with Ursula and Cruella?"

"I am getting kinda tired of being the pinball for all these villains. Gramps has been teaching me fighting techniques, but seems like everyone who attacks me has magic or a gun, and I'm sick of it. Grandpa was starting to teach me magic. If I could get Mom to teach me, I might be able to protect myself next time. 'Cause you know it's going to happen again, in this messed-up place."

"Let's talk about that, shall we? I don't think your mothers would object to that conversation. Let's talk about this messed-up place and how a kid can protect himself in it."

Henry talked. He kept right on talking, pouring out his frustrations, until a knock at the door interrupted and Archie had to get up. When Archie came back a minute later, apologizing that his next appointment had arrived, Henry jumped up, grabbed his bookbag, patted Pongo one last time and chirped, "Thanks, Archie. See you later." He climbed out the window to the fire escape to make his exit, lest Archie's patient recognize him and report him to Emma or Regina. He trotted home, checking in with Grace along the way.

Once safe inside his bedroom at Mom Regina's, he reached into his pocket for a little white card embossed in gold. He read it with a smile, then read it again with a frown. He reached into his backpack for his chem notebook and compared what was written on the notebook's last page to what was written on the card. He grunted. "She's got it wrong." The email address Belle had shared with him when they first started working together on the boundary curse—back when Belle had started believing she and Rumple might reunite someday—was wrong. Of course, Belle was still hooked on books and seldom used email; she might not know what a difference a period could make.

In his notebook he'd copied "mr. goldantiquities at gmail."

The business card read "mrgoldantiquities at gmail."

Heart pounding, he hopped onto his Ipad and found an email verifier. The business card address proved valid; the address he'd obtained from Belle did not.

Would Belle feel any differently about her husband if she knew that it was the fault of her own good punctuation usage that none of her emails had received a reply?

Henry logged on to his email account, preparing his thoughts for a message to his grandfather, when a new message popped up: "Henry, I expect you will return the item you borrowed from my
office. You can drop it by after school tomorrow, and please plan on staying a few minutes so we can chat about the concept of private property. Thank you, Archie."
Zelena reclines in her lounge chair. She's wearing an orange bikini that clashes something awful with her skin; her hair is piled up under a beach hat and she's sipping a mimosa. Between sips she chews on the straw. Behind her and to her left, on a raised platform, is the Sorcerer's Hat, silent and humble now, but they both know she can pop it open with a flick of his dagger and magic of all flavors and strengths will fly out, a Baskin Robbins of magic that makes his stomach growl. Behind her and to her right, also on a raised platform, is a dog kennel. Inside it, Belle kneels, head drooping, hair covering her face.

"Choose, doll," Zelena suggests in a tone as light as if she were inviting him to choose between Chunky Monkey or Cherry Garcia. She flicks her hand (and the dagger contained in it) behind her head. "Because you've been such a good boy, you may have one, but only one. Choose wisely, pet."

Ah, but he's much too clever to take this test. He'll take the magic, because as soon as he owns it, he can banish the witch and free Belle. He sneers and opens his mouth to voice his choice, and a hand shakes his shoulder. "Rumple? Rumple, they're coming. Wake up."

Dizzy, he lifted himself onto an elbow and blinked at Sam. "What...?"

"Wake up, Rumple. Do you wanna miss Tuesday?"

He sat up and rubbed his eyes into focus.

The campers (Rumple decided he'd think of them that way, as if they were some odd family that had come to this Portland park for a week of recreation and togetherness) were awake and moving around, though the sun had barely risen. He glanced with unveiled disappointment at the Sterno stove, now cold, and the cook pot, now washed; in fact, everyone in camp was washed, combed and freshly dressed. Rumple's stomach betrayed him. In that fake posh accent, Harridge assured him that "breakfast would be forthcoming" and advised he "might want to be prepared for it," jutting his chin toward the public restroom. Rumple took the hint, accepting a sliver of soap from Fred, "keeper of the assets," as Harridge dubbed him, causing Frank to grin. It was then that Rumple noticed for the first time Frank lacked most, if not all, his upper teeth. Perhaps that explained his silence. "It's Tuesday," Frank's wife waved a cheery goodbye as Rumple ambled off to the restroom with his soap and his bundle of clothes.

Good gods. Such a short time ago he'd washed with Blenheim Bouquet, $30 a bar, and dried himself with Egyptian cotton bath towels and after dressing carefully, would join his wife in the kitchen for eggs Benedict. What was she eating this morning, he wondered. Had she remembered to set her alarm? She so often overslept.

Then he stripped off his stained shirt and filled the rusted sink with water, and reminded himself his wife wanted nothing to do with him. In a flare of annoyance, he flicked his wrist, commanding his magic to create a clean shirt, preferably D & G or Armani, though right
now he'd settle for K-Mart. But of course the wrist flick only resulted in a bent wrist. He
grared at his wrinkled old face until the restroom door swung open and a man in fatigue
pants entered and made use of a urinal. Rumple tried to ignore him and proceeded with his
wash.

When he rejoined the camp, all six of his new companions had their eyes fixed on the parking
lot. "It's Tuesday," Frank's wife reiterated, squeezing Rumple's arm. "Have we met?" She
pointed to Frank. "This is my... my..." She frowned in concentration, then smiled
brightly. "It's Tuesday." As she looked down into her vacant eyes, he was beginning to catch
on to why the others called her Foggy. He'd seen this same vacancy in his Aunt Flora's eyes,
so long ago, just before she wandered out into the snow in her nightgown one night. He and
Aunt Fauna had been forced to sell her spinning wheel to give her a decent burial.

"Rumple, look!" Sam tugged at him, urging him to stand. "They're here!"

A green van pulled into the parking lot, and before it had come to a stop, people were
following it. Adults, children, the elderly, someone in a wheelchair, someone carrying a cat—
they seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. His own little troop joined the parade. "These
people," he said lowly to Harridge, "do they all live here, in the park?"

Harridge answered distractedly, eyes fixed to the van, which had come to a stop. "Various
places. It's a slightly different mix each week. Step up the pace, man—if you can. The supply
isn't endless, you know." Harridge didn't wait; he caught up with Shaggy and they blended
in to the crowd.

"If you're too late, don't worry," a shy female voice said from behind him. He glanced back
at Sam's mother, who was jogging to catch up, her son in her arms. "They always give Sam
more than he can eat." She nodded meaningfully at her son. "He has them charmed."

He wanted to ask who "they" were, but Jill and Sam had blended into the crowd. He stopped
to assess the situation: thirty or more people in various degrees of health, age and, judging by
their dress, need had pressed up against the back doors and sides of the truck. They stepped
back, though, when the driver and a passenger hopped out, went around to the back and
opened the doors. In a few minutes a folding table emerged, then boxes, ice chests and crates.
The public formed a misshapen line as the deliverers stacked up paper plates and wrapped
plastic ware, then the ice chests, some of which had been lined with aluminum foil, were
opened and the deliverers brought out tongs and serving spoons. The first person in line, a
middle-aged man in fatigue pants and a black t-shirt, stuck a package of cutlery into his
pants pocket and held out a plate to be filled with toast, bacon, scrambled eggs, a sweet roll
and an orange. The deliverers seemed to recognize him, or at least they chatted easily with
him as they loaded his plate. Now well supplied, he ambled off, and another took his place at
the head of the line.

Rumple stood back, shocked. He turned away when Fred and Foggy came up to the head of
the line. He couldn't watch any more. A thought had hit him in the gut and he wasn't ready
to confront it: they, and by association, he were beggars. His eyes stung and, despite the
complaints of his stomach, he returned to the camp alone. He had time enough to rub at his
eyes and push down the lump in his throat before his companions came home with their
plates filled and their steps energized. "I must say," Harridge declared, waving his spork
through the air, "Matthew grows more handsome every week. A meal tastes so much more
delightful when it's served by those long, lean hands."

"He's been working out with weights," Shaggy said. "He admitted it."

Even Fred yakked as he spooned eggs into Foggy's mouth. Rumple sat silent, embarrassed
for them: even at his poorest and weakest, in his long limp back from the war front, he had
never begged for food (there was a difference, he felt, between begging and what he had done
last night when he admitted to Shaggy he was hungry.) How could these people swallow their
pride with their free meal?

From the corner of his eye, he spied Sam and Jill whispering; Jill nodded and Sam came over
to Rumple. In his outstretched hand he held a pastry wrapped in a napkin. "Were you too
late, Rumple?"

"Too late? I don't know—for what, Sam?"

"Did they runned out of food?" Sam plopped down beside Rumple.

"Oh. Ah, no, I just didn't want any."

"Do you got a belly ache?"

"No, I'm fine."

"When I got a belly ache, I don't want to eat, but Mama gives me crackers and bread. Then I
don't threwed up. Did you threwed up, Rumple? You should eat some toast."

"Oh. Yes, I used to give Bae bread when he had an upset stomach." Then he frowned: he had
meant to avoid any mention of his family. That would just invite questions that he wasn't up
to answering.

"You want a sweet?" Sam made his offering. "It's all right. Ms. Dylan gave me two. Mama
doesn't like for me to eat too much sweets."

Rumple glanced down at the open palm. Sam was offering a bear claw. For a fraction of a
second, Rumple wanted to push the treat away: it reminded him of Emma, which reminded
him that she, along with almost everyone in Storybrooke, had turned against him.

Especially Belle.

"You can have it," Sam prodded. "I can't save it for tomorrow. The ants will get all over it."

His cheeks burning, Rumple felt stuck between humiliation and reluctance to insult a small
child. He could recall with perfect clarity Bae's pride in the handmade gifts he'd given his
papa; he couldn't hurt this boy's feelings. "Thank you, Sam. It's very kind of you to share."
He accepted the bear claw, taking a bite to show his gratitude. It was a hard swallow, but
Sam was pleased, so he took another bite. "Delicious."

Sam giggled and ran back to his mother, who kissed his sticky hand.

"They come back on Thursday," Fred volunteered.
"Who are they?"

"Matthew and Brenda Dylan. They're married. They run a home on Valley Street."

"A home? Foster children?"

Fred cocked his head. "Naw, for people like us. They're always full, though. 'No room at the inn.'"

"It's Tuesday," Foggy grinned at Rumple, then licked her orange.

Harridge stood up, gathering empty plates. "Help me clean up, Rumple." The firmness in his voice left no room for argument. As the men carried the paper plates to a trash can, Harridge said, "Pride's a strange thing, isn't it? Some men seem to think it's better to steal than to accept charity, as if the work involved in stealing somehow means you've earned it."

"Just wasn't hungry," Rumple muttered.

"They serve pancakes on Thursdays."

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It was quite out of character for him, but with nothing else to do until noon when the library opened, he reclined against the wall of the overpass, folded his arms and let his eyes close. Just for an hour or so, he told himself... just an hour... . . .

_She shoves a tray under his cage door: turpentine in a mug and an assortment of nails covered in spaghetti sauce. "Eat up, dearie. We have a baby to kidnap." An order, so the dagger compels him to obey: his teeth shatter as he bites down on a nail. She giggles girlishly. Quite pretty she is, green skin and all; as a man of unusual complexion himself, he can appreciate exotic beauty. She desires him. If he plays along, she'll grant him some privileges: a bath, a comb, a toothbrush. A meat pie. He tries to smile back at her as he swallows the first nail. "Delicious. Thank you, Zelena.""

"Good boy. Eat it all, and when you're finished we'll go kill your son. Maybe we'll picnic on his grave. Won't that be lovely?"

"Lovely," he agrees, gumming the second nail.

A hand shook him awake. "Hey, bud." He pried his eyes open, expecting to see a green woman crouched over him, dangling his dagger, but the concerned face peering back at him was sunburnt and hairy, and the dangled object was a flask. "Hey. Thought you could use this."

He accepted the flask and took a taste: cheap whisky that could have dissolved nails. He ran his tongue over his teeth. He was relieved to find he had a full set. He took another sip and returned the flask to its owner. "Thanks."

Shaggy shrugged. "We all have 'em."

He looked around the camp to find he and Shaggy were alone. "What time is it?"

"Why? You got places to go?" Shaggy grinned crookedly, but his eyes held hope for an
affirmative answer.

"Library." Rumple stood and stretched. "Job hunting."

"Yeah. Good luck with that." Shaggy took a swig from the flask.

He wasn't one hundred percent certain he would be welcome back; after all, no one had invited him. But he'd purposely left his clothes bundle at the camp so that he'd have an excuse to return, and if they didn't accept him into the group he could leave with his dignity intact. "Contribute something," Harridge had said initially, so he swiped a salt shaker from a deli, and if the group welcomed him back, he'd have something to offer. It was a far cry from the bottles of wine that he could have brought, just a few months ago... if anyone had ever invited him to visit.

The library closed at eight, the librarians calling him "sir" again as they bade him goodnight. He wandered the streets until night had settled in; he knew every landmark, every alley and every place that cops and travelers hung out in a one-mile radius of the park. He could call this territory his neighborhood, he supposed, more than he could have called the Storybrooke street that was named after him, where he could name the homeowners but had never set foot inside their houses (no one on Gold Avenue owed him money, and no one called out a greeting to him as he passed by their homes, twice a day, at 9:15 a.m. and at 8:15 p.m. on the dot. No one even glanced up from their lawn chores or their play; in fact, they ducked their heads down as he passed by.)

But as he approached the underpass, Sam came running at him. For a moment, Rumple thought the boy would hug him about the knees, as Bae used to, but Sam drew up short before that could happen. "Hi, Rumple! Guess what we did today?"

He figured then that he was welcome back, even expected. No one in the group would cross Sam. He continued walking in, the boy trotting at his side. "What did you do today?"

"We went to the children's museum. We went on a bus. There's a fire truck and a car and a boat," Sam frowned, trying to remember, "and a lot of other stuff, but the fire truck was the best. I want to be a fireman when I grow up. Were you ever a fireman, Rumple?"

"No, I never was." He fought off the temptation to add but I was a magician and I could do many, many magical things.

"Hey," Shaggy greeted him from the Sterno stove. He was dumping a sliced tomato into the pot. "Stew tonight. Potatoes, onion, tomato, beef broth."

"Wish we had roast beef to add to it," Harridge said. "My mother made the most delicious beef stew."

Rumple provided his offering. "This may flavor it some."

Shaggy shook some of the salt into the pot. "It'll be another fifteen minutes or so. Might as well have a seat."

"The museum gave free admission to kids under five today," Jill explained. "And only two
dollars for parents. They do that once a month."

"We'll teach ya all the freebies in town," Shaggy suggested.

"No time like the present to begin your education," Harridge said. "At least, until the stew is ready. Let us begin with safe places you can spend a rainy day or a cold night."

"Or a hot day, like today. The Fifth Avenue Movie House. You can sneak in through the emergency exit. The alarm doesn't work. Hide in the men's room until fifteen minutes after the movie's started. The usher only checks the house once, so you're safe after he's left," Shaggy provided.

"A laundromat," Jill said. "No one notices you. People leave behind newspapers and magazines, and those miniature boxes of detergent, and you can always grab a dryer with leftover time on it."

"The high school on Boxer Avenue. It's a bit of a walk, but they'll let you in to football games for free in the last quarter."

"There are two Goodwill donation stations in this area. Go after dark and you can pick up clothes and shoes. Or if you're good with your hands, you can find stuff to repair and sell to pawn shops."

"You can get free haircuts on Friday afternoons at the Brackenridge Beauty School. Sometimes the students make snide remarks about you, but it's a free haircut, so who's complainin'?" Fred shrugged.

"And minor dental work from the dental school on Eighth Avenue. Teeth and feet are the first to go when you live on the street," Jill said quietly. "Baking soda's only sixty cents a box at Shipley's Grocery and it works as good as toothpaste. A box will last a lot longer, too."

"Sprinkle some baking soda in your socks to keep your feet dry. You can also use it for deodorant. And you can get free samples of new products at the grocery stores."

"When the frost comes, 'round about late October, we'll show you which shelters to stay in. You have to get there by three o'clock 'cause they fill up fast, and they kick you out after breakfast, and you've got to sleep with your shoes and coat under your pillow so they don't get swiped, but it's not too bad."

"If the shelter's full, you can ride Route #3 on the bus line all night for $2.10. It's kind of boring—the bus just goes up and down Fifth Avenue—but the drivers won't kick you out if you fall asleep."

"The Booty School gives free Tootsie Pops," Sam contributed. "If you sit real still when they cut your hair."

"There you go, Rumple, my lad," Harridge surmised. "A whirlwind education on the art of street survival."

Fred added, "When times get rough, we'll show you how to panhandle the right way, so the cops don't mess with you."
"Stick with us. You'll learn," Shaggy said. There it was: an invitation to stay. Rumple smiled a little.

"It's Thursday." Foggy poked his shoulder and he sat up, startled, then relaxed as the noises of his fellow campers reminded him where he was—and it wasn't a cage. The sun had begun its rise and someone had put water on the Sterno stove to boil for coffee, and if not for the facts that he had slept on a blanket over concrete last night and he hadn't had a true bath in ages, Rumple could almost pretend it was the beginning of a normal day. He followed Harridge and Fred to the public toilets, where they washed, combed their hair and brushed their teeth with baking soda. As they stood side by side at the sinks, Harridge said in a low voice, "I know it's embarrassing the first time or two, but you really should join us for breakfast today, Rumple. Man can't live on half-eaten Big Macs and camp stew forever. No one will think the less of you; we're all in the same boat."

"What about them—the people who bring the food? Don't they—well, here I am, an able-bodied man—"

Harridge glanced down at the foot that Rumple was washing in the sink. With his pants leg drawn up, his mangled ankle was exposed. Reddening, Rumple ignored the meaningful look and kept washing his foot.

"Able-bodied," he repeated emphatically. "Don't they wonder why I'm not working?"

Harridge shook his head. "They might have, once upon a time, but the Dylans have been delivering food here a long time. They run a shelter on Valley Street. Small place; it's always full, more's the pity for us. But they haven't forgotten us just because they don't have room for us. And no, they don't think any less of an able-bodied man who can't get work. Rumor has it Matt was homeless himself, about ten years ago."

"Matt. . . Matt Dylan? As in—"

Harridge shrugged. "Maybe his parents were Gunsmoke fans. Before you ask, no, his wife isn't named Kitty. We don't make any cracks about his name, and he doesn't make any cracks about our living conditions."

Rumple ducked his head. "No, of course not." He carefully dried his mangled ankle with some paper towels, then slipped on a fresh sock and tucked the foot back into his shoe. He had to sit on the floor to wash his left foot.

Shaggy poked his head into the men's room. "Get a move on. Chow's here!"

"They're early," Harridge observed. "Will you join us?" He stretched out his hand and Rumple accepted his assistance in standing up.

Rumple suspected the question to hold a double meaning: Harridge was inviting him not just to breakfast, but to inclusion in the group. To say yes would be an admission of the status he'd been denying. But the fact was, he needed whatever these people and their associates could give, because he was in fact homeless. "I do like pancakes," he admitted.

"Thattaboy."
SEPTEMBER 2014

"Oh!" Belle and Henry said in unison as one tried to enter at the same time the other tried to exit Archie's office. "Sorry, Belle," Henry said, as Belle apologized too for almost bumping into the boy. Henry tossed back over his shoulder, "Thanks for the interview, Dr. Hopper. I'm sure I'll get an A on my careers paper now."

"You're welcome, Henry, and good luck." Archie stood as Belle came inside. His notepad and his favorite pen (green ink) were clutched in his right hand, and the forefinger of his left jabbed at the nosepiece of his glasses. "G-good morning, Belle. Please be seated. W-would you like some tea?"

Belle smoothed her skirt as she lowered herself onto the couch. "Good morning. Yes, please. Morning, Pongo." She patted the dog's head. A small smile brightened her face.

"Good news, Belle? You seem quite cheerful this morning." Archie filled two mugs with water and set them in the microwave.

"That was a little lie, wasn't it? That bit about a career paper." Belle crossed her legs comfortably.

"Why, ah, would you think that?"

"Because you're jumpy as a mouse in a cage full of hungry cats. You're poking at your glasses, you're stammering and you're blushing."

"If you ever get tired of the library, you should speak to Emma about a job in detective work."

Archie prepared his tea tray.

"I also notice you avoided answering my question."

"Well, you understand—confidentiality is a sacred thing in my profession."

"As it is in mine, Dr. Hopper. Questions that you ask a librarian to research, books that you borrow from the library, websites that you visit on our computers—all of that is confidential. So I won't press any further." Belle took a moment to scratch behind Pongo's ears. "I've made a decision, Archie. About my status. Living in limbo as I have this summer is—dishonest. It's time I stepped out from under my ex-husband's shadow and made an identity and a life for myself."

"Ex-husband," Archie murmured. "Your mind is made up, then."

"Yes. I've made an appointment with Albert Spencer to begin the proceedings."

"The proceedings for what, Belle?" When she hesitated, he prodded, "If you can't say the word, how can you be ready to take the action?"

Her voice fell an octave. "Divorce."

"Why now, Belle? You've been apart from your husband for nearly four months. Why now, and not before?"

"I suppose, before, I harbored a hope that he would change. A few weeks, a few months apart, and he'd realize what we had together, and he'd. . . ."
"He'd what? Vow to give up magic for you? Become a hero for you?"

"Choose me." She gnawed her lip. "Over everything else. Magic, power, money. Because I'm his wife, and isn't that what marriage is, a promise to choose your spouse over everything else? And because I gave up everything for him."

"Did you? For example?"

"My own identity, for one. I came to realize that, during the year Zelena held him captive. Without him to come to for information, they came to me. But when he came back, they stopped coming. They stopped inviting me to their homes, their parties. They treated me with the same suspicion they treated him."

"Even Ruby?"

"Even Ruby. When Rumple returned, suddenly she had no time for me."

"You were pretty busy yourself, as I recall, getting married so soon after his return."

"Yes, but when I invited her to be my bridesmaid, she made up an excuse."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"And after the honeymoon, when I invited her to come to our house for tea, she made up another excuse. It's as if, whenever he's around, people think of me as an extension of him, as if I have no mind of my own. As if I agree with everything he says and does."

"But since he's been gone, that's changed."

"Yes. Slowly, but it's changing. I understand it: he's done some despicable things. They're right to fear him."

"Do you fear him?"

"No. Well, not for myself. I believe he loves me and wouldn't hurt me—intentionally. But he wouldn't hesitate to hurt my friends, my father—I have to live in this town; it's not as though I can move somewhere else and start again. I need these people. Maybe he doesn't; he's always been a solitary person; I was his only friend, apparently not a close one, because he withheld his plans from me."

"After a year being tortured and locked in—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted. "I saw him in that cage. I know the kind of person Zelena was, the physical and psychological torture she could inflict, even upon a man she fancied herself in love with. I know all that. It's because of that that I was patient with him, respected his privacy—and it turns out I shouldn't have. It would have been better for him and our marriage if I'd forced him to come to you for therapy, or at least forced him to tell me what she'd done to him."

"He was, as I understand it, the most powerful sorcerer in the world. How could you have forced him into anything?"

"I would have said to him, 'If you love me and want to preserve our marriage—'"

"Belle, this may surprise you, but every wife says the same thing, and every husband will relent for a short time, but inside, he's seething with resentment. When a wife throws down the gauntlet,
things do change—they get worse."

"So how do they get past their problems?"

Archie cocked an eyebrow. "You ask this now? I thought your mind was made up; divorce was inevitable."

She shrugged. "It is. I suppose I just need to know what I could have done."

"Gold is a man of contracts and negotiation. That's where he feels safe, not in the blind trust of friendship and marriage. Perhaps that would have been the place to start: make a deal with him. But it's a moot point now... isn't it?"

A drop of moisture glistened in the corner of her eye. "Yes, it is."

"There's a book that I'd like you to read." Archie walked over to his bookcase, knelt, scanned the shelves and selected a volume, which he carried to her. "Take your time with it; some of these chapters, you may wish to read more than once. There's much to be learned here."

She read the title as she took the book from him. "On Death and Dying."

"What you're experiencing is a kind of death. Two psychologists, Holmes and Rahe, wrote that the second most stressful event a person can experience is divorce, second only to the death of a spouse. You've experienced both of those in the past two years. You need to grieve. This book can help."

They were in her wheelhouse now, and both knew it. "Thanks, Archie. I'll begin reading it tonight."

As she rose to leave, Hopper added, "Belle, earlier, I asked you if you feared him. I have another question for you: do you fear for him?"

Now the tear made its way to the corner of her mouth. "Every day."

Heart pounding, Regina tiptoed barefooted upstairs with her laptop tucked under her arm. Henry had gone to bed an hour ago; his bedroom door was closed and his light out. She could have waited, of course, for Monday to do what she was about to do. Henry would be at school, then back at Emma's, and she would have complete privacy. But she couldn't wait until Monday. She'd never really been good at waiting.

She closed her bedroom door behind her, locked it, plugged the laptop into the electrical socket at bedside and turned the computer on. As it connected to wi-fi, she eased into the bed, pillows propping her up. She brought the laptop onto her knees and watched the little start-up circle swirl. A little hypnotic thing, it was; relaxing. She should use this time to plan what she would say in her email, but planning, which required waiting, had never been a long suit. She'd always felt she was at her best when under pressure, anyway.

The computer was connected. She logged onto her email account. Gnawing at her lip, she started the composer.

She had no idea what to type in the subject box, so she left it blank for now.


"My darling Robin." No. What if Roland happened to be with him at the time he opened his email? Or what if Marian had his password and read his emails?
"Dear Robin," then. She stared at the large empty space beneath the salutation. She didn't know where to begin, so she just plunged in, as was her trademark. "I certainly hope I have the correct Robinofloxley. If I don't, please correct me and ignore the rest of this message. If you are Robin, father of Roland, friend of the poor, master of the forest, and beloved of Regina Mills, then please read on.

"Robin, I miss you more than words can say. I'm spending every minute of my free time trying to solve the little problem of the town limits. It's a slow go—you know I'm more of a doer than a researcher; at times like this, I almost wish I had my old tutor beside me. He actually enjoyed tinkering in his lab, can you imagine that? Henry's helping me and he's fabulous with book research—no surprise there. It's bringing us closer together, I think. I see my stubbornness in him. We won't give up, Robin. We're going to solve this problem and make two-way travel possible." She did her best to avoid any reference to magic or curses. "We need to do this for the sake of our young people, who have to be free to make choices. But I have to confess I'm also doing it for myself. I need to know something, Robin. If Henry and I succeed in our research—or even if we don't, and I might decide I can't wait any longer—"

An incoming message appeared beneath the one she was composing. "Ah, go away!" She moved her letter to Robin out of the way with the intention of banishing the incoming message—probably spam, or some inquiry from her campaign manager, or notification of an invoice for her clothing store. She never received interesting email. She seized her mouse in preparation for an attack against the intruding message.

"From: robinofloxley
To—"

She swallowed hard.

"From: robinofloxley."

Her hand shook as she opened the message.

"Regina, my love."

She gasped.

"Regina, my love,

After great trial and error, and much encouragement from the librarians at the New York Public Library, I have finally conquered this beast they call the Internet. I hope. Gods, Regina, I hope this is you and not some other Regina Mills!"

"Oh gods, Robin, yes, it's me!" she yelped at the screen. Then she collected herself, with the help of a sip of wine, and she continued reading.

"My love, if it's you reading this, please, please move this huge boulder of anxiety from my chest and answer me right away, if I have the slightest chance of ever seeing you again. Or if that's too much to ask for, at least tell me if you still care for me as I still care very much for you."

She yelped again, the laptop sliding off her knees, and she scrambled to rescue it from her Laura Ashley sheets, as if the sheets would swallow it, and Robin's message, whole. A sneezing fit overcame her, and as she twisted to the side to yank a Kleenex from the bedside box, the laptop slid to the floor, its power cord pulling away from the electrical outlet. "Eegads!" Another sneezing fit attacked her.
She tossed back the remainder of her glass of wine, then counted to ten, then calmly (except for her shaking knees) put everything to rights so she could read her message in its entirety. Whatever else he had to say—he'd kept this first message short, in case he'd made a mistake, either sending it to the wrong address or sending it to a woman who'd given up on him—whatever else he had to say, he'd said the magic words: "I still care very much for you."

True Love, the most powerful magic of all. Patiently, they'd knock down the barriers between them.

Heart pounding, Henry constructed what he used to call a "reading fort" of blankets and pillows. He adored his Ipad, the lighted screen of which made late-night sneak reading so much easier. Through the walls, he heard Regina sneezing and moving around in her bedroom: he'd have to make this quick, lest some noise from him alert her.

"To: mrgoldantiquities
From: truestbeliever
Re: It's me, Henry
Hi Grandpa!
Where are you? Write me back, okay?
Love,
Henry"

He smiled to himself as he shut off the Ipad.

Something sneaky was going on with Regina. That fact by itself was business as usual, and since Regina's conversion to the Light Side, it wasn't any of Emma's business. Regina was a grown woman, entitled to her secrets. But this current secret activity seemed to involve Henry too—he'd been asking for increasing amounts of time at Regina's house, and his behavior while at home with the Charmings hadn't improved since his grandpa had been banished from town for the second time: he'd merely moved on from outbursts and accusations to the silent treatment. Cut him some slack, Emma advised her parents. He's a teenager. But it was time for her to find a new place of residence for the two of them, so she began apartment hunting, while still keeping an eye on Regina.

And then one night the stars aligned perfectly: Josiah Dove called her to inform her that a two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath had opened up just a block from the Sheriff's Office, and considering it was a bonus to have an officer of the law living in the complex, he knock a hundred a month off the rent Mr. Gold had previously listed it for. On top of that, she'd won a free steak dinner for two, for being Granny's 10,000th customer. And on top of that, she figured out what Regina's deal was.

On her way out of Granny's, Regina had dropped a folder full of papers and Emma caught a glimpse. "Regina, my love," the message began. Emma needed no further information. Clearly, Regina had been corresponding with Robin Hood. Equally clearly, the correspondence had been going very well.

Hook chattered throughout the steak dinner. Emma "yes dear'ed" him periodically. But her mind had traveled to New York City—as she feared Regina soon would.
Belle had a place in this town, as a fill-in consultant on all things magic, a sort of junior Rumplestiltskin. She had enjoyed this position during her ex-husband's absences, first with the journey to Neverland, then his "death," then his long imprisonment. The work that the townsfolk brought her challenged her intellectually and fulfilled her emotionally: she was making a unique and much needed contribution to her society. Yet, she had no real society of her own. No gal pals to go shopping with, or watch romcoms with, or trade recipes and confidences with. At one time, she'd thought Ruby or Ariel would fill that empty space for her, but though they seemed happy enough to see her when she'd drop by their homes or their places of work, neither made an effort to reach out in return.

She attempted first to make the church her society. The ladies of the church, including the nuns, welcomed her and found plenty of work for her, organizing bake sales, gathering used clothing for the thrift store, writing the church bulletin, but none of them ever invited her over to their homes. The church ladies also had a nasty habit of referring to her as "Belle Gold." Some of the church ladies took it upon themselves to "counsel" her on church law concerning divorce. When the eldest of the ladies began to urge her to seek annulment, she fired back, "Under what circumstances, Mrs. Fowler? Our marriage was consummated, repeatedly, and to the satisfaction of both my husband and me." The poor church lady was sent away gasping in shock.

Belle withdrew from the church after that. But she still needed friendship, so she decided she would do what she did best: read. She formed a book club, meeting twice a month after hours at the library. The first book discussed: On Death and Dying. Attendance at the first meeting: three, besides herself: Betsy Pike, widow of a fisherman killed by Cora; Clive Grover, beloved of a mailman killed by Cora and glamoured into looking like Archie; and Emma, who'd come on the advice of Archie. "I'm not a widow, not a lover or even a girlfriend of someone who died, but that doesn't mean I don't miss Neal," she admitted, her arms folded and her eyes fixed to the floor.

Well, it was a start. Belle did find she felt a little better after the first meeting—though she took care to choose a comedy for the next discussion, lest her group become known around town as the Grief Club. "Very good, everyone," she said brightly as the discussion wound down. "Cookies, anyone? For our next meeting, we'll be discussing Confessions of a Shopaholic."

"Hey, Belle, how are you?"

Belle looked up from Shopaholic, blinking to bring her mind back to reality. A young man in a Marine’s Garage workshirt sat down on the vinyl-covered stool beside her. She couldn't recall his name (though she could recall the titles of the last five books he'd checked out: he preferred sports biographies), so she merely said, "Good morning" and resumed her reading.

"Hey, Will. What'll you have?" Ruby came over with a menu.

Oh, so that was his name. Will Scarlet, formerly of the Merry Men, now a service technician in training. "Meatball sandwich and curly fries," the mechanic ordered, "and a cup of black coffee." As Ruby moved away to the cook's window, he glanced over Belle's shoulder. "Whatcha reading?"

"Chick lit."

"Are you enjoying it?"

"I am, yes."

"How's your Honda running?"

"Fine."
"We're having a special on tune-ups. If you want to bring it in, I can give you a lift back to the library so you don't have to sit in the waiting room."

"I'll do that. Thanks." She kept on reading, or tried to.

"There's a new release at the Bijou this weekend. A Sandra Bullock flick. She's an astronaut lost in space."

"Sounds exciting." She closed her book. He was trying so hard to get her attention that to not give it was downright mean.

"Well, uhm, I know the library closes at five on Saturdays. The movie starts at seven. There'd be time for dinner beforehand."

"Yes, there would be."

Ruby returned with the coffee pot. "Just go ahead and ask her, Scarlet."

"You aren't really helping, Ruby," he grumbled.

"Okay, okay." Ruby raised her hands in mock surrender. "I've got other customers I can annoy." She took her coffee pot around to the other diners.

"What I was trying to say, before I was so rudely interrupted, was would you like to go out with me Saturday night?" His face was so hopeful. "Dinner at Dave's, then the movie? Or if you don't like science fiction, it's karaoke night at that new barbeque place."

"Sound like fun." She gave it some serious thought: at last, someone wanted to befriend the soon-to-be ex-wife of Rumplestiltskin, though she suspected what he was asking for was more than hanging out with a friend. "The thing is, I'm not ready to date yet. Legally, I'm still married. And, I guess, in some ways, emotionally too."

"Oh. I see. Well, maybe another time, huh? When you're ready, give me a call, huh?"

"Thank you for the invitation, Will. You cheered me up."

"Not enough, I guess. Enjoy your book, Belle." He picked up his coffee cup and moved to a table.

Emma had sent Henry over to study at the Zimmers'. She had dinner waiting when David returned from his shift and Snow had brought Baby Neal back from the sitter's. "What's all this?" Snow passed the baby to David and peered into the pots boiling on the stove. "Spaghetti, garlic bread, salad—is Killian coming over?"

"No, just wanted to do something nice for you guys." But she tossed the salad a little too vigorously, and her mother caught her out.

"What's wrong, Emma? You're nervous."

David shifted the baby from one shoulder to the other as a string of drool dampened his shirt. "You aren't getting ready to tell us something, are you? Like you and Hook—"

"Killian," mother and daughter corrected in unison.

"—are getting married or having a baby or something?"

"David!" Snow dropped the spoon with which she'd been tasting the sauce.
"No!" Emma released the salad forks and wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "Look, yeah, I do have something to tell you, but it's not that. Nothing like that. Killian and I are in no position for any of that. He just started his job. He hasn't even learned to drive yet. Not well enough I'd trust him on the road, anyway. No." She made a shooing motion toward the couch. "Please. Just—let's just sit down for a minute and I'll explain."

Pursing their lips, the Charmings seated themselves as their daughter had requested. She sat across from them in David's La-Z Boy. Running her palms against her jeans, she took a deep breath. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, okay? And I love you—I love you both so much, and I love Neal, and I'm glad you're in my life and Henry's. It's just that—this apartment was never meant for three adults, a baby and a teenager. And as grateful as I am that you're here for me, and I'm always here for you—"

Snow released a nervous laugh. "Oh, Emma. I'm so glad. We've been trying to find a way to say the same thing to you." She grasped David's knee, signaling him to contribute to the conversation; he nodded but wisely kept his mouth shut. "As much as we love having you and Henry with us, we're just too crowded here."

Emma's voice carried a note of alarm. "But—but—I don't think a bigger house is the answer. I think—don't be mad at me—but I think Henry and I need to find a place of our own. I mean, we're just at different stages in our lives, you know?"

Snow nodded. "We've got a baby, you're dating—"

"Henry's going to start driving before too long, and then he'll be dating, and then he'll be going—" Emma interrupted herself. "So... you agree with me? You're not mad or hurt or anything?"

"Yes, Emma, we agree with you. We just didn't know how to raise the issue without offending you. But we want you to know we'll always, always be here for you—"


"Me too. A ride to work. A babysitter—well, if I don't have an overnight date."

"A sock in the jaw for Hook if he misbehaves."

"David!" "Dad!"

Emma stood up. "Well! That went better than I expected. I'd better go stir the spaghetti before it sticks."

"Thanks, honey," Snow smiled sweetly. As soon as Emma was out of earshot, she leaned back on the couch and sighed. "We dodged a bullet."

David shrugged. "She's a grown woman. She figured it out."

"How long do you think it'll take for her to find a place?"

"Not long. I hear that house on Gold Avenue's available." Snow swatted him. "Just kidding." He winked down at her. "Tacos tomorrow night?"
"Oh!" Belle and Henry said in unison as one tried to enter at the same time the other tried to exit Archie's office. "Sorry, Belle," Henry said, as Belle apologized too for almost bumping into the boy. Henry tossed back over his shoulder, "Thanks for the interview, Dr. Hopper. I'm sure I'll get an A on my careers paper now."

"You're welcome, Henry, and good luck." Archie stood as Belle came inside. His notepad and his favorite pen (green ink) were clutched in his right hand, and the forefinger of his left jabbed at the nosepiece of his glasses. "Good morning, Belle. Please be seated. Would you like some tea?"

Belle smoothed her skirt as she lowered herself onto the couch. "Good morning. Yes, please. Morning, Pongo." She patted the dog's head. A small smile brightened her face.

"Good news, Belle? You seem quite cheerful this morning." Archie filled two mugs with water and set them in the microwave.

"That was a little lie, wasn't it? That bit about a career paper." Belle crossed her legs comfortably.

"Why, ah, would you think that?"

"Because you're jumpy as a mouse in a cage full of hungry cats. You're poking at your glasses, you're stammering and you're blushing."

"If you ever get tired of the library, you should speak to Emma about a job in detective work."

Archie prepared his tea tray.

"I also notice you avoided answering my question."

"Well, you understand—confidentiality is a sacred thing in my profession."

"As it is in mine, Dr. Hopper. Questions that you ask a librarian to research, books that you borrow from the library, websites that you visit on our computers—all of that is confidential. So I won't press any further." Belle took a moment to scratch behind Pongo's ears. "I've made a decision, Archie. About my status. Living in limbo as I have this summer is—dishonest. It's time I stepped out from under my ex-husband's shadow and made an identity and a life for myself."

"Ex-husband," Archie murmured. "Your mind is made up, then."

"Yes. I've made an appointment with Albert Spencer to begin the proceedings."

"The proceedings for what, Belle?" When she hesitated, he prodded, "If you can't say the word, how can you be ready to take the action?"

Her voice fell an octave. "Divorce."

"Why now, Belle? You've been apart from your husband for nearly four months. Why now, and not before?"

"I suppose, before, I harbored a hope that he would change. A few weeks, a few months apart, and he'd realize what we had together, and he'd. . . ."
"He'd what? Vow to give up magic for you? Become a hero for you?"

"Choose me." She gnawed her lip. "Over everything else. Magic, power, money. Because I'm his wife, and isn't that what marriage is, a promise to choose your spouse over everything else? And because I gave up everything for him."

"Did you? For example?"

"My own identity, for one. I came to realize that, during the year Zelena held him captive. Without him to come to for information, they came to me. But when he came back, they stopped coming. They stopped inviting me to their homes, their parties. They treated me with the same suspicion they treated him."

"Even Ruby?"

"Even Ruby. When Rumple returned, suddenly she had no time for me."

"You were pretty busy yourself, as I recall, getting married so soon after his return."

"Yes, but when I invited her to be my bridesmaid, she made up an excuse."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"And after the honeymoon, when I invited her to come to our house for tea, she made up another excuse. It's as if, whenever he's around, people think of me as an extension of him, as if I have no mind of my own. As if I agree with everything he says and does."

"But since he's been gone, that's changed."

"Yes. Slowly, but it's changing. I understand it: he's done some despicable things. They're right to fear him."

"Do you fear him?"

"No. Well, not for myself. I believe he loves me and wouldn't hurt me—intentionally. But he wouldn't hesitate to hurt my friends, my father—I have to live in this town; it's not as though I can move somewhere else and start again. I need these people. Maybe he doesn't; he's always been a solitary person; I was his only friend, apparently not a close one, because he withheld his plans from me."

"After a year being tortured and locked in—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted. "I saw him in that cage. I know the kind of person Zelena was, the physical and psychological torture she could inflict, even upon a man she fancied herself in love with. I know all that. It's because of that that I was patient with him, respected his privacy—and it turns out I shouldn't have. It would have been better for him and our marriage if I'd forced him to come to you for therapy, or at least forced him to tell me what she'd done to him."

"He was, as I understand it, the most powerful sorcerer in the world. How could you have forced him into anything?"

"I would have said to him, 'If you love me and want to preserve our marriage—'"

"Belle, this may surprise you, but every wife says the same thing, and every husband will relent for a short time, but inside, he's seething with resentment. When a wife throws down the gauntlet,
things do change—they get worse."

"So how do they get past their problems?"

Archie cocked an eyebrow. "You ask this now? I thought your mind was made up; divorce was inevitable."

She shrugged. "It is. I suppose I just need to know what I could have done."

"Gold is a man of contracts and negotiation. That's where he feels safe, not in the blind trust of friendship and marriage. Perhaps that would have been the place to start: make a deal with him. But it's a moot point now... isn't it?"

A drop of moisture glistened in the corner of her eye. "Yes, it is."

"There's a book that I'd like you to read." Archie walked over to his bookcase, knelt, scanned the shelves and selected a volume, which he carried to her. "Take your time with it; some of these chapters, you may wish to read more than once. There's much to be learned here."

She read the title as she took the book from him. "On Death and Dying."

"What you're experiencing is a kind of death. Two psychologists, Holmes and Rahe, wrote that the second most stressful event a person can experience is divorce, second only to the death of a spouse. You've experienced both of those in the past two years. You need to grieve. This book can help."

They were in her wheelhouse now, and both knew it. "Thanks, Archie. I'll begin reading it tonight."

As she rose to leave, Hopper added, "Belle, earlier, I asked you if you feared him. I have another question for you: do you fear for him?"

Now the tear made its way to the corner of her mouth. "Every day."

Heart pounding, Regina tiptoed barefooted upstairs with her laptop tucked under her arm. Henry had gone to bed an hour ago; his bedroom door was closed and his light out. She could have waited, of course, for Monday to do what she was about to do. Henry would be at school, then back at Emma's, and she would have complete privacy. But she couldn't wait until Monday. She'd never really been good at waiting.

She closed her bedroom door behind her, locked it, plugged the laptop into the electrical socket at bedside and turned the computer on. As it connected to wi-fi, she eased into the bed, pillows propping her up. She brought the laptop onto her knees and watched the little start-up circle swirl. A little hypnotic thing, it was; relaxing. She should use this time to plan what she would say in her email, but planning, which required waiting, had never been a long suit. She'd always felt she was at her best when under pressure, anyway.

The computer was connected. She logged onto her email account. Gnawing at her lip, she started the composer.

She had no idea what to type in the subject box, so she left it blank for now.


"My darling Robin." No. What if Roland happened to be with him at the time he opened his email? Or what if Marian had his password and read his emails?
"Dear Robin," then. She stared at the large empty space beneath the salutation. She didn't know where to begin, so she just plunged in, as was her trademark. "I certainly hope I have the correct Robinofloxley. If I don't, please correct me and ignore the rest of this message. If you are Robin, father of Roland, friend of the poor, master of the forest, and beloved of Regina Mills, then please read on.

"Robin, I miss you more than words can say. I'm spending every minute of my free time trying to solve the little problem of the town limits. It's a slow go—you know I'm more of a doer than a researcher; at times like this, I almost wish I had my old tutor beside me. He actually enjoyed tinkering in his lab, can you imagine that? Henry's helping me and he's fabulous with book research—no surprise there. It's bringing us closer together, I think. I see my stubbornness in him. We won't give up, Robin. We're going to solve this problem and make two-way travel possible." She did her best to avoid any reference to magic or curses. "We need to do this for the sake of our young people, who have to be free to make choices. But I have to confess I'm also doing it for myself. I need to know something, Robin. If Henry and I succeed in our research—or even if we don't, and I might decide I can't wait any longer—"

An incoming message appeared beneath the one she was composing. "Ah, go away!" She moved her letter to Robin out of the way with the intention of banishing the incoming message—probably spam, or some inquiry from her campaign manager, or notification of an invoice for her clothing store. She never received interesting email. She seized her mouse in preparation for an attack against the intruding message.

"From: robinofloxley"

"To—"

She swallowed hard.

"From: robinofloxley."

Her hand shook as she opened the message.

"Regina, my love."

She gasped.

"Regina, my love,

After great trial and error, and much encouragement from the librarians at the New York Public Library, I have finally conquered this beast they call the Internet. I hope. Gods, Regina, I hope this is you and not some other Regina Mills!"

"Oh gods, Robin, yes, it's me!" she yelped at the screen. Then she collected herself, with the help of a sip of wine, and she continued reading.

"My love, if it's you reading this, please, please move this huge boulder of anxiety from my chest and answer me right away, if I have the slightest chance of ever seeing you again. Or if that's too much to ask for, at least tell me if you still care for me as I still care very much for you."

She yelped again, the laptop sliding off her knees, and she scrambled to rescue it from her Laura Ashley sheets, as if the sheets would swallow it, and Robin's message, whole. A sneezing fit overcame her, and as she twisted to the side to yank a Kleenex from the bedside box, the laptop slid to the floor, its power cord pulling away from the electrical outlet. "Eegads!" Another sneezing fit attacked her.
She tossed back the remainder of her glass of wine, then counted to ten, then calmly (except for her shaking knees) put everything to rights so she could read her message in its entirety. Whatever else he had to say—he'd kept this first message short, in case he'd made a mistake, either sending it to the wrong address or sending it to a woman who'd given up on him—whatever else he had to say, he'd said the magic words: "I still care very much for you."

True Love, the most powerful magic of all. Patiently, they'd knock down the barriers between them.

Heart pounding, Henry constructed what he used to call a "reading fort" of blankets and pillows. He adored his Ipad, the lighted screen of which made late-night sneak reading so much easier. Through the walls, he heard Regina sneezing and moving around in her bedroom: he'd have to make this quick, lest some noise from him alert her.

"To: mrgoldantiquities

From: truestbeliever

Re: It's me, Henry

Hi Grandpa!

Where are you? Write me back, okay?

Love,

Henry"

He smiled to himself as he shut off the Ipad.

Something sneaky was going on with Regina. That fact by itself was business as usual, and since Regina's conversion to the Light Side, it wasn't any of Emma's business. Regina was a grown woman, entitled to her secrets. But this current secret activity seemed to involve Henry too—he'd been asking for increasing amounts of time at Regina's house, and his behavior while at home with the Charmings hadn't improved since his grandpa had been banished from town for the second time: he'd merely moved on from outbursts and accusations to the silent treatment. Cut him some slack, Emma advised her parents. He's a teenager. But it was time for her to find a new place of residence for the two of them, so she began apartment hunting, while still keeping an eye on Regina.

And then one night the stars aligned perfectly: Josiah Dove called her to inform her that a two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath had opened up just a block from the Sheriff's Office, and considering it was a bonus to have an officer of the law living in the complex, he knock a hundred a month off the rent Mr. Gold had previously listed it for. On top of that, she'd won a free steak dinner for two, for being Granny's 10,000th customer. And on top of that, she figured out what Regina's deal was.

On her way out of Granny's, Regina had dropped a folder full of papers and Emma caught a glimpse. "Regina, my love," the message began. Emma needed no further information. Clearly, Regina had been corresponding with Robin Hood. Equally clearly, the correspondence had been going very well.

Hook chattered throughout the steak dinner. Emma "yes dear'ed" him periodically. But her mind had traveled to New York City—as she feared Regina soon would.
Belle had a place in this town, as a fill-in consultant on all things magic, a sort of junior Rumplestiltskin. She had enjoyed this position during her ex-husband's absences, first with the journey to Neverland, then his "death," then his long imprisonment. The work that the townsfolk brought her challenged her intellectually and fulfilled her emotionally: she was making a unique and much needed contribution to her society. Yet, she had no real society of her own. No gal pals to go shopping with, or watch romcoms with, or trade recipes and confidences with. At one time, she'd thought Ruby or Ariel would fill that empty space for her, but though they seemed happy enough to see her when she'd drop by their homes or their places of work, neither made an effort to reach out in return.

She attempted first to make the church her society. The ladies of the church, including the nuns, welcomed her and found plenty of work for her, organizing bake sales, gathering used clothing for the thrift store, writing the church bulletin, but none of them ever invited her over to their homes. The church ladies also had a nasty habit of referring to her as "Belle Gold." Some of the church ladies took it upon themselves to "counsel" her on church law concerning divorce. When the eldest of the ladies began to urge her to seek annulment, she fired back, "Under what circumstances, Mrs. Fowler? Our marriage was consummated, repeatedly, and to the satisfaction of both my husband and me." The poor church lady was sent away gasping in shock.

Belle withdrew from the church after that. But she still needed friendship, so she decided she would do what she did best: read. She formed a book club, meeting twice a month after hours at the library. The first book discussed: On Death and Dying. Attendance at the first meeting: three, besides herself: Betsy Pike, widow of a fisherman killed by Cora; Clive Grover, beloved of a mailman killed by Cora and glamoured into looking like Archie; and Emma, who'd come on the advice of Archie. "I'm not a widow, not a lover or even a girlfriend of someone who died, but that doesn't mean I don't miss Neal," she admitted, her arms folded and her eyes fixed to the floor.

Well, it was a start. Belle did find she felt a little better after the first meeting—though she took care to choose a comedy for the next discussion, lest her group become known around town as the Grief Club. "Very good, everyone," she said brightly as the discussion wound down. "Cookies, anyone? For our next meeting, we'll be discussing Confessions of a Shopaholic."

"Hey, Belle, how are you?"

Belle looked up from Shopaholic , blinking to bring her mind back to reality. A young man in a Marine's Garage workshirt sat down on the vinyl -covered stool beside her. She couldn't recall his name (though she could recall the titles of the last five books he'd checked out: he preferred sports biographies), so she merely said, "Good morning" and resumed her reading.

"Hey, Will. What'll you have?" Ruby came over with a menu.

Oh, so that was his name. Will Scarlet, formerly of the Merry Men, now a service technician in training. "Meatball sandwich and curly fries," the mechanic ordered, "and a cup of black coffee." As Ruby moved away to the cook's window, he glanced over Belle's shoulder. "Whatcha reading?"

She showed him the cover. "Chick lit."

"Are you enjoying it?"

"I am, yes."

"How's your Honda running?"

"Fine."
"We're having a special on tune-ups. If you want to bring it in, I can give you a lift back to the library so you don't have to sit in the waiting room."

"I'll do that. Thanks." She kept on reading, or tried to.

"There's a new release at the Bijou this weekend. A Sandra Bullock flick. She's an astronaut lost in space."

"Sounds exciting." She closed her book. He was trying so hard to get her attention that to not give it was downright mean.

"Well, uhm, I know the library closes at five on Saturdays. The movie starts at seven. There'd be time for dinner beforehand."

"Yes, there would be."

Ruby returned with the coffee pot. "Just go ahead and ask her, Scarlet."

"You aren't really helping, Ruby," he grumbled.

"Okay, okay." Ruby raised her hands in mock surrender. "I've got other customers I can annoy." She took her coffee pot around to the other diners.

"What I was trying to say, before I was so rudely interrupted, was would you like to go out with me Saturday night?" His face was so hopeful. "Dinner at Dave's, then the movie? Or if you don't like science fiction, it's karaoke night at that new barbeque place."

"Sound like fun." She gave it some serious thought: at last, someone wanted to befriend the soon-to-be ex-wife of Rumplestiltskin, though she suspected what he was asking for was more than hanging out with a friend. "The thing is, I'm not ready to date yet. Legally, I'm still married. And, I guess, in some ways, emotionally too."

"Oh. I see. Well, maybe another time, huh? When you're ready, give me a call, huh?"

"Thank you for the invitation, Will. You cheered me up."

"Not enough, I guess. Enjoy your book, Belle." He picked up his coffee cup and moved to a table.

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Emma had sent Henry over to study at the Zimmers'. She had dinner waiting when David returned from his shift and Snow had brought Baby Neal back from the sitter's. "What's all this?" Snow passed the baby to David and peered into the pots boiling on the stove. "Spaghetti, garlic bread, salad—is Killian coming over?"

"No, just wanted to do something nice for you guys." But she tossed the salad a little too vigorously, and her mother caught her out.

"What's wrong, Emma? You're nervous."

David shifted the baby from one shoulder to the other as a string of drool dampened his shirt. "You aren't getting ready to tell us something, are you? Like you and Hook—"

"Killian," mother and daughter corrected in unison.

"—are getting married or having a baby or something?"

"David!" Snow dropped the spoon with which she'd been tasting the sauce.
"No!" Emma released the salad forks and wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "Look, yeah, I do have something to tell you, but it's not that. Nothing like that. Killian and I are in no position for any of that. He just started his job. He hasn't even learned to drive yet. Not well enough I'd trust him on the road, anyway. No." She made a shooing motion toward the couch. "Please. Just—let's just sit down for a minute and I'll explain."

Pursing their lips, the Charmings seated themselves as their daughter had requested. She sat across from them in David's La-Z Boy. Running her palms against her jeans, she took a deep breath. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, okay? And I love you—I love you both so much, and I love Neal, and I'm glad you're in my life and Henry's. It's just that—this apartment was never meant for three adults, a baby and a teenager. And as grateful as I am that you're here for me, and I'm always here for you—"

Snow released a nervous laugh. "Oh, Emma. I'm so glad. We've been trying to find a way to say the same thing to you." She grasped David's knee, signaling him to contribute to the conversation; he nodded but wisely kept his mouth shut. "As much as we love having you and Henry with us, we're just too crowded here."

Emma's voice carried a note of alarm. "But—but—I don't think a bigger house is the answer. I think—don't be mad at me—but I think Henry and I need to find a place of our own. I mean, we're just at different stages in our lives, you know?"

Snow nodded. "We've got a baby, you're dating—"

"Henry's going to start driving before too long, and then he'll be dating, and then he'll be going—" Emma interrupted herself. "So... you agree with me? You're not mad or hurt or anything?"

"Yes, Emma, we agree with you. We just didn't know how to raise the issue without offending you. But we want you to know we'll always, always be here for you—"


"Me too. A ride to work. A babysitter—well, if I don't have an overnight date."

"A sock in the jaw for Hook if he misbehaves."

"David!" "Dad!"

Emma stood up. "Well! That went better than I expected. I'd better go stir the spaghetti before it sticks."

"Thanks, honey," Snow smiled sweetly. As soon as Emma was out of earshot, she leaned back on the couch and sighed. "We dodged a bullet."

David shrugged. "She's a grown woman. She figured it out."

"How long do you think it'll take for her to find a place?"

"Not long. I hear that house on Gold Avenue's available." Snow swatted him. "Just kidding." He winked down at her. "Tacos tomorrow night?"
SEPTEMBER 2014

He woke up with a start and bolted upright. "Kill her, doll. Start with her pretty face. Carve her like a jack-o-lantern, with this." Zelena conjures a nail in his hand.

"Rumple?" a small voice breathed in his ear and a small hand patted his hair. "Did you have a bad dream?"

He nodded, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What are you doing awake, Sam?"

"I had a bad dream too."

Rumble scooted to the side of his blanket, making a space for Sam on it. "You want to talk about it?"

Sam shook his head emphatically but accepted the invitation to sit on the blanket, and accepted Rumble's arm around his shoulders. "Do you want to talk about yours?"

Rumple shook his head.

----------------------------------------------------

From silent observation, he learned the etiquette of this group, this new community that had admitted him without demanding upfront payment or proof of identity: Don't ask "Where are you from" or "How did you get here" or "What did you used to be, before you became one of us?" Give what you have; don't make others ask you to share. Your turn to be provided for will come soon enough. But also: keep your problems and your fears to yourself, especially around the child. Ignore other people's insults and idiosyncrasies; even if you're stronger and could win the fight, protecting your pride isn't worth getting kicked out of the group. When you sleep, tie your shoes around your neck, and keep your coat on. When you're ill, go away. Ask for what you need, offer thanks, but don't dwell on it. Don't talk about your plans; you're a fool to have any.

And never, ever say "Once I had..." or "Once I was..." None of that mattered now. Worse, living in the past crippled a person from moving forward.

They talked instead about the weather, about changes in the neighborhood, about politics (they kept up with the news, read the newspapers and magazines in the library), about the histories and biographies they had read in the library, the websites they had browsed, the celebrity Twitter accounts they followed, and the programs they'd attended, for free, with no one frowning as they seated themselves in the audience.

And sometimes they gossiped—or fabricated imaginary gossip—about the library staff who had come to know them by their interests if not by their real names, the staffers who smiled at the homeless as readily as they smiled at the moneyed patrons, those who were always good for five minutes' chitchat or a fresh joke, and those who would hurry over with Purell to disinfect the keyboard on a public computer after a homeless person had used it. Rumble's new community knew the difference between librarians, library assistants, library aides and
circulation attendants; they knew which ones had authority and which ones had power (not always one in the same). The Underpass Bunch, as Shaggy referred to those he lived with, liked to speculate about what the library folk did after closing time; Sam had the final answer: "They don't do anything. They just sit there at their desks waiting for the people to come back."

While her companions read newspapers or worked at the computers, Jill went off into a corner of the children's department and sat on a rocking chair with Sam in her lap—that is, for as long as a four-year-old could manage to sit still: he'd get squirmy and Jill would assign him a task ("find a book about dogs" or "bring me a Ranger Rick") to give him an excuse to move around. Sometimes he forgot to use his inside voice or his inside feet and Jill would have to admonish him, but he was, after all, only four; he should be expected to forget rules.

He would return with the assigned item, present it to his mom, then climb up into her lap and they would read together—really together, Rumple was impressed to discover: Sam could read one-syllable words and count to one hundred (though he sometimes declared that after ten came "leven-ten"). He seemed fascinated with animals, even the ordinary ones he saw in the park, and Jill would read to him relevant entries from the World Book Encyclopedia whenever Sam expressed curiosity about a creature. He couldn't decide, Sam confessed to Rumple, if he wanted to be a cowboy or a veterinarian when he grew up. Maybe both.

It was because of Sam, who liked to hold forth with his favorite librarians about all he was learning about animals, that the library implemented a new service: an "honor spinner," they called it. Folks were welcome to take books from the spinning rack without checking them out, keep them as long as they wanted, then return them for more. "Leave one, take one" the sign on the rack said. It didn't matter whether the borrower had a library card or not. It didn't even matter if the borrower accidentally left the book on a bus or got caught in a rainstorm and the pages became too waterlogged to separate. These were gently used paperbacks donated by the public and the librarians themselves, mysteries and romances and science fiction and, Rumple was pleased to find, westerns; and chapter books for children, everything from the Bobbsey Twins to Captain Underpants. They were a bit too advanced, Rumple thought, for a four-year-old, but Sam made no such distinction: when Nancy the Children's Librarian led him over to the brand-new "honor spinner" and invited him to cut the red ribbon wrapped around it, thus declaring it open to the public, one would have thought Sam had been given the key to the kingdom, the way he squealed as the ribbon fluttered to the floor. From the corner of his eye, Rumple caught Jill's lip quivering. The public may never know, but the Underpass Bunch did: the honor spinner had been created especially for Sam.

That night when the library closed, Rumple went "home" to the underpass with The Day the Cowboys Quit in his pocket, Jill had Morning Glory tucked under her arm, and Sam labored under the weight of half the National Geographic Kids Chapter series.

A month later, Sam traded those in for the other half.

That was how important the library was to the homeless, at least, to the Underpass Bunch. When he realized that, Rumple craved all over again to talk to Belle. She would tear up with joy if she knew the difference her comrades-in-profession were making, just by being there to open doors and answer questions and smile at people who seldom received a second glance
from strangers.

Rumple had been with the group a few weeks—he could no longer keep track of time—when Sam apparently decided to adopt him. The group had finished a supper of day-old bread (rescued from a dumpster just as soon as it had been thrown out—Harridge had lain in waiting at the bakery's back door at four-thirty that morning, in the knowledge that the bakers, newly arrived at work, would clear out yesterday's leftovers before firing up the ovens) and celery, having been tossed out from a grocery because it was a bit limp; and everyone got a swallow of vegetable soup, which the grocery had tossed out because the can was dented.

The sun was setting; there was barely a half-hour of reading light left, so the readers in the group were turning pages studiously, while the rest were chatting or sleeping. Sam, his head on Jill's leg, kept pestering her to read *Crocodile Encounters* to him, but she was glued to *Then Came Heaven* and ignored his whining. Finally he kicked his feet and she snapped at him, so before an full-on tantrum could develop, Rumple volunteered his services as a reader. He'd finished his own book anyway and was in danger of daydreaming about Belle. "But bring over one of the other books instead," he instructed the boy.

"Why?" Sam was in that irritating "why" phase this week.

"I don't like crocodiles."

"How about *The Whale Who Won Hearts'?"

"Hmm." Two words in that title brought back Enchanted Forest memories. "Pick another."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like Whales."

"Would you read it to me if I sit in your lap?"

"How about if you sit in my lap and I'll read you two chapters of *Parrot Genius'?"

"I read that one."

The rest of the camp had broken away from their activities to eavesdrop on the negotiations. Jill was grinning.

"Yeah, but it was a good one."

"Three chapters of *Ape Escapes'?" Maybe Rumple wasn't such a bad influence after all: Sam was learning to make deals.

"And then you'll go right to sleep?"

Sam grabbed his book and crawled into Rumple's lap. "I take it we have a deal, then?" Rumple asked, and with the utmost seriousness, Sam stuck out his hand to be shaken. "Deal."

At the end of chapter three, Sam started to whine for a fourth, but a frown from Rumple quieted
him. "We had a deal, remember?"

Sam collected his books into a tidy stack, then crawled into his sleeping bag.

"Good night, Sam," Rumple called to him.

The boy pouted but he echoed the good night, adding "Rumple." And he kept his word, remaining quiet until he had fallen asleep.

Rumple. The adults in the group called him Rumple too. There was something different about it, though, something warmer, when one's name was spoken by a four-year-old. "Good night, Bae," Rumple whispered.

"I need to ask you a favor." Jill sat down beside him with their plates of pancakes as Sam, led by Shaggy, trotted off to the toilets.

"Go ahead." Rumple politely set his plastic fork down, though he cast a quick look of longing at the sausages just begging for his attention.

"You get along well with Sam."

"Everybody does. He's a well-mannered and bright child."

"Thank you. Well, you know, Shaggy has a problem”—drinking—"and Fred's mind wanders, and Sam's a little afraid of Harry."

"I think Harry's afraid of Sam, too," Rumple observed.

"Probably," she chuckled. "Anyway, I need to go to Legal Aid today. I've been on the list for almost a year, you see, and my case is coming up next week."

"Case?"

"My ex- owes us back child support. I need to talk to the lawyer today, and then next Monday, I need to go to court. It's not a good environment for a four-year-old. He gets cranky when he's restless and can't run around."

"Wouldn't be good for him to hear that his father doesn't want to support him, either," Rumple suggested. "Do you trust me, Jill?"

She nodded. "You seem to have a lot of patience with kids."

"Leave him with me today. I'll take him to story time at the library, and then to the soup kitchen for lunch. If it's too hot to play in the playground this afternoon, I'll take him to the Movie House. We'll be here waiting when you get back in the evening."

He watched her struggle with the decision. He understood: he had felt the same reluctance to leave Bae with a neighbor when he had to sell his thread at market. "I was a single parent too. His name was Baelfire."

That made the decision for her. "A strong name. Thanks. I should be back before five."
When Sam and Shaggy returned from the toilets, she drew her son aside for a chat. She blinked in surprise when he shouted, "Yeah!" in answer to her question, and before she could bid him goodbye, the boy ran over to Rumple and dropped down beside him. "Let's go, Rumple!"

"We will, in another hour. The library isn't open yet." Rumple patted the boy's back. "Do you mind keeping me company today?"

"I want to go to story time, and the playground, and the movies. Can we see cartoons, Rumple? Will you push me on the merry-go-round?"

"We will do all those things, Sam. We have an entire day ahead of us."

Sam handed him his cane. "Let's go!"

Rumple glanced at Jill, whose face carried a mixture of emotions, even a hint of a sense of loss. He understood. But she waved a hand and smiled. "Have fun, you guys. I'll be back before suppertime."

"We will!" Sam tugged at Rumple's shirt. "Bye, mom!"

"We will have fun," Rumple assured them both. He ignored the complaints of his ankle.
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The nights were growing longer and chilly.

The Dylans distributed blankets along with breakfasts; they gave no lectures, unlike some of the charities that visited the park now. There was an increase in meal distributions, but often the free meal came with a price: compelled signing of anti-substance abuse pledges, sermons that were followed by pleas to worship certain gods or join certain churches. Rumple's group took the free food but merely smiled passively when "values" or warnings were heaped onto the plate too.

Dark circles ringed Jill's eyes. In the evenings after Sam had fallen asleep, she would fret. "My case has been pushed back til January. I may never get that child support. I don't like how those people from the Manna for Manana House were looking at Sam."

"We'll look out for him," Harridge offered, but everyone knew that was an empty promise.

"What if CPS takes him away?"

Rumple searched his memories but came up empty. The Storybrooke curse had supposedly made him an attorney, but he had no real knowledge of family law to draw upon. He longed for his magic. If he could have his powers back for just one hour, he'd provide Sam and Jill everything they needed so they could stay together.

Later, when he reflected on that wish, he surprised himself. Not so long ago, he would have used that one hour of magic to take back his place in Storybrooke. Let Portland take care of its homeless; Rumple would have taken care of Rumple.
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He awoke in the dawn to the squealing of brakes, followed by a dull thud and a man's screams. He grabbed his cane, but his ankle was so swollen he had to fight to get his shoes on, and so Shaggy was yards ahead before Rumple managed to take his first step. "What's going on?" a breathless Harridge came up behind Rumple, and they both followed Shaggy's retreating form
Rumple glanced over his shoulder toward the camp, where Sam and Jill were now sitting up and Sam had started to cry, though he had no idea why. "I'll take care of them," Rumple said; he'd already turned back before he realized how unlike himself he was acting. Well, one couldn't be expected to think clearly in all this noise, could one? He hobbled back to the camp and dropped to his knees, rubbing Sam's back as Jill cuddled and shushed the boy. "What happened?" she mouthed over Sam's head. Rumple could only shrug.

She looked around the camp. "Where's Fred and Foggy?"

Rumple shook his head.

Some long minutes later, Harridge returned. Rumple drew him aside and they had a quiet but brief talk, and then Rumple returned to the camp and offered to tuck Sam back in, distracting Sam with a promise of a bedtime story. "But it's not bedtime," Sam pointed out.

"A back-to-sleep story, then. About a dragon I once met." He lay down on Jill's sleeping bag and drew Sam's bag up tight around the boy, not because the morning was chilly, though it was, but because parenting experience had taught him that little children felt more secure when they were wrapped up snugly.

The promise of a personalized dragon story was too tempting, so Sam edged closer to Rumple and closed his eyes. "I'm ready."

Rumple told the story. It wasn't fiction, so he could tell it from memory, and he added lots of sound effects to cover up the soft sobs coming from the fringes of the camp. Before the story was finished, however, a dry-eyed Jill came back, lowered herself on Sam's other side and wrapped her arm around his waist. Rumple already knew what she now knew, and he respected her for pulling herself together so quickly to put up a brave front for her son. He'd done the same for Bae, the day Morraine's grandfather, Rumplestiltskin's only friend, died of snake bite.

Sam was breathing slowly, drifting off to sleep again, as Rumple finished the story. Rumple rolled onto his back, staring up at the concrete overhead; in this land without magic, he had no future Sight, but common sense was enough to predict that Jill and Sam wouldn't last much longer living like this.

For the thousandth time in his life, Rumple wished he was rich—but for the first time since the Frontlands days, he coveted money for the sake of someone besides himself. Someone had to get this kid and mom off the streets before winter struck—someone had to get all these people off the streets.

All except Foggy. A red-light-running bus had ended her street days.
They never found out what had happened to Fred. He didn't come back after his wife's death.

Shaggy went off on another bender; when he showed up again he was drunk as a skunk and his "Bang a Bong" sweatshirt was crusted with vomit. Rumple and Harridge grabbed him by the arms and steered him into the park's men's room, where they ran a sink full of cold water, shoved his head into it, and when they jerked him upright again, they informed him quite clearly that he was no longer welcome in the camp. "Do yourself a favor," Harridge growled. "There's a church across the street—go over there and ask them to find you an AA."

Rumple peeled his lips back from his teeth. "You show up like this again around Sam, I'm gonna shove my cane up your drunk ass." He whacked Shaggy on the back with the cane, as a taste of what was to come.

They left him in the men's room. He showed up again in the camp that night, just long enough to gather his belongings.

The fall rains came, and the Underpass Bunch parted ways temporarily, Jill and Sam going into the City of Portland Family Shelter. In the quiet morning hour of their last day together, Jill fretted that CPS would raid the shelter and take custody of the children there, since the parents clearly couldn't provide for them; but Harridge assured her otherwise. "Besides, we'll all meet back here in a week or two, when the weather's cleared."

She realized she had no choice anyway. She gathered her clothes and Sam's, along with some books from the honor spinner, and she roused Sam for a bite of breakfast before the men walked her to Chestnut Street. "See you soon," she said, and Sam waved the men a hasty goodbye, eager to see the playroom she'd promised that the shelter had.

Then Harridge and Rumple joined the "three o'clock wait," a line of men that wrapped around Needmore Avenue and Hoover Street in the muted hope of getting one of a hundred vacant beds for the night. The waiting men had figured out early on that the first hundred in line would get the vacant beds; if the weather was cold, excessively hot or wet, the shelter would put down mats in the remaining floor space: this would take care of another seventy-five. Numbers 176 and higher would be turned away after being fed in the soup kitchen. Quick-witted and savvy, Harry had his ways for ensuring that he and Rumple usually managed to squeeze in to the first hundred.

In the beginning, Rumple had some serious doubts when Harry referred to the two of them as lucky. The intake process was lengthy and intrusive, Rumple thought, demanding that the would-be "client" provide full disclosure on his medical problems, criminal background and substance abuse. Rumple snorted when the intake officer asked about his previous employment: "most powerful wizard in all the realms" would have gotten him stamped as delusional, so he fibbed. "I was a rent collector."
The shelter had strict rules, even stricter than the ones Rumple remembered from his brief military career: rules regarding tidiness, cleanliness, noise, smoking; rules regarding the number of bags the men could bring in; rules against cursing, bickering or gambling; rules requiring the surrender of all medications and food brought in from the outside; rules about where in the building they could go and for how long they could remain in any one room; rules requiring permission to use the laundry room, the telephone and the public computer; rules dictating when to go to bed and when to get up and when a "client" would be allowed to leave the building without surrendering his bed. Some of the prospective "clients" couldn't abide by the rules and were turned away; others looked for ways to beat the system and were usually caught and evicted. When Rumple narrowed his eyes as the list of rules was read out, Harridge shook his head at him in a warning. "A loss of personal freedom is a small price to pay to be out of the rain tonight. It gets easier."

Rumple learned the truth of that statement. He found that, in a way, the restriction on personal choice made life easier. Once he knew the policies and procedures, he need only remember to follow them. He'd served time in much worse places, including Prince Charming's underground facility. Between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. each day, he had the serenity of the public library to allow him to feel less like a prisoner.

In ten days, the weather cleared and Harry and Rumple returned to the underpass; Jill and Sam joined them a day later. Sam seemed to think he'd merely been away on a vacation; he jabbered about the playroom and the "pretend" classroom and library in the Family Shelter with as much enthusiasm as if they'd been amenities in a Holiday Inn. Then Jill put a pot of stew on to heat and Sam retrieved his copy of Penguins! Nature's Rock Stars and silently offered it to Rumple, who in turn offered sitting space on his blanket.

Sam hesitated. "But do you like penguins?"

"I like them fine. They're not as conceited as whales or as cranky as crocodiles."
Rumple patted the blanket and Sam accepted the invitation.

"I can read some of it," he suggested, and Rumple accepted that deal.

Harridge developed a head cold; hawking and honking, he was a disgusting mess. Jill shoplifted a bottle of Nyquil for him, and Sam swiped an entire napkin dispenser from McDonald's so that Harridge wouldn't have to use his shirt as a handkerchief. Rumple took over the early morning bakery watch: he didn't mind hiding in the alley behind the bakery, because whenever the back door opened, warmth and wonderful smells poured out.

Sam could now read two-syllable words and could count to sixty (sometimes forgetting some of the thirties). Now was the time to get him into a pre-school, Rumple wanted to advise Jill, but of course she realized that. Better than anyone, she saw her son's potential, her son's right to an education and a warm, dry home. Rumple saw her eyes drift sometimes to the sign on the building at the opposite end of the block from the library: Child Protective Services. She'd read it, then quickly look away and say something brightly cheerful, but when she thought no one was looking she'd read the sign again.

One night he broke down and said it, after Sam was asleep: "Don't do it."

"What else can I do?"
"Something will happen. Change. For the better."

"He needs a bed to sleep in. Food. Clothes."

"He needs you. And you need those things too."

"I tried." Her voice caught. "I still do. But no one will even let me fill out an application form, now; it's been so long."

He nodded; he understood perfectly.

Then she broke street etiquette and revealed something of her past. "I have bachelor's degree." She laughed harshly. "Do you believe it? In journalism. When I got the degree, there were fifteen hundred newspapers published in this country. Now there are about a thousand. When I first graduated, I wrote the lifestyles section of the Harbor City Citizen. You know: reviews of community theater productions, write-ups on fundraising events, interviews with PTO presidents, that sort of thing. I called them the 'aren't we wonderful' columns. I enjoyed it, I really did, and I planned to work my way up to reporting on local government. It wasn't a big dream, but that was okay: I liked Harbor City. Then I got married and we bought a house, and then the paper folded and I got pregnant, and no one would hire me, and my husband got laid off from the cannery—it all happened so fast—"

Rumple nodded. He, of all people, knew how fast fate could turn.

"Then he started hitting me. He'd always had a foul temper, but he kept it in check until everything fell apart. Foreclosure, bankruptcy, hospital bills. Just before Sam was born, I went into a women's shelter. They hid me in safe-houses in New York. Sam came, and they put me in a halfway house for substance abusers, because they didn't have anywhere else to send me. I had to get out of there. I went back to my parents' for a while, but they couldn't stand having a newborn baby in the house, and they wanted me to go back to Len. I got a minimum-wage job selling ads at a radio station here in Portland. I had to share an apartment with two college girls, and they were always complaining about the baby, but I couldn't afford anything else. And then Sam's babysitter quit on me without warning, and I had to stay home with him for four days until I found another sitter, and when I went back to work they fired me. My last job, I waited tables at a Moe's Original Bar B Que, but I was too slow and got fired. That was in February. I kind of floated between friends' houses for a while, and but you can only mooch for so long before your friends aren't your friends any more, you know? We lived in overnight shelters until the weather got warm, but Sam—"

She interrupted herself. Rumple didn't press her to continue; even on the streets, a person had a right to some privacy. But she sucked in a breath and finished, "One night I woke up, Sam was whimpering, there was a man standing over him, he was touching him—I don't know what we're going to do now. Another week or two and it'll be too cold to sleep out here. We'll have to go back to the shelters. Or else—I shouldn't put it off any longer. Sam needs to be in a home."

"If you give him up to the system, what will you do?"

She gathered up her soap and a towel. "Will you keep an eye on Sam? I'm going to to wash up."
He seized her wrist. "Jill, what would you do if you have to give up Sam?"

She pulled away. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it—"

"You can't understand!" she hissed.

"Yes, I can. I had a child once, until he was taken."

She gaped at him. "Ohhh. . . ." And then her face crumpled: in her eyes he could see she saw where she would be in the future when she looked at him: middle-aged, disabled, and still living on the street.

"There must be programs, government programs, churches—" he tried, but she hurried off. He didn't believe what he was saying either: there was no one, no help, anywhere. Not for little boys abandoned by their parents, not for crippled war deserters, not for displaced workers left behind by a squeezed economy. Not for Jill, not for Rumplestiltskin.

In the morning he washed himself carefully, shaved, and walked back to the pawnshop where he'd surrendered his pocket watch and cufflinks a lifetime ago. "Listen," he told the man in the cage, "I can fix things. Clocks, radios, furniture, toys, musical instruments. I had a shop of my own once, and I learned how. Let me prove it. Give me something to fix, and some tools. If you like my work, you can pay me by the piece or put me on sa—"

An approaching siren screamed from the street, interrupting him.

The caged man grimaced. "Silent alarm. If you really did own a pawnshop, you'll know what that is. Better get out now." He pointed to the window, where a black-and-white unit had just pulled up to the curb.

Rumple threw up his hands and backed away. "All right, all right."

He knew better than to run; he sauntered out onto the sidewalk and strolled down the block, in the direction opposite the parked police car.

Deterred, but still determined, he went to the back door of shop after shop, restaurant after restaurant, making the same offer: to work for free for a day, to prove his worth, and then, if his work met approval, to work for piecemeal pay or tips. Door after door was slammed in his face. "Don't you know nothin' about labor laws? You want to get us busted?" "Go home and dry out, you bum!" "Take a bath, why doncha?"

A cook in the last restaurant he approached showed sympathy—of a degree. She handed him a heavy brown bag. "You hungry? Here. Four orders of kung pao. You might as well have it; we'd just have to throw it out. Some jolly joker ordered it to be delivered to 672 Stevens—that's the Evergreen Cemetery."

"I'd rather have a job." The door closed, leaving him literally holding the bag.

He went back to the underpass with the results of his day's labors: a bag of spicy chicken and a pair of sore feet. He accepted his makeshift family's thanks, but instead of eating with them
he stormed off to the now empty rose garden, where he sank his head in his hands and cursed. He was furious with those people he passed on the streets every day, the ones rushing off to work or dragging themselves home after work or browsing the shops or planning their holiday family get-togethers. The people who wouldn't bother to stoop over to pick up the loose change that dropped from their pockets. The people who stepped to the other side of the sidewalk when he or Harry passed by. The people who smiled at Sam, trudging along with his library books, until they figured out what home Jill was leading him to. The people who, in a burst of warm human feeling, would drop a dollar at Harry’s or Rumple’s or Jill’s feet, despite the fact that none of them had asked for it—the same people who would vote no on government funding of jobs programs for the homeless and would sign "not in my backyard" petitions against emergency shelters.

Rumple was furious with these people, but just as furious with himself. A smart, able-bodied man ought to be able to fix his own problems. His power hadn't been exclusively in his magic, for gods' sake: he'd been perceptive, clever, studious; he could wheel and deal with the best of them; without calling upon the magic in his little finger, he could get what he wanted. So why not now? Had Zelena stripped him of his backbone as well as his pride? Had the loss of his marriage and his home so incapacitated him that he could no longer stand on his own two feet?

He stood, raising his cane above his head, ready to smash it against the park bench—at one time, not long ago, he would have smashed and trashed without a second thought. But he brought the cane back down, gripping it as he resettled on the bench, not because he wasn't furious any more, but because he couldn't afford to replace that damned cane.

As he escorted his pretend family into the library and temporarily parted company with them, Harry for the periodicals reading room, Jill and Sam for story time, Rumple was still furious. He had to get a grip: he sat down at a computer for a shot of hope. He berated himself even as he opened his email account: desperate fool. Hated by everyone who knew you. Feared by your own wife. And still you cling to the past.

Nothing from bookwormbelle. Of course not.

An invitation to an estate sale. An inquiry regarding the Mickey Mouse phone in his—no, in Henry's shop. A request for an extension on a loan payment—hadn't Storybrooke been paying attention?

"It's me, Henry."

He leaned a little closer to the screen.

"Truestbeliever."

He opened the message.

"Hi Grandpa!

Where are you? Write me back, okay?

Love, Henry."
Eleven words. He read them a dozen times. Eleven words from Bae's son, who wanted to connect with him. Who loved him. Who worried about him. Who could answer his questions about Belle. Eleven words that gave him focus and purpose. Eleven words that opened a floodgate of determination.

He clicked on the composer. "From: mrgoldantiquities. To: truestbeliever. RE: It's me, Henry."

This was a child, he forced himself to remember. A teenager (the same age as Bae when Rumple made the biggest mistake of his life) but still a child. Not naïve any more, but still innocent. Rumple must not alarm him. Bae would never forgive that.

"Dear Henry." He let the irksome cursor blink.

"Dear Henry,

Thank you for writing. I hope you are well." How cliché that sounded. How formal.

"Dear Henry,

Hello! I'm glad to hear from you. Are you doing all right?" [Meaning: have there been any new attacks upon Storybrooke since I left?]

"I'm living in"—did he want Regina and Emma and Belle to know where and how he was living? Because he had no doubt anything he told Henry would filter back, unless he required a vow of silence.

"I'm in good health. I'm living in Portland. I don't have a job"—no. "I'm well and living in Portland. At the moment I'm considering options for my future here. I've met some nice people, though I do miss Storybrooke, of course, and I hope to find a way to be able to see you again. In the meantime, I hope you'll continue to email me, as it seems impossible to communicate by phone between Storybrooke and here. Is Belle"—no. "Is your family well?" Henry was a sharp kid; he'd realize what that question really asked.

"I was glad we had the opportunity to become better acquainted while you worked in my shop. You're growing up to be a fine young man, in many ways like your father, in others like your mothers, but in many other ways, you're your own person.

"I hope to hear from you again soon. I miss you.

Your grandfather."

Was it too sentimental, that closing? Too vulnerable? Would a teenage boy with heroism in his genes find this message weak? He examined his feelings and determined that his statement was honest. He really did miss Henry, and that was all that statement meant. He sent the message and sat back with a confused sigh, relieved, conflicted, hopeful.

He still had a connection. No, not to a way back into his old life—that wasn't what he wanted, that wasn't how he would use Henry's continued affection. Through Henry, he still had a connection to Bae. In Henry, he still had someone who loved him unconditionally, and that fired him up again, fired up his determination to change his circumstances—their
circumstances, Sam's and Jill's and Harry's. Thinking of those circumstances made him angry all over again... which was exactly what he needed. Now, though, he was Rumplestiltskin-furious: a cold anger that frosted his emotions and enabled him to plan and plot. There had to be something... There was something; he just had to find it. And so with the patience he had learned while he searched for the Land without Magic Curse, he sat down with a pile of newspapers in search of an idea.

"Pardon me," a shy voice behind him seeped into his thoughts. He glanced over his shoulder at the middle-aged woman standing at his elbow, an open magazine in her hands. He recognized her as the Adult Services Librarian. "I thought you might find this article interesting." As soon as he accepted the publication, she moved away, on to assist a computer user.

He looked down at the article she'd selected for him. "Zombie Houses: Abandoned by Owners, Forgotten by Banks." He bent his head and began to read, and began to think, and began to plan, and began to smile. The article began with a quotation from an Amnesty International writer:

"Since 2007, banks have foreclosed around eight million homes. It is estimated that another eight to ten million homes will be foreclosed before the financial crisis is over. This approach to resolving one part of the financial crisis means many, many families are living without adequate and secure housing. In addition, approximately 3.5 million people in the U.S. are homeless, many of them veterans. It is worth noting that, at the same time, there are 18.5 million vacant homes in the country."

He was the first in line when the green van rolled into the park's parking lot, and as the Dylans began setting up their breakfast table, he assisted with the unloading. His cane and his limp didn't slow him down as he carried ice chests and fruit crates from the back of the van to the table. He seemed barely aware of what he was doing: rather, he was absorbed in asking questions. "Matthew, have you heard of this concept called 'zombie houses'? What about this movement called 'homeless liberation'?"

The Dylans looked at each other, then raised eyebrows at him. "Now, that's a very interesting topic, Rumple. Let's talk about it after breakfast." Brenda thrust a thermos into his arms. "Here, you can serve the coffee today."

When the last plate had been filled, the Dylans drew him aside to an unoccupied picnic table. "What you're thinking is illegal," Matt began.

"I realize that." Nor had Rumple missed the irony in the situation: a former landlord was now thinking of ignoring other property owners' rights in favor of providing free housing for people who couldn't pay rent. "It's getting cold. Winter's just a few weeks off."

"What you're thinking is controversial," Brenda added. "People will despite you for it. They'll throw every curse word and law in the books at you, to drive you away."

"Sam has such potential. Who knows: a veterinarian, a mathematician... How can people let that go to waste?"

"What you're thinking is dangerous," Matt added. "People have been beaten up just for
advocating the idea. If you act on it, you won't be safe."

"You could be arrested," Brenda said.

"Won't be the first time. Jill and Sam have real hope. If they can hang on until the Attorney General's Office catches up with her ex-husband, they could get back on their feet. They just need a place to stay warm and stay together until then."

"What are you going to do when they come after you—if you're lucky, the cops; if you're not, the neighbors?"

"I'm going to yell like hell until every reporter, every blogger, every tweeter and every amateur photojournalist pay attention."

"If you're sure, then," Brenda suggested.

"Not much I'm sure of these days, but this—yeah."

"All right then. We've got a friend you're going to want to meet, a priest."

He stopped himself in mid-eye roll. "A priest. Lovely."
"Mom?" Henry rapped his knuckles on the office door and Emma looked up from her monthly report to smile at him. "Can we talk?"

"Sure. Have a seat." Emma shoved the report aside. "Always glad for an excuse to quit the paperwork. What's on your mind?"

"About yesterday. I know you don't want me practicing magic, but you caught me at it and yet you let me off the hook, more or less."

"You're still grounded for the rest of the year, remember. I wouldn't call that being let off the hook."

"Yeah, but you could've done much worse. I disobeyed you."

"I had a talk with Archie yesterday. I thought he might have a fresh perspective. He reminded me that if not for magic, I'd be living in a stone building with no indoor plumbing, and you wouldn't have been born. Magic is part of who we are, he said, and to deny you that would be the same as denying you the right to call yourself a Charming. Both are part of your birthright. Besides, if not for your stubbornness, I never would've met you. And that would've been the real crime." Emma leaned back in her chair, thinking. "Maybe I was wrong about the magic. You were born to be a hero: maybe your brand of heroism is to break that curse so the kids here can go out into the world. So I'm backing down. Study magic with someone who'll teach you how to use it the right way, and won't put more on you than you're ready for. Someone who loves you."

"Thanks, Mom," Henry said in amazement.

"But you're still grounded because you disobeyed me and snuck around about it. Now, you've got some chores to do at home, don't you?"

"Yes, Mom, but there's something else I need to tell you." The opportunity to come completely clean had presented itself, and Henry told himself taking that opportunity was what a man would do. Probably she'd punish him further, but maybe at the same time she'd respect him for his honesty. Even if it backfired and she focused on what he'd done wrong instead of his confession, he'd rather get this stuff out in the open. Sneaking around behind two moms' backs was just too nerve-wracking.

She sat back in her chair, but she didn't cross her arms: that meant she wasn't mad. Yet. "I'm listening."

"Some of the times I told you I was studying at Grace's, I was at Dr. Hopper's office."

"Were you." Her voice flattened.

"In my defense, Dr. Hopper's been my therapist since I was seven. For a long time, he was the only one I could talk to. I know that's changed and I've got you and Mom and Gramps and Grandma to talk to." He paused a second, expecting her to interrupt, but she surprised him again; she kept quiet, and no anger flashed in her eyes. So he plunged on. "But frankly, mom, sometimes it feels like you guys can't understand what I'm saying. Because they're heroes, sometimes things are black-and-white to Gramps and Grandma when they're not to me. And you, you're not so sure of things as
they are, but—don't get mad, mom, but sometimes, you're so worried about doing the mom thing that you're closed-minded when I need you to listen."

"And Archie listens."

"Yeah. Don't be hurt, mom. I'm glad I have you to give me advice, but sometimes I wish you'd let me figure stuff out myself, even if it means I screw up a little." He tried to make a small joke of it to lighten the tension, but the look on his face informed her they'd come to a crossroads in their relationship. If they continued down the same path, at the least, he'd chafe at the bit; at the worst, he'd withdraw from her. The alternative path, though, would lead them to a place where they would separate, where he wouldn't need her any more and would leave her behind: his adulthood.

"I'm sorry, Henry. Maybe it is time for me to loosen the reins a little. I'll try to be less judgy and more open-minded." Neal would have been so much better at this stage of parenting. He would have talked her down from the panic of losing the child she'd had so few years to raise; he would have taken pride in the man Henry was becoming. Emma clung to that realization. "Starting with Archie. I didn't stop to think about how important he's been in your life. I shouldn't have interfered in that, and I'm sorry. We'll start your sessions back up again."

"Thanks, mom. There's one more thing. Please just let me tell you why I did it before you punish me."

"I suppose that's a reasonable request."

"When I was ten and found out about you, I had to find you. I had to run away to do it, but you were my family. I needed to know you. It's the same thing now. I know you don't want me to, but I've been emailing my grandpa."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "After I told I didn't want you to have any contact with him. And not just me: Regina, your gramps, your grandma—we all agreed you should stay away from him. You deliberately—". Emma interrupted herself, remembering her promises to listen and not rush to judgment. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Three weeks."

"He's written back, then."

"Yeah."

"Henry, we've talked about this. He's done so many awful things, and he's never shown the least remorse or tried to change. He's a bad example and worse, he's a bad influence. He's not even honest about it: he tricks people. He tried to trick his way back into town. He almost tricked me into going into that hat. He would've killed Killian. He would've killed everybody else too, just so he could take you and Belle and leave here. I don't want you anywhere near him."

"I'm not," Henry said reasonably. "He lives in Portland. And unless Mom and I break the curse, he can't come back and I can't go to Portland, so you have nothing to worry about."

"He can still influence you. He's a master manipulator; he's had three centuries of practice."

"I'm not saying I think he was right in everything he did. I'm just saying I love him and I want to keep writing to him."

"I don't want you to. I've made my reasons clear. I won't argue any more about it."
"I'm sorry, Mom, but you're wrong. I need to get to know him, and he needs me. I'm not going to stop emailing him."

"I can take away your computers."

"Yeah, you could do that. That would stop me for the next four years, not forever. You got to trust me sometime, Mom."

With a tightened mouth, Emma tried another approach, looking for ammo. "What's he been telling you? Let me see the emails."

"Don't hate me, Mom, but no. Just like I wouldn't show your emails to him. When he wrote them, he meant them for me to read. Not that there's anything in those messages for you to get upset over, but I won't show them to you."

"Henry, this is beyond disobedience. This is..." She shook her head, seeking a word.

"Collusion with the enemy?" He supplied. "I know that's how you see it, but that's not the case. It's ordinary stuff that we talk about: I tell him about school and baseball practice and what I want to do after graduation; he tells me about his job, the house he's fixing up, the people he meets. Never once has either of us said anything about him coming back to Storybrooke, or about magic. You have to trust me here. I'll ask him if he'd mind if I let you see his messages—it's the decent thing to do."

"This man would've trapped me and killed Killian. He doesn't deserve decency; he hasn't shown any to us."

"I'm not going to abandon him." Henry met her gaze with a steadfast one of his own. "There's got to be a way we can make this work. How about this: you're worried he's going to corrupt me. I'll ask him if he'd be okay with you reading his emails. And meantime, suppose I promise to show you anything he writes that I know you'd object to. Anything about magic or him wanting to get back into Storybrooke or wanting me to go to Portland. Mom, he's all I've got left on the Stiltskin side of my family."

"You'll ask him tonight about sharing those messages, and you won't write anything else to him until he answers."

"And if he says no?" Henry prodded.

"You'll live up to your promise to show me any mention of anything I'd object to." She sounded defeated and worried, but she seemed to realize that if she didn't relent on this matter, she'd lose his trust.

He reached across the table to offer a handshake. He had common sense enough not to smile. "Thank you."

------------------------------------------------

The book club was slow to catch on and didn't fulfill Belle's secondary purpose of making new friends. Anxious for someone to socialize with, she called Ariel and Ruby to invite them out to the movies, but both declined: Ariel had a date and Ruby had to work. Belle didn't mention to either girl that the night she'd chosen happened to be her birthday. Since her plans had collapsed, Belle went upstairs to her apartment after closing the library. As she opened the front door, she did her best to drive away the memory of last year's birthday, when Rumple had arranged a horse-drawn carriage ride through the woods and they'd cuddled under a plaid blanket and toasted each other with champagne.
As she stood on the landing, she could hear voices through the door. She eavesdropped: Moe was saying something about roses. Pulling the door open, she stomped the dusting of snow from her shoes.

Moe was standing in the living room, a phone pressed to his ear. The television was on, some sports highlights program. "Make sure you have an assortment of red and white roses. Twelve dozen: six each. They've got to be delivered to Granny's by five o'clock Tuesday; her victory party starts as soon as the polls close. And we need to double our stock of poinsettias. There will be a lot of Christmas parties this year, starting with Regina's... Right, December 1."

Belle kept her feigned smile on as she removed her coat. She wandered into the kitchen: no cake on the counter, no dinner in the oven. Well, she really didn't have room for complaint: Moe was just being Moe, loveable, blustery, loquacious but neither sentimental nor considerate. She set a skillet on the stove and tossed in a package of bacon. "BLTs tonight," she said, though Moe, still conveying orders to his shop assistant, didn't hear her. She was slicing tomatoes when a knock at her front door interrupted, and her heart leapt again. With a big smile she opened the door: at this point, she'd be happy if Moe had ordered a birthday pizza. Anything to show he remembered—though it would be out of character if he did. He'd left the chore of gift giving, whether the recipient was visiting royalty or his own child, to Colette, back in the old country; here, he might remember once in a while to call and wish her a happy birthday, but he just didn't have that sort of memory, he explained; besides, he figured he'd just get in the way: Gold always made a big fuss, candlelight suppers or lakeside picnics—one year it was even a fireworks display.

Dove stood on her landing. He carried a greeting card and the Game of Thorns Birthday Bouquet, complete with a pink teddy bear. "Happy birthday, Belle!"

She invited him in. "Oh, thank you, Josiah! I'm overwhelmed. I never would have—"

"Oh, no," he sputtered, "I don't want you to think I'm coming on to you or something. It's just that, since Mr. G. can't be here, I thought I ought to bring you a birthday present in his place. He'd hate it if you didn't get something from him, sort of."

"Oh. I'll put these in water." Belle turned away so he couldn't see her rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. "Thank you, Jo. Would you like to stay for dinner? We're having BLT's."

"No thanks. I've got a stew in the crock pot."

"Oh, Josiah—how's the boundary-breaking research going?"

Though she'd tried to make her tone light, they looked at each other a long moment, he wondering why she'd asked, knowing her opposition to the curse-breaking attempt; she wondering the same thing. Which answer would make her happy: that no progress had been made or that the curse would be broken any day now? Dove frowned a little in concentration as he tried to choose the right words; he wouldn't deceive his employer, but Mr. Gold would want him to be careful of her feelings. "Ms. Mills and Henry've been working hard on it. They found bits and pieces in the books, but nothing complete, so they're experimenting in the lab. They think they might've isolated one of the ingredients, though who knows how many other ingredients they'll need."

"Oh. Are the fairies helping?"

"No, Blue thinks the same as you about the boundary."

"I want you to know, Josiah, how I feel and how I decided that night—they aren't necessarily the same. My feelings are much more mixed."
"That's what I've always heard about true love: that you can't get over it." Dove waved as he stepped outside. "Good night and happy birthday again."

Belle waved a small goodbye.

Henry sat at his open laptop, mulling over his word choice. He didn't want to offend, but Grandpa would want to know why Emma wanted to read their emails. He finally decided on a casual but straightforward approach:

"Hi Grandpa,

Hey, Emma asked if she could read the emails you've been writing me. Is that okay? She's worried I might be talking about magic or other stuff that I'm not supposed to get involved in. You know how moms are. They worry.

Your grandson, Henry."

Or did Rumple know how mothers are? It just occurred to Henry that although he'd met his great-grandfather (good gods, if that was the parent who raised Little Rum, it was a wonder the child didn't grow up to be a kitten-torturing, eyeball-plucking building burner or something), and his dad and Hook had shared a few vague memories of Milah, he'd never heard word one about his great-grandmother. Didn't even know her name. All the more reason, Henry determined, to continue this correspondence. He had a need to know his lineage, so he could share it with his own children someday; he had a right to know as much about the Stiltskins as Rumple could tell him.

He sent the email off with the hope that Rumple would read between the lines and realize how important it was to reassure Emma.

The reply was waiting when he got home from school the next day.

"Hi Henry,

There are some things I've told you that I wouldn't want Belle to find out about; I think she'd get alarmed if she learned about my housing situation, for example. Please do not share my letters with anyone else. Thank you, Henry, for asking. It shows a great deal of respect and courtesy that you asked my permission.

Love, your grandpa."

Regina stared at the blinking cursor. She was so overwrought with jumbled emotions that she couldn't get past the "Dear Robin" of her reply. Her beloved had just shared with her news that made her heart leap, but where it leapt to, she couldn't say.

"My darling Regina," he had written, as usual.

"I want you to know that I miss you more with each passing day. I'm doing my best to adjust to this city, this life, and I'm gratified to watch Roland adapt. He's healthy and happy, and that reassures me that I'm doing the right thing by being here, but for him, not for me. If it were at all possible, the right place for me would be by your side. In this land of high-speed travel and complicated communications, it must be possible for a man to work out a life split between two cities. When it is possible, my love—when you and Henry succeed in your endeavors—I'll return to you. I believe that between telephones, the Internet and airplanes, I can continue to be an attentive, helpful father to Roland and an attentive, helpful mate to my beloved.

"When that day comes that I can cross the border to Storybrooke, I will have an important question
to ask you, and I will be free to ask it, my love. In the months we've been living together, it has become apparent that it's by your side that I belong. My feelings for Marian, and hers for me, are but memories of feelings. When I search my heart, I find a sentimental fondness for the marriage we once had, but which no longer lives. She too has experienced a fading away of the affection that she once held for me. Our life together is like a brother's and sister's. I share Roland's bedroom, and have done so since we arrived here. There are no kisses or touches between her and me, I want you to know that, Regina. My commitment is to you.

"As she and Roland have learned how to get around and get along here, they no longer need my day to day protection. Marian has a job; she works, in fact, at a bakery across the street from the school Roland attends. She is happy and has made friends. Were it not for the expense of living here, we would live apart. Regina, darling, she and I consider ourselves divorced. Since we were not married in this world, we will not go to its courts to dissolve our marriage. Don't be sad for her and me, Regina. Our marriage produced a wonderful child and I'm grateful for the years I had with her, and she feels the same.

"I'm sending along a photo of Roland and me, taken at the aquarium. Roland now thinks he would like to become an animal doctor. I thank the librarians at the public library who taught me how to make attachments. Should you be in a position to do so, once you've been re-elected, please give Belle the funds to allow the library to develop. The merry men would benefit greatly if she were able to offer computer classes.

"Godspeed on your research, my love. Every evening when I return from my job, I rush to the computer in hope of finding a message from you asking me to come back to Storybrooke.

Yours, Robin"

"Come in, Henry." Archie beamed as he opened his office door, and Pongo wagged his tail. "And welcome back, officially."

Henry tossed his backpack onto one end of the couch and flopped onto the other. "I'm glad that's over! And Mom knows now about me writing to Grandpa Gold. I told her. I couldn't stand doing stuff behind her back."

Archie moved to the mini-fridge. "Grape juice?" At Henry's nod, he took out a bottle and tossed it across the room to Henry's waiting hands. "I'm glad you talked to her, Henry. Shall we begin with that? How did it go?"

The boy described his conversation with Emma as he took swigs from the bottle. "I feel bad that she feels bad," he concluded. "But I can't just dump my grandpa. He's not just someone I used to know; he's the only link I have to my dad. And I'm his. We owe it to each other to try to connect, don't we?"

"Not every estranged family needs to reconnect, but in your case, I think it's helpful. Your father died so unexpectedly, and so soon after you met him, that your bond with him had only begun to form. He was no longer a stranger you had no feelings for, and yet, you didn't get enough time with him for your relationship to solidify."

"Would it be easier, getting over him dying, if he'd been a part of my life all along?"

"A very astute question." Archie sat down, unconsciously patting Pongo's head as he considered it. "In some ways, I think yes, because you'd have a lifetime of memories—all kinds of memories, including unhappy ones—to draw on. But that could also make it harder to let go. But this is the life Destiny has handed you, so this is the life we must deal with. Do you think about Neal often?"
Henry nodded. "But like you said, there isn't a lot of information for me to draw on. If I was still a kid, I'd probably make stuff up about him, but I don't want to do that. I want to remember the real him, but I kinda wonder what that was. I only saw the parts of him he wanted me to see. And I'm worried that's how it was for him, about me. We weren't together long enough for the real us to come out. You know what I mean?"

"I do. Is Mr. Gold able to help you fill in the blanks?"

"We haven't talked about my dad yet. It's still just everyday stuff."

"That's all right," Archie assured him. "Sometimes people don't realize how important talking about everyday stuff can be in connecting people."

Henry brightened. "But he said he missed me."

"He trusts you, Henry."

"Yeah. That's why—when I see Belle walking around, going shopping and stuff, she seems so unhappy and worried. I keep thinking if I showed her the emails, she'd feel better. But he said he doesn't want her to know. If she knew he'd been living on the streets, and about his limp and not having any money, she'd get upset. And there's nothing she can do to help him, so the worrying would only make it worse." Henry stared at Archie with piercing eyes. "You've been treating her. You would know. Would it be better if I told her, or would it just make her feel worse?"

"Sometimes both occur at once: it's better for someone to know the full truth, but the truth hurts."

"Like when I first met my dad. It hurt at first, but I'm glad I found out."

"Yes."

"Well?" Henry wouldn't let the question go. "Would it be better for her to know where is he is and what he's been doing?"

"Unfortunately, Henry, this is getting pretty close to the line between one patient's right to be helped and another patient's right to confidentiality. But I will say Mr. Gold's feelings need to be taken into account. He trusts you; whether he's right or not to ask you to withhold information, you did agree to keep his secret. Perhaps when his circumstances improve, he'll change his mind."

"I think he wants to tell her himself," Henry blurted. "I think he wants to write to her, but he's scared. I don't get it: they love each other. How come they can't forgive each other?"

"Distance can mess up relationships even more than they were before. If your mom had told you about Neal before you met him, do you think it would've been easier or harder for you to bond with him when you finally did meet him?"

"I don't know. Maybe harder, because I would've been mad about him letting my mom go to jail. Maybe easier, because I would've known he wasn't that kind of guy." Henry grinned abruptly. "But I think I would've gone to my grandpa and asked him to take me to New York a lot sooner."

"He might just have done that, too. What do you think of your father, as a person?"

"Everyone calls him a hero. They even named my uncle after him. But he wouldn't have wanted that. He would've said he was just doing what he had to, to protect me and mom. " Henry scowled, looking down at the carpet. "Same as his father did, killing Pan. Why don't people call Grandpa a hero for stopping Pan? He had to kill himself to do that. Isn't that what a hero would do?"
"They were afraid of Mr. Gold. And he'd done some terrible things, including creating the curse that took us away from the Enchanted Forest. The curse broke up families. Not everybody can forgive that. I think, when he sacrificed himself to stop Pan, he confused them. It wasn't what they expected from him. If he'd tried to stop the Snow Queen, and if he hadn't tried to capture Emma, I think some people might have decided he'd changed and they could forgive him, like they forgave Regina. But when he brought Ursula and Cruella into town, they made up their minds about him then. He was a villain who'd killed his father for revenge, not to save the town."

"Is he? Am I being stupid for loving him?"

A watery smile flickered across Archie's face. Many a patient had asked the same question about the people they loved. In fact, Belle had asked a variation of this question, several times. "I don't think it's ever stupid to love someone. Risky, but not stupid. And as a psychiatrist, I can tell you love is the most dependable of all medicines. It can cure many, many types of pain, both in the one who receives it and the one who gives it. As I've told your mothers, I think you need to continue to reach out to your grandfather. You need his love to help you heal over the loss of your father, and no one in this world needs love more right now, I think, than Rumplestiltskin. I'll talk to your mothers again. We'll bring them around." Then he blinked and changed the subject, because he'd probably crossed over that line he'd mentioned earlier. He'd just revealed another patient's confidence.
Rumplestiltskin, radical. He quite liked that sound of that, though he couldn't say the words aloud; what he could say was "Robert O'Neal, grassroots organizer."

That was how he styled himself these days: Robert, after Robert the Bruce. O'Neal, after—

Whoever he was now, he wasn't the person he thought he was. And he was glad of it.

"The property is located here," Father Daniel spread a street map across the coffee table and pointed to the rectangle bordered by Cumberland Avenue and Hayes Street. "Three bedrooms, one bath, with a study that can be converted into another bedroom. It's in limbo right now: three weeks ago, the owners abandoned it after receiving a notice of foreclosure. But the bank that now owns it, Barton National, is up to its ears in foreclosures. The average rate of time it takes them to act on a property they've foreclosed on is ten months."

"So we have a roof over our heads for the next ten months," Jill beamed.

"Well, it's not quite that simple. You'll have neighbors to deal with. To your immediate south, a woman in her seventies. She lives alone and has no children. She'll be easy to befriend. But to the immediate north, a young couple, the Roses. They were friends with the former owners, and they're likely to ask questions. They're also likely to be bitter against Barton, and they may assume Barton kicked their friends out to bring you in. My recommendation is that you tell them the truth."

"That's sticking our neck in the bloody noose, isn't it?" Harridge protested.

"It's a gamble," Father Daniel agreed. "They could call the cops. But unless the property owner asks them to remove you, there's not much the cops can do, short of harass you and look for excuses to arrest you. Don't give them any. Even if the Roses were to call Barton and tell them what you're doing—which isn't likely, considering Barton forced their friends out—as I said, Barton's in over their head with foreclosures. Take good care of the property—upgrade it, even—and the bank may see you as an asset. They may let you stay until they've gotten around to finishing the paperwork to take back the house and put it up for sale. An empty house is an invitation to vandals and drug dealers."

"What about the neighbors across the street?" Rumple asked.

"Two families. One has three kids, all under twelve. The other has one kid, age six. Once those kids meet Sam, it'll be harder for the parents to turn you in. How do you explain to your six-year-old that you called the cops on his five-year-old friend?"

"We'll make that decision even harder for them. As soon as we move in, we'll go over with Sam and fresh baked cookies and introduce ourselves," Rumple suggested. "Then we'll immediately begin cleaning up the property, show them we're responsible, considerate people."
"There's more." Father Daniel reached into his pocket for a packet of papers, which he set atop the map. "I've had the utilities turned on in my name, but you'll need to pay them. You'll need money for food, house repairs; you'll need jobs. Easier said than done in this economy, but even harder for people who haven't been employed in years," he glanced at Jill and Harry. "Or lacking ID," he glanced at Rumple. "Even those who are willing to hire an illegal alien can't, by law. So I had to make you legal."

Rumple opened the packet to find a birth certificate and a state ID card. He read the name on the documents: "Robert O'Neal, born Des Moines, Iowa, April 14, 1961." He grinned. "I'm an Iowan!"

"But raised in Scotland."

"I'm no longer an illegal alien, just an Iowan with a funny accent."

"I used the name you suggested. You have a job now as a dishwasher at a residential substance abuse treatment center on Ninth Street. You'll need to take two buses, and you'll be working nights and earning minimum wage."

"But I can put food on the table." Rumple picked up the ID card. How much older he looked now, in the photo Father Daniel had taken of him, just a week ago.

"The rest of you are on your own," Father said to Jill and Harry. "You have genuine ID and employment records. The Dylans will help you write resumes and connect with Dress for Success, so you'll have decent clothes for job interviews. I recommend you do your utmost to find work soon; you'll need the money if you're going to keep up a house."

"You've thought this out to the last detail," Jill praised Daniel.

"It's not my first time at this particular rodeo. And I don't want to give you the wrong impression. It'll be hard, just a subsistence living, and there are no guarantees. You miss a day of work, you could get fired. You miss paying a bill, your electricity or water could get cut off. A neighbor reports you, the bank could decide to evict you. And most importantly, what you're doing is illegal, and a lot of people see it as a form of stealing."

"But what would the press say if a heartless institution that's already forced people out of their homes were to evict three hard-working adults and a five-year-old?" Rumple mused.

"Besides, it's a lot better than how we've been living," Jill said, glancing meaningfully at Sam, who sat at Father's desk, drawing pictures. Her expression completed her thought: she and Sam could stay together, at least, for now.

Harry slapped his knees. "How soon can we move in?"

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Father was right: it wasn't easy. Jill found a small job as a crossing guard at Sam's school; she earned only eighty bucks a week, but it was a start and it enabled her to be home for Sam. Harry took much longer to find work: his age and the extent of his unemployment counted against him every time. When he was finally made an offer, it was for a part-time job cleaning churches. The bulk of the financial responsibilities fell upon Rumple, and at times he felt a stab of resentment, not because he was the primary breadwinner—he took
pride in providing for a family again, even though it wasn't his own—but because the work he was doing was beneath him: messy manual labor, cleaning up other people's messes, when just a few months ago he'd been a sorcerer, a landowner, a businessman. Even as a peasant, he'd at least been a skilled laborer. Sometimes in frustration he complained aloud to Father Daniel, but the priest snapped right back at him, "Our Lord was a carpenter when He walked among us." To which Rumple would mutter, "A skilled laborer, not a dishwasher."

The heart of his complaint, though, lay not so much in pride as in pain. Washing dishes required long hours of standing, and without the benefit of his cane, since he needed both hands to operate the dishwasher. Some mornings it was a struggle just to get up from his seat on the bus to hobble to his front door. Various helps—a rubber mat to stand on, a high stool to sit upon as he ran the equipment, and a dose of Motrin with his supper—reduced but didn't alleviate the pain.

But every two weeks, when his paycheck was placed in his hand and he got on yet another bus to go downtown to cash it and pay the bills, he shut up. Some nights, with his belly full, thanks to the work of his own red, chapped hands, and with Sam climbing into his lap, dragging along a book (what was it with this boy, that he found encyclopedia entries just as entertaining as Captain Underpants?) to be read aloud in unison, both of them pointing at the words, he almost felt proud.

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As planned, on their first day in the house, the four of them took a plate of cookies (alas, store-bought, because the kitchen lacked a stove and they had to continue to cook over Sterno) to the Roses and introduced themselves, warmly and politely; the Roses didn't invite them in, but rather glared at them from the front door, but that was okay: the O'Neal-Harridge-Sawyer clan stayed only a moment, having not really expected any reciprocity. "We just moved in," Harry said, ready to tell the Roses the full truth, should they mention the bank or the house's former owners. But when Mr. Rose just grunted and Mrs. Rose looked across the lawn to judge the newcomer's car (none) or furniture (also none), Harry gave a little bow and concluded, "If you ever need anything, or if you'd just like to chat, drop on by."

The elderly woman took to Harry right away, as soon as she checked out his left hand (no ring) and the lawn mower he'd dragged over. "I've just finished ours, so I thought as long as I have the mower running, I'd do the neighborly thing and ask if you'd like yours mowed." Of course she did. In gratitude, she brought over a pitcher of lemonade and sat in their not-yet-remodeled kitchen for a full hour, telling stories of her past and listening in delight to Harry's fake accent. (She found Rumple's fainter one quite lovely too.)

The neighborhood kids responded to Sam in various ways: the older ones looked down upon him as insignificant, the younger ones were a bit intimidated by his interests, but the Hernandez six-year-old invited him to play on her swing-set. Whether they considered him an equal or not, Sam fed off the attention of his peers, and he enjoyed kindergarten immensely. "Going to work," he called it as his mom walked him down the block; just like the adults, he had a job to go to. He had chores at home as well, fetching tools as Rumple fixed the leak in the bathroom sink or Harry and Jill replaced the tile in the kitchen. When Mr. Rose saw the lame man trying to balance on a ladder to clean out the rain gutters, he came over with his own ladder and pitched in, answering Rumple's queries with a grunt.
"I live in a house with some friends," Rumple emailed Henry. "There is Harry, who professes to be from London, but both his true accent and his ID prove otherwise; and there are the Sawyers, Jill, who looks a bit like your mother Emma, and her son Sam, who looks a bit like your father did at age five. We are what is commonly called 'squatters,' though our friend Father Daniel calls us 'house liberators.' The house we live in, you see, is what's known as a 'zombie house,' meaning its previous occupants abandoned it when they could no longer meet the mortgage and its present owner, a bank, has for the moment forgotten about it. We are at risk, of course, of being caught, though it's highly unlikely that the bank would want the bad publicity that would come from evicting a mother and a child, not to mention an elderly gentleman with a British accent and a middle-aged guy who walks with a cane.

"We are, in some ways, doing the bank and the neighborhood a favor by maintaining the house. We've been here a month, and though our presence has raised a few eyebrows, it seems to be because we're unrelated, not because we're squatters. No one has asked about our status, yet, but if they do, we'll tell them the truth. With a five-year-old in the house, it's too difficult to lie. Besides, the neighbors have no fond feelings for banks and the cops have better things to do."

As he re-read his message, Rumple wondered at the ease with which he'd written it. He'd confessed to being a trespasser; worse, he'd confessed to being a dishwasher. What would his grandson think of him? And surely it wasn't a grandfatherly thing to do, to cause Henry worry; would it be kinder to lie about his living conditions?

He let the cursor blink as he reconsidered. Then the warning message popped up on his screen: he had only ten minutes left on his computer session, and then he would have to vacate his seat for the next, possibly homeless, individual needing a computer. He clicked "send." The message might cause worry, but not alarm: it was, at root, a hopeful message. He logged out, picked up his cane and his library books, and gave the librarian a smile as he shuffled out. Someday he'd thank her, maybe show her a photo of his home.

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She wasn't Catholic, but Jill and Sam had started attending services at Father Daniel's church, as a thank-you for his assistance. Harry cleaned Daniel's church every Thursday: "a down-payment on my debt to you and your Boss," he joked. And Daniel, whose reputation was invested in this project, stopped by occasionally to admire the restoration work and to offer advice.

Rumple thought about asking for some personal guidance. Clergy in this world, unlike those in the Enchanted Forest, fulfilled the role of spiritual counselor, or so he read; he figured if any soul needed restoration, it was his. His nightmares of Zelena hadn't dissipated, only expanded, interweaving themselves with memories of three hundred years of mayhem and mischief. Whether it was the Dark One's doing or his own, his dreams were telling him he had to own up to the evil he'd done, though he could never repair it. Sam's presence in his life told him the same thing. He felt the hypocrisy every time he punished Sam for an infraction. He could trust Father Daniel, beyond a doubt, but to ask the man for guidance would require revealing far more about himself and where he'd come from than would safe. Father would lose trust in him, if he'd didn't believe his fairy tale; and if by some great miracle Father did believe his story, the priest would never come close to understanding it.
Rumple carried on, then, washing dishes, riding the bus, cleaning gutters, paying bills, and fighting off his nightmares.

"Rumple?"

He twisted around from the newly installed, second-hand stove, over which he had a kettle boiling. "Sam? What are you doing up?"

The kid was wearing his new Iron Man pajamas (well, technically, not new: second-hand from the Salvation Army Thrift Shop). Jill had tucked him in hours ago; he still had three hours before he had to get up for school.

"I heard a noise."

"That was a siren. An ambulance headed for the hospital. Nothing to worry about. Lots of ambulances go through here; the hospital is close by." Rumple took a mug down from the cupboard and a spoon from the silverware drawer. He would have liked a cup of real tea, made fresh from leaves, but such niceties were out of their budget. He was learning to enjoy Lipton's. "How about if I tuck you back into bed?"

"Not yet." The boy scraped an aluminum-legged chair back from the table so he could seat himself. "I want to sit with you a while."

"Ten minutes." Rumple pointed to the cat-faced clock, whose whiskers pointed to the four and the ten. Sam had been learning to tell time. "Deal?"

"Deal."

"Cup of tea?" It would be a quick dunk of a tea bag in the water, topped off with half a cup of milk; Sam couldn't handle a real cup of tea yet, but he liked to pretend.

"No." Then he remembered to add, "Thank you."

Rumple prepared his own cup, adding a drizzle of honey. He kept his back turned toward Sam, granting him some privacy, and kept his tone casual. "Did you have another bad dream?"

"No. Rumple, is this our house?"

Now Rumple turned around. "Why do you ask that?"

"Jorge Alonzo said we're sneak-thieves."

Rumple brought his cup to the table and sat down across from Sam. "What does your mother say?"

"She said we're borrowing it for a while. But things you borrow, you have to give back, right?"

"Yes. You borrowed Alyson Alonzo's light saber, remember that?"

"Yes."
"And you took good care of it while you had it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you enjoyed it while you had it."

"Yes."

"Someday, we'll return this house to the people who own it, but for now, we'll take good care of it and we'll enjoy it. Does that sound fair?"

"I guess."

"What time is it now, Sam?"

"Twelve-four."

"The short hand tells the hour."

"Four-twelve."

"We call that four o'clock. Do you remember our deal?"

"I have to go to bed now." Sam slid down from his chair.

"Should I tuck you in?"

"I can do it. Rumple?"

"Yes?"

"Does your leg hurt?"

"Not any more. Good night, Sam."

------------------------------------------

Phoenix House, where Rumple washed dishes, was a residential treatment facility for men with substance abuse addictions. Twenty men lived there, along with two professional staff. Besides washing their dishes, Rumple assisted the cook in serving the meals, a task which gave him opportunity to listen as they talked about their outside lives, which varied widely—the residents ranged from a hotel porter to a priest to an early-retired lottery winner—and their common problem. From them he picked up all sorts of information, from marital advice to stock tips, but the topic he listened to the most closely was the "how" of their disease: how they became addicted and how they were fighting back. His ears pricked up and his serving slowed way down (to give him an excuse for remaining in the dining room) on the day the subject of PTSD came up.

It was raised first by a Marine veteran who'd seen and done some shocking things in Iraq, but as three others spoke up, it became apparent that there was a connection between the post-traumatic stress disorder they suffered from and their dependence on alcohol or drugs. Nor was the condition a respecter of position: the three others who spoke up were a police officer who had accidentally shot a child, a teacher who had survived a car crash that killed his family, and the priest, a victim of childhood sexual abuse. As different as the initial
incidents were, the symptoms were very similar—and very familiar to Rumple: nightmares, anxiety, angry outbursts, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, a feeling of isolation. The men had turned to drugs and alcohol to "take the edge off" and give them a false sense of normalcy and power.

As they talked, his hands began to shake, causing the dishes he was passing to rattle. The Marine glanced at him as he nearly dropped a platter of pork chops, and in the seconds during which their eyes connected, Rumple saw his own large brown eyes in the Marine's: I was a prisoner of war. As he dished out peas, Rumple saw that the priest's hands looked exactly like his own: I was abused. As he brought the butter dish to the teacher, Rumple saw on the resident's face his own crooked nose: my son died in my arms. And in all of them, he saw his own weakness: I sought normalcy and power through magic.

He excused himself with the excuse of fetching more iced tea. He slipped into the pantry and covered his face with his apron to muffle the sobs.

But when he got home at four a.m., he was able to sleep undisturbed by the memory of Zelena's laugh, because now he understood, and now he saw light at the end of his tunnel.

On his day off, Rumple took Sam to story time. After the program, they made use of the public computers: Rumple to email Henry, Sam to play Minecraft. And then they made use of the collection: more NatGeos for Sam, books on PTSD, addiction and the Big Book for Rumple.

He only wished he could afford treatment at the Phoenix. Although he wondered what the therapists would make of his particular addiction.

When he wasn't washing dishes or working on the house, Rumple would borrow Sam's Red Flyer wagon and search Dumpsters for things he could fix and sell. The extra money came in handy, but more importantly, perhaps, this sort of work enabled him to reconnect a bit with his past. Along with his correspondence with Henry, it was his only connection: his name, his attire and his hairstyle had all changed.

Father Daniel caught him fixing a toaster one morning. "You know, Father, you and I have something in common: we both fix broken things."

"I like that thought," Father said. "I'm going to use it in my next sermon: 'Our Lord: Fixer of the Broken.'"

"I may have misjudged you—your kind, I mean," Rumple admitted.

Father Daniel raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I had a run-in once with a... nun. I called her a few names, she called me a few, and ever since, I've harbored an ill will toward all clergy. You've... shown me I was wrong."

Father chuckled. "You called a nun names?"

The pain in his ankle had worsened. One afternoon he could barely walk to the bathroom to shower for work. He reached for the phone with the intention of calling in sick, but as soon as
it was in his hand, the phone rang of its own accord. "Robert? It's John." Rumple swallowed hard: if his boss was calling, it could only mean one thing. John must've decided Rumple's disability was interfering with the job.

Well, if he was going down, he'd go with a brave face. "Hello, John. What's up?"

"Francis has decided to retire, give his two weeks' notice. You know how hard it is to hire a cook just before Thanksgiving, and at the salary we offer? Francis says that from talking to you, he thinks you might be a good replacement for him. What do you think? Want to give it a go? Trial basis til the end of the year. If it works out, we'll make it permanent come January 1. Twenty thousand a year, health coverage, one week vacation. Start today."

Rumple gripped his cane. "Twenty-two thousand a year and two weeks' vacation."

"That's what we were paying Francis, and he'd been with us five years."

"I know."

"Twenty thousand five hundred and two weeks' vacation. If we make it permanent, twenty-one."

"Deal."

"Somebody's looking out for you," Father Daniel said. "You ready to come to church now and thank Him, Robert?"

"I now have a job with a bit less standing and a bit more money. Tell you what, Father: when I have a sit-down job, I'll come and kneel in your church."

"Mark my words: He'll have you yet, Robert O'Neal."

"Ah, Father, if you knew the half of it. To get me to come over to your Boss' side, even I would have to call that a miracle." But his braggadocio was false: he was beginning to wonder if his being here, among these people, was not an accident.

"I have a hunch, Robert, you've already seen a goodly part of Hell, so why not seek Heaven?"

"Its gates are closed to the likes of me," Rumple scoffed.

"If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?"

"But at what price?"

"My Boss addressed that very question. 'I am the good shepherd,' He said. 'The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.'"

This conversation was becoming uncomfortable, and the air in Daniel's office felt too close to breathe. Rumple brushed aside his discomfort with a quip. "That's some overpriced mutton, if you ask me."

But Daniel wouldn't allow the joke to stand. "He didn't think so when He redeemed us from
the curse of the law."

Rumple rose abruptly. "I've got to go, Father." But in the cold of the night, he sweated, wondering what, if anything, Daniel knew about curses, and who could have cast a curse so powerful that it took a god's death to break it.
Drowning is No Sin

OCTOBER 2014

Emma sat with her feet up on her desk and her eyes shifting between the business card in her hand and the phone on her desk. She was still in this position and still scowling when her father came in to relieve her from duty.

He leaned against the doorframe. "Em?"

Her head jerked up and her feet crashed to the floor.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to startle you, but hey, it's five o'clock."

"Thanks." But she made no move to leave. Instead she sighed deeply. "David, come in and close the door. I've got a dilemma and I need your advice."

He brightened and complied with her request. It wasn't often that his grown daughter asked advice of anyone. "Professional or personal?"

"Both, unfortunately." She turned the card around so he could see it and pushed it toward him.

"'Albert Spencer, Attorney at Law.' What's up?"

"One of the unpleasanter duties that we have to perform sometimes is to deliver divorce papers." Emma ran her hands through her hair. "I never had to do that before, but in August, Spencer came by wanting me to deliver a summons and complaint of divorce to Gold."

"Oh." David didn't sound surprised. "That's probably best, so Belle can move on with her life."

"Yeah, well, that was two months ago. At the time, I couldn't do it; I didn't know where he was."

David's eyebrows raised. "And you do now?"

"No, but Henry does. The thing is, Henry promised Gold not to tell anyone about his whereabouts. Maybe exactly for this purpose, maybe so divorce papers couldn't be served."

"That doesn't prevent the divorce from happening. It just slows it down."

"Maybe he hoped that would be enough and Belle would change her mind. Whatever his reason was, he made Henry promise not to tell, but Henry accidentally let it slip the other day."

"You know where Gold is."

"Yeah. I do now. Well, not exactly: I know the city, not the address. And I don't know what name he's going by. I did a search but," she shrugged and quirked a smile, "no Rumplestiltskins in Portland, not as a first or last name. Care to take a guess how many adult males with the last name of Gold?"

"Too many, I'm sure. So he's in Portland."

"I'm assuming the one in Maine, though there are thirteen others."

"He wouldn't have wandered far," David speculated. "He's probably going to be trying again to get
back into town, you know. For his magic."

"I expect so. Henry promised to tell me if he says anything like that." Emma chewed on a fingernail. "But the thing is, Henry has an email address for him, so I now have a way to get a hold of him, ask him for his mailing address."

"And if he doesn't give it?"

"It'll take time, but I can trace him. The question is, do I force Henry to break his promise?" Emma shrugged. "I did my due diligence back in August when Spencer approached me; at the time, I tried to find Gold and couldn't. Now I can, but it means forcing Henry to betray his grandpa. That's how he'd see it, anyway: a betrayal."

"I'm not so sure you can force him to give you Gold's email address. He's as stubborn as you."

"He doesn't have to agree to it: I can get it off one of his computers."

David's face darkened. "Would you do that?"

"This is a gray area. As far as Spencer knows, I did what I was supposed to and my duty to him ended a month ago. Legally, I'm not bound to do any more. And I'm not inclined to force my son to break a promise just to make Spencer's life easier."

"What about Belle's life? This is for her, ultimately."

"It'll just drag things out. Spencer's filed a Motion for Service by Publication. When the judge approves that, he can run a notice in the Mirror, and if Gold doesn't respond to it within three weeks, Belle can go ahead with the divorce."

"So you're not legally required to get that email address."

"No. But—morally? That's what I'm stuck on."

David made a scale of his hands to weigh the choices. "Save Belle three weeks or violate Henry's trust."

"When you put it that way . . ." Emma sighed. "I was afraid I was putting my mom responsibilities ahead of my sheriff responsibilities."

"You're not being negligent, Emma. Belle will get her divorce. And from what I've seen, it won't change things for her in a way that really matters. True Love is indestructible, even if both the lovers do their damnedest."

"Yeah, but you can love again." Emma pressed a hand to her heart. "Regina's proof of that."

"And you?" Her father asked. "Have you fallen in love again?"

"How'd we get off on this topic? We were talking about the law."

"Love is the law, the higher law."

Emma leaned back in her chair. "And that answers my question. Henry's promise to Gold is safe from me."

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NOVEMBER 2014
It was a tight squeeze, and not just because Emma's kitchen table was so small; with no common enemy to bind them as allies, the Charmings, Mr. Jones and Ms. Mills found that amongst the roses of their relationship, there were still thorns. Certain subjects were safe to talk about: the weather, Henry's grades, the meal spread before them; other subjects should remain verboten: the election (although Regina had won, twenty-three percent of the vote had gone to an unasked-for write-in campaign for David), the boundary curse (and anything else to do with magic), and pretty much anything and anyone in their common past.

Still, everyone made an effort, for Henry's sake, and when the last slice of pumpkin pie was consumed, Regina offered to help with the dishes—and just as soon as she reminded herself that the Charmings didn't do their housework by magic, she picked up a dishtowel without a single complaint. Once that chore had been completed, the clan sat down in the living room and struggled to find something to say, all the safe topics having been thoroughly explored over dinner. When David's eyes wandered longingly to the TV, Snow bounced to her feet and exclaimed, "I know! Let's play charades!"

"Sure, charades!" Emma echoed, in support of her mother. Personally, she detested charades, having been forced to play it in one too many foster homes, but anything to fill the silence. And so Prince Charming, Snow White, the savior, the Evil Queen and Captain Hook limped through an hour of attempting to act out the titles of movies that only Henry and Emma had ever seen.

"Only in Storybrooke," murmured the newly officially elected mayor.

--------------------------------------------------------------------

"Great dinner, petal." Moe already had the remote control in his hand before he rose from the kitchen table. "Thanks."

"Dad." Belle clasped her hand around his, staying the use of the remote. "Before you turn on the game, there's something we need to talk about."

"All right." Moe sat down again at the table and pointedly set the remote beside his much-used dinner plate. He snuck a quick glance at the TV, but when she crossed her arms, he gave her his full attention. "What's up, petal?"

"Dad." She began to pace as she searched for careful words. "Dad, you know I love you. And I'm grateful for all you've done for me."

"My pleasure, sweetie." His eyes wandered to the TV again as he assumed the conversation was nearly over.

"But Dad, I'm a grown woman. I have a life of my own, a busy life, and I need to stand on my own two feet. That doesn't mean I'm pushing you away; it's just that... I think I need a little distance. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I agree. This apartment is awfully small," Moe said. "We need more space. Why don't you move back home?"

"No, Dad," Belle sighed. "That's not what I mean. I love you, but please—it's time for you to move out."

"Move out," Moe echoed.

"You need to have a life of your own too. We've been leaning on each other and that's keeping both of us from developing a social life of our own. Do you see?"
"You—you want to have a boyfriend over?"

"No!" Belle threw herself onto the couch and clutched a cushion to her chest. "I don't have a boyfriend; I don't intend to have a boyfriend. I think it'll be a long time before I feel like dating, if ever. Rumplestiltskin was my true love, and you don't just toss that out like an old pair of socks. I'll love him for the rest of my life. No, it has nothing to do with boyfriends. I need some space, independence, if I'm going to figure out what comes next in my life."

"Space. I see." Moe stood, his chin raised. "I'll pack my things and get out of your hair immediately. Where did you put my suitcase?"

"Dad! That's not what—Dad, I want you stay through Christmas. We should have Christmas together, right?"

"I would think so, but if you need your space, far be it from me—"

"Oh, Dad, don't get huffy. I'm not pushing you out of my life, just asking you to move back home after Christmas. I'll come over every Sunday for dinner, and you can drop by if you need something, but please, try to understand. My life has turned inside out this year. I need to figure things out. Please, Dad, go home, but don't shut me out. I'll always need you." She opened her arms, inviting a hug, and the big man never could refuse such an invitation.

So let his little girl have her space. There was no hope of ever getting any grandchildren if she didn't. Now that the Dark One was gone, the thought of becoming a grandfather someday was appealing.

--------------------------------------------------------------------

The library was closed during the week of Thanksgiving; still, Belle spent quite a bit of time downstairs, decorating for Christmas and planning the December story times—and seeking a much-needed break from ESPN blaring in her living room. Once her work was done, she remained in her office, huddled in a cashmere sweater that Rumple had bought for her last year. She had a cup of soup and an open book before her, but she couldn't concentrate on either one. It seemed like as far back as she could remember, life had been difficult, fraught with illness, war and torture at the hands of enemies, but this year had been among the worst, thanks to Zelena.

This year had also been, for a few precious days, among the happiest of her life. She'd been so angry for so long after she caught Rumple attempting to kill Hook that in imagination she had rewritten history: she'd isolated out those memories that she could interpret as signs of Rumple's growing wickedness—and worse, his deceptions. She had amplified the big sins and magnified the small, and sometimes she reinterpreted innocent remarks as lies.

Now, with distance and silence between those days and this, she had to face reality. She opened the library's copy of the Mirror—she'd been avoiding doing more than just checking it in, these past two weeks—and flipped to the Legal Notices. Hers was the only entry: "NOTICE OF SERVICE OF PROCESS BY PUBLICATION MAINE STORYBROOKE COUNTY in the District Court French-Gold v. Gold 0000001 To: Rumplestiltskin Gold: Take notice that a pleading seeking relief against you has been filed. . . ."

This was the final run of the notice. Rumple would have twenty-one days in which to answer—and of course he wouldn't. Couldn't. Spencer knew this full well, and so did the judge; no one outside of Storybrooke could lay their hands on an issue of the Mirror even if they wanted to.

It seemed unfair. In a month Spencer would request a hearing, which of course Rumple wouldn't show up for, because he wouldn't know anything about it, and two months after that—about a year after Rumple had been released from Zelena's cage—the divorce would be granted, and Rumple
would never know. He might suspect—he was a smart man, and in Storybrooke he'd been a non-practicing family law attorney—but he would never know.

It seemed a dirty trick, but there was no other way, Spencer said. The judge understood that and sympathized. The judge also understood what kind of man Rumple was; the divorce would be granted without question and all the remaining assets of the marriage—of the three-week marriage—would go to her. Even if the judge had qualms about handing over everything to her, again, there was no choice: Rumple couldn't access his funds without coming back to Storybrooke, and that was impossible. So, Spencer assured Belle, there would be no contest.

Except they all knew—it was a universal fundamental truth in the lands with magic—that while marriages could be broken, True Love couldn't. Not by law, not by the will of the people, not by magic, not by death. The divorced parties would be permitted, by law and by social convention, to marry again; True Love would even permit them to love another, just as deeply and permanently as the first. But once in True Love, a person could never fall out of it. What mattered was how the individual proceeded after the separation: having experienced True Love once and being certain of its inviolability, the individual could stand on faith, using that certainty to build a foundation for the next relationship; or the individual could sink in the mire of blame, anger, guilt and faithlessness.

Regina had been tested; her relationship with Robin proved where she stood. Emma had been tested; her relationship with Hook stood on firm, if not solid, ground. Only time would tell what Belle would make of her life. She wasn't yet emotionally finished with her first Love. Somewhere between anger and bargaining, that was how she and Archie had charted her progress in the five stages of grief, when they last spoke. He'd given her an assignment, asked if she felt ready to take it on, as it would require a great deal of strength, because if it moved her forward, she would be headed for stage four: depression. She'd said she'd try.

She calmed her aching heart, picked up her pen and began to write it all out, everything she could remember of the past year, every detail, recorded honestly. She wrote until dark, and then she turned on the desk lamp and kept writing. She wrote until she filled a stenopad. She wrote until the cramp in her hand would not allow her to write any more, everything she'd seen and heard and experienced in the past year, as clearly as she could remember it, without anger and insult coloring the memories. She wrote until Moe came downstairs to fetch her for dinner.

With a grumble she followed him back upstairs and marched to the kitchen, intending to throw some pots and pans around to show her displeasure at being coerced to leave her work just to cook for her father. But he surprised her: shamefaced, he ushered her to the kitchen counter and seated her on a barstool, then he poured her a glass of tea and put on a pair of potholders and fumbled about in the oven. In a few minutes he had a tuna casserole on the counter and was dishing it out onto two plates. "You might not remember, but I can be a fair hand in the kitchen when I want to be." His tone was not defensive, but rather apologetic. He brought out two bowls of salad from the fridge. "I'm sorry, Belle. I got lazy, I guess. Took advantage."

"It's all right, Dad. We all need to be spoiled sometimes." She shook the bottle of Italian dressing, then offered to pour some on his salad. He nodded as he sat down beside her at the counter.

"I'll remember that, petal, and if you'll let me, I'll spoil you, when you come to see me on Sundays."

They fell into an easy conversation as they ate. Not once did he glance at the television.

In the morning, as her father lay snoring on the couch, she tiptoed downstairs again with a cup of
coffee and a plate of toast. In the dawn chill she shivered, despite her cashmere sweater, but she had an important task ahead. She had struggled with bravery, just the same as everyone else, but she’d always opted to do the right thing despite her fears. Today the right thing was to face the truth. She sat at her desk and turned on the radio, adjusting the volume to low, because she needed the cushion of music between the history she’d written and her vulnerable heart. As Christmas music wafted under her thoughts, she re-read everything she’d written last night, even the parts she couldn’t bear to accept—the parts that described her own selfish, impulsive acts.

She read slowly, almost objectively. When she was finished, she picked up her pen again and wrote down what she had learned:

1. Whatever had happened to Zelena, she deserved it.

2. Rumple had done some terrible things this year, without explaining himself or sharing his worries with her.

3. Rumple had done some wonderful things this year, without being given credit for most of it.

4. Some horrible things had been done to Rumple this year, and no one knew the extent of it but Rumple himself. He had refused to speak of it—and, through her discussions with Archie, she understood now that the reason for Rumple’s refusal was more than an unwillingness to relive those memories. His reticence had been his way of sheltering Belle.

5. During his imprisonment and after, no one but her, Archie and Henry had shown any concern for him. In fact, when she’d banished him, most of the town had been relieved.

6. Belle had done some awful things this year.

She had to reach for a Kleenex.
Henry and Rumple established a pattern of emailing once a week. It came about because a break in their correspondence, caused by Rumple's participation in a plumbing class, resulted in a moment of panic for Henry: "I was afraid something had happened to you!"

After that, they made a deal to write regularly: every Monday Henry would send a message, even if he had nothing of interest to say, and every Tuesday Rumple would answer. They also got into a pattern of nonjudgmental truth-telling: Henry confessed that he, Regina and Dove were working together on attempting to break the boundary curse; Rumple explained just exactly how he had come to meet his housemates and how they had acquired the house they now occupied. They promised, the two of them, not to criticize each other's decisions; both felt they got enough of that from other people.

Though he felt more at ease now, Rumple's nightmares continued. He found himself at inexplicable times breaking out in a cold sweat, and once in a hardware store he had to leave abruptly when he saw that the clerk was a woman with long, red hair. At other times, when he passed couples on the street or observed the Hernandezes sitting side by side on a porch swing, a wave of depression would sweep over him, leaving him drained and exhausted when it had dissipated. Some days, getting out of bed was a challenge. On days like these, he was grateful to have a routine job that demanded little of him intellectually and a great deal physically.

He despaired sometimes whether he would free himself of Zelena. As for freeing himself from Belle, he had no wish to do so.

"Dear Grandpa,

I went by to see Archie today. I don't have to sneak over there any more. My moms let me go now. Anyway, I had a good long talk with Archie about how screwed up our family is. Talking about it didn't change anything, but it did make me feel better. Every so often my mom Emma will ask if there's anything she should know about the emails you send me, and I tell her no. As long as we just talk about ordinary stuff, we're okay.

Anyway, it's coming up on Thanksgiving and me and Emma are hosting it here. Grandma, Gramps, Killian and Regina are all coming. Everybody's bringing something. Christmas is going to be at Regina's house, she's having it catered (I think she might be trying to outdo Emma, but so what.) Do you have plans for Thanksgiving? Wish you could be here.

Love,

Henry"

As he reread the message, a phrase jumped out at Rumple: "a good long talk with Archie." Archie, who knew all about Storybrooke and the Enchanted Forest. Archie, unlike the AA or any therapist in Portland, wouldn't think Rumple was delusional for saying, "My name is Rumplestiltskin and I am a magic addict." Archie, who already knew some of the evil that
Zelena had perpetrated, and who was counseling Belle, would understand and believe.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he dashed off a short message:

"From: mrgoldantiquities
To: Archibald_Hopper
RE: Help

Dear Dr. Hopper,

I wish to retain your professional services, though I must admit up front, I am unable to pay you and I have no idea how we can do this, since the only way we can communicate seems to be by email.

I really do need your help.

Sincerely,

Gold"

He had a one-word answer waiting the next day: "Yes."

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Once again, he swallowed his pride to ask for help. His skin crawled as he entered a church for the first time in his very long life. He half-expected an avenging angel to sweep down from the heavens and threaten to slay him with a sword for desecrating these holy grounds: he was, still, the Dark One, although a toothless one. Once inside the cool, quiet sanctuary, he could hear his own breathing and his heart pounding in his ears, but then Father Daniel emerged from a sort of closet. The priest's welcoming smile and deep, strong voice took some of the fearsomeness out of this fortress of good. In a moment Rumple was led to an office cluttered with books, he was offered a cup of tea and a seat in a thickly cushioned armchair, and Father put him at ease by asking about the new sink Rumple and Jill were installing. After some chitchat, Rumple was ready to ask his embarrassing favor.

"Father, an old acquaintance of mine happens to be a psychiatrist. He lives some distance away, but he's agreed to start providing some counseling sessions for me if we can work it out technologically. He feels that Skype sessions would be the best option, but as you know, I don't own a computer and the public library is not the appropriate venue for private conversations. So I'm asking your help. I need a computer I can use in private once a week or so. I can't pay—"

Daniel waved his hand. "No payment necessary. You're welcome to use this one, any time. I hardly use it; I still write my sermons in longhand." He tapped the lid of his laptop. "I can guarantee you privacy and quiet." And then he made an offer that caused Rumple to sputter: "You can come and go as you like. I'll give you a key."

A key to this holy place. For the Dark One. The irony in that pricked his conscience; the trust in that floored him. Rumple blinked. "Th-thank you, Father."

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

This week, when he went downtown to cash his check and pay the bills, Rumple took a short
He wished he could buy something for Henry. It wasn't just the lack of money; anything he might try to mail to Storybrooke would be returned as undeliverable. On the bus going home, he mulled the problem over.

His eyes wandered across the aisle to a woman reading a library book (he immediately recognized the Portland Public Library markings that he knew so well now). Power Scrapbooking, it was called; he smiled at the contradiction in terms. Then he smiled broader as he realized he'd just found the perfect gift for Henry: he could write out stories from Bae's childhood and illustrate them with sketches. He'd picked up some drawing tips from Milah, back when they were first married; he'd taught her to spin and weave, and she'd taught him to draw. He'd never been good at it, but Henry would forgive some lopsided trees or misshapen sheep in the sketches. He'd work on this book every night until December 20: that was the last day the library was open for the year. The librarians would teach him how to scan the pages; he'd then email them. Henry would love it even better than any store-bought gift. Rumple's life was so busy now, between his job and house repairs and reading, but he could spare an hour a day to write. It would be a joy.

It would be a way to honor Bae. Bae would've loved it too.

He felt like a burglar, sitting there alone in Father's office, in front of the laptop. Father had shown him how to connect to Skype, but then had gathered up a legal pad and a couple of books and had wandered off. "I'll give you some privacy. I'll be in the kitchen working on my sermon. Come on by afterward; I'll have a cup of tea waiting." Father was a coffee drinker; if there was tea in his pantry, he'd bought it especially for Rumple.

"Thanks." Rumple meant for the tea as well as the use of the computer. Father closed the door behind him and Rumple sat there in the leather office chair, waiting for Archie to answer his call. He looked around a bit, just for something to do, but trying not to pry. At the top of the desk, under a lamp, a Bible lay open and a Post-It with a hand-drawn arrow pointed to a verse. "'For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.'" He had a hunch Daniel had intended him to see that verse.

"Hello, Mr. Gold." Archie's face jumped onto the screen.

"Hello, Dr. Hopper. Thank you for meeting with me." Rumple leaned forward, raising his voice to be heard, but then he decided that was unnecessary and he shifted to a normal volume.

"It's my pleasure."
"Before we begin, I've thought of a way I can pay you for your time—"

"That's not necessary."

"It is, because I intend to take quite a lot of it."

Archie grinned. "T-that's good. I'm glad. I think we'll find a lot to talk about."

"I'm nearly four hundred years old, Doctor. I have a lot to talk about. Though, talking about personal matters is not something I have much practice with, though I've come to realize that I need to learn."

"That's the right mindset. I think we can make good progress, despite the small disadvantage of distance."

"But as for payment, we can arrange that through my assistant, Mr. Dove. If you'll call him and tell him that I'd like for him to honor any invoice you send him, and give him this number—" He could see Archie writing. "He'll know what that number means, and he can be assured, then, the request comes from me. And while you're speaking to him, please tell him—please tell him Gold says thanks. Thanks for all his patience over the years. He put up with a lot of crap from the town just because he worked for me. And he put up with a lot of crap from me. He'll find it weird that I asked you to thank him; he'll also find it weird that I'm asking him to write you a check every month. But he'll do it; he always follows through."

"I'll do that tomorrow." Archie set his pen down so he could focus entirely on his patient's face. "Before we begin, there's something you need to know." Archie drew in a breath. "Mr. Gold, Belle has begun divorce proceedings."

Rumple's mouth opened and closed but no sound came out.

"Her attorney has been unable to locate you; that's why you haven't received the papers." Archie fumbled with his words and his glasses. "Because of the magic, you know, the barrier." He let his voice trail.

"Her attorney? Who?" Rumple latched onto a thought he could have clear feelings about. "I'm the only—was the only family law specialist in Storybrooke."

"Spencer agreed to. . . .I know it's not normally his area, but there was no one else."

Rumple bit the word in two: "Spencer. Of course he did. He has no right—he put ideas into her head, that's what I think. He convinced her—"

"No, Mr. Gold, I'm sorry to say, it was her idea. She felt, under the circumstances. . . .I'm sorry." Archie was struggling with himself, so tempted to explain, to soothe, to help a hurt man understand the actions of his equally hurt wife, but she was his client and deserved her privacy just as much as Gold deserved his. Anything Archie learned in his sessions with one could not be shared with the other, no matter how much good the revelation might do. He repeated uselessly, "I'm sorry."

"If that's what she truly wants, then." Gold's eyes were wide, his face pale, his voice hushed.
"Mr. Gold? Would you—would it help to talk about—how you feel about this?"

Rumple raised a hand between himself and the monitor. "I think—I'm going to have to stop for now, for tonight. I need some time to process this." He stood, hovered as if uncertain where to turn, then added, "If this what she truly wants, I won't contest it. Good night, Doctor."

"Mr. Gold? Will you come back next week?"

"I don't kn—" He started to walk away, then remembered he still needed to turn the computer off. "Yes. I'll come back. I still—yes." He pushed the power button on the CPU.

Daniel glanced up from his Bible as Rumple stumbled into the kitchen. "Cup of tea?" Then the priest looked closer. "Robert? Are you all right?" He stood and pulled out a chair next to his own. "Here, sit down a minute."

They sat in silence for several moments after Daniel had poured tea for them both. Then Rumple managed a single sentence. "My wife, she's filed for divorce."

Daniel hid his surprise. Now was not the time to point out that Rumple had never mentioned a wife or a life outside of the one he'd been living on the streets. "I'm sorry."

Rumple closed his eyes as he drank his tea. "I suppose it's for the best. What she needs."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

What could he say that wouldn't sound insane? My wife is a fairytale princess and I'm the evil sorcerer who lied and deceived and cast sleeping spells on her? "We were married... a very short time. We'd known each other, long before. We... got married a short time after my son was killed. After I'd been through... It was bad timing, I suppose. They say you shouldn't make life changes so soon after you've experienced a trauma, but I suppose we... clung to each other, like drowning sailors. After I lost him, I suppose I was afraid I'd lose her too." Hope flickered in his eyes—though he recognized it as false. "Another time? If we'd waited? If more time had passed after his death. If I could talk to her—" He shook his head, shaking himself out of the daydream. "She's better off without me. I'm—I'm quite a bastard, Father; you have no idea."

"I have a feeling you're not the man you used to be." Daniel fell silent a moment. "Why don't you call her?"

"It's too late. She's better off without me."

Daniel had been down this same road with several of his parishioners. There was nothing he could say to take their pain away; he'd learned over time the best he could do for them was to listen, if they wanted to talk, and to remain silent if they didn't. Sometimes just sitting with someone in a time of shock could be a service. He briefly rested his hand on Rumple's shoulder, but he let it slide away; Rumple was not a demonstrative man, nor comforted by touch.

"Thinking about her, about going home to her someday, that was what got me through this year. What got me moving again. It's going to be difficult without that hope." Rumple stood
up, leaning on his hands. "I'd better go. It's late, and I have to work tomorrow."

"I'll come by and see you on Friday."

He nodded. "Oh. I almost forgot: we'd like to have you join us for Thanksgiving."

"I'd like that." Daniel stood to walk him to the front door. "Call me if you need anything."

He walked through the next week in a daze, barely hearing the questions Sam asked, barely noticing the lives going on around him. He went to work without fail. He paid the bills, bought the groceries, fixed the Dumpster rejects and sold them at pawnshops, without fail. But in the early mornings, when he returned from work, he lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. He didn't mention his secret to Jill or Harry; they were almost happy now. They didn't deserve to be brought down.

When he caught himself in unguarded moments thinking of the divorce, he refocused: Belle would be free now. Belle could live a life of her own, out from under his shadow. Eventually Storybrooke would forget she'd ever been the Dark One's lady; they'd embrace her for the sweet soul she was. That's what mattered: Belle would be happy.

He pushed other thoughts out of his mind and pushed himself to keep on going.
Every Dog on the Street Knows

CHRISTMAS 2014

David unlocked the front door and snapped on the living room lights as Snow, sleeping baby on her shoulder, whispered, "Well, we got through our first holiday season with Regina without anyone throwing fireballs or food."

He chuckled. "I don't have to go out on patrol, Neal's sound asleep, and we've got the rest of the night to ourselves. You know what I'd like to do?"

Snow lay the baby down in his crib. "Have a cup of cocoa and turn in early?"

He followed her into the bedroom and encircled her waist with his arms. He set his chin on her shoulder. "I want to make tacos."

"Tacos?! But we just ate a huge—" she glanced at him and he waggled his eyebrows. "Oh, you mean—'make tacos.'"

He nipped at her ear. "With extra salsa."

Now, in the gap between semesters for Henry and between jobs for Regina, there was plenty of time for continuing research on the boundary curse. Emma surrendered to the inevitable, allowing Henry to live at Regina's throughout Christmas break. With Emma having the apartment all to herself, Hook saw an opportunity to close the distance between them; he showed up unannounced on the second night of Henry's absence with a single red chrysanthemum in his grip and a dufflebag at his feet. "For you, m'lady," he bowed, offering the flower. "Did you know flowers supposedly have been used throughout time to send hidden messages? Mr. French assures me that this posey sends the message of love."

"It's nice." Emma didn't know much about flowers (and didn't care), but she gave him credit for trying. She eyed the bag at his feet. "What's that?"

He tilted his head coyly. "My toothbrush."

"Oh really." Emma snatched up the bag. "We can't stand out here all night. It's cold." She stepped aside so he could enter, then closed the door and ran her hands up and down her arms to bring the warmth back.

"Allow me." He encircled her in his arms. She refrained from mentioning that the leather of his coat was cold against her skin.

Instead she suspiciously eyed the bag, which now sat upon her coffee table. "That's an awfully poofy bag for just a toothbrush."

"Well," he shrugged, "there's also my hairbrush, cologne, a change of clothes. . . or two. . . ."

"Just how long were you planning on staying—without asking me first?"

"Oh, don't think of me as presumptuous, love, merely hopeful. I thought, with Henry gone—"

"He's only across town, you know."
"I thought you'd be lonely and," he punctuated the words with kisses, "would enjoy some company."

"Oh, but you're forgetting something," she drew away from him. "I'm an officer of the law, and that means I have night patrols to make."

"Let your deputy do it. Surely he can cover this thriving metropolis alone."

"Huh-uh. He's taking vacation this week."

"Hire a temp?" Hook raised an eyebrow hopefully.

"Not in the budget."

He removed his coat and hung it in a closet. "Then I'll be waiting right here with a cup of soup and a grilled cheese ready for your return."

She smiled as she shook her head. "Killian, you just don't give up, do you?"

"You knew that about me long before we became lovers." He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her against his chest. "Now, before I allow you to go out into the cold, dark night, how about if I cook you a nice, hot dinner?"

She winked at him. "Sure. Let's make tacos." She walked over to the fridge in search of ground beef.

Belle beat Dove to the punch. Expecting he would drop by on Christmas to bring a gift for her on Rumple's behalf, she invited him, along with Moe, to Christmas dinner at her apartment. He accepted, with a stunned expression, and then he gathered his poise to ask, "How about if I bring the eggnog?"

"That would be fine, Jo. See you at eleven?"

"Sounds good, ma'am—". At her frown, he corrected himself. "Ms. Belle."

They were making progress.

Sure enough, when he arrived at exactly eleven, he had a small gift as well as a bowl filled with eggnog—but then, so did she. Before he could take off his coat, she dived under the Christmas tree for it. "Merry Christmas, Jo."

"Oh, ma'am—Belle—you didn't have to. . . ."

"But I wanted to. You're a good friend, Jo. Go ahead, open it."

She watched in delight as he removed the wrapping paper carefully, then folded the paper. Finally he lifted the lid from the box and removed the contents. "They're great. Thanks!" He admired the leather gloves before trying them on. "Real comfortable. I have trouble finding the right size, 'cause my hands are so big, but these fit great."

Really, it hadn't been that difficult: she'd gone to each of the shops that sold gloves, asked if they had sold to Dove, and when she found the one that had, she asked them to check their records to find out what size he'd bought. It was research; she was a librarian: voila.

"Open yours," he urged. When she did, she discovered a woolen scarf, bright blue with gold
edging. "From Mr. G. Well, you know: if he could've been here."

"Thank you. It's lovely. And it matches my coat." She draped the scarf around her neck and wore it for the rest of the afternoon. Dove and Moe watched some football while Belle finished cooking, then they sat down at her card table to enjoy a turkey, stuffing, gravy, mashed potatoes, green beans, rolls and pie. After the meal, Moe stood and began gathering the plates. "Let me and Josiah take care of the clean up, petal. It's our turn. You put your feet up."

"Thank you, Dad. I believe I will." She retreated to the couch but continued the conversation, watching the men wash the dishes. It was a nice break. In fact, the entire day was quite nice, but something—someone—was missing. She wondered where he was, whom he spent his holiday with. She hoped he wasn't alone, yet, she felt a pang of jealousy to think he might be with someone else. She had no right to such feelings, yet there they were.

JANUARY 2015

Regina fell back against her pillows. The monitor of her laptop was dark, but she continued to stare at it as if Robin might at any moment reappear in its frame. She had a big goofy grin on her face; it had been there all night. She was a businesswoman and a politician, sharp, well-dressed, savvy. She owned a five-bedroom house and a BMW and more Louis Vuitton shoes than she could count, but today she would have traded them all for a chance to kiss her beloved just once. Instead, she settled for a three-hour Skype session, and it was heaven. She'd known within the first five minutes that the spark between them was still alive.

And the best part of all: he'd conducted the conversation from his own apartment. It was a cramped little one-bedroom place that a former fish feeder at the New York Aquarium had lived in, in a dingy building that required bars on the windows, in a neighborhood that serenaded him at night with sirens and shouts and blaring car horns. It was taking half his salary to rent, but it was only one bus ride to his job with the Sanitation Department, and he had hopes of one day soon getting promoted. He reddened as he described his prospects: though the old saying claimed that a cat may look at a queen, a garbage man was hardly fitting company for a mayor.

Regina didn't care, she declared. His social status made no difference to her. As for his economic status, that would change, she promised; soon the boundary curse would be broken and he could return to Storybrooke and they'd find work suited to his skills. What mattered for now was that he was free of his marriage, free to come home to her, someday soon.

Archie glanced down at the spiral notebook Belle was holding out to him. "A record of the past year."

"Yes. Everything I could remember. It's disorganized and messy."

He smiled faintly. "So is life."

After he took the notebook from her, she dropped down onto his couch. "It turns out I'm not the hero people expect me to be—that I expected me to be. I realized that after I wrote this out."

"None of us are, Belle." Archie seated himself in his favorite chair, the notebook on his lap. "This whole classification system we've put ourselves in, heroes and villains, it's unrealistic and harmful. If we'd spend a little more time listening to each other and a little less time labeling each other, we might get somewhere."

"I thought I was listening to him; I thought the problem was that he wasn't communicating. But I wonder now if he tried, in the only way he knew how, and I was too caught up in this fantasy I had
of who he should be and who I should be and how a marriage should be." She fumbled in her purse for something, and Archie, catching on, offered her a box of Kleenex.

"Don't waste your energy on blame. Blaming yourself is just as counterproductive as blaming him. The question to consider now is what you can learn from the mistakes you both made." He tapped the notebook. "This was a brave endeavor, Belle. I'm proud of you for taking it on. This is an opportunity for growth." He handed it back to her. "But I think the best way we can explore this ground is by listening, both of us, to what you had to say, in your own voice."

"You want me to read this aloud?"

"Yes. One story at a time, so we can discuss each one." Archie sat back and crossed his legs as Belle took the notebook back. "Figure out what worked, what didn't, and why. What you want to take into the future, what you want to leave behind."

"I must admit," Belle said, "as I was re-reading this record the other day, I caught myself slipping into Stage Three."

"Bargaining," Archie identified it. "Everybody does. 'If I had done such-and-such, he wouldn't have done thus-and-so.' But we can't change the past; even Zelena learned that. All we can do is try to understand what happened and why, and do better next time. But I didn't give you this as an exercise in guilt. I hope you found moments to be proud of."

"I did. For both of us."

"Very good. Shall we begin with the first entry?"

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A hot dog in one hand and a Coke in the other (he could get away with this only because Mom Regina had a meeting with her mayoral staff-to-be and wouldn't be home until ten), Henry slid onto the roller chair at the desk in his bedroom. He licked a drop of ketchup before it could fall, and at the same time, he pressed the power button on his laptop with his pinkie finger. The monitor lit up and he set his soda down on his chem textbook so he could maneuver the cursor. He brought his email up and began to type one-handed.

"Dear Grandpa,

"You're welcome for the selfies (that's what people call photos of themselves that they took themselves). I'm glad they turned out okay. I'm not the greatest photographer. And you're right, that girl in the second picture is Grace. Before you ask, no, she's not my girlfriend, just my lab partner.

"Thank you for the great Christmas gift! I loved the drawings and the stories about my dad. I used to wonder what he was like when he was a kid—I guess every kid wonders that. But now I know. He wasn't anything like me, but he was the kind of kid that I would've wished I was. You know what I mean? That story of him when he was seven putting a rope around the sheep's neck and trying to ride it like a horse really cracked me up. And I loved the picture you drew to go with it."

"I kind of wonder what he would think, if he read these stories. Would he be embarrassed at the crazy stuff he did when he was little? Or would he be kind of proud that he was such a brave little kid? Maybe both. Probably he wouldn't want me to know about some of the wild things he did, because he took fatherhood pretty seriously and he tried to be what he thought was a good example for me. If he was here now, I'd tell him he didn't have to try. He was a good example already."

"You probably didn't intend it, but in those stories I learned more about you, too. I know from what
he told me that you were poor but he never went hungry and despite the ogre war, he felt safe, right up until the army tried to take him. From the stories you wrote, I also learned that you must've been a very patient and wise father. You let my dad try things, even if they were a little risky and even if you knew he would fail, and you never made him feel bad when he screwed up. My favorite one of the stories was the one about Bae's ninth birthday, and how he said to you that night that he was too old to be tucked into bed any more and that he wanted you to shake his hand instead of kissing him goodnight because that was how men said goodnight. I could just imagine how he felt when he got his handshake and went off to bed by himself for the first time, grown up but a bit sad because part of growing up means leaving a lot of good stuff behind. But I could also imagine how you felt, proud of him that he wanted to grow up but hurt that he didn't seem to realize how important he was to you and everything you gave up for him.

"Grandpa, when I got to thinking about that, I realized how much kids mean to their parents. It made me appreciate my moms more (don't tell them that, though. I really am too old to be tucked in!). I have to tell you, it also made me think about you in a different way. To me, you were always someone kind of mysterious and far away, someone we kids made up stories about because nobody knew anything about you except that you had a lot of money and you could scare the bejeebers out of anyone, even my mom. Then when I started working for you in the shop I got to know you a little better and you weren't so scary up close, but you were still someone I had to look up to. I mean, there was no other way to see you, you were this big figure with more power than anyone could imagine. But with these stories you don't seem so distant and big. You seem like a guy that just missed being able to kiss his kid goodnight.

"So thank you for the stories and the sketches. But also thank you for letting me get to know you better. I hope you had a great Christmas.

Love, Henry"

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"Well, that's everything." Moe closed the doors on the back of his van. He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before removing his keys from his pocket. "Sunday, twelve-thirty?" He winked at her. "I promise to leave the TV off during dinner."

"Sunday. I'll bring lunch." She stood on tiptoe to hug him. "Take care, Dad. And thanks."

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"Ah, Ms. French." Spencer was waiting for her at the circ desk.

Belle bade the last of the story time listeners goodbye before inviting the attorney into her office and offering him a chair. He carried a brown envelope, which she frowned at; she already knew its contents.

"I wanted to bring these by personally." He wasted no time in opening the envelope and placing the contents before her. The words "Complaint for Divorce" in fancy scroll headed the front page; the document appeared to be a dozen pages long. Spencer had warned it would be, and had warned it would take quite a while to assemble the list of Gold's assets, even excluding the two properties Gold had given away to Henry and Dove. "It'll be an extensive list," Spencer had warned, smiling, just as broadly as he smiled now. He crossed his legs, making himself comfortable in the visitor's chair. "We ran notices in the newspaper for three weeks. Gold has not responded, so we can proceed. The rest will go quickly, I assure you, since he's not contesting the divorce. The judge knows full well what sort of man Gold is and will gladly grant the divorce with all the assets coming to you. All you have to do is sign where my secretary placed the Post-Its. I'll deliver this to the courthouse myself as soon as I leave here."

"I've been thinking—" Belle began, ignoring Spencer's scowl. "I was married to him less than a
month. The assets should revert to him."

"Ms. French, as I explained before, there's no way he can access the money. If you don't claim it, it will sit in limbo for perpetuity. That's not doing either of you any good, nor does it benefit the community to have that money simply sitting in accounts. It needs to circulate."

"But it's not right—"

"Ms. French." Spencer uncrossed his legs to plant his feet firmly on the floor. "Think of your tenants. They need to know who owns the property they're renting, who to go to when there are problems. Now, Mr. Dove does a fine job of managing, I won't deny that, but the tenants need resolution. It's irresponsible to drag this out. Ms. French, you know as well as I do, he can't come back." Spencer let the thought sink in before he pointed to the document. "As soon as you sign, you can move on with your life, and so can this town. By the end of next week, you can put all this ugliness behind you."

"My marriage wasn't ugly," Belle muttered.

"I didn't mean to imply—"

"Mr. Spencer, I want you to run those notices again. Run them in every major newspaper in the United States. Give Rumple a chance to respond.""This was your idea." Spencer grit his teeth. "You came to me, asking me to arrange your divorce. Are you changing your mind?"

"No, I just think he needs a chance to answer." Belle lay the papers in her "in" tray. "Another month, Mr. Spencer. Run the notices until February."

Spencer rose. "Very well. I get paid regardless." He paused in the doorway. "Happy New Year, Ms. French."

"Happy New Year, Mr. Spencer."

"I did something I'm not sure of, something impetuous," Belle said without preamble as she rushed into Hopper's office. "It felt right but," she shrugged, "whenever my heart and my head have been at war and I've followed my heart, I've lived to regret it. Maybe I'm just waffling."

"Tea?" Archie didn't wait for her answer; he heated two mugs of water in the microwave and prepared the tea tray, adding a plate of smiling Santa sugar cookies. "I think I've known you long enough that I can say, what you call 'impetuousness' or 'whimsy' or 'spontaneity' usually isn't. You've an analytical person, Belle; whatever decision you've taken, you've had boiling on the back burner for some time before you made a move. And if you've regretted the decision, I suspect it's your heart that's wounded, not your head. Calling it 'impetuousness' is how your head attempts to justify to your heart a half-baked decision." He held the plate out for her. "Have one. They were a Christmas gift from Ruby." He bit into a wreath-framed Santa, using his palm to catch the crumbs. "Mmm. Now." He set his cookie on a napkin and returned to the microwave as it dinged. "Tell me what you did."

"I delayed my divorce." She was sitting on the couch with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her two fists. She still had her coat and mittens on; she seemed oblivious to them until she reached for her cup, and then she remembered and removed her winter gear. "I told Spencer to run the newspaper notices again. I know, I know," she moaned, "Rumple won't see them, but it just seemed so unfair to divorce him without giving him a chance to respond. Really, I'm delaying the
inevitable, but—"

Archie made a stop sign of his hand. "Whoa. Why do you say 'inevitable'? Divorce is a choice. Yours and his, preferably, or at least yours, but still, a choice. You don't have to do it."

"Even if there were no bitter feelings between us, a marriage is impossible when magic separates us. He can't come here, I can't go there. If it was a temporary separation—if he was gone on a long business trip, or to war or something—it would be different, but no matter how we feel about each other, we can never be together."

"That's not exactly true, is it?" Archie chastised. "Regina isn't letting magic separate her from Robin. She still writes to him, and she's determined that someday she will bring that barrier down. If she doesn't—I think she'll eventually leave Storybrooke and go to be with him."

"Give up her magic?" Belle looked askance. "Regina?"

"I think," Archie nodded thoughtfully, "that year apart from Henry taught her to reconsider her values. And I think if she had to choose between love and magic, she'd choose love. The tough part, for her, would be choosing between Henry and Robin, if Henry decides not to leave Storybrooke. But you have only your library and your father to keep you here."

"Are you suggesting I go after Rumple?"

"I wouldn't make such a suggestion to a client. It's too monumental. Besides, that's why you're here, isn't it? So you can figure out what you need." Archie sipped his tea. "Now, how long is this delay?"

"A month."

"Do you think that's enough time to choose how you want to spend the rest of your life?"

"No," Belle groaned. "I thought I was so sure, before. But not now."

"What's changed?"

Belle removed the notebook from her tote bag. "This. Looking back over the past year. It made me realize how happy I was with him—but, Archie, the happiness I had was a lie! That's why I'm so confused. Why did he do that to me?"

"Do what to you?"

"Pull me in!" She huffed. "He charmed me! He made me think he needed me. He made me think he'd changed. But it was all a lie, and I can't figure out why."

"Unfortunately, you may never know the answer to that, but here's something I want you to think about: what if it wasn't a lie when he said he needed you? What if he really did but didn't know what he needed from you, or couldn't articulate it? What if his love was real, and the power-lust was the lie, but the darkness in him clouded his mind?"

Belle spoke slowly, still fighting, but the fight in her was weakening. "That doesn't negate what he did to the nuns, what he would have done to Emma and Hook—what he would have let the Snow Queen do to you and everyone else."

"I'm not a hundred percent certain that Rumplestiltskin did those things. Not of his own free will, anyway. You tell me, Belle: you've read book after book about magic. Just how much free will
does a person have, when that person is possessed by the Dark One?"

"Very few writers ever considered the idea," Belle reported. "No one seems to have gotten to know a Dark One well enough to ask such questions. And most of the Dark Ones were neither self-aware or scientific. Even if they'd let someone get close to them—which none of them did—they wouldn't have stopped to analyze their situation. They just gave in to whatever impulse they fell prey to."

"But you and he were the exceptions. You were aware; he was scientific, and he allowed you to come closer to him than anyone had come to a Dark One. You must have talked about his curse. What did he tell you?"

"Whispers," Belle remembered. "He said his head was constantly filled with whispers from a voice he didn't recognize, planting thoughts and desires, hungers that he'd never experienced when he was human. Yet most of the time, he could talk back and resist the urges."

"But not all the time."

"No. But it was harder in the beginning. As years went by, he gained more control over himself."

"Let me pose another question to you: was he weaker against the Dark One at the times when he was physically weak? Ill or injured or exhausted?"

"I never saw him ill or injured. Not until Zelena caught him."

"He was physically weak then, to be sure. Was it harder for him then to resist the Dark One?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. He didn't talk about it. He wouldn't."

"Or couldn't?"

"Or couldn't," she allowed. "But Archie, are you looking for excuses for his behavior?"

"I'm looking for reasons for you to forgive him," the psychiatrist confessed.

"He's not here for me to forgive."

"Forgiving him would do you as much good as it would him." Archie gave her a moment to think about that. "Mercy is twice blessed. It blesses her that gives and him that takes. And it's what everyone needs when they've been left behind. Elisabeth Kubler Ross wrote, 'Each of us has a Gandhi and a Hitler in us.' You came to realize, when you wrote your notebook, that you can sometimes do wrong too. I'm not saying you're capable of the kinds of acts that Rumplestiltskin has done. Then again, you haven't had the Dark One whispering in your head night and day for three hundred years. But to admit that you've done wrong, sometimes intentionally, sometimes with the intention of hurting someone, and then to forgive yourself is one of the biggest steps you have to take if you're going to move on. And the other one, the other big step, is to forgive Rumple for his wrongdoings, both the intentional and the unintentional." He leaned forward to touch her knee. "This is the hardest thing you'll ever have to do in a relationship: to truly forgive. But it's the only way to move forward. Love starves to death when it's fed a diet of anger. It thrives only when it feeds on forgiveness."

"How do I begin?"

"You've already completed the first step. When you wrote that notebook, you faced the reality of what happened between you and your husband. Now I'm going to ask you to reflect on what you learned about yourself from the time you were with him."
"I learned that I can't live in his shadow. I need to be a person apart. I need a life of my own, my own work, my own friends, my own thoughts, my own goals. I lost track of all that while I was with him. I was so focused on trying to take care of him, I lost myself. I learned, too late, there's more than one way of communicating and more than one way of listening. That, I think, is where I most went wrong. I expected him to tell me all his fears and hopes, because that's what I would have done. If Zelena had held me prisoner, I'd have come running into Rumple's arms, crying and pouring out my heart and asking for sympathy and comfort."

"But he couldn't do that. Just as we all are, he is in part a product of his upbringing, his generation, his gender, his class. And you are so very different from him in all those ways. It's no wonder you didn't know how to talk to each other."

"I wish I could apologize to him for that."

"I wish you could too. And I'm sure he'd apologize to you for that as well." Hopper tapped his fingers against the arm of his chair. He seemed lost in thought for several minutes, but then he sighed and brought himself back to the present. "Do you think his lying to you was malicious? Did he want to hurt you?"

"No," she answered promptly. "He was lying to avoid hurting himself, I suppose. And to hang onto me." She pursed her lips in thought. "He'd just lost Bae. He was afraid, maybe, that he'd lose me too, unless he took me away from here. And afraid if he couldn't keep his magic, he couldn't protect me."

"And what if he'd told you these fears?"

"He probably thought I'd think he was weak and I'd leave him." Her eyes widened. "That's exactly what happened anyway. I thought he was weak, clinging to magic like a crutch, instead of leaning on our love. And that's why I threw him out. I was insulted, coming second in his life. I was hurt that he trusted this—thing—" she fluttered her fingers in imitation of the imp. "Instead of me."

"How many people have you had in your life that you could depend upon, Belle?" He held up fingers to take a count. "Two? Three?"

She counted on her own fingers. "My mother, until she died. My father. My nanny when I was little; my governess when I was a teenager; my handmaid when I became an adult. None of them could save me from the terrible things in life, but they did their best for me. And after he warmed up to me, Rumple. I could depend on him, in his own weird way, once I got to know what that way was."

Archie kept his fingers in the air. "How many people could Rumplestiltskin depend upon?"

"Me and Bae." Archie raised two fingers. Then Belle reconsidered. "Except Bae left, and when Rumple pushed me away, I left. Until finally I pushed him away."

Archie made a closed fist of his hand. "So: Rumple could depend upon this many people."

"That was his own fault," Belle interjected. "He kicked me out of the Dark Castle, and then he sent me away from his shop, from his house. He chose to push me away, and he chose to let go of—" She cut herself short and gulped. "No. I never meant to say that. He didn't let Bae go. He tried to hold on."

"Maybe after those attempts to hang on—to Bae, to Malcolm, to Milah—he concluded that people thought he wasn't worth sticking around for." Archie sipped his tea again. "I want you to know
you're making good progress, Belle. You're at step three on the road to forgiveness. "He glanced at the miniature grandfather clock on his mantle. "That's your assignment for this week: step three. I want you to go back through your journal. Everywhere you find a 'Rumple did' statement, I want you to write down what you think he expected to gain from that action. When you've done this, I think you'll find your anger has slipped away."

"And when it does?"

"Then, you'll be ready to forgive him."
"Good evening, Dr. Hopper." Rumple greeted the grainy image on the monitor.

"Mr. Gold." Archie smiled in relief. "I'm glad you came back."

"I said I would."

"Yes, you did. How has it been this week? Are you—would you like to talk about the divorce?"

"No. Not yet. I need more time. Just—you said she had filed. How far along are they in the process?"

"They've begun publishing a notice in the Mirror."

"All right. I'll need some time yet. Let me have some more time to adjust. I'm still—stunned."

"That's fair. All right then. Let's begin then with talking about why you decided to ask for my help."

"It was something I heard a Marine say..."

An hour later, Rumple closed the laptop, rose and pushed his damp hair back from his face. He was sweating, though the room was a bit chilly; winter was setting in. He felt as if he'd run ten miles—and he couldn't remember the last time he'd run. He'd probably been a kid then. But it had gone much more smoothly than he had fretted it might: he'd known Archie a very long time and that enabled him to speak in a sort of shorthand, making brief references to places and events and people that they'd both known so that he could spend his time elaborating on the parts that really mattered. And Archie's gentle, non-judgmental way of handling people—even that stammer that appeared every now and then—made him non-threatening. Rumple felt Hopper wasn't looking for excuses to despise him, though there were plenty, beginning with the fact that he'd encouraged Jiminy's childhood life of crime.

He wandered out to the kitchen. Father was busy writing away at the table, but a cup and a spoon were waiting at the place at the opposite end of the table, and a teapot sat on the counter. Rumple lifted the china lid and peeked inside: real tea! Father had brewed tea from fresh leaves!


"Oh no, I won't need supplements." Rumple brought the cup over to fill. "I don't want anything covering up the flavor."

He sat down, savoring the tea and the silence as Father worked. After he'd finished his sermon, Daniel didn't ask how the session had gone or what Archie and Rumple had discussed. Rumple appreciated that. He wanted to repay Father somehow, though he knew.
the priest would just brush away any thanks. "Daniel, I notice that cupboard door is off its hinge. If you have a screwdriver, I can put it right in a just a minute."

"Sounds good, Robert. I'm sure we have a screwdriver or two in the junk drawer." He went digging in said drawer. As he presented a handful of screwdrivers for Rumple to choose from, he smiled. He knew what Rumple was up to and he respected it.

Happily, Rumple went to work. He figured if he looked around he could find plenty of other little repairs that needed doing, plenty of other ways to pay Daniel back for the use of his laptop. Though he knew he didn't need to: they were friends, after all, and friends enjoyed exchanging favors.

-----------------------------------------------

They hadn't been able to afford a turkey and stuffing, but they would eat well just the same. Harry had made a tuna casserole with a saltine crust; Jill and Sam had prepared butterflake rolls and green beans with pearl onions; and Rumple had baked an apple pie from scratch. They didn't have a TV to watch the Macy's parade on, but they had a radio and listened to a broadcast about it. And they had a guest, Father Daniel, who'd forgone a lavish dinner with the wealthiest family in his church to come down to the east side of town to eat tuna with squatters. Daniel had brought wine (and grape juice for Sam). For once, he had no news about city ordinances or rallies for justice, just some hackneyed riddles for Sam and compliments for the chefs.

"So," Rumple asked as he led Daniel into the kitchen, "you could've had a gourmet meal in a mansion. Why did you choose us?"

"'A man's life consists not in the abundance of his possessions.' Besides, you're a better cook than the Connors' paid staff." He took the place offered him at the head of the table and he stretched out his hands to Jill on his right and Rumple on his left. "Shall we pray?"

Rumple had some doubts about praying, but out of respect for his friend, he closed his eyes and bowed his head. It was a lovely prayer, anyway. As they sat and began to pass the dishes around, Daniel said, "I like to take opportunities whenever they pop up, and Thanksgiving is built for one. How about if we each say something we're thankful for? It'll be music to the Lord's ears."

"A noble tradition," Harry remarked. "My family practiced it every Thanksgiving—" and then as heads snapped up and eyebrows raised, he backpedaled. "Back in London. Where, ah, we celebrated Thanksgiving as a . . . a show of forgiveness for our American brethren, for them rebelling against King George."

"Which George was that, Harry?" Jill's eyes twinkled. "I always forget. The seventh or the tenth?"

"Oh, who keeps count? Take more of the casserole, Father. I added fresh mushrooms and peas. You'll love it."

"I love peas!" Sam chirped.

"I guess Sam will start with the giving of thanks, then," Jill volunteered. "What else are you thankful for, besides peas, sweetie?"
"My friend Alysa... Nancy the Librarian... dolphins and turtles and birds... grape juice... the slide at school; it's shaped like a elephant. And mom and Rumple and Harry and Father." His speech concluded, Sam shoveled beans into his mouth.

"I am thankful for everyone at this table, for the food that's on this table, for the roof over this table, and for Legal Aid," Jill said, raising her coffee mug of wine.

"Hear, hear," said Harry. "And for the Dylans and for friends departed, from this town or from this existence."

"I too am grateful for everyone here, and for all the aforementioned, and for the staff at the Main Library, and for... acts of kindness, of affection, of generosity, that remind us we're needed and loved," Rumple contributed.

"And for the Father who made all and everything possible," Daniel added. "I believe I will have another scoop of the casserole, Harry. I do love fresh mushrooms."

So does Belle, Rumple reflected. In that moment he felt no guilt or anger or desperation, just gratitude for the time he'd had her in his life.

This time, the yellow Post-It marking Daniel's Bible pointed to "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and come down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." Rumple liked that: "neither shadow of turning." A lovely phrase.

"Good evening, Mr. Gold." Archie's face appeared a bit distorted in the computer monitor until he sat back in his chair. "How was your Thanksgiving?"

"It turns out, despite my circumstances, I have several things to be thankful for." Rumple sounded surprised as he too made himself comfortable in Daniel's leather chair.

"Is that so? Tell me about them."

Rumple began listing everything good that he could remember from the past year. When he'd come to the end, he blinked. "It was still a crappy year, in balance, but there were a few things I'll remember—people, mostly. That's what surprises me more than anything, I guess. I've always expected crap to happen to me; life has never failed to screw with me. What I didn't expect was to find people like Father Daniel, and the Dylans, and Sam and Jill and Harry and Henry." He paused, looking down at his hands. "And Belle." His cocked his head as if listening to a voice in his memory. "She really did love me, for a while. If I had accepted that then... . . ."

"Don't beat yourself up, Mr. Gold. You had far more to deal with than you could handle," Archie said. "Than anyone could have handled. And so few emotional resources to draw on. What matters is how we proceed from here. You've just made a very important statement, one that we can build on. I'd like you to say it again."

"She really did love me." This time he smiled, albeit sadly.

"And so does Henry, and all these new people in your life. Love is something you deserve,
Mr. Gold. It's something you're capable of giving—something you have given—and something you have a right to expect."

Rumple's face paled. "That said, how do I keep it?"

"That's the most important question you can ask. I think we should spend some time talking about your experiences with love. Perhaps when we've finished, we'll have an answer. But I want to assure you from the outset, Mr. Gold: not everyone you love will turn against you. I hope that someday you'll see that."

"My track record in that regard is abysmal."

"It doesn't have to remain that way. Shall we begin at the beginning? Tell me about your mother and father."

"Zelena," Rumple said abruptly.

"I'm sorry?"

"That's what she did. That was one of the ways she demonstrated her control over me. One of the ways she had fun. She would force me to tell her about the people who had hurt me and the ones that I had hurt. Made me relive it. And each time, after she left me in a heap on the floor, she'd conjure a nail and give it to me."

"So you would have a visual reminder of the pain," Archie surmised. His face paled now too. "I'm sorry, Rumple. That woman was a sadist. You and I will talk about your past because we need to if we're going to answer your question, but I promise you, I'll never push where you're not ready to go."

"All right." Rumple took a long drink of tea. "We'll have to start with my father, because I never met my mother. I don't even know her name. My father's name was Malcolm. . . ."

Sam's entire family (as he proudly called his and his mother's housemates) entered the library together, but once inside, parted ways: Sam and Harry ambled into Room A for Ms. Nancy's special holiday story time session (with an appearance by Santa), while Jill took a seat in Room B for Ms. Ellen's Intro to Blogging class. Rumple, meanwhile, logged in to public computer 7A to check his email.

"Hi Grandpa,

"Man, am I stuffed! Would you believe we had THREE kinds of meat for Thanksgiving dinner? Gramps cooked a turkey—he said he wanted to do it because it reminded him of the old days, back on the farm with his mom. He'd set a trap in the woods and catch a turkey for their holiday meal. And then Grandma brought over some fish that Leroy had caught, and Emma cooked a honey-glazed ham with slices of pineapple. Regina brought a ham casserole —I guess that counts as a meat, too? Anyway, we watched the Macy's parade on TV, then we ate until we were all busting, and then we watched some football (it's Grandma that's the real football fan in the family. You'd be surprised how she yells at the coaches and the referees!) and then we ate again. Mom says we'll be eating turkey and ham sandwiches for the rest of the year so we can get rid of the leftovers."
"It snowed some here, just enough to cover the lawns. Did you get snow? I figured you must have, since Portland's not that far. Did you have a nice Thanksgiving? Did you watch the parade on TV?

"Grandpa, I wanted to ask your advice about something."

Rumple sat up straighter in the library's little roller chair. Advice. His grandson wanted advice. He glanced over to the Reference Desk, where Lucy, the Adult Services Librarian, was talking on the phone. My grandson wants my advice, he wanted to say. She would understand, he thought: she had a grandson of her own. She'd shown him a photo once, after he'd shown her a selfie Henry had emailed ("selfie"—knowing the word made him chuckle. Six months ago he barely knew the difference between Google and Yahoo).

"Grandpa, I wanted to ask your advice about something. There's a boy in my class named Quincy. He gets teased bad enough about his name, though I don't see why. He was named for King Quincy of the Green Mountains. Anyway, he hasn't had his growth spurt yet (that's what Grandma says) and he's the smallest kid in the class. He gets pushed around by this bully named Tom and his gang. Of course they don't do it in front of the teachers. They'll grab Quincy in the boys' room or in the parking lot after school and they do crap like pantsing him and knocking his glasses off and throwing his coat in the trees. One time he came into class with the buttons ripped off his shirt and his nose bloody. He wouldn't tell Mrs. Shurtz who did it, but we all know.

"Here's the thing. I've been thinking I should do something about it. I'm not as big as Tom, but I'm fast, and Gramps taught me how to defend myself. I could probably take Tom, and some of the guys on the baseball team would make sure it's a fair fight. Nothing like having nine guys with baseball bats coming after you to make a gang of bullies turn tail! But when I told Quincy my idea, he said no! He said it would only make Tom madder, and the next time, the beating would be worse. I guess he's right.

"But Grandpa, I can't just stand back and pretend I don't know what's happening. If I talked to Gramps, he'd say a hero never lets the weak be victimized. But it's not that simple. Because I can't follow Quincy around all the rest of his life like a guard dog, you know. In the movies, someone would start teaching the kid karate or something, but this is real life. Quincy's small and uncoordinated and it would take him years to learn how to break a board with his hand, let alone defend himself against five guys.

"Gramps is great for learning stuff from, but he's kind of a black-and-white thinker. To him, it's the fighting that's the issue. I think it's deeper than that."

Rumple nodded and muttered at the monitor, "It is, Henry. It's about humiliation, not just bloody noses. It's about prestige and power and—" He stopped suddenly. He'd been thinking about Hordor and the myriad other bullies he'd faced in his spinner days, but the moment the word power popped into his head, it was like a bucket of ice water thrown into his face. Power was his thing. Power that had come to him in spades, all at once, on the night he thrust the dagger into Zoso's chest. Power too tantalizing to resist, too overwhelming to control. Power that let him defeat any enemy, no matter the number, no matter the size, no matter the ferocity. Power that gave him prestige, protection, revenge, and immeasurable satisfaction. Beneath his boot he'd crushed out lives: ogres, yes, and torturers, but also
innocents who'd merely offended, or who'd merely been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd been the judge and jury; the Dark One had carried out the executions. Upon the instantaneous acquisition of unstoppable power, he'd resorted to behavior he'd observed in the powerful. He'd become a bully. Not even his wife's pleas or his son's crying could stop him.

Tomorrow he would make this the focus of his Skype session with Archie. How he'd gone from victim to bully in one knife-stroke, and how that same knife had made him a victim again to yet another bully. He'd assumed this was Fate's way of screwing with him, punishing him, but now he was wondering if he'd been caught in a dysfunctional loop.

He certainly hoped so. Fate, as every mage knew, couldn't be escaped. Loops, as every spinner knew, could be snapped.

"Grandpa, you understand how messed-up people can be. What do you think I should do?"

"Befriend him," Rumple started typing in answer. "Help him to make friends. People who aren't alone, no matter how small they are, are no longer weak. Build him up with friends and that will make all the difference in how he sees himself and how others see him." What a difference it would have made in my life, if I'd had friends, he wanted to write. When I was bullied, if I'd had people I could turn to for comfort and support. It might have given me the strength to fight the biggest bully of them all, the Dark One. If I'd have known what a friend looked like, I would have recognized one in Belle. Instead, I treated her as a responsibility. A treasured object to be protected, a child to be sheltered, instead of a helpmate.

He wondered who else he'd met over the years that might have become a friend if he'd given them a chance. At least, he was getting a bit of an idea now of what a friend looked like. He finished his reply to Henry, praising him for his perceptiveness and his caring. And then he tracked down The Rationale of Bullying and as he scanned it at the self-checkout machine, he smiled over at Lucy. "Happy holidays," he said. "And thanks."

JANUARY 2015

"I'm seeing a physical reaction in you whenever we talk about Zelena," Archie commented once the initial greetings were over. "It's so hard to observe much without being in the same room; I wish I could take biometrics. But what I think I'm noticing—confirm this for me if it's true—is a shortness of breath, increased heart rate, sweating, jitteriness, anxiety."

"Confirmed," Rumple agreed, scooting Father's chair a little closer to the computer. "My nightmares are increasing in frequency and intensity. When I'm at work, though, I feel better. Safer."

"How so?"

"I guess it's that so many of us are in same boat. If I flipped out, they'd understand. They wouldn't call the cops on me. And cooking—it calms me down. It's physical enough to be tiring, but not exhausting like dishwashing was. And it's somewhat like working in my lab."

"Let's explore that a while. Do you miss the magic?"
"Of course I do," he answered too quickly. "It was protection! It put food on the table and a roof over my head. It was creative, it was entertaining, it was therapeutic—"

"It brought people to your door, demanding your help."

"It gave me a social life, I suppose. It gave me Belle."

"And took her away."

"And took my son away, twice."

"It was creative, it was entertaining, it was therapeutic—"

"It brought people to your door, demanding your help."

"It gave me a social life, I suppose. It gave me Belle."

"And took her away."

"And took my son away, twice."

"It gave me life—a tediously long life—but took away my reasons for living."

"Do you have reasons now, for living, even without the magic?"

"I don't know. There are people who need me, others who count on me."

"But what about you? Do you enjoy living?"

"Huh!" He had to think about that. "There are moments—like yesterday, when one of the counselors told me that Martin—that's the former Marine I told you about—is no longer exhibiting symptoms of malnourishment. That's a big problem for addicts, you know. But he's gained weight; his BMI is 19 now. He's no longer cold all the time. He's concentrating better because he's eating better."

"Because of your work."

"Yeah." Rumple savored the words: "Because of my work."

"What else? What other moments give you enjoyment?"

"Sam. I don't get to see him all that often, with my schedule, but on my days off I take him to the park or the movies or the library. Last Sunday I taught him how to use a hammer. He helped me fix a loose floorboard." Rumple thought for a moment. "He means a lot to me. I worry about that sometimes."

"Why?"

"I'm going to lose him. He's going to find out what I really am and he's going to despise me."

"Who are you now, really? You're not the Dark One. You're not Rumplestiltskin. You're a hard-working guy who's doing his best to provide a home for a kid. Same as a million other decent, responsible guys."

"I'm not—"

"Sure you are."

"I shouldn't have let him get attached to me."

"Do you mean, you shouldn't have let yourself get attached?"

"Why did I? Was I compensating for Bae, all those years I lost with Bae?"
"Is that wrong, if you were? Have you accepted Sam on his own terms?"
Rumple grinned. "That's the only way to take Sam. He's his own guy."

"You fulfill a need for him right now. What's wrong if he's fulfilling a need for you?"
"Is it disloyal to Bae?"
"If you love Sam, what does that take away from Bae?"
Rumple shook his head. "The memory—I'm distracted. I'm not thinking about Bae as often as I should."

"Bae's gone, Mr. Gold. You grieving over him won't add or take away anything from him, only from the living. Including yourself."
Rumple broke down then. "He shouldn't have died. He hardly got a chance to know Henry. I hardly got a chance to apologize. I never made it up to him, for abandoning him. In those first few weeks when I had him back, I didn't know how to talk to him, or what he wanted; I let myself get caught up in trying to impress Lacey so she'd stay with me; I was so afraid of what she'd do if she wandered away from me—" His explanation degenerated into sentence fragments punctuated by gulps and tears. Archie talked him through it.

When he'd regained his composure, he leaned back into Father's leather chair, exhausted. "I'm sorry, Dr. Hopper."

"Never apologize for real emotion. Mr. Gold, you should try to get some rest now. Go home, eat a healthy meal, spend an hour with Sam. And when you're ready, I have an article I want you to read, about a treatment that's proven effective with PTSD. It's called EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing."

"I've heard of that. The therapists at Phoenix House don't use it, but I read a bit about it."

"I've been studying up on it, ever since we began our sessions, and I'd like to see if it will help reduce the physical reactions you have when you talk about your experiences with Zelena. Read the article I'm emailing you, and we'll discuss it next week. In the meantime, don't be concerned that your nightmares are increasing right now. It's to be expected; we're dredging up some painful memories. Just use the techniques I taught you to bring yourself back to a state of relaxation, and keep up your dream journal."

Rumple wasn't the only one in the house on Hayes Street to be struggling with nightmares. Sam's were continuing, although his fears had changed in the months since he'd gained a home: where he once dreamt of ferocious dogs and boogy men attacking him, he now dreamt of squad cars with flashing lights and howling sirens crashing into his bedroom, and cops with guns yanking him out of his bed.

Fearing for him, Jill had sought assistance through the health department, the school, various nonprofits and the family shelter, but had found no free psychological treatment programs for low-income children. She tried to help him herself with books from the library.

"We have to do something," Harry muttered after a long night interrupted by the boy's
crying. "He's being teased by some of the kids in the neighborhood. They're threatening to call the cops on us."

"If we lived here legitimately, he'd feel more secure," Jill said. "I have to admit, I worry about it too, that any minute we'll get caught and thrown out. And it's a very cold winter this year."

"It's time we bring this to a head." Rumple tightened his jaw. "It was a risk coming here, but I'm going to ask you to take an even bigger risk."

"What are you thinking?"

"Honesty. I want to come clean with the bank, tell them what we've been doing—and see if I can cut a deal. If I fail, we can expect immediate eviction, after all our hard work on this place, but Father Daniel can find another zombie house for us and we'll start again."

"I'm in," Jill said. Harry added, "As am I."

"But you haven't heard the plan yet," Rumple pointed out.

"Whatever it is, I'm okay with it. We wouldn't be in this house if not for you and your plans."

His eyes widened. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had shown blind faith in one of his plans. Of course, he could credit this trust to their ignorance; if they had an inkling of who he really was, what he had done in the distant and recent past, they'd run away shrieking. Once again, just as he had with Belle, he had anchored his relationships to a lie. He owed Jill and Harry the truth about himself—the problem was, if he told them the truth, they’d never believe him.

He gave himself a mental shaking. However unethical and bizarre the foundation of his relationship to these people might be, he had no choice now but to move forward. They needed him, especially that little kindergartener. They needed him to be the man he claimed to be. He'd just have to live the lie.

He'd known a few outlaws in his time, men and women who traveled under an alias. He knew how difficult it could be not to let the truth slip out. But he also knew that in time, an outlaw could remake himself, become the person he claimed to be. Without magic tugging at his sleeve, luring him back to old habits, a remake just might be possible even for Rumplestiltskin. He remembered how difficult it had been to look Belle in the eye, in the short time they'd been married, even as he'd proposed to her, even as he'd made his wedding vow to her.

He raised his eyes to meet the smiling confidence of his housemates. He felt fed by their friendship, a man starving for a family. They would never learn about his past, but they would know the truth about him, he vowed it, because what they thought him to be, he would make that the truth.

"Okay," he said. "Now, here's my plan."
A/N. Couldn't help it. I just had to sneak in that old TV cliché: "Now, here's my plan" and then we cut to the next scene.
The Only Place We Call Home

JANUARY 2015

Oh what he would have done for one of his D & G suits. Even an Armani tie would have been nice right now, not for their sake but for his own. He always felt taller in a tailored suit. But since that wish was out of reach, he dressed in Sears slacks and a midnight blue dress shirt that he bought just for this day at a Goodwill. He'd had to hem up the slacks; as he was doing so last night, he fretted that he might have shrunk an inch or so in the past year. He'd heard that happened to people as they aged, and now that he was no longer immortal he had to take ageing into consideration.

Yesterday he'd bought a bottle of hair color and with Harry's assistance he trimmed his shaggy mop and dyed out the gray. Today he'd spent an extra half-hour in the bathroom, showering and shaving and combing his hair and brushing his teeth. He had no leather shoes to shine, but he had washed his sneakers. Then he collected his evidence in an accordion folder, tucked it under his arm, slipped into his coat and with Sam and Harry waving him goodbye from the porch he set off for the bus stop. Ninety minutes later, he arrived downtown and walked head high into Barton National. He approached the first desk he saw and offered his hand before the banker could greet him. "Good morning. I have an appointment with Ms. Orwell."

He was led to a small glass office off to the side from the lobby, where a young woman in a pencil skirt and white blouse welcomed him.

"Ms. Orwell? Robert O'Neal."

"Yes, Mr. O'Neal, please be seated. I understand you wanted to talk to me about one of our properties. Normally we work through realtors—"

He sat across from her and set his accordion folder on her desk. "No, ma'am, the property isn't on the market yet. It's one the bank acquired through foreclosure, in September. I'm not interested in purchasing it but in renting it. I realize what I'm about to propose is unusual, but I think you'll see it's very much to the bank's advantage to take my offer." He opened the folder and removed an envelope full of documents, speaking as he unpacked. "It's the three bedroom at 311 Hayes Street, corner of Cumberland Avenue." He watched her expression shift from perplexed to disgusted for just a moment before she settled on a pleasant curiosity. She probably wasn't familiar with the property, but she had a definite opinion about the neighborhood and that opinion wasn't favorable. Good. Point one in his favor.

"As you may already know, that's a low-income part of town. The two-bedroom next door to 311 has a valuation of $55,000. The three-bedroom across the street is valued at $63,000. Average price for a three-bedroom in this neighborhood is $60,000. The appraisal district valued 311 at $56,000. It needed a lot of work, including new tile and a new stove in the kitchen and a new shower system in the bathroom. One of the bedrooms needed repainting and there were assorted smaller repairs: carpet patching, curtain rods, loose floorboards." He started spreading out "before" and "after" photos illustrating the work he was describing.
"Whoa, wait." The bank officer set a staying hand atop his photos. "You said 'needed.'"

"Correct. We made the repairs. Did a very nice job of it, if I do say so myself." He grinned proudly and pointed one by one to the photos as she removed her hand from them.

"You made . . ." she said faintly. "When? Who are you? Are you the house's former owner?"

"No, the current residents." He removed another photo from the envelope. This one showed Rumple, Sam, Jill and Harry standing on the porch, with brooms and paint brushes and a plunger in their hands. Even Sam held a dustpan. They were all smiling. "That's me, that's Harold Harridge, that's Jill Sawyer and the little guy there is five-year-old Sam. He's in kindergarten at Taft Elementary. His mom works there. Harry's a custodian for five churches. I'm a cook at Phoenix House. And we're all quite talented with household repairs, as you can see." He was talking continuously, leaving no space for the banker to slip in a question or even stop to mull over the information he was providing. "I took a plumbing class before I installed that shower system. We also maintain the lawn, of course, ours and the lady's next door. She's in her seventies and yardwork is beyond her capacity. We're also founding members of the Hayes Street Neighborhood Watch. When spring comes, Harry will be planting zinnias along the sidewalk."

"W-who gave you permission to do all this? Who permitted you to move in?" Her face was reddening.

He widened his grin, as though he was proud of his answer. "Nobody. We're squatters. We moved in back in October." He withdrew a spreadsheet from the envelope. "Here's a list of all the improvements we made, along with the costs for materials, and this column shows what the cost would have been if you'd hired plumbers and painters and so on. Here's the total of the value we added to the house and the money we saved you—"

She pushed herself to her feet, her hands flat on the desk. "Wait a minute! Did you say 'squatters'? You're squatters?"

"That's the vulgar term for it. We prefer to think of ourselves as housesitters. Or caretakers. Yes, that's better: volunteer caretakers of the property. What the Portland Coalition for Affordable Housing calls us is 'house liberators.' Father Daniel Leary is head of that coalition and our sponsor." He produced a small white card from the envelope. "Here's his business card. He can vouch for us as responsible residents."

"What gave you the right to squat for four months in our house?" Ms. Orwell's voice shook with anger and nervousness.

"Please, sit down, Ms. Orwell. You'll give yourself a heart attack. You'll also worry all those customers out in the lobby."

She sat down.

"Now if you'll just look at my spreadsheet, you'll see this situation is a win-win for all concerned. We get a place to live. You get a well-cared-for house, all repairs made for free. Plus someone occupying the house pretty much round the clock, discouraging burglars and
drug dealers and juvenile delinquents. Do you know how fast the value of a house declines when no one's living in it, keeping it clean, keeping the electricity and the water turned on? You probably do; your bank owns seventeen houses that have been unoccupied for more than six months. Cops responded to nine calls on your houses last year: six for vandalism, two for meth labs, one that was being used by prostitutes. Having a family living in 311 guarantees its protection. Now, let's talk money. Given the fact that you haven't shown the slightest interest in 311 in the five months since you foreclosed, and given that the bank has been letting its foreclosed houses sit for ten months on average before you do anything with them, it would be to your advantage to have us continue to maintain 311 for you." He waved a hand carelessly. "No need to thank us. We're glad to help."

He removed a legal-looking document that he'd typed up yesterday. "Agreement of Occupancy," he'd headed it, and he'd filled it with legal jargon and spaces for initials and signatures.

"So here's my deal. Of course, I'll give you a couple of days for your legal department to look it over, but I'm sure they'll find it in order. I happen to be an attorney, specializing in contract law. Retired. I found cooking a more respectable profession," he chuckled. "Now, to cut to the chase: what I'm proposing here is an open-ended agreement between my family and the bank. In short, we'll continue to live in 311, maintaining it, paying the utilities, and we'll pay rent of $10 per month until such time as the bank manages to sell the house. We'll even provide tours for prospective buyers, with tea and cookies. Once the bank has secured a new owner, you'll give us a thirty-day notice and provide us another of your foreclosed properties—minimum of three bedrooms—where we'll provide the same service and pay the same rent, until, once again, you sell that property. And so on. You get the idea."

She muttered, "This is ridic—"

He removed a printed page from the envelope. "Did I mention that Jill is a journalist? She writes a blog. This is her most recent entry. Seven thousand, five hundred followers as of yesterday, including about a hundred in Russia. How that happened, she has no idea. Her blog is all about her experiences as a homeless mom, and now a squatter. Readers especially love her stories about Sam." He took a close-up of Sam from the envelope and propped it against Ms. Orwell's phone. "You can see why. Besides being so cute, he's quite bright. We think he'll be a mathematician when he grows up."

"She's been writing about—living in our house?"

"Seven thousand, five hundred readers. And Harry, he's sixty-two. So our little family consists of an elderly gentleman, a small child, a young woman and me." He tapped his fingers against his cane meaningfully. "I was injured during the war." He neglected to mention it was the Ogres War of 1721. "We're a colorful family. I guess that's why so many people have been following our story on Jill's blog. I guess the local news outlets would find our story interesting, too. Especially if we make this deal. . . .or if we don't and you throw us out on the streets again. . . .in the winter. . . .an elderly gentleman, a small child, a young mother and a disabled veteran." He smiled pleasantly and at last fell quiet to let his words sink in.

She opened, then closed her mouth. She glanced at Sam's photo propped on her phone. She
glanced at the red circled totals on the spreadsheet. She glanced at the photo of the new sink. She glanced at his cane. Then she picked up the "Agreement of Occupancy" and tried to read it, but her eyes kept wandering to the photos. With a shuddering sigh, she said, "Uh... Mr., Uh..."

"O'Neal." He was still smiling.

"I, ah, we, we will look this over and, ah, have our legal people look it over..."

"And get back to me," he finished for her. "Very good. We'll await your answer." He rose, leaning on his cane. "I won't take any more of your time, Ms. Orwell. When you're ready with your answer, you can call me at the number indicated on the Post-It attached to the contract. Or drop by, if you'd like to see the improvements we've made." He winked at her. "You know where we live."

He walked out before she could collect her wits.

"This isn't enough," Belle blurted.

"What do you mean?" Archie looked up from his notepad and Belle looked up from hers. She'd come to the last entry in the record of memories she'd written, but before she read it aloud to him, she had a confession to make.

"I see now this can only be a half-truth." She indicated the notebook. "My half. Archie, when I banished him, I didn't give him a chance to explain. I was afraid he'd talk me out of my decision, manipulate me. I told him it was my turn to talk; I thought I'd given him a hundred opportunities to talk, and it was by choice that he didn't take them."

"You think otherwise now."

"I read that book you recommended, Loving Someone with PTSD. I know now that talking about your feelings isn't always an option. I feel like I should apologize to him for not understanding that before."

"He's not angry. He doesn't blame—" Archie abruptly clamped his mouth shut.

But it was too late. "How do you know?" Belle leaned forward and clamped her hand onto his knee. "Tell me. How do you know what he's feeling now? Have you talked to him?"

Archie reddened. "I can't—Take what I said as conjecture. An educated guess from a man who's known Rumplestiltskin many years. Please. Let's move on. Your father. How are things now between you two?"

She fixed him with a frown. "I need to hear his side. I owe him that. If he's talking to you, then maybe he's ready to talk to me too." She tightened her grip on his knee, digging her nails in until he yelped. "We can't be finished with the past until we do this, Archie. Tell him for me. I'll listen to anything he has to say, and I won't argue or judge."

Archie shook his head. "I'm sorry, Belle. He's not ready yet."

"When he is, I'll listen. I promise." An idea flashed across her eyes. "Archie, how about this, then? How about if you have him write one of these reflection journals and we can exchange them? That way, each of us can learn the other's point of view."
"That could be a useful exercise, but I'm afraid it will be quite some time before he's ready to attempt it." He frowned at her. "And that's all I can say."

"I can be patient." Belle sat back with a half-smile dancing on her lips. "So he's talking to you. That's a big step forward. Will you tell me this: is he okay?"

Archie thought for a moment, then nodded. "I think he'd say he is."

"That's an evasive answer, Archie."

"Suppose he asked me the same question about you. Would you want me to tell him the truth, that you're lonely, overworked, tired, not getting enough to eat?"

"No."

"The most I should say about you, if he asks, is you're okay."

"Has he asked?"

Archie sighed. "He has. And now we're going to drop this subject, Belle, because he has a right to confidentiality, just as you do. Now, let's talk about your homework for this week. The strongest tool for forgiveness is the ability to see a situation from the other party's point of view. Now that we've finished exploring the past year from your perspective, I want you to consider his. Go back through your journal, and every time you find 'Rumple did this' or 'Rumple said that' I'd like you to rewrite that incident, as you think he'd have written it. Try to consider his expectations for the actions he took. What did he think would happen? And try to consider his emotions. There will be a lot of speculation; I know he didn't tell you much about his time with Zelena. But don't worry about being factually correct; what matters is that you're emotionally correct. I'd like you to bring me the first revision when we meet next week. This will be difficult, but I think you can do it. You've always been able to see through the facade into the heart of a person."

When she left the psychiatrist's office an hour later, she felt lighter than she had in a long time.

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FEBRUARY 2015

Father Daniel nodded a greeting as Rumple limped into his office. "Hey, Robert." He finished what he was writing on his legal pad, then stood up. "Leg bothering you?"

"I slipped on a patch of ice as I was getting off the bus on Friday. It'll be okay." He leaned a little extra hard on his cane.

"I have a heating pad. Birthday gift from Father John. Rubbing it in that I turned sixty. Would you like to borrow it?"

"Yeah, that might help. Thanks."

"Any word from the bank?" Daniel gathered his legal pad and a handful of pencils, then walked around the desk, clearing a space for Rumple. "Computer's all yours."

"The bank hasn't called."

Daniel chuckled. "You threw 'em for a loop." He moved to the doorway. "When you're done with your session, I'll have that heating pad ready. And a cup of tea."
Rumple eased himself into the vacated leather chair. "Thanks, Daniel. You're a lifesaver."

"You're one of a kind yourself, Robert." He left the office.

Rumple slipped off his shoes and massaged his ankle as he waited for the laptop to warm up. This time, Daniel's sticky note marked "Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them, for The Lord your God, he it is that does go with you; he will not fail you, or forsake you."

As soon as he logged in to Skype, Archie was waiting, a big grin on his freckled face. "Hey, Archie. Did you have a date this evening?"

"How did you—oh, you're teasing. That's a first for you, Mr. Gold."

"I'm belatedly developing a sense of humor."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did have a luncheon date, but since a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell—" Archie adjusted his glasses. "Besides, I have some news for you."

"Okay..."

"Belle has put the divorce proceedings on hold."

Rumple's eyes widened. "On hold—what does that mean?"

"Indefinitely. She told Spencer not to file the complaint until he's managed to contact you. She feels it's unfair to you to proceed without your knowledge."

"Does she know I've been talking to you?"

"Uh, yes." The psychiatrist reddened. "I may have let that slip. I'm sorry."

Rumple waved the apology away. "But she hasn't shared that information with Spencer, apparently, and she hasn't tried to call me herself."

"No, and she hasn't asked me to tell you about the divorce. However, she did want me to tell you that when you're ready to tell her your side, she'll listen." Archie waited, letting Rumple figure it out for himself.

"Has she told you she's changed her mind about divorcing me?"

"I really can't tell you any more without violating the doctor-patient privilege."

Rumple released a breath. "She has, then."

"If that were the case, how would you feel about it?"

"It's the best news I've had in weeks."

"Even though it leaves your relationship in limbo? You can't be with her."

"If she's changed her mind about the divorce, someday she might change her mind about the marriage. She might want me back."
"At this point, I don't think it would help you to dwell on that thought. Let's get back to our previous work. You had been talking about Zelena and the shaving incident. . . ." He raised two fingers, signaling the beginning of an EMDR session.

Rumple settled deeper into the chair. This was going to be a long session.

Emma froze in the entrance, ignoring the service bell tinkling overhead. Her first realization was that Granny's was packed. Her second realization was that the people who had filled Granny's to overflowing was a very select group, all of them teenagers.

She recognized most of them: teammates and classmates of Henry's, kids who did volunteer work in the animal shelter, the hospital, the church, the library. Good kids, just boisterous sometimes, as most teens are. She observed them from the entrance and determined that, although they were causing the wait staff and the cook extra work, they weren't being disruptive. In fact, Granny, pitching in in the kitchen, had a big grin on her face. They were spending money, buying sodas and fries and burgers. And they seemed to be working on something. They'd pushed the tables together and were passing papers around and talking back and forth. At the head of the table was Grace: she was multi-tasking, chatting with several people at once, popping cheesy fries into her mouth. Henry seemed to be her lieutenant. He was the detail man, taking notes, implementing Grace's instructions. Emma remembered now: he'd talked about this project at the dinner table. The teens had organized on their own to form a campaign. Their goal was to see Belle's dream of a college and career center come true by the end of the year. Emma slid onto a stool at the counter and eavesdropped.

"People, please." Grace stood up and was tinkling a butter knife against a glass. The sweet little music that action produced couldn't be heard over the chatter, so Henry rose and banged a napkin holder against the table and in his deepening voice called for attention. The room quieted, everyone sat down and Grace proceeded. "Okay, so let's talk about procedure. We've got to work on it from both ends: lots of publicity and individually targeting each member of the City Council to win them over. But before we get to that stage, we need to form committees: the political action committee, the publicity committee and the library liaison committee. I'm passing around sign-up sheets for each committee. Sign up where you can do the most good, not where your friends are signing up. Our future depends on our success here."

Ruby had squeezed her way over to Emma and was leaning on her elbows to listen. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I present the mayor of Storybrooke, 2020."

"She is good," Emma acknowledged. She picked up Ruby's order pad and wrote on it: HOT CHOCOLATE, CINNAMMON, NO WHIPPED CREAM. Ruby took the hint. "Back in a sec."

Emma continued listening in. She was proud of her son for his involvement in a worthy project; she was proud of the leadership skills he was exhibiting. But she was also a bit worried: suppose the teens invested so much of themselves into a project that had no future? Not that Emma expected resistance from the library board, the librarian, the mayor or even the City Council. There would be some balking from people who feared any new spending would mean a rise in taxes, but most of the town leadership would feel as she did, proud of these kids' efforts and eager to encourage community mindedness. What worried Emma was how these teens would react when their efforts resulted in a totally useless product.

Because what good was a college and career center when no one could leave town?

When he came in from work at 4 a.m., cold and wet, he found a message on the cell phone he shared with his housemates. "Mr. O'Neal, this is Ms. Orwell with Barton National Bank.
After careful consideration of your proposal, we have decided to decline your, ah, unusual offer. However, at the moment we have no plans for the house at 311 Hayes, and we feel it's not in our best interests to remove your family from the premises at this time."

"Not much of an answer," Harry grumbled when Rumple played the message for them at breakfast. Rumple had waited up specifically for that purpose. "It's like they're saying 'You leave us alone, we'll leave you alone.'"

"I think, realistically, that's the best answer we can expect. Look at it this way: we still get to stay here until they sell the house, but we don't have to pay them rent," Rumple explained.

"We're safe then." Jill hugged Sam.

"For the time being, yes."

Sam hugged his mom, then came around the kitchen table to hug Rumple. "Thanks for our house, Rumple!"

Rumple hugged him back. "So what do you want to do today, Sam?"

"Make a snowman in our yard," the boy decided, "and eat pancakes."

"I have an idea too," Jill suggested. "Now that we have a somewhat permanent address, let's have a housewarming party."
"How can it be a ribbon cutting when the council won't even vote on funding until summer?" Regina puzzled.

Gavin Glover said, "A pre-ribbon cutting, we're calling it. We'll do it upstairs because the basement is unsafe, but we'll have architectural drawings of what the career and college center might look like, if we get the funding. This will be our encouragement to the city councilpeople who are considering voting for us—and a nose-thumbing to the ones who aren't."

Belle explained, "We thought we'd make it a 'we love our library' party, for Valentine's Day. Except we'll throw it the day before, so we'll get a turnout. People around here have their own private parties for Valentine's Day." She sounded a little wistful, remembering the Valentine's Days Rumple had created for her in the past.

"Ah," Regina's eyes sparkled, "as long as it's for political gain, and not on February 14, count me in." She had plans of her own for that night and she smiled a pleased little smile thinking about them.

And so on the evening of Friday, February 13—early, so children could attend—there was a pre-ribbon cutting for the would-be college and career center, and a pre-Valentine's Day party at the library. As guests sat in respectful silence on folding chairs in the children's department, Regina cut the ribbon with a giant pair of scissors, Ms. Odette's Ballet School gave a little performance, the Wednesday Evening Poetry Association read selections from McKuen and Suzanne Somers, and Granny's catered, with finger sandwiches, punch and heart-shaped cookies. Belle observed that the councilpeople who had been speaking out against the budget request nevertheless posed for photos alongside their pro-library peers and Mayors Mills and White.

Belle also observed that there was much hand-holding and close-sitting by the marrieds, the betrothed (Ariel and Eric) and the seriously dating (Ruby and Archie). Public Displays of Affection were prohibited by library policy, but given that it was so cold outside and rather chilly inside the drafty building, and given that tomorrow was Cupid's day to reign, Belle didn't break up the snuggling. There was even some hair-flipping and foot-shuffling among the teens (especially Henry and Grace). Rumple never was one for public displays, but he would have been glued to her side, looking down on her occasionally with a knowing half-smile, and subtly sliding a protective hand around her waist as he surveyed the crowd, subconsciously watching for threats.

If he had been here. And he would have been, for as much as he detested parties, he celebrated her achievements even more. He would have been here.

It was a motley crew attending the house party at 311 Hayes: the Hernandezes, whose children ran through the halls whooping and swinging their light sabers, the Roses (who openly snooped around the house, looking for flaws in the cleaning and the repairs), Mrs. Hallifax, the widow who had fixed her mind on an impending name-change (she hinted to Jill that she thought "Mrs. Harridge" had a rather nice ring), Father Daniel and the Dylans and members of the Portland Coalition for Affordable Housing (taking photos for their website) and Ms. Lucy and Ms. Nancy from the library. Housewarming parties being unheard of in this neighborhood, everyone seemed to have a different idea of what should be happening: Daniel brought a bottle of wine, Mrs. Hallifax brought a vase of flowers, the librarians, who
had researched the subject, brought the traditional loaf of bread and box of salt. Frank Rose brought a six-pack of Walmart Beer and immediately planted himself and his beer on the couch and stared at the empty TV stand throughout the evening. His wife, after paying her respects to the neighbors, snagged a bag of potato chips from the Hernandezez's contribution to the refreshments, and she parked herself beside her husband as her daughter joined the Rebel forces in their war against the Evil Empire. Someone found the radio and set it on a conjunto station. Harry spent the evening ducking Mrs. Hallifax by dashing about from kitchen to living room to porch, filling cups, picking up litter, serving sandwiches.

Jill and Sam lit up under the attention, moving easily from one guest to another (even the anti-social Roses), chatting, urging people to eat, sharing shopping tips (Jill) and best places to play (Sam). Rumple, who always felt awkward and tongue-tied in a crowd, faded back to the kitchen with the excuse of preparing snacks, but he watched the Sawyers from the corner of his eye, both envious of their social skills and proud of his part in providing for their comfort. They were home here, that was obvious, house-proud and secure, and a large part of that was his doing.

Until Alyson Alonzo brought a snowball inside with the intention of pummeling Darth Jorge, no one noticed that outside, there was snow on the ground and the temperature had dropped to 13 degrees, or that inside, the heater made a clunking sound, seemingly in time with the conjunto music. It was, as Jill commented, her face flushed and glowing, a house-warming party, after all.

"Dear Grandpa,

"Hi! Hope you had a nice Valentine's Day. I went out to the movies with some friends—and before you ask, NO, NO GIRLFRIENDS! It's just that some of my friends happen to be girls. You see what I mean? And everybody paid for their own ticket and popcorn, and we didn't even go to a chick flick. It was The Avengers, which you should take Sam to, because it's awesome.

"Both of my moms had dates, sort of. Hook (I'm not supposed to call him that, but sometimes I forget. Heh heh heh.) took Emma to La Tandoor and then who knows where, they weren't back yet when I went to bed at 11. Regina had a Skype date with Robin. A candlelight dinner. She had filet mignon and wine; he had beans and franks and a Schlitz. It must've been a great date even though they were three hundred miles apart, because when I saw her the next day, she was still smiling. Gramps and Grandma went out dancing, and they told me they saw Archie there too, with Ruby! Yup, Gramps said they kissed. So I guess they're a couple now. And it must be serious because Archie hates dancing!

"Belle kept the library open on Valentine's Day until 9 p.m. I don't think she got much business. My friend Gabe—he has a part-time job delivering for the Pizza Factory—told me he delivered a pizza to her apartment at 9:15, so I guess she went right home after work. It was a small pizza with extra onions. I thought you might want to know that.

"She and the library board (did I tell you, Mr. Dove is on the board?) threw a ribbon cutting party for the college and career center the day before Valentine's. It was nice. Regina said it was a smart move, because they made it a thank-you-in-advance party for the city council members that will vote for the budget increase. There were posters of architectural drawings for what the center might look like (Marco drew sketches of the furniture that he would build; he says he'll hire guys from the high school wood shop class to help him). Belle has a list of the books she wants to order, but until a truck can drive across the town line, nothing can be brought in from outside. There is
already a small collection of ebooks though, so the center could open for business on March 1 next year. Grandma would run it and Emma would teach the life skills class until Robin can get here. She's been standing in front of the bathroom mirror to practice. Guess you know Emma hates public speaking and she's only doing this because there's no one else who's lived out in the world.

"My friend Grace—you probably know her; her dad is Jefferson—Grace was voted by the Storybrooke Chamber of Commerce as 'promising young leader of the year' because of the work she's doing to get this center going. If you've ever tried to get a group of middle-school and high-schoolers to work together on anything (except football) you know what I'm talk about. And come to think about it, it's pretty impressive that Grandma and Regina are working together on the PR side of things. Things are changing here, little by little.

"Thanks for the 'before' and 'after' pics of your house. You guys really did a lot of work on it! You should be proud.

"For my Careers class, I wrote a paper about journalism. I got interested in it because of a movie I saw on TV, All the King's Men (from the title I thought it was going to be about knights). I know newspapers and magazines are dying out, but I think there's still a place for reporters, and not just on TV. I've been reading some online newspapers and blogs, and I think that's where the future of journalism is. So I'm giving it some thought. . . .

"'Henry Mills, reporting to you live from Storybrooke, for Google News.' Hmm. How do you take news seriously when it's coming from a company called 'Google'? 'Henry Mills, reporting to you for Yahoo News.' Not much better. Oh well, by the time I graduate college, there'll be some online news source with a serious name.

"That's if I get to college. Not looking too good right now. We're still not getting anywhere with the boundary curse.

"Love, Henry"

There is a way, Rumple almost wrote, to get around the curse on the town border. It would involve freeing a fairly powerful mage, a long-time apprentice of the Master Sorcerer, Merlin, from his current situation, trapped in the Sorcerer's Hat. Yes, the same one that Archie trapped Ursula and Cruella in, and that Regina freed the fairies from, and that a chernabog flew out of. As Storybrooke is now aware, it's possible to control the release of the Hat's prisoners—scratch that: occupants—so that some are expelled from the Hat and others are not. What Storybrooke, other than Hook, is not aware of, is that the apprentice is in the Hat. He was apparently a latecomer to town, so no one met him, though how and when (and why) he arrived is unknown to me or anyone else. The spell to release him is known to me, however. . . . since I put him there in the first place.

Rumple typed those words, then the last admission drew him up short. If he confessed to Henry that he'd trapped yet another practitioner of light magic in that Hat—even though he'd done it before he'd caused Hook to trap the nuns—because the confession was fresh, the act would feel fresh, and Henry, who believed Rumple had changed—improved—in the past year, would turn against him. Would stop writing to him, probably start hating him.

He couldn't bear to be abandoned again, especially not by the last of his flesh-and-blood. He erased everything after however. Then he realized that even without the confession, Henry would put two and two together: Rumple had trapped the nuns in the Hat. Rumple knew the apprentice was trapped in the Hat. Hence, four.
Equally likely: the apprentice, once freed, would create a door-portal (doors were his stock in trade). Doors could be shut and locked against undesirables; first on the list would be Rumplestiltskin. With three exceptions, the apprentice would get no argument from townsfolk on keeping the Dark One out.

It was not in Rumple's best interests to provide this information to Henry. Regina was a bright woman, and with Dove and Henry aiding her in the research, she'd find a way to break the curse herself. Regina was not one for subtleties: she'd tear the entire curse down to enable Robin to return and Henry to pass through freely to attend college. She'd deal with the consequences of unwelcome entrants later. And then, if he moved quickly (Rumple smiled), he could return home.

He deleted the entire email.

"It was difficult," Belle admitted as she settled onto Archie's couch. On her lap lay a new stenopad; the first three pages were filled with her generous, loopy handwriting. "I'd get caught up in the writing and shift over to my own perspective."

Archie nodded. "The closer you are to the subject matter and the other person, the more difficult it can be to decenter. But if anyone can handle this exercise, it's you, Belle. You've always been able to see through to the true heart of another person."

She opened to the first page. "I only got one incident done."

"That's fine. Why don't you read it to me?"

She cleared her throat nervously. "Okay. I wrote in the first person for Rumple. Here goes. 'After the fight in the barn, I transported myself back to the place I felt safest: not my house, because really, I spend very little time there. It's so far apart from the other houses. I prefer it that way; the apartness gives me privacy, allows me to keep my secrets, gives me a measure of safety. But over the years I've used the house more as a warehouse than a home. I've filled it with stuff, some of it rare, some of it antique, some of it just junk. I used to tell myself that I was working on this stuff, cleaning it, sorting it, cataloging it, repairing it and tagging it for future sales. But somehow I never got around to asking Dove to load it in his truck and take it to the shop so I could sell it. I just let it pile up. It made the house seem smaller. And the toys and the women's clothing almost made the house appear to be a family home."

'So I transported myself back to the shop. This is where I feel safest, with all my magical items around me. This is where I spent ten hours a day, six days a week for twenty-eight years while I waited for the savior. This is where I feel in control. No one knows all its nooks and crannies; no one knows its hiding places and the value of what's stored here, except me. I transport myself to the front door. I think I'll have to open the door with magic, because all my keys have long since disappeared, but to my consternation I find the door is unlocked. I will have to speak to Dove about that. If Regina or the Blue Mosquito had wanted, they could have cleaned the place out of its magical treasures, and done a great deal of harm. If children wandered in here, or dwarfs, they could have injured themselves."

'When I open the door, I can see the entire showroom at once, and the bars of sunlight streaming in through the blinds in the side windows, and the walls of sunlight streaming in through the display windows that face the street. It's a warm, welcoming sight. I expect to find a thick coat of dust everywhere, but the cabinets are dust-free, the glass in the display cases free of streaks, the wood floor shines with fresh polish. I can smell Lemon Pledge—Belle. Belle has been here, cleaning. I'm
struck by this realization. How many hours has she spent here, tidying up, in anticipation—in faith that I will return? And after all that Zelena forced me to do, half of which she doesn't know yet, most of that she never will. She has kept the faith and she has not blamed me for my actions. How has she managed to do that, over an entire year and across two realms? Thinking about that makes me wonder what the town has put her through. Have they treated her as they did before, a curiosity, the woman who was locked up in an asylum for three decades? Or have they made a pariah of her, the Dark One’s lady? Have they embraced her, perceiving her open-heartedness, her sweetness? Or have they treated her as a substitute for me, someone to be left in a corner, avoided, until trouble arises and magic is needed?

'As I walk around the shop, examining my treasures, I find that some of them have been used: jars of potions and powders, formerly filled, are half-empty. Books of magic now contain bookmarks that explain the Dewey Decimal System. Definitely Belle. Then they have used her as they would have me. I hope they have repaid her. Would she have made deals with them? In the Dark Castle, I’d taught her the laws of magic; she knows that when magic is used, balance must be restored somehow, and the safest way to do that is by demanding a sacrifice. Impulsive and generous as she is, she is still a thoughtful person and I think she would charge a suitable price for the magic she’s been asked to give. What would she charge, I wonder? She’s not money-oriented, and she has no grand scheme that she needs to collect objects for.

'I check the rent ledger on the counter, next to the cash register. Dove’s handwriting fills the most recent pages. He’s been faithfully collecting rent. I see that only three tenants are in arrears. I really must give the man a raise.

'I check the wall safe, where I keep my most precious objects: some unstable and rare magical materials, Bae’s baby blanket, our chipped cup. Everything is there, untouched. She knows what’s in the safe and how to open it, but I doubt if she ever did. She would have considered it wrong to open the safe without me being here.

'As I leave the safe, I cross by a mirror on the wall. This mirror used to be one of Regina’s, used for spying, but she traded it to me years ago in return for toys for Henry. At the time she had no inkling that one day, magic would come to Storybrooke, so to her, it was just another mirror and its plain frame didn’t fit her décor.

'I avoid looking at myself in the mirror. I don’t want to see the physical manifestations of what the witch has done to me. But the service bell jangles and through the mirror I see the new arrival: Belle. I turn around slowly but make no move toward her until she, not hesitating at all, rushes to me, and then I know we’re okay. She doesn’t despise or fear or blame me. She opens her arms and I open mine and we sink into each other, such a perfect fit, her hand stroking my hair. Only she knows what that does to me. Her cheek pressed to mine, her lips against my ear and mine against hers. We speak in hushed tones, though there’s no need for it. It just feels more intimate, her breath against my ear.

"I knew you’d be back," she says.

'I tell her I’m astounded by her faith in me, after all the terrible things I did. She denies my culpability; I confess that some of my awful actions this past year were my own doing. She’s still in denial. She’s not a naïve woman and she’s seen for herself how cruel I can be, but she won’t let that part of the truth sink in. If it ever did, she’d run from me. I think she knows that, and because she loves me—because fate has trapped her in love with me—she has to pretend I’m better than I am. I’m trapped in love too, and the times I’ve tried to push her away haven’t worked, so I drop strong hints. ‘I will never comprehend why you continue to stand by my side,’ I say, giving her an opening to ask for reasons why she shouldn’t. She doesn’t take the opening. I should push her away again.
That would be kindest thing, but I've never been kind or unselfish and even with all my magic, there are certain things I'm still afraid of. Losing the one person in the world who loves me is foremost among them.

'Then she proves the extent of her faith in me by giving me my dagger. Regina has given it to her for safekeeping, she explains, and now she's returning it where it belongs. But it's not an outright gift: she doesn't come right out and say it's a condition of returning the dagger, but she asks me to promise I won't attack Zelena—won't seek justice for Bae. Does she not understand what this witch has done and can do, if left alive? Does she not understand that Bae would be alive, Henry would have a father and I would have a son after three centuries of searching, if not for that damned witch? Doesn't she feel my grief and my fury, or at least, some grief of her own? Her goodness both magnetizes me and repels me. If I had the patience I once had, perhaps I could wait for my revenge until Zelena does something horrible and even Belle gives up on her. But my son's soul is trapped, replacing my own in the Dark Vault, and I can only free it by avenging him. I will kill the witch and she will take his place in hell and he will take his rightful place in heroes' eternity. I have sworn this on the dying body of my only child. Belle is no naif, but her soul is too innocent to understand the oath I've taken. She has only read of the demands of the magic of the blood; she's never seen it for herself. She probably believes blood magic is only a legend. But the price for a life is life, nothing less, and there is no way in hell I'm leaving justice to the Charmings. I will take care of this myself, as I have always done. There is no law, no justice, no protection for peasants in this world or the one we came from, and to them, despite all my power, I'm a peasant.

'Belle gives me my dagger. 'This is trust,' I tell her, and I make my pledge to her. 'I am now and for all the future, yours.' I give her back the dagger. She is stunned.

'Since I can't free her from this love that traps us, I do the next best thing: I pull her in close. I will make her as safe as I can from Hook, who is still alive and vengeful, and Regina, who might decide to go dark again and would like some leverage against me. And who knows who else might pop up from the sea or some portal and want to destroy or control the Dark One? Belle's association with me doesn't just blacken her name; it places her in constant danger. I fear for her life just as much as I fear her love will make me soft and careless. So I draw her in close. I will brand her with my name and my ring, so anyone who dares harm her will realize that they're calling down upon themselves the full rage of the Dark One.

'I propose to her. Not in the traditional way, but in the most binding way a sorcerer can, by giving her control over my magic. She realizes the extent of the power I've just offered her; what she may not know is that if she accepts, if she takes the dagger, by the laws of magic we're united; the wedding will be merely a formality to satisfy the laws of man. We will be twice bound.

'She accepts and kisses me. While she is distracted, I perform a sleight of hand, and the dagger in her bag is now a fake, the real one locked inside my safe. I need my freedom from Belle's control long enough to kill Zelena. I will return the dagger later, and Belle will be none the wiser. We'll be free of an enemy and Bae will be freed from hell.

'I hate to deceive Belle. I hate even more that I'm doing so in the midst of what should be our happiest moment. But she's left me no choice. If I carry out justice in the open, she will recoil from me in shock. She will run from me. And even worse, she will have faith in no one ever again, not even herself. And so I deceive her, cheat her in the same way my father cheated so many drunks and bumpkins in his day. There will be other times I'll have to trick her this way; there will be other enemies. It's never-ending; the fools keep coming, in the belief that they'll be the lucky one to bring down the Dark One. This is part of the price to be paid for having all this power. I'll never be free of them. But at least Belle will be safer now, with my ring on her finger to warn off those who'd use her to get to me.
Exhausted and hoarse, Belle let herself drop back against the couch cushions.

Archie cleared his throat. "Wow."

A thick tear slid from her eyelashes to her cheek and she swabbed it away, but she couldn't catch the next one. She squeezed a cushion against her chest. "I think I'm beginning to understand. It doesn't make what he did right, but it makes sense. I have to wonder how different everything might have been for him if he'd had the protection of the law, or at least friends he could turn to, in the time before he took the Dark Curse."

"Excellent, Belle. Far more than I had hoped for." Archie gave her a few minutes to gain control over her emotions. "How do you feel?"

"Closer," she said.

"Closer? To resolution?"

"Closer to him. And to a part of myself I'd shut off."

"What part is that?"

"The part that forgives."
He lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, shadows from the tree outside his window dancing along the walls. His alarm clock told him he had an hour yet before he needed to dress for work. He lay and thought.

Last night he'd admitted to Archie what he'd done—or rather, hadn't done—in his most recent correspondence with Henry. Even as he said it, he realized how selfish it sounded: he knew a way to free Storybrooke from its accidental confinement. He knew a way to make amends for an act of evil he'd forced another person to commit. It would have taken little effort on his part to share the spell with Henry that would free the apprentice, and yet, he couldn't make that effort.

"In a passive-aggressive way, I guess, by me telling you what I didn't do, I'm putting the ball in your court," he admitted to Archie. "You now know what I couldn't tell Henry."

"And what would I do with that information? You haven't told me the spell," Archie reminded him.

"You could force me to. Threaten to discontinue our sessions. Or threaten to tell Henry."

"Could I?" Archie poked at his glasses in an angry gesture. "Do you think I would do either of those things?" When Rumple didn't answer, he continued, "I don't think you do. I think you wish I would, though, so you could preserve your self-image as a bastard while still doing what you know is right. What do you really want me to do, Mr. Gold?"

"You're right," he said, shame-faced. "I was trying to trap you. Because that's what I do, that's who I am."

Archie snapped back, "No it isn't. Not any more. Face who you are, Mr. Gold. An ordinary, decent, hard-working man who sometimes can be incredibly selfish then at other times will lay down his life for his family. Not a villain, not a hero. A human, and a long way from where you were before."

"A long way from where I need to be." In more ways than one.

Rumple fell silent as he considered his options. In the final analysis, his heart told him he really didn't have an option: he knew what he had to do. But he also knew it would rob him of his last hope. "I'll tell him," he mumbled at last. "I'll tell Henry about the apprentice, if Regina can't break the curse herself. Christmas. If she hasn't broken it by Christmas, I'll tell them."

"And close that door on your past," Archie said grimly. "On any chance of getting back to Belle."

"Yeah." Rumple rubbed his face. "Because Henry deserves a future, and because I burned my last bridge when I deceived Storybrooke with Ursula and Cruella."
"I think that sounds like a decent compromise," Archie decided. "That will give the first graduating class of Storybrooke High six months to get their college applications in."

A compromise, yes, but not between two competing goods—between the kids' needs and his own self-interest. Rumple dropped his gaze to the desk in front of him. He couldn't face Archie any more.

Daniel had left another sticky-noted Scriptural message for him. The passage marked this time was "He is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing." Rumple snorted.

"Christmas," he repeated. "I never go back on a deal."

"I know you don't," Archie said.

Now, as he lay in bed staring at the ceiling, he wondered about Archie's description of him: ordinary—yes, without his magic and his money, there was nothing impressive about him. Hard-working: his aching ankle and flat feet were a testament to that. Incredibly selfish at times—oh yes. He was taking away from Henry and the kids of Storybrooke their birthright, and in exchange, all he gained was a microscopic hope. That left no doubt as to his selfishness.

Decent? He was closer to the moon than he was to decency.

There ought to be a law against walking and talking on a cell phone at the same time. Belle grasped that as an excuse as she bumped into a passerby as she was answering her phone while scampering, in heels and in snow, along the sidewalk. But in truth she was just being her normal klutzy self, a daydreamer in a multi-tasking world. She patted the arm of the person she's nearly mowed over; the two travelers assured each other of their non-injury, and she resumed her phone conversation as she resumed her trot to the library. "Yes, I realize that...I have been thinking about it...The thing is, Mr. Spencer, my feelings on the matter haven't changed: I still think it's a weasely thing to do, to divorce a man behind his back...Yes, I agree: the boundary curse may never be broken; we may be stuck like this for the rest of our lives. But what's expedient and what's right are two different things. My decision stands: the divorce is on hold until I can tell him about it...It's about honor, Mr. Spencer, and good faith...It doesn't matter what he deserves; I have to live with myself, don't I? I'm happy to compensate you for your time, but for now, we wait. When the boundary curse is broken—as I'm sure it will be; we've broken all the previous curses—I'll call you again and we'll pick up where we left off. Thank you, Mr. Spencer. Good day."

She muttered to herself as she unlocked the library. Spencer, crass though he may be, had a point. It wasn't like Belle to be indecisive. Even when she was faced with the biggest decision of her life, whether to accept the Dark One's terms for ending the ogre war, she'd made up her mind quickly and never waffled. Perhaps this uncertainty was just the outcome of two very turbulent years, the Zelena Era. Or—if she was honest with herself, and she had to be; Archie wouldn't let her hide behind dissemination—her head was losing the war with her heart.

Was that it? She had never denied that she still loved him: that was never in doubt. Whether they could live together was the issue. She tightened her jaw. She had to remember that. This wasn't about love; this was about real life. Real, every day life.
Which made her wonder: what if the Enchanted Forest, not Storybrooke, was their real, every day life? Would their marriage have lasted, if they didn't have constant interference from assorted heroes and villains?

What if there had never been a Zelena?

"Dear Grandpa,

"Hi! Thanks for the tip about 'Homeless Not Hopeless.' You're right, it's very well written. I learned a lot about what it's like to homeless, but more importantly, it made me feel, and that made me think. If I become a real journalist, homelessness is one of the issues I want to write about. Though I hope it will be a thing of the past before then. Your friend is a really good writer and I hope she gets a job again, if not with a newspaper or magazine, then with one of the online news services.

"I was in the library yesterday, for a meeting about the college and career center, and after it Belle asked us what we were reading these days. Clarisse is into these paranormal romances, and Grace is reading a David McCullough, but I told Belle about 'Homeless Not Hopeless.' I didn't tell her the writer is your friend, I promise! Or that the 'Robert' she writes about is you. I'm sure nobody would know from reading the blog that she's talking about you, so I thought it would be okay to tell Belle about the blog. It's so well written I knew she'd like it. If I kinda stepped over a line by telling her about the blog, I'm sorry, I hope you're not mad. I just felt like she'd learn a lot from it, because I did. I think it's time that Storybrooke became more aware of the outside world. Some people have this idealized notion of what it's like out there. And I thought that Belle would be a good person to start with, because she's going to be helping us plan our future out there, if we ever deal with the town line problem. I hope you're not mad. Like I said, I'm sure she doesn't realize that you're 'Robert.' If you hadn't told me, I wouldn't know. He sounds like a totally different guy. Or I guess I should say, you sound like a totally different guy from the 'Mr. Gold' that lived here. I'm glad I got the chance to know the real you.

"Love, Henry"

"Dear Henry,

"No, I'm not mad at all that you told Belle about the blog. I'm sure she will be moved by it. I'm glad you're reading it. It's a good choice for a budding journalist, and not just because Jill has almost 8,000 readers. As it turns out, some of those readers nominated her for the Hillman Award, which is given for 'investigative journalism and commentary in the public interest.' As you can imagine, we're all over the moon here. If she wins she gets a trip to New York and a cash prize. Most importantly, it's sure to jump start her career. She deserves it.

"Here's a photo of Sam when Jill told him the news. The reason it's so blurry is that he wouldn't stop jumping up and down.

"Love, your grandpa"

Before he sent the message, Rumple brought up Jill's blog and re-read the entries, studying closely all mention of himself, seeing this character as an unsuspecting but open-hearted Belle would. He was mentioned a lot; he hadn't realized how important a role he'd played in the
Sawyers' recent lives. When he reached the most recent entry, he sat back in his chair and released a pent-up breath. Robert (no last name given; Jill avoided any specifics that would invade her own or her friends' privacy, and she never once slipped and called him "Rumple") as the writer painted him was a wise and gentle protector, resourceful, kind, quiet, even-tempered. Grandfatherly, she described him at one point (he snorted at that. Maybe it was a good thing he'd dyed his hair). Belle would like Robert. Gold would have thought him weak, prey too small to bother with. But then, Gold didn't exist any more. Did Robert exist at all? Is this how Jill and Sam really saw him?

Well, they were young. He'd managed to hoodwink them, that was all. The important thing was that if Rumple couldn't see Rumplestiltskin in Robert, neither would Belle.

He closed the blog and sent off his message to Henry.

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She'd seemed unusually distracted throughout their session. At first Archie had attributed the lack of focus to the multiple projects Belle had been juggling, and in fact he'd seen this before in new singles: they would overload themselves with activity, often meaningless busy work, just so loneliness wouldn't creep in. As a coping strategy, it only delayed the inevitable, but sometimes those delays gave the lonely one time enough to regroup. Besides, Belle was normally laser-focused, a skill honed by a lifetime of reading, so Archie excused her if this once she rambled, nattering on about the online course she had enrolled in and plans for the library.

Finally she brought it out into the open: "I'm feeling a bit of a spoiled brat these days."

He chuckled. "You're anything but. You're one of the most hard-working and ambitious people I know. But let's follow that train of thought a moment. Why do you feel spoiled?"

"I sit here week after week, moaning about poor poor pitiful me—"

"No, you don't, Belle. You're doing some significant psychological work."

"At the moment it just seems like rich girl whining. I've been reading about people who have real problems, like no place to sleep at night, no money and no food for their kids." Belle ran her hands through her hair, lifting its heaviness from her shoulders as if she were lifting the weight of her thoughts instead. "I may be going home alone tonight, but at least I have a home to go to. And I always will; I don't fear that. If I went broke and couldn't pay my bills, Dove would see to it they were paid. And if I needed to, I could go home to my father. But regardless of where I went, it wouldn't be some city park I'd be sleeping in, night after night, with nothing to feed my child but a can of stew I'd dug out of a dumpster."

Archie asked slowly, a suspicion forming, "What made you think about that?"

"Henry." Then she puffed a breath and explained. "I mean, Henry told me about this blog—that's an online journal."

Archie nodded to indicate he recognized the term. He didn't say anything; he no longer trusted his voice.

"I've been reading it and it's made me rethink things. I mean, I've had some real problems. I'm not inflating them. Twenty-eight years in a secret asylum, getting shot, getting kidnapped by my own father, amnesia, and everything that happened to the man I love; those are some
major problems. But I'm in a better place now, if not a pretty good place. I have a great job, friends, a plan for the future. Reading this blog reminded me of all that."

Archie swallowed forcefully. "Which blog?"

And there it was. "It's called 'Homeless, Not Helpless' and it's written by a young mom, I guess she's about twenty-five, and her husband started beating her when their finances took a nosedive, and she gathered up a few clothes and her son—she has a five-year-old—and ran. And pretty soon her money ran put and she couldn't get a job—" Belle continued to summarize the story behind the blog, but she didn't have to. Archie already knew all about it. He should: one of his other patients had led him to the blog, so that he'd gain a bit more understanding about that patient's recent problems.

He held his breath as Belle continued to describe the blog's contents. He wouldn't tell her; that would be a betrayal of confidence, especially when Rumple had made it crystal clear he didn't want Belle to learn about his current condition. But, though the blogger never used the name "Rumple" or "Gold," nor did she provide much detail in her physical description of her housemate, Belle was an attentive reader. How long would it take her to connect the dots? And once she did, Archie had no doubt, all doubts about her husband would be shoved to a back burner. Concern for his welfare would take control. That was only natural for two people bound together by true love.

Archie didn't know much about magic, but he did know not even anger, disappointment and pride together could withstand the force of true love. He just hoped that, once she figured out who "Robert" was, Belle would remember who she was—who she had become this past year—before she went off half-cocked.

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In the days leading into spring, Father Daniel, accompanied by his compadres in the Portland Coalition for Affordable Housing, visited the house on Hayes Street several times. Jill, Harry and Rumple, recognizing the debt of gratitude they owed him for their changed circumstances, had volunteered to repay him by, as Jill put it, "paying it forward," assisting the PCAH in their latest effort, an attempt to overturn an anti-loitering law that, Daniel said, was "an anti-homeless people law in disguise." The PCAH had an office downtown and in the beginning, Jill, Harry and Rumple had gone down there to work, taking turns with one of them remaining behind to babysit, but when Rumple started bringing samples of his cooking to the office, the office decided to come to him. On his days off, in his kitchen, he could prepare entire meals for the volunteers as they armed themselves with maps, newspaper articles, government reports, opinion polls and case studies. Harry and Daniel led the door-to-door campaign; Jill did all the letter/email writing. Sam played beneath the kitchen table with his Matchbox cars.

Mrs. Hallifax suddenly decided to join the cause, bringing with her a Rolodex built over a lifetime, and a little army of retired ladies who'd grown bored with knitting and chose to go militant instead.

Rumple really didn't have the time to spare for this campaign, but he made the time anyway. At least he could repay this debt, unlike the one he owed Bae.

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"How did he do this?" Regina kicked off her shoes as she shoved yet another ornately lettered tome away from her. On her dining room table teetered books of all sizes, languages and subjects, roughly sorted into piles that had made sense at one time, but just now, tired as she was, the former queen couldn't remember what that sense was. She estimated there must be close to a hundred books stacked up here, volumes she, Henry and Dove had toted over from the shop, Gold's basement, her vault and the library, books that had taken her ex-teacher centuries to accumulate. "The man must've been a glutton for punishment."

But she remembered how he'd done it, and why. Rumplestiltskin had read every one of these volumes, taking notes from most of them, committing some of them to memory, over long winter nights in the Dark Castle, with not so much as a cat to keep him company (he preferred it that way, he insisted; Regina hadn't understood it then—even in the blackest of her moods, she needed people around her—but she could now; he'd isolated himself so that he could avoid getting caught up in life and risk wandering off the path that would led him to Baelfire). Over long winter nights he'd read, even though it meant he, an uneducated man, had had to teach himself multiple languages just to read books that might add nothing to his knowledge base—books that might not even tell the truth. Over long winter nights, over short summer nights, with the moon beckoning, with warm winds carrying the songs of birds and grasshoppers to his tower windows, he'd sat at a desk and read by candlelight. Now that she knew his purpose—and understood it; she would have done no less to get her own child back—she no longer questioned his dedication; she only wondered if his bookishness and his hermitry had been there in the beginning, when he was just a peasant with a modicum of artistic talent and a sweet child to raise alone, or if the search for Bae had imposed those qualities upon him.

Just because she'd known Rumplestiltskin longer than anyone here didn't mean she really knew him.

She shoved all thoughts of her former master aside with his books. She wasn't meant for this sort of work; she learned best by observation and trial and error. She was a person of action, and those were the sort of people she preferred to interact with. People like her Robin. She smiled as she wandered into the kitchen for a bite.

Archie and Rumple been treading on thin psychological ice in recent weeks, a few steps at a time, exploring his time with Zelena, both of them taking chances: Rumple with remembering the physical and mental torture she'd subjected him to, and Archie testing out a treatment that he'd never tried before. At first Archie had been highly reluctant—because, after all, what he was doing amounted to no more than experimentation, for he'd only completed an online course from the EMDR Institute; he'd never even seen a clinician perform the procedure, except on Youtube. To make a guinea pig of his most troubled patient—and to do it by Skype, with no chance of monitoring biometrics—gave Archie many a sleepless night. Oddly, it had been the patient showing the greater courage: "It's okay, Archie," Rumple had smiled reassuringly. "You won't break me."

"If any part of the procedure is uncomfortable—"

"I'll let you know. I read the article you sent; I watched the Youtube videos; I chatted with the therapists at Phoenix House to get their opinions. I'm ready to give this—what did you call it?—this eye therapy?"
"Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, EMDR. But 'eye therapy' will work too."
Archie had slugged down some Red Bull, took a deep breath, rippled his shoulders to work the tension out, then suggested, "All right, Mr. Gold, let's begin."

That was seven sessions ago; they'd made some progress. Rumple could now talk about his time in the cage and the smaller, teasing acts with which Zelena had reminded him of her ownership of him: the dog bowl she'd made him eat from, the time she'd shaved him and intentionally nicked him, the time she'd made him sit up on his knees and whine like a dog. He could describe such events in vivid detail without shaking or sweating.

They'd just stepped out on the ice, however. There was so much more territory to cross: the time she'd made him threaten Belle, the time she'd made him threaten Roland, her torture-by-pseudo-psychoanalysis game.

What she'd done to Bae. What she'd made him do at Bae's grave.

Those memories consumed his dreams sometimes. But not all the time, not any more. Some nights he dreamt of peaceful, loving moments with his families, the ones he had before, the one he had now. Those dreams were rare, but they fed his soul, gave him the nourishment he needed to wait knee-deep in snow at the bus stop at 4 a.m. so he could return from work to his current family.

The family he suspected he soon would lose.

The teens did it all the right way. They'd gone to Belle first, spoken with her privately, just three of them, Grace, Henry and Clarisse Shoemaker, who'd been a volunteer shelver in the library ever since Belle had reopened it. Grace did all the talking and she was the epitome of diplomacy as she laid out her strategy of "divide and conquer" for the campaign to win city council and the public over to a budget increase for the library. She even had a poll: every Storybrooker age thirteen to eighteen had been asked two questions: did they plan to go to college (forty-one percent said yes) and would they use a college and career planning center if there were one (ninety-seven percent said yes; the few who said no, Grace explained, expected to work for their parents' businesses).

"Very impressive," Belle said, admiring the chart. She'd listened carefully, asking questions that she expected the public and the politicians would ask, but as far as she was concerned, they'd won her over just as soon as they said, "We want to help."

The career center would go into the basement. Belle had been using the space for storage but had long dreamed of making something of it. The teens were doing her PR work for her; all they needed was her blessing. She gave it in her heart long before she gave it in her words.

Under her guidance, they met privately with the library board to explain the campaign. Grace made their pitch.

"A wonderful job, Ms. Hatter," the president said. "We welcome you to this endeavor."

As Belle walked out with the board members at the meeting's end, she felt energized. She'd always hoped that the library would become the community's center for self-directed learning, cultural enlightenment and entertainment. She'd shared her dreams at length with her beloved, and he had agreed wholeheartedly and had offered to assist in any way she deemed appropriate. As she locked up the library for the night, she reached into her pocket
for her phone. She'd already scrolled down the directory to Rumple's number before she remembered. In her eagerness to share the news with someone who'd be as happy about it as she was, she'd almost forgotten she didn't have a husband to share news with any more.

"You're good," said Harry, passing the yellow legal pad across the kitchen table. "You have a Walter Cronkite-meets-Sherwood-Anderson quality." When her two housemates raised their eyebrows at him, he defended himself. "What? I read too, you know."

Jill took back the legal pad, then turned her attention to Rumple. "Do you think I stand a chance? There must be hundreds of other nominees, professional—"

He held up a warning finger. They'd had this argument before, that just because a writer hadn't received a paycheck for her work didn't mean she wasn't a professional. "You stand a chance. Eight thousand readers say you do, including three who nominated you, one of whom is a for-profit journalist." A reporter for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution had sent Jill a fan email; that was how they'd learned the identity of her first sponsor for the Hillman Award.

"I still wish I knew who the other two are," she mused.

She didn't notice that under the table, Rumple gave Harry's ankle a slight kick.

"If you win," Harry suggested, throwing a quick frown at Rumple, "there'll be job offers. Newspapers, magazines, maybe even TV."

"Maybe the Portland Press Herald will finally accept my resume," she said.

"Think bigger," Rumple advised.

"I've had too many disappointments from big thinking. I'd be content with the Press Herald. Besides, I don't want to leave you guys."

"Maybe your new employer will let you write from home," Rumple speculated. But his tone was doubtful. He no longer had Second Sight, but for her, he could see a future, and it wasn't here, in a borrowed house shared with two old guys.

Dove was smiling broadly as he hunched over the book of checks and a stack of invoices to be paid. This caused Belle to frown as she entered the shop's workroom, because Mr. Dove took the monthly bill paying very seriously and never smiled while writing checks. Her heels clacked against the linoleum as she came up to his worktable; still smiling, he looked up at her. "Morning, Ms. Belle. What can I do for you?"

"Just wanted to show you pictures of the 'We Love Our Library' posters the tenth-grade art class made." She handed him her phone.

"Excellent," he agreed. "The more attention we can get for the library right now, the better we'll do with the budget vote. I hear Mr. Baggins is wavering; his daughter is in Grace's math class."

As he scrolled through the photos on her phone, her eyes drifted over the stack of invoices. He'd been making out all the usual payments: the shop's utility bill, bills from the
landscaping company, the glass replacement company and the plumber for maintenance on
the rental properties, the phone bill. But off to the side, by itself, was one on Archie's
stationery, for services rendered during February 2015. The invoice was directed to "R.
Gold."

So that was why Dove had been grinning while writing out checks: somehow he'd been in
touch with Rumple. Belle already knew that Archie was providing treatment somehow to
him, so of course it made sense that Dove, who had power of attorney for Mr. Gold, would be
paying his therapy bills. That was no surprise: Archie had let it slip to her that he had,
somehow, communicated with Rumple. And the fact that Dove was paying him strongly
indicated that Dove had been in communication with Rumple, too. Dove was too loyal to his
boss and too protective of his boss' interests to pay an invoice for an expenditure that Gold
hadn't authorized, especially one of this size: $320 for four one-hour sessions.

Hmm. So at least two people in Storybrooke were in contact with Rumple. She now had two
channels through which she could talk—or at least get a message—to Rumple. She ought to
take advantage. After all, she couldn't proceed with the divorce until she had spoken to
Rumple. That was why she'd held up the proceedings. . . wasn't it?

And yet she walked away without asking Dove to deliver her message. She chastised herself:
it wasn't fair to Rumple or to herself for her to leave them in limbo like this. She needed to
move forward. She needed to give him as well as herself a chance to be happy, whether alone
or with someone else. But now that she finally had the chance to overcome what she'd
claimed was the barrier keeping her from divorce, she couldn't proceed.

Maybe what her heart was trying to tell her was that she hadn't completely forgiven him yet,
and that was why she hadn't let him go. At least, that's what she told herself as she returned
to the library.
Once more, Daniel forsook the groaning dinner tables of the wealthy to dine at the Hayes Street house at the conclusion of a very busy Holy Week. "It's not just the food," he admitted as he sat down at the formica table. "It's the conversation. It just seems more real, here." Rumple and Harry carried the bowls and platters from the counter to the table as Jill poured the iced tea (and Sam longingly eyed the Boston cream pie waiting in the distance).

"Conversation, we have aplenty," Rumple said, seating himself. "As for the food, I'm sorry to say, it's just chicken and dumplings, but the dumplings are from scratch."

"I helped," Sam piped up.

"He did indeed. He's quite the sous chef."

Daniel led the blessing, then as the food was circulated the conversation remained light. But when Jill looked around and saw that every plate and glass were filled and every lap had a napkin to protect it, she introduced a serious subject. She and Sam had attended Daniel's Easter services, and she had given the sermons much thought since coming home. "Father, if you don't mind talking shop at dinner, there's something I've never quite understood."

"I'm always happy to talk shop, when it's the Lord's shop we're talking about," Daniel quipped.

"Well, it's the Trinity," Jill puffed out a breath of exasperation. "I've always told myself I just have to accept it; I'll never be able to understand it. But how can Jesus be both man and God, at the same time?"

Daniel chuckled. "You're standing on well-tread ground there, Jill. Every believer puzzles over that question at some point, and most end up taking the tack you did: you take it on faith. But let's take the question apart and maybe when we put the pieces back together you'll feel more at ease. First let's look at the evidence that Jesus was God. . . ."

Rumple half-listened. What the followers of Daniel's tradition called a great mystery was, to a sorcerer, no puzzle at all, but merely great skill, one Cora had mastered, one her daughter had even managed to pull off a few times: surely Daniel's god had merely cast a glamor upon himself.

The question Rumple found more interesting—but he wouldn't raise it at the dinner table with a child present—was the claim that this god had raised a man from the dead. That was amazing enough, but even more shocking was Daniel's claim that the god himself had died and been brought back to life. Not just fell into a coma and woke up again; not just fell under a sleeping curse and was revived with True Love's Kiss, but had completely and entirely died, been buried, then had come up out of the grave and walked the earth again before ascending into heaven. No sorcerer Rumple had ever met or had heard of had made such a bold claim, not Merlin, not even crazy Zelena. Only a man could be so daring—only Frankenstein, and the product of his efforts had been a monster.
Rumple chewed thoughtfully. He'd like to meet this god of Daniel's, if only to challenge him to prove his claim, sorcerer to sorcerer.

No. Rumple glanced over at Sam, who had dug a hole through a dumpling and was pushing a piece of chicken through it, making truck sounds. No, if he met Daniel's god, he wouldn't challenge him. From the way Daniel had described him, through a story about a demon's repeated failed attempts to tempt him, this god was immune to manipulation.

And then it struck him, what Daniel had said earlier: the man-god that Daniel called Lord had willingly allowed mere mortals to taunt him, torture him, nail him to a cross and kill him slowly. The man-god had raised no cyclones or lightning bolts to strike his enemies dead, had not so much as tossed a fireball at their leader. He had not called upon his magic to unbind himself and transport to safety. He'd allowed himself to be killed, in order to fulfill a prophesy, Daniel had said, and to pay a blood debt.

Rumple knew, the hard way, all about the ineluctability of prophesy and the necessity of paying full value on a debt, particularly one that demanded a sacrifice of life. As a former immortal he understood these principles in a way modern man, so far separated from the ancient laws, could not. This part of the Christian god's legend didn't confound him at all, as it did Jill and Harry.

Nor did it confound him that a sorcerer could love others so deeply as to transform himself so that he could walk among them, then take their blood debt onto himself, allowing the very people for whom he was dying to torture and revile him. Rumple thought he could understand that too, because even when Bae had turned away from him, he would have given anything and everything if it would give Bae ease. That was no mystery: that was simply fatherhood.

But what did frustrate him, as he lay in bed trying to fall asleep that night, was why hadn't he heard about this wizard three hundred years ago? If they were both on the side of Good, why hadn't the Blue Fairy told Rumple and Bae about this god, in time for him to spare them from Zoso?

If he could reach this god, he'd drop to his knees and beg him to rescue Bae. Not try to make a deal, because surely a god so powerful lacked for nothing, and Rumple in his present state had next to nothing to offer anyway. No, he'd hang his head, letting the tears fall, and he'd beg for his son's life.

And as he slipped into the twilight of sleep, what worried him was whether it was too late to approach this god, father to father, to beg for Bae's life—or whether the god, seeing upon Rumple the curse of the Dark One, would drive him out as a demon.

That is, if the man-god really existed at all.

With the library board's unanimous support, Belle and library board president Gavin Glover, accompanied by Grace Hatter and Henry, next scheduled a meeting with Mayor Mills. She sat them at the marble table that she used for meetings with department heads, and her administrative assistant Geri served them tea, just as she would have served the department heads. The primary difference, as Regina sat with steepled fingers at the head of the table and her assistant took notes, was that the mayor had to keep squelching a grin, though she did occasionally sneak a peek at the
As soon as the visitors were out the door, Regina rested her back against it and pumped her fist in the air. With this opportunity to expand the library, Belle would surely come back around to helping in the research to break the curse. For what would be the point of a college and career center if no one could leave town to go to college? She was formulating plans for how to rope Belle back in when her phone rang and something quite unexpected happened.

"Regina? It's Emma. Listen, you got plans for lunch? I thought I'd pick up something from Dave's and bring it over. I'd like to talk about Henry."

"As it happens"—the conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door; Geri must have gone to lunch—"I'm free." Regina pulled the door open to find Emma, take-out bag in hand, grinning at her. She closed her phone and eyed the bag suspiciously as Emma let herself in and seated herself at the table. "I hope that's not fish and chips."

"For me, yeah." Emma unpacked the bag and pushed a container over to Regina. "For you, a garden salad, dressing on the side."

"You paid attention." Regina picked up a package of cutlery and neatly arranged a place for herself at the opposite end of the table, then poured cups of coffee for them both. "Personal or professional?" She spread the paper napkin across her lap before drizzling dressing on the salad.

"Personal, but about our son's profession." Emma fished a set of stapled papers from her jacket and slid them across the table. "Henry's careers paper. He got a B, by the way."

"I've seen it." Regina speared a tomato with the plastic fork. "I assume it's not the B you're concerned about."

"Nope." Emma finally took the hint in Regina's frown and removed her leather jacket and tuque. "It's the content."

"He said he wants to be a reporter. An unstable future with dubious income, but—"

"Nope, that's not what I'm here about. I'm not worried his ability to make a living. I'm worried about how he plans to get there." Emma sawed her plank of fish in half, then slathered tartar sauce on it. "He wants to study at NYU."

"I know. He made a good case for it. NYU has a well regarded journalism department."

"But it's in New York, not Storybrooke." Emma bit into her fish.

"He knows his way around New York. He'll do fine."

"Yeah, I know," Emma barked. "I'm the one who taught him how to get around, remember? You're gonna make me say it, aren't you?"
Regina folded her hands primly and smiled a little smugly. "Yes."

"All right. You were right and I was wrong—well, not wrong, but I think we can meet each other halfway, right? I'm going to help you try to break the curse." She waved her fork in the air. "But what I want is for us to find a control mechanism so we can keep people like Gold and Ingrid and your mom out of Storybrooke."

"Well, Ms. Swan, I can accept those terms. Henry has been quite busy lately with his library project, so I would welcome a new lab partner. But bear in mind, I'm the lead. You'll take your instructions from me."

"It makes sense," Emma conceded. "You've been working on the curse for ages now."

"And I have many years more experience in the practice of magic than you."

"True."

"So I'll be in charge."

Emma quirked a grin. "Of the research. How about if I'm in charge of recruitment?"

"What do you mean?"

"Of helpers."

"Inexperienced laborers will only muck up the work."

"Nope again. I'm gonna recruit experienced magicians. I'm going over to the convent tonight to work on Blue and the others, and I think Belle's ready to topple. She's got to know that the college center's no good if people can't cross the town line."

Regina raised her coffee cup in a toast and Emma rushed to join her. "To a successful venture."

They ate for a few minutes in silence, then Regina asked in a conversational tone, "Have you given thought to what you'll do when Henry leaves town?"

"Have you?"

"Robin is in New York, so NYU fits in with my plans nicely."

"I always liked Greenwich Village. I could go back into bail bonding there."

"And leave all this behind?" Regina spread her hands to indicate the entire town.

"What about you? Leaving your mansion and your position."

"For Robin and Henry, I'd do it in a New York minute."

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"How do you know your god exists?" Rumple dared to ask Daniel on the evening after an especially trying therapy session with Archie. Having spent the past hour reliving the day he'd killed Pan, Rumple was in a mood so foul not even fresh-brewed tea could comfort him.

"And don't tell me you read it in that book. How do you know? Have you seen him? Shaken his hand? Heard his voice?"

"It's different for every believer. Because each man is unique, God speaks to each in a unique way." Daniel explained. "For me, it was when I was fourteen and my mother died, after a
two-year bout with lung cancer. Her last words to me and my brother were 'Don't worry about me. I see the angels coming.' I was holding her hand, and as the strength left her and her hand fell out of mine, I could feel arms wrap around me, and then I was certain, absolutely certain. I've never doubted since."

I felt nothing when I died, Rumple wanted to say.

"The Lord will speak to you too. You just need to pay attention." The kettle whistled and Daniel got up to turn the stove off. "It could be through something written—that's why I keep leaving those messages for you. It could be through another person. If you're listening, He'll find a way to speak to you." He poured the hot water into the teapot, then returned to the table. "And He's always listening to us, in whatever way you want to talk to Him."

A most curious sorcerer, Rumple thought. What did this being have to gain from wasting his time on the powerless? But then, the people of Misthaven had said much the same thing about Rumplestiltskin's deals with the likes of peasants and handmaids.

"No one is beyond the sound of His voice," Daniel continued. "And no one is beyond hope for His help. He promised us: we have a very persuasive advocate to speak on our behalf."

Rumple grunted.

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Inspired by the work of the teens, Belle plunged into developing plans for her dream library. It would have, in addition to the college and career center, a small-business start-up center, job-search and computer classes, updated technology including a self-checkout machine and tablets available for circulation, an ebook collection, a puppet theater, and something called a "makerspace." When she first read about that in American Libraries, she began to realize just how far different the profession was from what she had imagined it to be when she'd first told Ruby she needed a job. The farther along she got in her plans, especially those involving technology, the more lost she felt. The original Storybrooke curse may have created a psychiatrist and lawyers (good grief, did that mean the dentist hadn't attended dental school? She shuddered as she recalled her last extraction.) but Belle wanted to be a real librarian; it was too important to the success of the library, and the library was too important to the success of the community. The children's futures were at stake.

She needed to learn, and not just from books. She needed the experience of librarians out there in the world. She needed to go to school, for real. But with no college in Storybrooke, she was stuck. Or so she thought for several months, until she came across an article about online degree programs.

It required a bit of fudging—with Dove's assistance, she fabricated a high school diploma for herself—but as of now she could call herself an undergrad at Syracuse U. She would work on a BA in literature, and after that, a MLS. It would take years, but she was young. After she'd completed her registration, she took a long walk around town, telling everyone she bumped into what she had done. Very possibly, she would become the first fairytale character with a college degree.

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Rumple had been steeling himself for this moment. He'd talked it over, several times, with Archie; he'd come to terms with the likelihood of another sort of loss, another heartbreak, and with Archie's help he'd prepared the brave face he now put on as he let himself into the house at 4:15 in the morning to find a light on in the kitchen and Jill sitting at the table with two cups of tea and an opened letter before her.
Slipping off his coat and boots in the mud room, he moved slowly to prolong the moment when she would set a match to the explosive that would blow his world apart. She was watching him, mixed emotions shadowing her face. Finally he had no more excuses for delay; he entered the kitchen and wordlessly accepted a cup from her. He glanced down: the thickness of the letter would reveal the news.

It looked pretty thick.

To his pleasant surprise, he felt a grin coming on. That gave her permission to grin, clamber to her feet, throw her arms around his neck and whisper—because her son was sleeping nearby, "I won."

He hugged her back. "You deserve it." He was referring to more than the letter on Hillman Foundation embossed stationery. They both knew this prize represented so much more than a free trip to New York and five grand.

When she released him, she gave a small shrug. "Maybe now I'll get on at the Press Herald."

He shook his head, still grinning. "There will be bigger offers."

She surrendered to joy. "Yeah."

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Ariel slid onto the diner bench and "ahem-ed" loudly to get Belle's attention. Belle's grip on her tablet slipped, and the tablet fell, knocking over her glass of iced tea; Granny had to rush over and mop up the mess. The matron didn't mind, though; she'd made a good income from serving lunches to the librarian-to-be, who needed company as much as she needed a good meal, and Granny hoped that Belle's enrollment in college would serve as a good example for Ruby. In fact, nearly everyone in town had heard and approved of Belle's enrollment; the Mirror had even run a front-page article about her. (She'd refused to be interviewed at first, until the reporter pointed out that the publicity would do her budget campaign some good.)

"Whatcha reading today, college girl?" Ariel teased. "Scarlet Letter? Moby Dick?"

"I'm reading a blog Henry directed me to." Belle reached into the napkin dispenser and grabbed a handful to dab at her eyes.

"What's a blog? And why is it making you cry?"

"It's just," Belle had to pause to sniff, "very. . . ."

"Sad?"

Belle nodded. "And happy and uplifting and depressing and inspirational."

"Wow." Ariel picked up the tablet and glanced at the story Belle had been reading. "What's a blog?"

"It's like an online journal. The woman who writes this one is homeless and she has a five-year-old son."

Ariel looked skeptical. "'Homeless'? How can you not have a home? Everybody has one. Even the Shoemans. Eleven kids, four bedrooms." She shuddered.

"Everyone in Storybrooke has a home. But out there, in the rest of the world, half a million people
don't. They sleep in emergency shelters or outside."

"Half a million!" Ariel breathed. "How can that be?"

Belle lifted her shoulders. "The woman who wrote this blog, she slept under an overpass for seven months after she lost her job. She and her son slept under a piece of canvas, with some other people. She was scared to death that the authorities would take her son away because she couldn't provide for him."

"Why didn't someone give her a place to live, like Granny did for me when I first came here?"

"I guess most people out there aren't as generous as Granny."

The young women smiled in Granny's direction, and the matron waved off the compliment. "I was glad to do it, sweetie."

Belle pushed her tablet across the tabletop. "Here, read the first entry."

In a few minutes both young women were dabbing away tears.

----------------------------------------------
MAY 2015

Sam trailed after her as she relocated her Goodwill suitcase from their bedroom to the kitchen. His thumb was in his mouth, even though he'd turn six in two weeks. Harry reached out to remove the thumb, but Rumple murmured, "Let him have it this once," and Harry relented. They both knew what the thumb-sucking meant.

Jill had been carefully preparing Sam for this moment. She'd borrowed library books about New York; she unfolded the map at the back of the Mobil guide so she could show him where the airport was. "My plane will be landing here. And then a driver will be waiting at the gate with a sign that says 'Sawyer.'"

"That's me!" Sam had declared. "I'm supposed to go!"

"No, honey, not this time. I'm Sawyer too, remember? The driver will have a car waiting, and he or she will drive me to the Ritz Carlton, here." She pointed on the map. "That's a big and very old hotel."

"What's a hotel?"

"Remember when we stayed at the Motel 6? It's like that, but bigger. I'll sleep there for three nights, and then I'll get back in the car, and the driver will take me to the airport, and the airplane will fly me back to Portland." She pointed to the red circle she'd drawn on the calendar. "On May 6. I'll be home around four o'clock." She pulled the Gigo Owl Clock toward him. "Show me four o'clock." When he did, she praised him and stood the clock upright on the kitchen table. "Let's leave that here so you can look at it when you want to." She set a magic marker next to the calendar. "And each night, when Harry tucks you in, you can cross off another day, and when May 6 comes, you'll know I'll be home soon."

She kissed the top of his head and set him on his feet, and pulled her suitcase behind her as she made her way to the front door. She put on her raincoat and stooped for one last hug. As she opened the door and stepped out onto the porch, Harry said, "Wish we could afford a
"taxi for you."

"There'll be time enough for taxis," she said, waving at the trio standing on the porch. "Be good," she blew a kiss to her son.

"I will." But his face still bore a pout.

"I meant you two," she winked at Harry and Rumple.

As she strode down the zinnia-lined sidewalk, headed for the bus stop, Sam stretched his hand out and Rumple took it. "Your mom did a very good thing," he said softly.

"Okay." But Sam didn't sound sure. He'd never spent a night without her, and even though he was almost six, he thrust his thumb back into his mouth.

"I have a surprise," Rumple said.

"Cookies?"

Rumple smiled. "Not yet. My surprise is: I took the day off work tomorrow. We can go to the zoo or the museum. You choose." Slowly, so as not to startle the boy, he turned the two of them around and moved back inside the house.

"Dear Grandpa,

"Congratulations to your friend on winning that award and getting a great job! What a turnaround for her—her head must be spinning. To go from living in a park to living in Washington, DC, as a reporter, that's an amazing story and I'm sure it will give hope to other people who are in difficult circumstances. In my Careers class, we've been reading Jill's blog for months now and we sent in a Hillman nomination for her. We watched her acceptance speech in a livestream on the Hillman website, and our teacher brought in a cake and punch to celebrate. Here's a photo of us with a congratulations banner we made. Would you please share it with her? We'd like her to know we think it's great what she did.

"In her speech she talked about how love gave her hope and motivation to get back on her feet—the love of her son and her friends. When she said it was her friends Robert and Harry that got her off the street, I cheered and the other kids looked at me like I was nuts, because of course they don't know who Robert really is. I wish they did. I wish you would let me tell Belle and my moms and Gramps and Grandma and Archie and everyone else (especially Hook) because if they knew what you did, they'd change their minds about you. They would see that you've changed. I bet they would let you come back to Storybrooke (if we could break that curse).

"What do you think, Grandpa? How about letting me tell them? Will you at least think about it? The best Christmas present I can think of is for you to be here.

"Love, Henry"

"Dear Henry,

"I appreciate your offer and especially your hope for seeing me again. I would enjoy nothing better than to spend Christmas with you. But I'm afraid you're mistaken about how the community would react if they learned about the circumstances under which I've been living this past year. Most would feel I got what I deserved. No one would interpret my helping Jill
and Sam as altruistic; and in fact, I’d have to agree. What I did in appropriating a house for us to live in benefitted me as much as it did my friends. There was nothing to be admired in it, other than, perhaps, a bit of business sense.

"It's important to me that Belle has her best chance at happiness. She's such a caring person that if she knew that someone she once loved was in a bit of trouble, she would be miserable. She'd blame herself, and that would do neither of us any good. She couldn't change my situation, and to know she was worrying about me would only make me worry about her. It's been almost a year now since she saw me last. She's doing well on her own.

"Someday, if the stars align just right, I may see her again. Until then, when she remembers me, I want her to see me in her mind's eye as the man who brought her breakfast on a silver tray, not as the unwashed old man stealing food from a dumpster. Do you understand, Henry? So please, don't raise my name around her or anyone else in Storybrooke. I wouldn't want either my enemies or my friends to know how I've been living.

"Love, your grandpa"

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"Dear Grandpa,

"I get it. I mean, I don't, but I won't say anything to anyone about Robert.

"Maybe you'll think this is just the Truest Believer talking, but I do believe that someday the stars will align the way they're supposed to and we'll all be together again, but it'll be different this time. Because I think we're smart enough to learn from our mistakes, and when we get our second chance, we're going to appreciate it.

"I get that you want Belle to remember you at your best. But Mom said something once when she was Skyping with Robin and he'd just got off work (he's a garbage man in New York). He was dirty and sweaty and he hadn't shaved, and he said he was embarrassed for her to see him that way, especially because you know how Mom is; she puts on lipstick just to go out to pick up the newspaper from the lawn. But what she said to him was. 'Love doesn't see with the eyes; it sees with the heart, and you look handsome to me.' That just shows you how much she's changed! Or I should say, how much love changed her.

"And I think Belle would be the same, when she sees you again. She wouldn't see an old guy who digs in dumpsters any more than she would see a guy in an Armani suit bringing her breakfast on a silver tray. She would see a man who's so considerate that he cooked breakfast for her.

"Love, Henry"
"It's been a year since I banished him," Belle observed as she walked into Archie's office. "It's fitting that today is the day we review the last time I spoke to him."

"This will be rough. Let's fortify with tea first."

"It will be rough," she admitted. She opened her notebook and began to read the last entry.

"I'm standing in the dark at the town line. I've just saved everyone from Ursula and Cruella. Yes, it's my fault that they were in Storybrooke in the first place, but I didn't know how bad they would get. I thought I could trust them. Maybe I knew better, but they were my last chance. Out here in the world, no magic, no money, I'm nothing and nobody. I have to depend upon others. There's no way Regina or the Charmings would have let me back into town. Oh yeah, they'd forgive the likes of the Sea Witch and the Puppy Killer, give them a second chance, give Regina a second chance, but not me. Never mind how many times I helped them. Never mind that I'm Henry's grandfather and he forgives me.

'All I want is to go home, back to my shop, back to my wife, back to my life. Why is that too much to ask?'

'She still loves me. I know she does because we're true love and I still love her, even here, in the land without magic, in the dark, in the street. We need each other. Who's protecting her while I'm out here?'

'I was wrong. I know that. I should have let her in. From the beginning, I should have told her what I'd been through, what I felt. How much I cared for her. How desperate I was to shelter her. I never should have lied to her, not that time, not this time.

'If I had come here, alone, to this line, if I had just told her how sorry I am and how much I miss her, would she have forgiven me? Would she let me in?'

'I'm standing here waiting for her decision. Not theirs. They don't matter. If they decide to keep me out, but she still forgives me, I can accept that. I'll come back later and try again. Henry wants me back. Archie is telling them to let me in. But it's up to Belle.

'"One question," she says. "Tell me the truth."'

'And I do. I would have searched for the author and forced him to write us a happy ending.'

'"It's been decided," she says. Just as she did long ago, to her father, when she agreed to leave with me. Forever, she agreed. I guess she forgot. It's been decided that I won't be let back in, nor will she forgive me. "You haven't changed."

'I have, but she just can't see it. Maybe I haven't changed in the way she wanted me to. I can't pass her test. "I love you, I always will, but we can't be together." Those were her last words.

'Is there any hope for us? I'm a man who's always clung to the thinnest thread of hope. Is "I love you, I always will" strong enough to hold me?'

'The phone's silent. I suppose they're all gone. Three times I sent her away. Three times she's sent
me away. Are we even now?

'I have no idea where to go. What comes next? Maybe she thinks she can move on, but we're trapped in love. There's no moving on for either of us. She may find someone else, she may even marry and have his kids, but she'll always love me.

'Me, I know it's pointless to try to love again. Who would have me, anyway? I'll keep hoping she changes her mind. Hope is all I have now.'"

She closed her notebook.

"What about you, Belle?" Archie asked. "Do you have hope?"

"For a miracle," she admitted. "It's going to take a very powerful miracle to overcome the two of us."

"That's what I've heard true love is, a very powerful miracle. It brought David out of a coma. It gave Regina the fortitude to try to change." When she didn't reply, he continued, "That concludes our exercises, Belle. What have you learned about him?"

She thought about it a long moment. "I learned he's motivated by fear, not by greed or blood-lust or a desire to cause harm, as most people think. He's not a trickster, though in fear he will deceive and lie. He trusts no one because the few people he did trust abandoned him. And yet he's a man of infinite patience and hope, a fierce need to protect, and a deep capacity to love."

"What did you learn about yourself?"

"I'm a good-intentioned person with a big heart but not enough patience. And my listening skills need a lot of work."

"And?"

"And I forgive him, and I wish with all my heart that he'll forgive me." She pulled her hair away from her shoulders and smiled. "I can hear him now, saying 'There's nothing to forgive. You only did what I deserved.'"

"What else would he say, Belle?"

"'I love you.' He'd say, 'I love you, and it's forever.' And I would say, 'I love you too, forever.'"

"But?"

She shrugged. "How powerful is true love? Is it the miracle we need?"

"Is it?"

"Time will tell. I'm learning, Archie, learning to be patient."

20 May 2015

The house was silent, as it should have been at 4:20 a.m. as Rumple returned from work. The porch light had been left on so he could see as he unlocked the front door; a night light had been left on in the living room so he could see as he entered the house. On the kitchen table a mug, a spoon, the sugar bowl and a box of teabags had been set out, and on the stove a kettle filled with water waited so that Rumple could have a cup of tea before bed. All was just as it
should be, and as always, Rumple sighed tiredly but contentedly because he was home.

He'd noticed something as he was making out the grocery order form for Phoenix House for next week. Today was May 20. Exactly one year ago, Belle had banished him from her life, from their marriage, from magic, from Storybrooke. His feet had moved more slowly after that realization; his ankle had throbbed. He wished he could have talked to Archie tonight.

He turned the stove on and sat down at the table to wait for the water to boil. He planted his right leg on a chair and massaged his calf. If he concentrated on the physical pain, he could ignore the emotional pain, he assured himself, but his eyes kept drifting to the calendar on the wall, next to the clock. May 20. No one looking at the calendar would think there was anything significant about that date; he'd never mentioned it to his housemates. He wondered what Belle had been thinking tonight. He was certain she had thought of him, but whether with bitterness or something sweeter, or maybe both together, he couldn't guess.

May 20. And in three weeks he would be left behind again.

The kettle whistled and he turned the stove off, then poured the water into his cup. He brought the cup to the kitchen table and dropped a teabag into it, then he sat down again to wait.

At work, he'd taken up his predecessor's habit of listening to a radio as he cooked. He'd never done that in Storybrooke; he'd preferred silence then. But he found that he had developed a curiosity about the people here, in the land without magic; he'd found them quite different from the people he'd known in the Enchanted Forest and Storybrooke. Sometimes he listened to talk shows, but he found he learned more about how people really thought and felt by listening to music. He'd flip around the stations, sampling a bit of everything: no genre had a monopoly on truth. The style was just the spice, he'd learned; the message was the meat. Tonight he'd listened to a station that proclaimed itself "Portland's portal to your pop past." They'd been playing a retrospective of songs by a band called the Beatles, after which they'd featured selections from the members' solo work. As he listened, his foot tapping to the rhythm, he decided he rather liked this band. He would have to borrow their CDs from the library.

The disc jockey shared tales from the Beatles' history, and Rumple decided he liked them a little more for knowing they'd earned their success the hard way, one gig at a time. Their struggles had united them; their fame had bound them even tighter, the DJ said, because each one knew there were only three other guys in the world who knew what it was like to be a Beatle. But the lads grew up, changed, and power plays drove a wedge between them. In bitterness they'd gone their separate ways. Rumple's foot stopped tapping then; power was no friend to relationships of any kind, it seemed. Marriages as well fell apart; families were torn asunder. But there was hope, signs that the anger was drying up and that the Beatles were beginning to remember what they'd once meant to each other. Individually, they were healing themselves and their families. They were learning that love meant more than control.

"Woman, I can hardly express/My mixed emotions at my thoughtlessness/After all, I'm forever in your debt."

Rumple stopped peeling potatoes and stared out the window into the afternoon sun. "'I never meant to cause you sorrow or pain.'" He hadn't. He'd acted in fear. And he hadn't trusted his
worries to the one person who had pledged to always help him. The grown man in him had known he could depend upon Belle, and yet the abandoned child inside pushed the panic button, insisting he could keep her only if he took her away from everyone who could remind her he was the Dark One.

"'Don't let another day go by/It'll be like starting over.'"

Forgiveness was in the air for the Beatles—until one of the lads was murdered.

Shot to death as he and his wife were going home to their child. Rumple pounded the steaks extra hard as he listened. "This is one of the songs John wrote for his son," the DJ said, and as Rumple listened, he had to rub his sleeve over his eyes. "'Close your eyes, have no fear/The monster's gone; he's on the run; your daddy's here.'"

Rumple had dropped the tenderizer and walked outside. It was all too much.

Now as he sat at his kitchen table, his cup warming his hands, he couldn't bear up under the heaviness of regret. He needed—not a second chance—that was too much to ask for—but just the chance to speak to Belle and Bae once more to say how sorry he was that he'd let them down time and time again.

He felt a tug on his sleeve. His eyes flew open. A bleary-eyed, Spiderman-pajamaed Sam stood at his elbow. "'Rumple?' he whispered. "Are you crying?"

He scooted his chair back to make room and lifted Sam into his lap. Lying to the boy was pointless. "Yeah. I guess I was."

"I'll come back and see you. I promise."

He kissed the top of Sam's head. "I know you will."

There was hope for him, signs that the fear was drying up and with it, the need for power. He was learning that love meant more.

-------------------------------------------

JUNE 2015

Regina leaned into Emma's space to whisper as four nuns, led by Mother Superior, moved carefully down the rickety steps leading to Gold's basement. "How did you win them over?"

Emma counted them off on her fingers. "Three facts. One: Father Benedict is the only priest in Storybrooke. Two: Father Benedict is seventy-two. Three: that poll the kids did? Four kids want to go to seminary school so they can become priests."

Regina plastered on her political smile. "Ladies, welcome. Let me fill you in on the work we've done so far." She reached for Henry's lab notes and started to review them aloud, but a voice interrupted her.

"Is there room for one more?"

Eight heads snapped in the direction of the stairs. There, teetering on the top stair, Tinker Bell peered down at them. A book was tucked under her arm and a pencil was tucked behind her ear. Regina grinned as Henry moved to Tink's side to give her an enthusiastic hug. "Always room for
As he waited for Archie to return from a "BRB" (whatever that was), Rumple picked up Daniel's Bible and read the passage the priest had left for him tonight: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

He liked that. He glanced at the monitor: Archie hadn't returned yet, so Rumple read the rest of the page. Archie still hadn't returned, so he turned back to the beginning of the chapter called "The Gospel of Matthew." By the time an embarrassed and apologetic Archie resumed their session ("Sorry. Caught a stomach virus."), Rumple was engrossed in his reading. After the session (this time talking about the Sawyers' impending move) as he shut down the laptop, Rumple picked up the book and carried it into the kitchen, where Daniel waited with tea and a cobbler one of his parishioners had baked. "Daniel... would you loan me this book?"

"Sure." Daniel squelched a grin as he cut into the dessert. "Keep it as long as you want. Ice cream or whipped cream on your cobbler? It's peach."

"I never turn down a scoop of ice cream." Rumple sat down at the table. "Hey, Daniel, I was wondering about something... Here Matthew says, 'But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness.' What hope is there, then, for that body? Is there a way to expunge the darkness?"

Daniel fumbled the tub of ice cream he was lifting from the freezer. "That's what this book is about, Robert. It shows us there's always hope, because God's love never ends and never flags."

"But the worst of mankind—surely he turns his face from them."

"Let me ask you this. Is there anything your son, if you had one, could do that would make you turn your face from him?"

"No." Rumple recoiled at the thought.

"Then why would you expect any less from the Lord, who promised us, 'I have engraved you on the palms of my hands?' Daniel set the ice cream on the counter and returned to the table. By the time their conversation had wound down for the night, the floor was covered in melted vanilla, but Rumple had the gift of a book and a lot to think about.

"I have to get back to the Enchanted Forest somehow," Rumple implored Archie. "For Bae."

Archie had no idea how to answer that. They'd talked about this before, at length, Rumple's belief that when Bae had freed Rumple from the vault of the Dark Ones, the price for that had been his soul. Archie had been skeptical, particularly when Rumple had expressed an intention to "set things back the way they should be" by trading back his soul for Bae's. "No more giant's beans, no more realm jumper's hats," Archie had gently reminded Rumple then, but Rumplestiltskin had never allowed practicality to stand between him and his son. So now, all Archie could do was nod. "You will. You moved heaven and earth to find him before; you'll do it again. We must concentrate first on you getting—" he almost said well, but he amended it to a word Rumple would find more persuasive—"stronger."
The verse that Daniel had chosen to leave for Rumple tonight was "'No longer will there be any curse.'"

When the Skype session had concluded and Rumple came to Daniel's kitchen for tea, he brought with him a question. "Father..." He drizzled a spoonful of honey into his tea as he chose his words carefully.

Daniel waited; he could see this would be an interesting conversation.

"Do you remember, in April, when you talked to us about the meaning of Easter?"

"Sure."

"You talked about the necessity for a blood sacrifice as payment for sin, and then you talked about your savior defeating death through his own resurrection."

"He did indeed. Once and for all, He did away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

"In your tradition, there is a heaven that some souls go to after death, and a hell that others go to, to suffer in eternity, yes?"

"Our Scriptures have informed us of both. A place of no more sorrow or crying, and no death; and a place of eternal fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth."

"In your tradition," Rumple continued slowly, "if a soul resides in hell, can it ever be rescued and brought to heaven?"

Daniel fiddled with his teaspoon as he reflected. "There's been a lot of study and a lot of discussion on that question, and no consensus. Some cite Hebrews 9:27: 'People are destined to die once and after that, face judgment.' But others cite Revelation and have hope for a heaven where the gate is never shut, and an invitation to come in is extended to all who will wash their robes."

"Which side do you take, Father?"

Daniel smiled wryly. "I'm inclined to agree with C. S. Lewis: 'The doors of hell are locked on the inside.'"

"Aye," Rumple said softly. "It takes one who's been there to lead another out."

On their last night as a family, Jill used some of her Hillman winnings to treat her "boys" to a Sea Dogs game. "I wish I could take us to a Red Sox game," she said, "but at the moment, that's out of my league."

"It's great the way it is," Harry assured her. "Sam will remember this game, and then he'll remember us." He stopped at a vendor to buy Sam a hot dog and a root beer, and Rumple bought the boy a cap. "There, now he has the full baseball experience."

The adults took turns clutching Sam's hand; if they hadn't, he would have charged down the bleachers and onto the field, he was that excited. Once they settled into seats, Rumple lifted the boy onto his lap and kept him gently pinned there, though it earned him fresh bruises.
every time Sam bounced up and down—which was every time a bat connected with a baseball.

As he held the lad steady, Rumple closed his eyes, pretending that it was a five-year-old Bae he held. Bae, who, at any age, would have considered a baseball game a very fine birthday present. Bae, whose birthday would have been today.

Jill and Sam didn't need a moving van. They had no furniture of their own, and their clothes fit in one suitcase and their books and toys fit in one box. "It's a good start," she said, surveying their packed property atop the kitchen table.

Rumple gave her shoulders a squeeze. "It's a very good start."

"When are we coming back, Mom?" Sam asked for the fourth time that week. He kept forgetting.

"Not for a while, sweetie. When you're new on the job, you don't get vacation for a long time. But we'll call Harry and Rumple every Sunday, right?" Jill hugged her son, but over his head she exchanged a knowing glance with Rumple. They both knew what was coming. There would be weekly phone calls, but over time they'd grow shorter and farther apart. Maybe they'd come back to visit a year from now, when she had a two-week vacation coming, but probably not. Sam would have found new friends long before then; his old ones would fade from memory, and that was natural, that was right; he was a child; he needed to let go so he could move on.

"Gonna miss you kids," Harry carried the box as Jill pulled the suitcase and held her son's hand.

"Your zinnias are beautiful, Harry," she said, plucking one to tuck behind her ear.

"You'll be doing important work. Maybe something you write will sway votes," Daniel suggested as he opened the trunk of his car. Harry lifted the box and the suitcase inside, then stood back.

"It's a nice day for flying," Daniel said, opening the back door. Rumple helped Sam into the back seat and fastened the seat belt. Sam held his arms out for a last hug, his face solemn.

"The National Coalition for the Homeless," Harry mused. She'd be their new blogger. "You're in the big leagues now, Jilly."

Daniel opened the passenger door and leaned on it to wait. He'd forgone a golf invitation from his church's wealthiest donors to drive the Sawyers to the airport.

At yesterday's Skype session with Archie, Rumple had found the customary Post-It marking a verse in Daniel's Bible: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven."

Harry hugged her and kissed her cheek. "You take care, little sister. If you ever need anything—"

"You too." She cleared her throat and stared at the grass.
Then it was Rumple's turn. Displays of affection came awkward to him; his childhood had been devoid of hugs and kisses and bedtime stories. He'd done a little better for Bae, and a little better still for Sam. Now he embraced Jill without hesitation. This was his family and they were leaving the nest, as all young ones must. He would miss them terribly; he was proud to let them go. He'd done well for them.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank you too," he answered.

Then he stepped back, she climbed into the car and Daniel closed the passenger door. As the priest walked around to the driver's side, Jill rolled down her window. "Write to us, soon."

"There'll be an email waiting for you two as soon as you get into your new apartment," Rumple assured her.

The car started and pulled away from the curb, and Jill raised a hand in farewell, and Sam threw his arm back and forth in his own wave. Rumple and Harry waved until the car had turned onto Cumberland.

"They grow up so fast," Harry mused. Then his brow drew down. "Oh oh." He scampered back into the house. "Tell her I'm on my way to work!"

Rumple looked across the lawn to the future Mrs. Hallifax-Harridge, who was emerging from her front door with a tray of lemonade. "She won't believe me, Harry. She knows your work schedule." He chuckled as he followed his friend inside. Laughing was better than the alternative.

A/N. The songs quoted above are "Woman," "Starting Over" and "Beautiful Boy," all by John Lennon.
A Long Way from Where I Need to Be

JUNE 2015

Henry noticed that when they all piled into cars to drive to the town line, Blue got into an SUV with the other nuns, while Tink got into Regina's Mercedes with Emma. Just to shake things up a bit—and remind them they were all on the same team, for now, anyway—Henry got into the nuns' car. On his lap he carried his most recent contribution to the boundary-breaking effort: a box full of boomerangs. In an ultimate show of trust, Regina allowed Emma to drive the Mercedes as she sat in the back, holding a velvet-lined jewel box that sheltered the product of their labors, a vial containing a bright yellow liquid.

"Explain to me again what these toys will show us?" Astrid inquired.

"These are boomerangs," Henry replied. "When you throw them, they come back to you. I'm going to throw them across the border. If they come back—"

"We'll know people can cross the border and come back too," Astrid surmised.

They arrived at the orange line and gathered well back from it, no one daring to allow so much as a toe anywhere near the line. Once again, the nuns clustered together, apart from the occupants of Regina's car; Henry set himself in the middle. "All right then," Regina said, sounding businesslike; only Henry could detect the slight tremble in her hand as she opened the jewel box.

"Wait a minute," Emma suggested. "Shouldn't we say something?"

Regina pointed out, "This isn't a spell, Ms. Swan. This is a potion. I should hope you'd know the difference by now."

Emma made a mouth. "That's not what I mean."

"A prayer?" one of the nuns suggested.

"Not what I had in mind either, but it wouldn't hurt."

So Regina waited, resisting the urge to tap her high heel against the asphalt, while Blue led a prayer. When she'd concluded, Blue nodded at Regina. "We're ready."

Regina removed the vial from the box, then passed the box to Tink. She uncorked the vial and passed the stopper to Emma. "Here goes nothing." Everyone took another step back as she walked down the orange line, dribbling the liquid onto it. The paint bubbled up and hissed as drops of the potion splashed down upon it. When she'd reached the end of the line, Regina recorked the vial, set it back in the jewel box, and watched the chemical reaction between paint and potion. After a few minutes the paint stopped hissing and a faint, oily cloud arose from the asphalt, then dissipated. When nothing more happened, Regina signaled Henry. "Go ahead."

With one of the nuns holding his box, Henry reached inside and retrieved one of his boomerangs. He licked his lips, shared a nervous glance with his mothers, then flung the toy across the line. The researchers observed it flying away purposefully, then it made a graceful turn and started back toward them and collectively they held their breath. It flew closer and closer, aimed directly at Henry, who held his open hands in the air to catch it, murmuring, "Come on, come on, a little closer"—and then, just as it crossed the orange line, it vanished.
The researchers released their breath in a disappointed sigh.

"Try again," Emma urged, and Henry threw a second boomerang, with the same result; then a third and a fourth.

"That's it," Henry said when the fourth vanished. "I'm out of boomerangs."

"Well," Emma turned back to the Mercedes. "Back to the old drawing board."

-------------------------------------------------------

"To: mrgoldantiquities

"From: jillsawyer

"Hi Rumple! We're doing great, love it here in Washington. It's sooo big and sooo expensive but the NCH folks are all friendly and helpful, and they've taught us how to get around. They've been generous with my work schedule; I'm allowed to work half-days in the office and half-days at home so I can be here when Sam gets out of school. It's a dream come true. We're renting a basement apartment from an elderly couple; we're just three blocks from the bus stop and five blocks from the elementary school. And Sam wants you to know that the zoo is just two bus rides away; we've been there three times already. He has decided that when he grows up, he'll be a veterinarian for the zoo, and his first task will be to teach the elephants how to hold a toothbrush in their trunks so they can brush their teeth.

"We miss you and Harry and will try to make it back at Thanksgiving to see you.

"Hugs, Jill and Sam"

-------------------------------------------------------

Belle stumbled in to Moe's two-bedroom bungalow, her shoes slippery from the rain, and her arms loaded down with a sackful of groceries and a wrapped gift under her arm. "Happy Father's Day, Dad!"

Moe took the bag from her and accepted a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, petal. I gotta say, the best thing about being a father is having a daughter like you." He carried the bag into the kitchen and set it on the counter. "What are you cooking for us, sweetie?" He poked around in the bag.

They'd been taking turns cooking Sunday dinner for each other ever since he moved out of her apartment. She'd learned to tolerate his five-alarm chili and his sauerkraut-drenched hot dogs; he'd accepted her boeuf bourguignon and lobster Thermidor without complaint, though both father and daughter popped Rolaids like after-dinner mints after eating each other's cooking.

"I decided since it's your special day, I'd cook something special."

Moe's smile froze. "Everything you cook is special." He was trying extra hard to be supportive now; they'd had a row when she'd explained to him that she was putting the divorce proceedings on hold, and he'd come to the library the next morning to apologize. "You're a grown woman. You make your own decisions. I had no business arguing with you about your marriage. Your mother would've torn me a new one if she'd been here to hear me." Belle had instantly forgiven him and made an apology of her own for losing her temper, and they'd been walking on eggshells since then.

"What are you cooking today?" He asked hopefully.
Wordlessly, Belle reached into the grocery bag and produced a frozen pepperoni pizza and a six-pack of Budweiser. He threw his arms around her. "My favorite!"

"Wait, there's more." She gave him the wrapped box.

He tore off the ribbon and wrapping, then tore off the lid. Then his smile really did light up. "A universal remote! Belle! This is the best Father's Day ever!"

She gave him a small push. "Go on in to the living room while I cook. The Mets are playing the Cardinals."

"We've made good progress," Archie said, leaning back in his chair.

Rumple too sat back and ran his hands through his damp hair. It was an extraordinarily hot summer, that was how he excused the rivers of sweat that had soaked his hair and his shirt, but if Archie had asked, he would have admitted nerves had something to do with it. He'd spent the past hour reliving Bae's death.

"I will free him," he vowed between clenched teeth. "I don't know how yet. If I can get back to Storybooke and reclaim my magic—"

"Even if you had your magic, how would you get to the Enchanted Forest? No magic beans, no portal jumpers; how would you get to the vault?"

"It took me three hundred years to find Bae. I'm not giving up on him now."

Archie had come to know Rumplestiltskin well enough by now to spot the gleam of an idea in his eyes. "You know a way, don't you?"

"The apprentice could do it. He can easily build portals between worlds." Then the gleam disappeared. "But I burned that bridge, didn't I?"

"You're assuming that if you released him from the Sorcerer's Hat, he'd want revenge on you for imprisoning him there in the first place."

"Wouldn't you, if you were him?" Rumple growled. "And what better way to get that revenge than to make sure my son remains imprisoned in the vault?"

"What if you're wrong?"

"What?" Rumple was still submerged in self-loathing and couldn't follow Archie's train of thought.

"What if the apprentice doesn't want revenge?"

Rumple's mouth fell open. "What?"

"What if he forgives you?"

"Forgives? Me?" Rumple snorted. "Archie, who slipped the crazy pill into your coffee?"

"I've never met this man, I admit it, so I could be wrong." Archie leaned forward a little to smile encouragingly. "But—here's your assignment for the week, Mr. Gold: consider the
possibility that I just may be right. That the apprentice might forgive you—and might even want to help free Baelfire."

Rumple's lips formed words but no sound came out.

"Have a good week, Mr. Gold."

When he wandered into the kitchen for his usual post-session cup-and-chat with Daniel, Rumple was moving in a daze. Daniel pretended not to notice. "German chocolate cake tonight," he announced. "The parishioner who provided it thinks she's the best baker in the county—better than Mrs. Olander, who baked last week's pie." He slid a slicer through the cake. "And you and I are the beneficiaries of that feud."

Rumple dutifully offered an appreciative chuckle, but his eyes were still glazed over. Moving automatically, he forked up a mouthful and began to chew, and then he blinked, forked up a bigger mouthful and chewed sincerely. "Mmm." He pointed his fork at the cake. "She wins."

Daniel grinned around a bite. "I'm reserving judgment. Mrs. Earhart has yet to enter the competition." His eyes twinkled. "I believe I'll have to mention to her how wonderful Mrs. Blaskey's cake is. . .almost as good as her own pineapple upside-down."

Rumple patted up the last crumbs with the back of his fork. "Do you have any parishioners who specialize in homemade bread?"

"Indeed we do. You really should attend our services and find out for yourself."

"I'm afraid you'll never convert me, Daniel, not even with cake and pie. But I was wondering if you could recommend some passages about forgiveness."

"One of my favorite subjects." Daniel licked his fork, pushed it and his plate away, then drew his Bible forward.

"Dear Grandpa,

Happy Father's Day!

"Grandma, Mom and I took Gramps out for breakfast. Mom wanted to buy him a gift but she didn't know what, since she'd never celebrated a Father's Day before. When she asked Grandma, Grandma said he'd like anything she gave him because it would be his first Father's Day too. So after the breakfast Mom took him to the riding stables and they rented horses and went out riding for the afternoon. Mom hates riding but she knows Gramps misses it. They had a great time and Gramps got sunburned and Mom got 'saddle sore.'

"I was thinking about my dad all day, wishing he was here. I'm sure you do too. I wonder what kinds of gifts he would've liked. I know he loved the Yankees so maybe I could've gone to a ballgame with him. Or maybe the three of us could've gone fishing (I saw the fishing gear in the back of your shop, and it was pretty smelly, so I know you like to go.).

"Anyway, here's a little piece of video that I shot of my dad, you know, before Tamara and Greg and all that crap. He was teaching me how to tie knots. Said it was a skill that could come in handy someday. He was a patient teacher. I would've learned a lot from him, if there'd been time.
"Hope you had a nice Father's Day. Did you have to work?"

"Love, Henry"

------------------------------------------------------------

When she arrived home from her father's house, Belle tackled her housework. She really ought to be studying, but that mound of laundry was threatening to avalanche and she hadn't a clean bowl or spoon in the entire apartment. She rolled up her sleeves, clicked on the radio and dove into the dishes. She'd been in a strange mood all day; a little manual labor would pull her out of it.

Station WSB was playing parent-themed songs tonight, of course: "Isn't She Lovely," "Golden Slumbers," "Put It There." Then a quiet, melancholy tune came on, and Belle turned the faucet off to listen. "I put my hand in my father's glove," the singer is reminiscing about a winter's day in her early childhood. "Mirror, mirror, where's the crystal palace?/But I can only see myself/Skating round the truth who I am/But I know, Dad, the ice is getting thin/When you gonna make up your mind?/When you gonna love you as much as I do?"

Belle sat down, listening. It was time to make up her mind. She reached for the phone. She started to dial Spencer's office, then reminded herself that today was Sunday as well as a holiday; not even Spencer would be at work. For just a second she thought she would have to wait—but no. She was done waiting. And she was paying Spencer enough that she'd earned the privilege of calling him at home. She dug up her dusty old phone book, found the number, and dialed. He wasn't long in answering: no doubt he'd checked the caller ID and realized his most expensive client was on the line. He picked up on the third ring. "Good afternoon, Ms. French."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Spencer. I won't keep you long; I'm sure you're enjoying your Sunday, despite the rain."

"I have been, yes. I went out to the marina and did a little work on my yacht before the storm hit."

"Very nice. Mr. Spencer, I called to inform you that I'm withdrawing my petition for divorce. I'd like you to inform the court, first thing tomorrow."

"Withdraw," he repeated. "A complete withdrawal or another postponement?"

"Withdraw," she insisted. "There will be no divorce."

"Ms. French, may I remind you—"

"No, you may not. Withdraw the petition first thing tomorrow morning, Mr. Spencer. And then send me a copy of the withdrawal request." Before he could protest further, she added, "Thank you. Goodbye." And she hung up, squealing and dropping back onto her couch, her feet kicking in the air. After a moment of celebration, she phoned her father.

"Did you forget something, petal? I think you might've left your sweater in the kitchen—"

"Maybe I did forget something, Dad. But I'm remembering it now. I love Rumple. I have for thirty years. That love survived imprisonment, amnesia, and a whole lot of interference from people who meant well, as well as from a slew of vicious enemies. And in the end, it even survived the horrible things we did to each other, and the kind and loving things we didn't do for each other."

Moe sounded confused. "Belle?"

"I'm telling you, Dad, I'm listening to my heart, and my heart says this love is true and it's indestructible. Not even magic can break it. I don't know, but someday we're going to end that
curse on the town line, and then I'm going to run to him and we'll be together again, because that's
what's supposed to be. I know what you think of him, but it's not your decision to make. It was
mine, a long time ago, when I vowed to go with him forever, and I'm going to honor it, and with all
my heart I'm going to thank the Fates for giving me this love."

"What brought this on? Honey, maybe you need some rest. You've been work—"

"No, Dad. I won't argue with you. This is how it's going to be. I'll see you next Sunday. Good
night, Dad."

Her hands were shaking as she set the phone down on the coffee table. Her hands were shaking,
but that boulder that had been sitting on her chest the past year had fallen away.

------------------------------------------------------

"Dear Grandpa,

"Hi! Grandma bought a computer! It's so she could start planning the college prep classes that she'll
teach if the city council votes to allow the college and career center to be built. Emma said she was
being premature, but Grandma said she was casting her bread upon the waters. Clarisse and Grace
came over to Grandma's and we played around with the College Board website, and I came out
with a list of colleges I'd like to study at. Emma was happy to see I had University of Maine,
Northeast and Boston U on my list, but my number one is NYU. What better city for a budding
reporter to live in, huh?

"Here's a pic of me and Clarisse and Grace with Grandma. Before you ask, NO, NEITHER ONE
OF THEM IS MY GIRLFRIEND. I'm still too young for that (and too poor! You know how much
a dinner date costs these days? Regina and Emma give me allowances but they make me put half
of it in my college fund. Which I guess is the right thing, but still.)

"Love, Henry"

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"Dear Henry,

"I'm glad to hear you're preparing for college. I did a little checking and I know NYU is quite
expensive, especially for out-of-state tuition, and living in New York City can be costly. I'm
sure Regina will be able to assist you financially, but I would like to contribute too. I've been
in communication with Mr. Dove, who manages my finances in Storybrooke, and if it's all
right with you and your mothers, I've authorized him to write a check each semester to pay
your room and board at whichever university you choose. Please, tell your mothers I ask to
be allowed to do this in the place of your father. If he were alive, I'm sure he would be
punching the sky with his fist in victory as his son goes off to college, the first in our family's
history to attend school at all. He would do everything possible to assist you. I'd like to do
this in his memory.

"I know you'll do well in college, Henry. Enjoy your time there.

"Love, your grandpa"

The opportunity to help Bae's son get his start in life should have pleased Rumple. He'd never
been able to do much financially for Bae, couldn't afford a tutor for him and there were no
public schools in those days, had taught him to read with bartered books that were missing
pages and had taught him to write with a stick in the dirt. And now look: Bae's son would
attend university, and Rumple would contribute toward his success. It should have made an
old man happy, but it didn't, not much, because it wasn't much. Not compared to what he could be doing.

He picked up one of the golf pencils that the library had set for patrons to use, and on a scrap of paper he wrote out the first line of the spell that would open the Hat. Then he stuck it in his pocket and walked home in the snow, because it was still a long time until Christmas, and because he was a selfish bastard who still harbored hopes of reclaiming his marriage.

"Man, Grandpa! You're the BEST!

"And I promise I won't goof off too much at NYU!

Love and THANKS,

Henry"

For all practical purposes, he was no closer to NYU now than he was a year ago, but the Fates hadn't chosen Henry to be called the Truest Believer for nothing. That was his role in life, just as his mom was the savior, and he took it seriously: his job was to get other people to believe too, so they could perform their roles. As Henry reread his grandfather's message, he smiled a smug little smile. People were starting to come around: his moms were collaborating, and not just in decisions concerning his upbringing; Blue was working side-by-side with Regina and Tink; and now Rumple, in his financial contribution to Henry's future, seemed to be demonstrating confidence that the curse would be broken.

Henry grabbed a marker, got up from his desk and climbed up on his bed so he could reach the ceiling. Some weeks ago, he'd tacked a road map there so he could look at it as he fell asleep. He'd already marked on it the approximate spot where he figured Storybrooke lay, and he'd encircled New York City. Now he drew a circle around Portland. That would be his first stop, once the curse was broken. He imagined himself standing at his grandfather's door, suitcase in hand, an "NYU or Bust" sticker plastered to its side. And seeing Henry standing there, tall and bursting with confidence, ready to start his life, Rumple would surely feel energized about the future too. Hope, after all, was a contagious thing.

Belle was unusually quiet as she entered Archie's office for her weekly appointment—quiet in her body as well as her voice, Archie noticed. She'd left her stenopads behind; she was through with them. He gave her a moment to settle on the couch before he surmised, "You've made a final decision."

She nodded. "You know I've been at war with myself about this divorce." She forced herself to say it aloud: "About me divorcing Rumple. I've come to a realization: whether we're living in the same house, the same town, or hundreds of miles apart, he's my husband and I'm his wife. It's what was meant to be, and it's what I want to be."

"Asking for a divorce—that came from a place of jealousy and fear. That was the same place that Rumple was acting from when he did all those awful things. When I understood that, through the writings you had me do, and when I got past those feelings, I could see what I really wanted and what I should have done. So I'm doing it, at last: I called Spencer and withdrew my petition for divorce. I'm waiting for the miracle that I know will come when we're both ready for it."

"That's the Belle I know and admire," Hopper said softly. He opened his notepad.
She set a staying hand on his pen. "No. No session today. There's someone else I need to talk to." When he frowned slightly, she pointed to the laptop on his desk. "I need to talk to Rumple."

Archie followed her line of sight to the laptop, but then returned his gaze to her, studying her closely. "Yes. I'll arrange it."

"Now," she suggested.

"It'll have to be Tuesday night, 6 o'clock. He has to call me from a friend's computer. He doesn't have one of his own. Unless you want to send him an email? I can give you the address."

She thought it over, then shook her head. "I need to see him. Hear his voice. I need to see his eyes as we talk it all out."

"Tuesday night, then."

She gnawed her lip. "You said he doesn't have a computer. What else doesn't he have, Archie?"

"I can't—he specifically asked me not to say anything to anyone about... his economic situation. You can ask him for yourself, but I don't think he'll be willing to discuss it."

"All right then." Belle stood and gathered her tote bag. "I'll be back Tuesday night."

A/N. The song quoted above is Tori Amos' "Winter."
As soon as Belle had gone, Archie hurried to his laptop and dashed off an email. If Rumple were given some lead time, he could work through the emotions that Belle's request (demand?) would most likely stir; it was seldom a wise move to put a patient in a position where a spur-of-the-moment response would be required.

"From: archiehopper

"To: mrgoldantiquities

"RE: your next session

"Dear Mr. Gold,

"Belle has asked to talk to you during our Skype session on Tuesday. I think it would be good for both of you to speak, if only for a few minutes, but I won't permit it if you are not receptive to the idea. If you're not ready for this, I can delay it. I won't do anything you're not comfortable with.

"Archie"

Even as he clicked "send," Archie realized that without a home computer, Gold might not receive the message before Tuesday, but he had to try. He hadn't exaggerated when he'd complimented Gold on the progress they'd made in their sessions, but to speak face-to-face to Belle might be something Gold didn't feel strong enough for yet.

Rumple had assumed his weekly visit to the library would be brief, just a quick check of his email; he had a meeting with the Portland Coalition for the Homeless this afternoon, and he still needed to pick up some groceries. Those two days off he got from his job each week were always packed with activity. But then, he hadn't counted on this.

With the clock ticking on his computer session, he sat staring at the screen, at one sentence in one message in particular: Belle has asked to talk to you. Stunned, it took him several minutes to feel anything, and then he felt everything at once—anxiousness, anger, excitement, hope. He had to cut through the roiling emotions before he could think clearly. Although he told himself he needed to think carefully before making a decision, he already knew what he would do. There were many things he didn't want her to know, but there was one thing that he needed to hear her say. It was the only thing that mattered.

"Yes," he wrote. Then he clicked "send."

She'd spent two hours preparing for this, trying on most of the clothes in her closet, styling and restyling her hair, applying her makeup (then scrubbing her face to start all over again), selecting and deselecting jewelry. All the fuss wasn't really for him—he'd told her time and again that she was just as beautiful in sweatpants and sneakers as in a Valentino and Jimmy Choos. The fuss was for her; the more put-together she appeared on the outside, the more put-together she would feel on
the inside. She'd been rehearsing what she would say to him, as well, but none of the phrases felt right in her mouth.

She sat now in Archie's office chair, at his desk, staring at the monitor as Windows went to work. After handing her a cup of chamomile, Archie had excused himself, explaining he would be next door at the diner if she wanted to talk to him afterward. He gave her arm a little comforting pat and, leaving his key with her, closed the door behind him.

She sipped the tea and watched the Windows icons fly, and when the computer had finished loading, she opened Skype and clicked on "Gold" in the contacts. And then she waited.

He had gotten his hair trimmed, had shaved, and had put on the clothes he'd worn to impress the bank. To Harry's "Got a date?" quip, he'd merely frowned, annoyed at the interruption of his thoughts as he silently rehearsed what he would say to Belle. As he caught the bus to the rectory, he had an entire speech prepared—when he stepped off the bus and approached the rectory, he realized he'd forgotten every word.

Daniel quirked an eyebrow, just for a second, as he opened the door and welcomed his guest in, but he didn't ask. "Mrs. Earhart has joined the fray and it appears victory in the dessert wars is imminent," he announced. "Pineapple upside-down cake awaits when you've finished your session. Jasmine or Darjeeling tonight?"

Rumple barely heard the question, but his voice on autopilot replied, "Jasmine, please."

Daniel patted Rumple's arm as he passed by toward the kitchen. And then there was nothing left but to limp into the office—his ankle was aching tonight—seat himself at the desk and watch Windows load up. He glanced down at the open Bible beneath the desk lamp; the message Daniel had left for him tonight was "There is no fear in love."

"You never give up, do you, Father?" Rumple murmured as he reached for the mouse. A bubbly tone was ringing even as he opened the software. She asked to speak to me, he reminded himself. Surely that had to a sign of something good to come—unless she wanted to inform him she intended to remarry. He folded his hands in his lap as he waited for her image to emerge.

And suddenly he wasn't nervous any more.

And suddenly she wasn't nervous any more. "Rumple." It came out as a sigh of relief.

"Sweetheart." He couldn't help it: he reached out to the monitor to touch her cheek.

"Are you all right?" She peered at him anxiously. "You look like you've lost weight."

"No, well, maybe a couple of pounds—I'm fine; I—and you? You look like you haven't been sleeping—" Then he clamped his mouth shut because that remark could be taken as an insult.

She didn't take it that way, though. "I'm okay. I may not be getting as much sleep as I should. I've been pretty busy. The library, and I'm taking classes—I'm working on a bachelor's degree online."

"Belle, that's wonderful. You'll be the first of us to go to college. I'm happy for you."
"It'll take ages—I only just started, and I hope to get a master's in library science so I can really make something of the library. We're adding a career and college center to it, and new computers, and I'd like to someday have a little art gallery on the second floor—" she clamped her mouth shut because she was rambling, but she'd just fallen into the conversation as if they were old friends catching up on each other's news, not an estranged—

"What you're doing is important, Belle. You're bringing real change to a town that's never had any. Opportunities for kids, and for the poor."

"Everyone's been pitching in, even Regina. She even worked with Mary Margaret to get the city council to fund this project. And the kids—Henry and Grace and their friends—oh, Rumple, you should've seen them, like a little army of salesmen, going door to door—But you must think I'm silly, chattering like a chipmunk. . . ."

"On the contrary. I'm enjoying hearing your voice, and all your plans. You've always fascinated me, Belle, the way you can see right through the fog to what needs to be done, and you just jump in and do it."

"My mother was like that. When the ogres came, you never would have guessed she was a duchess; she put on a borrowed housedress and went out into the streets, tending the wounded right alongside the healers. I wish you could have met her."

"I do too, but I expect I have, through you." He hesitated to ask; no matter how she answered, he'd have mixed feelings, but . . . . "Are you happy, then?"

She could hear the unspoken without me. "No. I'm busy, I have work that fulfills me, and friends, but—no."

"Maybe you're just pushing yourself too hard, not taking the time to celebrate your accomplishments."

"No." She drew in a breath of bravery. "It's what I did to you." The admission tumbled out: "It was judgmental and unfair and—I was acting like a child, a spoiled-rotten, petulant little brat who—I used your dagger on you, Rumple! I swore I never would, and I did—twice! Of all people, I knew what that would do to you, I'd seen it, and yet I enslaved you, I didn't even give you a chance to explain. There I was, accusing you of keeping secrets from me, of being too cowardly to tell me the truth, when—"

"I was, Belle; I was too cowardly to tell you the truth. And I've regretted it every minute since you made me realize what I'd done—"

"No, I should have understood! I was your wife, pledged to stand beside you, in sickness and in health, and I knew what you'd been through. How unreasonable and insensitive I was to expect you to come back after a year in her cage and just open your soul to me, as if she'd done no more than pick your pocket, not lock you up and starve you and torture you and kill your son!" She buried her face in her hands. "Oh, Rumple, I'm so ashamed!"

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, don't cry." He tried to make his voice do what he wished his arms could have, provide her reassurance and comfort. "You did what you needed to, to stop me from killing Hook, and doing worse. With all that power I'd stolen, who knows what kind of a tyrant I might have become?" He chuckled humorlessly. "Look at how villainous I was with the Dark One's power. Can you imagine what I would have become, with ten times the
magic in my veins? You did what you had to do, Belle. What was best for everyone, including Henry, including you, and including me. It took me a long time, but I did finally come to see that. Driving me out of Storybrooke broke the chain for me. I'm free of the dagger and free of the curse."

"You're forgiving me?"

"Yes, and I'm asking you to forgive me. Not all of the blame for what I did can be placed on Zelena, or my father, or Milah or Hook or Cora or Zoso. Some of what I did, I could have stopped myself from doing, and the rest—even if I can lay the blame at someone else's door, I was the one doing wrong. I apologize for all the worry and anguish I caused you, and especially, especially for making you feel second-best. I never, never meant for that happen. I didn't see the distinction between magic and my family. To me, having one meant having the other, keeping you safe and giving you the life you were born to have. So I'm asking you, will you forgive me?"

"Of course I do." She let the chair take all her weight now, relaxing for the first time. "I've been feeling just awful, after I realized what I'd done to you."

"I've felt terrible too. You were my wife, but I was treating you like a spy for the other side. As if you were sent in to rob me of my magic. I'm truly sorry, Belle."

She released a deep, shuddering sigh. "I feel suddenly tired. Like I've just run twenty miles in my high heels."

He chuckled sincerely now. "I feel hungry."

"Let's make a deal: I'll get some sleep if you get something to eat."

"And can we talk again? I don't have a computer; I'm using a friend's. I come here once a week to talk to Archie. But my friend won't mind if I take a little extra time and call you after my therapy session, about seven o'clock. Unless you have to work or study?"

"I'll be here. I need this."

"So do I."

"Rumple," she asked delicately, "is there something else you need? I sent you away without any money, or your car, or anything. You've never used your ATM card."

"It doesn't work here. This isn't just the land without magic; it's the land without magical debit cards."

She giggled, grateful at his attempt to cheer her up.

"But I'm okay. I don't have as much as I used to, but I find I have enough. And friends—I'm not much of a Dark One any more, so I've been able to make some good friends here. If I'd remained in Storybrooke, I'd still be the Crocodile. Magic and immortality don't provide much motivation to change." He paused for a moment. "Belle, I still love you. That's the one thing that will never change."

"I still love you too."
"Good night, sweetheart. Try to get some rest."

"I'll see you next Tuesday, Rumple."

How easy it had been, she thought as she closed Archie's laptop. She'd expected to stutter over her own apologies, sputter in defensiveness as she explained why she'd done what she'd done. She'd expected to lose her voice to tears as she learned how much she'd hurt him—or worse, that she hadn't hurt him at all; that he'd walked away from Storybrooke and right into a new life, one where he didn't need her. One that provided him a new love, perhaps. But none of that had happened. They'd talked so easily, like old friends, like family. That conversation, she realized, was Forgiveness' gift to them.

How easy it had been, he thought as he caught the bus home. He'd expected to trip over his own tongue, awkward in the presence of the woman he still loved and felt so helpless to impress. He'd worried that his insecurities and that little streak of anger that remained from her rejection of him would compel him to lie to her, or at least, pretend to be more than he was. But none of that had happened. From the first hello, their conversation had rippled like the water in a quiet pond. That conversation, he realized, was True Love's gift to them.

She walked over to Granny's, where she found Archie at the counter, chatting with Ruby over a shared slice of German chocolate cake. She returned his office key.

"Is everything okay, Belle?" Ruby asked.

"Fine. Just sleepy, that's all. Thanks for the use of your computer, Archie."

"Any time." He studied the key in his palm. "Next week, for example?"

She shook her head, and his face fell. But then she explained, "I have a laptop at home. I'll get Henry to install Skype for me. Good night, you two."

They beamed at her. "Good night, Belle."

A cup of jasmine tea and a slice of pineapple upside-down cake were waiting at his place at Daniel's kitchen table. He was smiling as he walked in, and Daniel returned the smile. "Went well, I presume?"

He nodded as he forked up a bite of cake.

"Good, good. Now, how do you feel about cookies? I think next week, I'll mention to Mrs. Blaskey how wonderful her chocolate chips are."

His fork hovered in mid-air. "I never say no to a chocolate chip cookie." The bite of cake vanished, and after a sip of tea, he added, "Daniel, did I ever say thank you for letting me use your computer?"

The priest rubbed his chin. "Come to think of it, yeah, last week. And the week before."

"Good, 'cause I'm really looking forward to those cookies."
Ariel leaned on her arms, the lower half of her body dangling in the water, the upper half shivering and pebbling and panting. She'd lost her beautiful seashell comb in her first dive, and her mascara raccooned her green eyes, the whites now cracked with red. She glared up the slope to the grass, where Belle, fully clothed, her hair in a tidy French bun and her make-up flawless, stood with folded arms.

"Did you get it?"

"Why'd you have to have such tiny fingers?" Ariel griped. "Or better yet, why couldn't you have exchanged wedding cars instead of rings?"

"I take that to mean you haven't found it yet."

"No, I haven't found it yet," Ariel mimicked. "And I'm cold and tired and wet."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize—I thought, since you lived in the sea, you liked being, you know, cold and wet." Belle squeezed her lips into a small mouth of sympathy.

"The key word there is lived, past tense. I haven't been in the ocean in two years now." She flopped onto her back, spreading her arms out, inviting the summer sun to take her problems away (with the malicious glance up the bank, she mentally added: all of my problems, including the friend variety). "When you said, 'How about a swim' I thought you meant you and me, like in the city pool, in our bikinis, with blankets and sunglasses and cute lifeguards in tall chairs watching us. Not me, alone, diving repeatedly into the Pacific in search of your discards."

"Ariel, that's my wedding ring you're talking about, and our chipped cup." Belle glanced meaningfully at her feet (her warm, dry feet, still shod in her Derek Lam booties), where chunks of white china were cradled in a towel. Belle hadn't been perturbed to discover that the cup had broken to bits (that was her fault, after all); she would get Regina to reassemble them magically. As to whether Belle would confess to Rumple what she'd done—yes, of course, in a spirit of openness and honesty. Just not yet. Their reconciliation was still in pieces like the cup, and needed the magic of True Love to glue them back together. "And anyway, this is just Mills Lake. The Pacific is about three thousand miles that way." She pointed backwards over her shoulder. "And a whole lot warmer."

Ariel snarled in a lip-curl that reminded Belle just a little of Rumple.

"The sooner you go back in, the sooner you'll find my ring, and the sooner we can go to lunch. My treat," Belle prodded, then offered the sure-fire carrot: "I'll take you to La Tandoor."

With a groan Ariel hauled herself to her feet, wiggling her lovely toes in the mud; she'd have to repaint her toenails tonight. She had a date with Eric, of course, and she'd be wearing open-toed sandals because he did so admire her long legs and trim ankles. She walked back into the lake until the water was deep enough to dive in. If she still had a tail, she'd flip it at her not-so-good friend, but since she'd traded that for the long legs Eric admired, a flip of her long hair had to suffice.

"And a chilled bottle of Riesling," Belle waved.

Twenty minutes later, Ariel dragged herself out of the water for the last time. Whether she'd found
the stupid ring or not, definitely the last time. Her arms ached and she was pretty sure she'd caught a cold. "Describe the ring to me again?"

Belle's head jerked back. "How many wedding rings did you find down there?"

"Fine. I'm too tired to play anyway." She slipped in the mud as she tried to negotiate the slope. Belle caught her under the elbows before she could fall and straightened her, then pulled her up the slope (years of helping Dove or Rumple carry bicycles and canoes in the shop had given Belle considerable upper-body strength).

With another lip curl, Ariel reached into the little pouch Belle had tied to the mermaid's wrist for just this purpose. When she flattened her hand under Belle's nose, a pair of linked white gold rings, one of them bearing a diamond, sat in her palm. Belle released a pent-up breath as she delicately lifted the rings from Ariel's palm and inspected them for damage. Finding none, she slid the rings onto the fourth finger of her left hand. Then she squeezed her left hand in her right. She felt fully dressed now. "Thank you, Ariel."

Watching the relief wash over her good friend's face, Ariel smiled. "You're welcome." Then she sneezed.

---------------------------------------------

Harry lifted the lid from the pot bubbling on the stove and inhaled the fragrance. "Mmm, beef stew. With just a splash of Zinfandel to the broth."

"Mellows it out," Rumple said over his shoulder as he tossed a salad. "Supper will be ready in fifteen. Set the table." He walked over to the refrigerator to set the salad inside to chill.

Harry dug into the silverware drawer, but he was watching Rumple, trying to figure something out. Then he snapped his fingers. "Got it." He pointed at Rumple's right leg. "You're not using your cane, and you're hardly limping."

Rumple shrugged. "It wasn't bothering me this morning. Set the table."

"I mowed the lawn today, after work. Ms. Banker called."

"You mean, Ms. Orwell?"

"She may be an Orwell, but she'll always be a Banker to me," Harry declared, setting out spoons and knives on the table. "The realtor's bringing prospective buyers by in the morning."

"Oh." Rumple's tone flattened. But this was the deal he'd asked for, and he didn't mind the challenge of tackling repairs on another house. It was just that Sam would expect to see this one, when he came back for Thanksgiving. But such was life: everything must change. He glanced down at his wedding ring and smiled. Everything.

Harry was setting out the bowls and salad plates now. "Listen, Rumple, I've been thinking, when it's time to move, I might not go with you."

Rumple's smile became a knowing one. "Thinking of getting married, are you?"

"Now, let's not rush things. I'll move in and see how that goes first."

"I think Sue Ellen will have other ideas."
"I'm not the marrying kind, I told her that."

"Kinds can change." Rumple glanced down at his ring again. "Thank the gods."

Emma's ponytail bounced as she thudded down the rickety stairs of Gold's basement. When she came to a stop at the landing, she thrust her hands onto her hips and waited with a smirk for the experimenters' attention to swing around to her.

Finally conversation died and two nuns, a teenager and a sorceress lifted their heads from vials, Bunsen burners, microscopes and stenopads. They all appeared a bit miffed at the passive interruption.

Regina said dryly, "What? No pizza, Ms. Swan?"

"I brought something better." Emma strutted toward the lab table. "And I expect applause." She spun on the heel of her boot and shouted up the stairs, "Okay, you can come down now."

"Well, I really could use a hand with these books," a voice huffed. A pair of high heels appeared on the first step, then carefully moved down to the second step, then the third, and by the fourth the researchers could see a stack of books walking itself down.

"Belle!" Henry yipped, rushing forward to take the top half of the stacks. "You came to help us!"

"Yeah." Belle's arms shook under the remaining books—those ancient, wood-covered tomes of magic carried a lot of weight—and Emma and Regina relieved her of the rest so she could catch her breath. One of the nuns conjured a second table to accommodate the collection.

"You want to tell us why, or will you let the sheriff take all the credit?" Regina queried.

Belle waved a dismissive hand. "I've been rethinking a lot of things lately. Now. All of these books contain mention of spells for portals. I thought we'd go through them and look for commonalities, then we'll know the building blocks of the spell we need to develop."

The nuns shared a glance and a nod. "That sounds logical."

"Well," Emma sighed. "All right then. I'll order the pizza." As she reached for her phone, the researchers applauded.

"From: samsawyer

"To: mrgoldantiquities

"Re: tooth

"Hi Rumple! Mom is helping me spell but I'm typing this my self. I miss you. Do you miss me? My front tooth fell out the one at the top and now I have a big hole I can whistle through it. I got a dollar from the tooth fairy. I put it in the piggy bank. But I wanted to spend it but I didn't. Here's a picture of me with my tooth gone and my dollar.

"We went to the zoo! There was seals and eagles and wolves and crocodiles and pandas and apes and I don't remember the others. I told the zoo keeper I want to be a vet. She said I could but I have to go to school a long time because vets have to go to college. To learn about medicines."
"We will come and see you in five months. That's a long time. But don't worry we won't forget.

"your friend, Sam"

"If we get the funding—and the latest poll shows the citizens are in favor of it, and by Regina's count, we've got half the council on our side. If we get the funding, the city will call for bids; that'll take a month; we could start construction by fall and be in business by March."

Her hair—she was wearing it a few inches shorter now, and the summer sun had given it red highlights—swished against her shoulders as she moved her head around; she was always so animated when she talked about the future. He wanted to reach out and brush her hair back, but he would just have to imagine it, as he lay in his bed tonight and watched the lights from passing cars dance on the ceiling. His hands in her hair. She, standing on tiptoe, her head tilted back. Her mouth pressed against his. He wondered if she still wore those mile-high heels. He wondered if she sometimes lay in her bed and stared at the ceiling and wondered about him.

"Marco will be making the furniture for us. He's the only furniture maker in town, so we won't have to take bids there. He's planning to hire students from the woodworking class at the high school. Oh!" Belle brought her hand to her mouth. "I'm doing it again, aren't I? Chattering like a chipmunk. I guess, to tell the truth, I'm a little nervous."

He shook his head. "I want to hear all about it. Storybrooke's changing; that's remarkable, considering the time lock with the first curse. The town is changing and you're the one making it change. The Nolans and Regina may be the nominal leaders, but you're leading from within. Grassroots leadership, they call it here."

"Thank you. I guess it's the duke's daughter coming out in me. But what about you, Rumple? We've barely talked about you. You said last week you're living in Portland and cooking in a restaurant. Tell me more."

"Nothing to tell." His mouth traveled to those words automatically so that he didn't have to confess. "I have a house—" Then he abruptly grunted in frustration. This was cowardly and weak behavior, not the kind of conduct a man owed his wife. He'd discussed this Archie: he'd sworn to Archie he'd never lie to Belle again, or twist the truth. "No. Belle, I can't give you the wrong impression. It's not a restaurant I work in; it's a substance abuse treatment center. And I don't own a house. I'm living in a three-bedroom fixer-upper in the forgotten part of the city. I just—I promise I'll tell you everything eventually, but not yet, okay? I'm not up to talking about it yet."

"Oh." Her face fell. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

Of course he did, but he'd come to realize over the past year that the true answer to that question wasn't money or magic; it was her and Bae. But this was only the third time they'd talked; he didn't want to scare her off by rushing things. Not that either of them could do anything to change their situation, anyway. "I'm all right. My life is different here, but I'm getting by. And getting along—I have some good friends." He chuckled a little. "And even though I make a lot less now, I'm actually doing something, not just fixing broken junk and dusting shelves. I'm just a cook in a treatment center, but I'm helping people. I never would
have thought that my cooking would actually do anyone but me any good. I first learned to cook after Milah left. I had to get creative then; you know, no refrigeration, no grocery store to shop in, mostly we just ate what we could grow or catch. In Storybrooke I learned to cook gourmet just to have something to occupy my time when I wasn't in the shop. I bring everything I learned about cooking from the peasant days and the Storybrooke days to my job. Phoenix House doesn't have much money, so I have to be inventive, but I know how. And it matters. The meals I cook—most of these guys haven't had a nutritious meal in years. Drugs and alcohol kill a person's appetite. But I feed them well and I watch them gain weight, and their skin color improves, and their hair starts to grow back, and their eyes clear up. It matters. What I do matters."

He paused. He was so tempted to tell her about his work on the house and his activism with the Coalition, but that would open questions he wasn't ready to answer yet.

"I'm glad," she said softly. "I remember what a difference your cooking made to me, when I came out of the asylum."

He made a small sound of incredulity. "All those years of having more money than I could spend, and more magic than I could expend, and I did nothing for anyone but me. Turns out when I finally start offering something to people, it's plain, ordinary cooking."

"It's you you're offering, Rumple."

"I guess you're right."

"I'm grateful to have this chance to get to know you all over again."

"So am I, to get to know you better. I'm afraid I was too self-absorbed before, to see all of you. You're special, Belle."

"You are too. I love you, Rumple."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

Grace stood trembling at the podium beside Belle and Gavin Glover. They had just completed an hour-long presentation in which they've proposed a 25% increase in the library's budget to allow for technology upgrades and the college and career center. Each councilperson had in front of him/her a package presenting the details of the full proposal. Belle had submitted these packages two weeks ago so the council would have plenty of time to study them and prepare questions.

And questions there were, aplenty, everything from inquiries as to which brand of tablets the library would buy (Belle referred them to Appendix L, a comparison chart) to a challenge to Belle's qualifications to lead these changes. "After all, you aren't a licensed librarian, are you?"

Belle thought the question rather provocative, considering it had come from an architect whose "degree" was no more existent that hers. But she smiled patiently. "Actually, librarians are not 'licensed,' but rather 'degreed.' In this world, a Master's in Library Science is required. I happen to be pursuing a degree and expect to add 'MLS' to my business card in 2021."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Regina purred, "it's never been this council's practice or its role to get involved in the hiring of city staff. But if you insist on going there—"

"We don't," barked one of the councilmen. "Kindly shut your pie hole, Councilman Fitch."
Regina finished, "Ms. French has been our librarian for three years now and I can assure you, her performance reviews have been more than satisfactory. Now, if we can dispense of that unrelated topic and return to our agenda?"

"I like what I see here," Councilman Thatcher (who happened to be Grace's uncle) said. "I want to thank our teens for their civil spirit and hard work on this project, and thanks to Ms. French and the library board for their vision and leadership here. I call for a vote."

"Is there a second?" Regina asked.

"Second."

"Then the vote is called. Councilpersons, please press the 'y' button if you vote 'yes' on the question of increasing the library's budget by 25% for FY2016 to fund these additional projects. Press 'n' to vote 'no.' Please vote now."

This was just a formality, everyone knew: the council had met behind closed doors with Belle and Glover, and meanwhile Grace's team had divvied up the eleven councilpeople according to prior acquaintanceship and had lobbied them, steadily and thoroughly, over the past month.

They already had a pretty good idea they'd won.

The electronic tally board confirmed it: six 'yes' votes, four 'no' votes and one abstention.

"Congratulations, Ms. French, Mr. Glover and Ms. Hatter. The new budget will go into effect on October 1." Regina tapped her gavel. "The agenda being concluded, I call for adjournment."

"Second."

"Meeting adjourned." Regina was nearly bowled over as Henry came running at her in a bear hug. She shouted over the top of his head and the applause from the onlookers, "Victory party at Granny's!"

"Madame Mayor." Regina's administrative assistant rapped her knuckles lightly on the closed office door. Inside, Regina and her red pen were passing judgment on the city budget. Even though she'd stood squarely behind the library increase, that didn't mean she was ready to throw open the locked doors to the city coffers, as some of the other departments seemed to think, overly encouraged now by Belle's success ($150,000 for the Parks Department to build a statue of Poseidon on the banks of Mills Lake? Really? Didn't they remember whose father Poseidon was?)

She chuckled as she redlined it. "The Mighty Red Pen strikes again." Then her assistant's forceful "ahem" interrupted the mayor's fun. "What is it, Geraldine?"

Geri was quite used to the mayor's gruffness—but no less intimidated by it. "Ma'am, the sheriff—"

Before she could finish her announcement, Emma pushed in, a Dave's bag in one hand and a file folder in the other. "Lunch and Henry," she said briskly, depositing her deliveries onto the marble conference table. As Emma started unpacking the bag—fish and chips for herself, a salad for Regina—Geri took note of what still needed to be provided. "I'll bring a cup of black coffee, Ms. Mills, and a root beer for the sheriff."

"Thank you." Regina gracefully seated herself at the head of the table, smoothing her skirt beneath her.

Emma flopped into a roller chair to the mayor's left and simultaneously popped a chip into her mouth and slid the folder across the table. "Mom had Henry and some other kids take an online pre-SAT. Those are his scores."

"What's a 'pre-SAT?" Regina drizzled dressing on the salad as she flipped the folder open.

"The SAT is a college admissions exam. Kids in high school usually practice for it by taking a pre-test." She held up her hand in a stop gesture. "I know: Henry won't start high school til the fall. So this is a pre-pre-SAT. Just to give the kids an idea what to expect."

"Mathematics, Critical Reading, Writing. These are just numbers."

"Long story short," Emma managed around a chip. "Henry's test scores prove he's college material. Maybe even Ivy League."

"We knew that."

"Yeah, but now the colleges will too." Emma retrieved the folder. "I'm going to tack this up in Gold's lab so we see it every day and work twice as hard to break this curse."

"And those boys who want to attend seminary school, have they taken this test?"

Puzzled at first, Emma doctored her fish with tartar sauce as she tried to figure out what Regina meant. Then it clicked. "Ah ha! So the nuns will have incentive too. Good idea. We'll post those scores right next to Father Benedict's birth certificate."

"Morning, Ms. Lucy." Rumple approached the reference desk.
"Morning, Mr. O'Neal. Any news from Sam and Jill? We miss them around here."

"Sam starts first grade next week. His school has a good after-school program, so he's enjoying it. One of Jill's articles for the Coalition was reprinted in the Washington Post."

"So they're doing great, then," the librarian beamed.

"They are. They're planning to visit at Thanksgiving."

"That'll be wonderful."

"Say, Ms. Lucy, I've been reading the Bible, and I wondered, are there other books like it, books that other religions consider holy?"

"A great many. Come this way, Mr. O'Neal."

Five minutes later, Rumple had the Bhagavat-Gita in his hands and a list of five other holy books in his pocket. Eventually, he'd read them all. It would be some heavy reading, but it would occupy his mind and teach him a great deal about the people of this world, who looked and sounded and moved like the inhabitants of the other realms he'd visited, but who often thought much differently. Without magic weaving in and out of their worlds, they were, in many ways, freer, but in other ways, more uncertain. These holy books, Daniel had said, offered a degree of certainty in a confused world. As Rumple stood before the 200's, a sense of quiet washed over him. These books, he thought, represented humanity as it really was: stripped bare of ego, ambition; the individual, alone, reaching out, asking to be noticed, begging to be understood and accepted despite being understood. These books were mankind at his most hopeful. If he read them, Rumple might understand.

Geri tapped on the mayor's closed door, then slid inside, carefully closing the door behind her. She coughed politely and the mayor glanced up from the one-hundred-page city budget. In her right hand, Ms. Mills clicked her ballpoint pen open and closed, open and closed, in a rapid rhythm that let Geri know this was not the time for an interruption. Geri reached behind her to grab the door knob and sneak back out, but it was too late: Regina's concentration was already interrupted.

"Yes?"

And the day could only get worse. "Uh, Madame Mayor, you have visitors. They're in your appointment book, but I didn't schedule them." Geri added hastily, "I can send them away."

"Who is it?"

Geri gulped. "Nuns." She fully expected that five-pound budget to come sailing at her head, but Regina—Regina smiled. And tossed her pen onto the desk and rose and smoothed her skirt. And smiled. Not her "I'm going to chew them up and spit them out before they realized they've been swallowed" smile either. A genuine, "glad to hear it" smile. "I made the appointment, Geraldine. Show them in."

"Oooookaaaay. . . ." Geri backed out the door.

"Oh, and order us some lunch. Salads and soup. Nothing heavy." Regina moved to the marble table. "We have some magic to work on this afternoon."

"Oh."
Returning to her desk, Geri shook her head and muttered to herself. Regina lunching with nuns! What was next? Robin Hood being hired as CFO?

---------------------------------------------

"You look kinda sad," Belle observed. "Is it something I can help with?"

His heart took a leap at the question. He didn't know where he stood with her: did she think of him as a husband or as a fond acquaintance? This was only their fourth conversation since the second banishment; it was too soon to ask; they needed to get reacquainted—or, more accurately, acquainted to the people they had become. But the fact that she noticed his emotions and wanted to help surely was a positive sign.

In his therapy session earlier, he'd expressed to Archie his regret for having kept secrets from his wife. If they gave each other a second chance, he promised, he would do his best to open up to her. No time like the present, Archie had replied. Take it a little at a time right now, and if their relationship grew, sharing would not be such a struggle later on.

All right then.

"Belle, there's something I ought—something I want to tell you." And he really did want to. Later, when he thought it over, he wondered if his desire to share his story with her came from a year of therapy sessions, in which he'd learned bit by bit to tell Archie the full truth, or if it came from the change he perceived in her: a quiet, nonjudgmental maturity. She'd always seen the good in people, but the Belle he'd been speaking to this past month could, he thought, see the bad too—and understand it. Perhaps even, to some extent, sympathize, in realization of the source of the conduct.

"Until last October, I was living on the streets. I slept under a bridge, washed in a park restroom, stole food, picked pockets."

Her eyes burned and her throat tightened, but Belle forced her body to remain relaxed. If she gave way to emotion, he would backpedal, trivialize his experiences to reduce the sting. Not only would this opportunity for building trust be lost, but likely, it would never come again. In his neverending drive to protect his family, he would never share his pain with them if he knew it caused them pain. So she swallowed, breathed deeply, and kept her eyes fixed on his.

"I tried to get a job, but—" he chuckled, "they thought I was an illegal alien because I couldn't prove my identity. They were right, of course. Brought to this world by a curse. Over this past year I've learned just how many holes there were in that curse. I tried to use my ATM card; it didn't work in this world. I sold my cufflinks and my pocket watch."

Her eyes darted toward his left hand; he raised it so she could see. "No, sweetheart, I didn't pawn my ring."

She wondered if she should someday tell him what she had done with her ring... and their cup. Maybe, since those precious talismans had been restored, it would be wiser not to reveal her moment of temporary stupidity.

"When my money ran out, I picked pockets and stole food from people's plates. But then I met some people, other homeless people, and," he shrugged in surprise, "they helped me."
"I'm glad. I thank them for it."

"I don't know why they accepted me. At least, not at the beginning. I was ill-tempered and prideful. I was... Mr. Gold. Just temporarily removed from my money and my magic. I acted like I'd get it all back any day now and then I'd be on top again. But they tolerated me anyway, taught me how to survive on the streets, made sure I was fed and not alone. That was the most important part: not being alone. I came to learn that even Rumplestiltskin needs other people."

That did it: tears came despite her best efforts to be strong.

Her tears—pity? Guilt?—frustrated him. "I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad. Please, Belle, listen to what I'm saying: this isn't a sad story. I'm okay. These people looked out for me, and I started looking out for them too. It was what I needed, even more than the food and shelter, and I finally realized that. We met a priest who helped us, and we found a place to stay and jobs. And listen! One of us won a journalism award and got a great job in Washington, writing for the National Coalition for the Homeless. She and her son—"

"Wait a minute. The Hillman Award?"

"Yeah, how did you hear about the Hillman?"

Belle narrowed her eyes. "Henry. That sneaky grandson of ours." Her word choice was deliberate, and they shared a quick grin in her acknowledgement that they had a grandson together. "Henry had me reading Jill's blog." Then her eyes widened. "You're Robert!"

"I go by Robert O'Neal here. If I called myself Rumplestiltskin here they'd lock me up. Or else assume I was a wannabe rock star."

She forced herself to chuckle at his joke; he deserved to be rewarded for his forthrightness. But as soon as they hung up for the night, she knew she'd be curling up on her couch and sobbing into her pillows, alternately in hurt for him and in anger at herself. She needed to feel these feelings, she realized; need to take on the blame before she could accept his forgiveness and let the guilt go. But she wouldn't let him see what she was feeling, not yet; it would hurt him and he would clam up again.

"I've read the entire blog. I know about the deal with the bank and all the work you put into the house." She finally allowed just a little sympathy to leak through—though she knew that was not what he wanted; he wanted her to feel proud of him for the friendships he'd formed. "Oh, Rumple, you were the Robert who became a grandfather to Sam, weren't you?"

"I'm very fond of him, yes."

"Jill wrote that you made a difference in his life. You and Roland and Father Brian were the best male role models he ever had, she said."

Rumple blushed. To shy away from the flattery, he corrected the facts. "Actually, the priest's name is Daniel and our roommate is Harry. The bank has the house up for sale now, but when they sell it, they'll move us into another fixer-upper. I don't think it'll be much longer that we'll continue this arrangement, though. The widow next door has her heart set on
Harry, and I've been able to put a little money aside so eventually I can get an apartment."

"You are okay," Belle surmised. "And you will be okay."

"I really am. So if I looked sad before, it's just that I miss Sam. But I wouldn't have it any other way, believe me. He's in a great school and his mom is doing important work. I have no doubt there will be plenty of other positive role models in his life." He sighed. "The house is too quiet without him, too clean without his muddy shoes and his toys strewn about. The time he lived here, all my memories of Bae came flooding back. Sam helped me to remember that there was a lot more to my life than the misery I'd been hanging onto."

"Well," she replied, "I'll dedicate my story time tomorrow to Sam, as a thank-you. I know from the blog he loves all kinds of animals."

"Even crocodiles." Rumple smiled wryly.

"Dear Rumple,

"My school has got a slide that looks like an elephant!

"Your friend, Sam (and mom says hi)"

"Good afternoon," Rumple nodded pleasantly to the strangers traipsing through his kitchen. He was standing at the stove, cooking his breakfast in his bare feet, but at least his hair was combed and his chin freshly shaved. He rubbed his palms against his jeans, then offered a handshake to the three visitors, two women and a man, all in their twenties. One of the women, he'd met previously; she was the realtor the bank had engaged to sell the house. She'd been selling on the east side for several years now, so she knew a good deal when she saw it, and Harry and Rumple were it. As she'd walked around the house for the first time, inspecting, she complimented their handiwork and the "homeyness" with which they kept the house. She'd been selling on the east side for several years now, so she knew a good deal when she saw it, and Harry and Rumple were it. As she'd walked around the house for the first time, inspecting, she complimented their handiwork and the "homeyness" with which they kept the house. She told them straight out that Ms. Orwell had informed her of their deal, and though she'd been skeptical at first, she thought otherwise now.

Standing in the Sawyers' bedroom, she gestured to the empty closets. "Where are they? I understood that a woman and a child lived here too."

Harry explained, telling her the truth.

"Oh. Too bad. I mean, good for them, but it's always a selling point, with houses on this part of town, that families feel safe enough to live here." She closed the closet. "Well, I'm selling it as a family-friendly property, anyway."

And that was just what she was telling today's prospective buyers. "There's an elementary school just two blocks away, a middle school four blocks north, churches and a convenience store nearby."

"And a park with a public pool, and a movie theater, that way." Harry pointed south. He lifted three coffee mugs down from a cabinet. "Coffee, anyone?"

The female buyer blinked. "That's so nice of you. Thanks."
Rumple held a chair out for her, and Harry did the same for the realtor. The husband eyed them suspiciously.

Rumple opened the oven and the scent of cinnamon filled the room. He grabbed a potholder. "Fresh baked," he said, lifting out a tin of rolls. "Would you care for some?" He plated them as Harry set out three salad plates for the visitors.

"Oh, my," the woman crooned. "I must say—we've been looking at houses for four months now, and no one's ever offered us brunch before."

The husband scarfed down his roll as his wife and the realtor talked business. He nodded occasionally, but that was the extent of his participation in the conversation. His hand snaked out for another sweet roll.

"Well, I think we've seen enough," the wife said at last. She stood, and when her husband, still chewing, remained seated, she jabbed him with her elbow. "Leon, you're going to be late for work if we don't leave now."

Leon half-rose, but reached for another roll. He had one in each hand, so the realtor had to hold the front door open for him and his wife as they walked out.

"Thanks, fellas," the realtor called back over her shoulder.

Harry came back from the porch to find Rumple glaring at the sole remaining roll on the platter. "I made a dozen. That was going to be our breakfast this week."

Harry shrugged and plucked up the last roll. "We should send the bank our grocery bill."

"He had tiny handwriting," Emma grumbled. "I almost need a magnifying glass to read it." She straightened from the desk she'd been leaning her elbows on in a futile effort to bring her eyes closer to the legal pad filled with spidery little marks.

"Has, not had," Belle corrected with a snarl.

Emma ignored the comment but reddened a little at being chastised by the sweet-natured librarian. She swatted at a dust mote floating before her nose. "Hey, can't we open those windows, let some air and sunshine in here?" She pointed to the narrow windows near the ceiling of the pawnshop's workroom. "It'll be easier to read these files if we get some light in here."

Belle stubbornly shook her head. "I learned early on, when Rumple has a door or a window locked, there's a good reason for it. It's quite possible that sunlight or a breeze could interact unfavorably with a potion or a powder or a spell."

"Learned it early on, huh?" Emma threw her research partner a half-grin as she leaned back to ease the crick in her shoulders.

Belle tightened her chin defensively. "There might have been an incident involving an overzealous maid who was eager to impress her employer—and convince him that she wasn't the pampered duchess he assumed she was. She might have, uhm, commanded the Dark Castle—which he'd ordered to obey her commands—to open the door to what she thought was a broom closet, and in fact, there was a broom there, and when she started to sweep with it, it suddenly took off into the air. She had to hang on for dear life as the enchanted broom flung her from the kitchen to the pantry to the great hall, and would have dragged her up the winding stairs to the east tower, if her
screams hadn't alerted her master. He advised her to let go; he would catch her. She was afraid, but he'd rescued her from a fall before, so she trusted him, and into his arms she fell. Later she wondered why he hadn't just used his magic to bring the broom down to earth, but much later, when she understood the feelings she had developed for him and suspected he felt the same, she figured out why he'd chosen to catch her instead." Belle's eyes twinkled. "After that, she found all sorts of excuses to slip and fall in his presence. He thought he'd hired a klutz, but by then, it was too late."

"That's a sweet story," Emma said quietly. And as she returned her attention to Gold's microscopic handwriting, a thought flashed in her head: if things had gone a little differently, Belle could have been her mother-in-law.

-----------------------------------------------

"I think we've gotten all the use we can out of EMDR," Archie said.

Rumple nodded. "I can talk about traumas without breaking out in a sweat, or suffering nightmares afterward. The therapy's done me good."

"I have an exercise I'd like you to do next. A journal. Each night before you go to bed, I want you to spend some time writing a memory. The first memory that comes to mind; doesn't matter if it's trivial. Describe it in as much detail as you can, as factually and honestly as you can. I've used this technique with many patients, to gain an understanding of what the subconscious mind is holding onto, and perhaps, what we need to do about it."

Rumple thought about that for a moment. A year ago, he would have resisted this exercise; he would have pronounced it a waste of time (but in actuality, he would have rejected it because he dreaded facing the past). His therapy sessions, though, had given him confidence in Archie's methods, and his burgeoning friendship with Belle had eased his mind. If he never made it back to Storybrooke—if he never held her again, never stroked her cheek or pressed her head against his chest—still, he could be at a sort of peace in the knowledge that their love and respect for each other were strong enough to carry them through their disagreements. He ate and slept well these days, and the music he listened to as he worked and the books he read during his breaks taught him of this world, and his efforts with the Portland Coalition connected him to this world's people.

So on his next grocery shopping excursion, Rumple bought a wire-bound notebook and a box of pens. Each morning before he went to bed—for he was still working a night shift, and usually went to bed at 5 o'clock—he took his notebook onto his lap and wrote.

He relived the first time he held Bae—as he flashed back to that night, he could hear the nightjars singing, could smell the fire in the hearth burning and the kettle of stew bubbling, could feel the rough swaddling cloth rubbing against his even rougher hands and the slight weight of his newborn son in his arms. He could see the pink of Bae's gums and the flecks of gold in his brown eyes. And as the baby reached up to squeeze his papa's nose, Rumplestiltskin stopped the memory there, where they had been happy, because it was real and true, though it had lasted only a moment, and he needed to remember it and be thankful for it.

He relived his first meeting with Milah: she and her younger sisters and their mother had stopped at his booth on Market Day. The other women were focused on the thread and the cloth he was selling, but Milah was interested in him. Few women had ever looked at him the
way she did that day. He had no illusions about his attractiveness: he was short, skinny, prematurely gray; he was very good at his trade but grossly underpaid; he owned a small flock of sheep and a good, but elderly, dog, and owned neither horse nor wagon; the hut he lived in was water-tight but too small for a family. But she looked at him from the corner of her bright eyes, she smiled at him from behind her luxurious hair, and when her family moved on to another booth, she lingered, and in a characteristically bold move, she said, "My name is Milah," and in an uncharacteristically bold move, he said, "My name is Rumplestiltskin. Will you go to the Harvest Festival with me?" Such anticipation then as they began their courtship; such hope as they began their marriage. How she glowed in her wedding dress, a ring of wildflowers in her hair. How she clasped her hands in joy as he led her to the cottage he'd bought for her. How she answered his kiss with her own. How she yielded to his touch and fitted her body to his as if they were made for each other. How in the morning she brushed the hair from his eyes and talked of the children they would have someday. How happy they had been, both of them—and he stopped the memory there, because that moment was real and true, though it had only lasted a moment, and he needed to remember it and be thankful for it.

He relived the day after the day after his father had taken him to the spinsters. The first day had been filled with tears and long hours standing in the open door, watching the empty road, in hope, but the night dissolved the hope into fear. But the next morning, Fauna had greeted him with a warm hug and a warm bath and warm, clean clothes; and Flora had filled his belly with warm bread and filled his mind with his first lessons in something other than con games. He could smell the fresh air as she knelt with him in her garden; he could feel the cool, moist soil as he pressed his fingers into the mysterious earth; he could hear her voice, always a note of song beneath the words, as she taught him the names of the plants. Such a good day, full of learning, full of warmth. For the first time, full. And he stopped the memory there, because that moment was real and true, though it had lasted only a moment, and he needed to remember it and be thankful—be thankful, yes, to Malcolm, because if not for the man's selfishness, Rumplestiltskin would have never known the warmth of these women.

He relived the first (though, alas, hardly the last) time Belle broke one of his treasures. She'd come to him in tears, every bit as fearful of his reaction as when she'd dropped the teacup, because this time she knew the value of the object she'd broken, how many years and how many deals it had taken to acquire the Vase of Venus. It held no magical properties, but it was ancient and beautiful and much sought after by art collectors, so he had given it pride of place on a pedestal in the Great Hall, and there it sat for exactly nine days before she slid in a puddle of mop water and went crashing into the pedestal, and the Vase of Venus toppled and —she dissolved into tears before she could finish the confession. His first reaction to the news was to grasp her elbows—not to shake her in anger, but to steady her trembling—and to ask if she was injured. Only bruised, she said, and raised her skirt a little to show him the black-and-blue blotches on her shins. He knelt at her feet, sent healing magic into her skin, dried her damp shoes with magic, and when he stood again, he found her staring at him in amazement. She'd expected to be punished. It was in that moment he realized something had changed in him—not that he'd fallen in love with her, for he hadn't yet, but that for the moment, she'd caused him to forget he was the Dark One. For that moment, he'd been just a man, kneeling at a woman's feet to offer aid. And he stopped the memory there, because that moment was real and true, though it had lasted only a moment, and he needed to remember it and be thankful for it.
In the summer days that passed as he waited for life to change again, he collected many more moments, and as he wrote in his journal these representations of the harm that had been done to him and the harm he'd done, he infused them with an additional meaning—not a replacement for the original meaning, because he needed to hold himself accountable for his past, but an addition, a remembrance of brief moments of kindness and affection that others had shown to him and that he'd shown to them. He needed to hold himself accountable for these moments of love too.

Throughout the summer, their therapy sessions centered around the journal. Archie had him read one aloud at each session, then they discussed why he'd found that memory important enough to retain. As the weeks progressed, Rumple grew less animated, more comfortable in his own skin. After the last journal entry, Archie asked, "Did you notice something all those memories had in common, Mr. Gold? They were all pleasant."

"So they were," he answered, surprised.

He was learning, apparently, how to make himself happy.
"Dear Rumple,

"My school has a slide that looks like an elephant! Here is a drawing I made.

"I will see you in three months.

"Your friend, Sam (mom says hi)"

Astrid's tongue poked out of the corner of her mouth and a big drop of sweat slid down from her forehead into her ear as she concentrated. He'd explained to her several times how a boomerang worked: concentration was no more required than brute force. But she seemed to believe she had to put as much effort into her throws as if she were on the pitcher's mound in the bottom of the ninth and two outs and the score tied. Henry gave up trying to persuade her to accept the physics involved in throwing a boomerang and instead left her to her superstitions. Walking up to the town line like a bowler approaching the alley, she let the toy fly. It seemed to prefer joining its brothers in no-toys' land over joining the researchers in victory.

The women silently piled back into the van.

What they didn't realize was that Henry had been snapping photos with his phone as they put Formula 51 to the test. It wasn't the potion or the boomerangs he photographed: it was the women, because Henry was pretty sure he'd been witnessing history in the making. Just before she tossed the first 'rang, Astrid had called for a prayer, and as Mother Superior led it, aloud, the bumbling nun had reached out a hand to another nun, who reached out to another, who reached out to Emma, who, closing her eyes respectfully, reached out and connected to Regina, who then took Blue's hand. It had to be history—either that or the set-up to a lame joke: four nuns, the savior and the Evil Queen walk up to the town line... .

Seriously, though, history. Henry emailed the photo, captionless—because no words could express what this photo represented—to his grandpa, whose sole, startled comment was "Wow."

So they hadn't broken the magical barrier yet. But they had broken a psychological one.

"Rumple, my lad," Daniel clasped a hand over his guest's shoulder as he invited the man to enter the rectory. "How goes it?"

"It goes," Rumple allowed.

"You look a bit down." Daniel led him into the office.

"Yeah, maybe. It's too quiet at the house, with Sam and Jill gone and Harry next door all the time. I don't know: I'd expect to prefer the silence. Before I married, I lived alone for—more years than I can count. It's strange how quickly you can become accustomed to having other people around." He seated himself at the desk and clicked the computer on.

"I may have a solution for you." Daniel leaned against the door jamb as he spoke. "The Coalition wants to replicate your success. We have two homeless families that we'd like to get
into houses."

"As squatters?"

Daniel nodded. "There's an abandoned house on Dawn Avenue and another on Houdini Street. We'd like you to teach them how to do the clean-up and repairs, how to ingrain themselves into the neighborhood, how to deal with the banks—you know, pretty much everything you did."

A corner of Rumple's mouth twitched into a smile. "A seminar in squatting."

"A seminar in successful squatting," Daniel amended. "I'll drive you and them over to the properties on your next day off."

"You're jumping the gun there, padre. I didn't say I'd do it."

Daniel's dark eyes twinkled. "One of the families has three kids and another due in September."

Rumple groaned. "All right. Friday at 10 a.m."

"Thanks, Rumple." Daniel straightened. "See you after your session. New York style cheesecake this time."

Rumple's stomach growled in answer and he blushed; the priest chuckled as he walked away.

----------------------------------------------------

From Sue Ellen Halifax's porch swing, Harry lifted his hand in a brief greeting as Rumple crossed the lawn and dragged himself into their house—or, Rumple reminded himself, Barton Bank's house; with the parade of lookiloos the realtor had been bringing in, the house would most likely be sold soon. Harry looked the perfect picture of suburban gentry watching the moon rise from his porch: a golf shirt and kakis (no one would know they'd been bought from a thrift shop), a tall glass of lemonade in his hand, one leg crossed over the other, his arm draped casually across the back of the swing—almost but not quite touching Sue Ellen's shoulders. "Won't be long now," Rumple mumbled. Not that he wasn't happy for his friend's impending change in marital status, but he'd just had a very long and dirty day and his ankle and his back ached like the dickens and he wished someone would bring him a glass of lemonade.

As he passed into the living room, Rumple eyed the couch longingly, and the stack of library books waiting on the coffee table within arm's reach. He dearly would have loved to flop onto his back on that couch, stretch out an arm and grab up a book, prop the book on his chest, and as he slowly turned its pages, his eyes drooping, conjure a tall, heavily iced Long Island tea with a bendable straw. But he was filthy from having assisted Father Daniel and the Parnassuses in de-trashing the Houdini Street house, which had, until the cops drove them out yesterday, been occupied by druggies and rats. He hadn't planned to get involved in the manual labor—after spending three hours lecturing to the Coalition's two chosen families about everything from how to get the utilities turned on and get mail delivery started to how to de-lice the carpets, he was already tired. He'd agreed to drive over to Houdini Street with the family, just for a quick look to determine what work would need to be done before the house would be habitable, but when he saw Mrs. Parnassus' sagging belly he knew what that
meant: the baby had dropped and would join its three sisters sometime within the month. And then when the three sisters—ages two, five and six—smiled up at him, obeying their mother's command to "say hello to Mr. O'Neal and 'thank you for helping us'" in their meek little voices, he said, "Wait," and jumped out of the church van and trotted into the rectory's garage for brooms, scrub brushes, pails, bleach, mops, shovels, garbage bags, a vacuum cleaner and trash cans. Immediately he regretted the trotting—his ankle shot lightning bolts up his calf for the rest of the day—but once they had arrived at Houdini Street, he had no regrets about bringing along the supplies, and in fact he sent Daniel to the hardware store for work gloves, hammers, nails and roach and rat traps. The Parnassuses had been staying in the Portland Family Shelter—they'd been there six weeks and expected to remain another week, until the house was fit to occupy—but when the girls started playing noisily in the sandbox in the backyard and Mrs. P., massaging her belly, leaned tiredly in the back door to watch them, Rumple knew this family needed to move in as soon as possible.

And so he'd distributed the tools and the cleaning supplies (and Daniel enlisted two Coalition members to pitch in), and they'd worked until suppertime, and then Daniel called the nuns who operated the church thrift shop to persuade them to re-open just long enough for Mr. P. and Daniel to fetch back linens, towels, a box of dishes, a double bed and a pair of camping cots. By sunset, the adults stood in the living room, counting the bags of trash they'd collected and admiring the state of cleanliness to which they'd brought the two-bedroom house. "The linoleum will need to be replaced in the bathroom," Rumple dictated, and Mr. P. wrote it down. "Don't plug that refrigerator in—the cord's frayed. I'll replace it on my next day off. You'll have to limit yourselves to nonperishables till then. The window pane in the kitchen will need to be replaced; I'll get my roommate to do that. He's a better glazier than I am. You'll need more furniture and a lawn mower, and trim back those bushes around the kids' bedroom window. The faster you can get this house looking lived-in, the easier it will be for passersby to forget this place was a drug hangout."

As the family settled down on the floor to pizza provided by the Coalition, Rumple lowered himself slowly to the back seat of the church van. His ankle wouldn't support him if he got down on the floor with everyone else. Daniel joined him outside, sitting in the driver's seat. They munched on pizza as they watched the moon rise. "A good day's work," Daniel judged. "More than I expected to do," Rumple admitted. "I'm going to be limping at work tomorrow."

"Face it, Robert: you're a nice guy." And Daniel smirked as Rumple choked on a pepperoni.

Now, standing in his shower, his hair full of shampoo and a soapy loofah dangling from his hand, Rumple leaned against the stall. Niceness, he was learning, had a price just like magic, and it was just as habit-forming. Then he thought of those little girls and the baby to come, and he calculated that he'd been paid for his labor.

Just one thing, though: as he'd dropped Rumple off at the Hayes Street house, Daniel had grinned wickedly. "One family down, one to go. Next week we get our second family settled."

As they chatted idly about their week—Belle proud of the flood of new customers that, in all the publicity over the budget proposal, had registered for library cards and started dropping in with their children to browse the collection; and Rumple pleased with his progress in the house repairs—
Belle's eyes kept drifting to the bit of his chest exposed by the "V" in his shirt, and to his forearms and biceps, as revealed by the short sleeves. When she didn't seem to hear a question he'd asked, he had to call out her name.

"Oh!" She perked up. "Sorry, Rumple, I, ah—" She cleared her throat, then tossed her head defensively. "I was caught up in admiring the view."

"The view?" He glanced over his shoulder at the messy shelves of books behind him. Belle hated mess, especially when it came to the storage of books.

"Not that view." She chewed her lower lip. "You."

"Me."

She nodded. "You're toned—"

"Hauling couches and installing sinks will do that."

"And tanned—"

"Repairing driveways, mowing lawns—"

"And—well, in the Forest you always wore head-to-toe leather and in Storybrooke it was suit jackets, even in August—well, jeans and a t-shirt really emphasize the workout you've been getting."

"Oh!" He looked down at his chest, then his arms. Maybe she had a point. He didn't look too shabby, for a 350-year-old. He blushed, but he grinned at the same time. His wife desired him!

Suddenly all memory of how tired he'd been after his work on the abandoned houses this summer was wiped away. What he did remember, with perfect clarity, was how expressive of her affections his bride had been in those short weeks of the marriage.

She raised her eyes to his, allowing him to see her yearning. "I want to be with you!" she blurted. Those were the sweetest words he'd heard in a year. "I want to be with you too."

"We're working like mad on breaking the curse," she sighed, "but we keep losing boomerangs."

He wasn't sure what that meant, but right now, his mind was occupied with something Archie had said: what if the Apprentice would forgive him?

She leaned forward to pick up a notebook from her coffee table. "Rumple, this is draft number 51. Would you please listen to it and tell me where we're off?" She read aloud the rather lengthy and complicated formula Regina and Blue had composed.

He dragged his thoughts from the future to listen intently, shaking his head every so often and making notes. "No, that won't work," he murmured once, then: "No, they've got that backwards." When she had finished her recitation, he corrected the errors, but counseled, "Even with these fixes, I don't think it'll break the curse. There's a missing element—I don't know what. And some of the substitutions they're using for ingredients that this realm doesn't have, they won't pack the punch a curse-breaker needs."

"Are you saying it can't be done?"

"I don't know. Believe me, Belle, I want this curse broken just as much as anyone else, but I just
don't have the answer. You're inventing something that's never been invented, and under unstable conditions. This land was never meant for magic." He lowered his head. "I was wrong to bring it here. If I hadn't, Bae would be with us now."

"Don't," she insisted. "You did what you thought you needed to, to find him."

"I could have left it to our bail bondswoman. That's her family's super-power: finding people. She could have found him, I could've gone to him, and instead of offering to fix our problems with magic, I would have said what I'd always intended to say, that I was sorry and I loved him."

"I miss him too, but getting mired in blame won't solve our current problem."

"No, of course not. I'll think about this," he tapped the page on which he'd made his notes. "And see if I can figure something out."

When his hazy face appeared in the laptop's monitor, Archie was stabbing repeatedly at the nosepiece of his glasses. His head was bent over a file folder and a frown creased his forehead.

"Dr. Hopper?"

Archie looked up and his forehead smoothed out. He set the file folder aside. "Mr. Gold."

The words came out with a breath. "Pardon me. I was just—" He lowered his head again, deep in thought, and Rumple sat quietly, allowing him time to collect himself. "I received some disturbing news. " He licked his lips.

"Belle?"

"No, no, she's fine. She's probably hovering over her laptop as we speak."

That was as usual. The three of them had developed a pattern for Tuesday nights: Rumple and Archie would hold a one-hour therapy session, then they’d hang up and Rumple would call Belle—if she didn't get impatient and call him first.

"Henry's fine too," Archie added quickly. "Everyone here's fine. It's a child, a boy, seven years old. A colleague of mine with CPS—that's Child—"

"I know what CPS is," Rumple broke in. Until she'd been hired by the NCH, Jill had lived in constant dread that Child Protective Services would take Sam away.

"Rumple, do you remember how it was for Henry before the curse broke?"

Archie very seldom used Rumple's first name. Wherever this conversation was going, it was to a dark place and Archie felt the need to have Rumple on his side from the start of the journey. "I remember. Henry was withdrawn, depressed, friendless. Regina had him in therapy with you, from the age of five or six."

"No one was supposed to know about that."

"But everyone did."

"He'd gone to several of the adults in his life—teachers, Cub Scout leaders; I understand he
even came to you at one point."

Rumple nodded. "He was scared to pieces, but he thought that because I was the only person in town who wasn't afraid of Regina, I'd tell him the truth." The corner of his mouth twitched. "I only wish I could have. He came to me to ask if I knew who his birth mother was. He seemed aware—though I don't suppose Regina told him—that I was the one who'd arranged for his adoption. My own grandson, and I didn't know it. Just one of the innocent victims of my curse."

"I was treating him for what I thought were delusions." Archie sounded just as bitter as Rumple had. "All the time, not knowing I was the one living under a delusion. How he was able to hang on to his sense of reality, after five years of weekly therapy—it's the biggest regret of my life."

"It wasn't your fault. Only Regina was protected from the curse. It was her fault—and mine, for not thinking what the curse would do to the children."

Archie looked up at him with glimmering eyes. "We can never make it right, what we did, and didn't do, for Henry. But we're awake now, Rumplestiltskin. We're awake now, and there's another, and we can do something about it before it's too late."

Rumple stiffened in Daniel's leather chair. "I'm listening."

"You can help him," Archie said urgently. "Only you. Only you can understand what's in his mind. Only you can protect him from his memories. Only you can tell him the truth. You're out there; I'm not. I can't come to him. You're just sixty miles away from him."

"What are you asking me to do?"

"He's called Tommy, but that's not his real name. Penny—that's my colleague; Penny Hall—she'd placed him with a family called the Hoffmans, after his mother died." Archie shot Rumple a piercing look, as if he expected some sort of reaction, but then the psychiatrist blinked and the shadow of worry returned to his face. "He did well at first, but then he started lying, and when the other children caught him in his lies, he'd start fights with them, even the bigger ones. He lied to his foster parents, his teachers, and he threw tantrums when the adults tried to correct him. He started running away. He ran away nine times over the course of a year. The Hoffmans couldn't handle him. Penny rehoused him; he ran away from that family too. He's now in a group home, and in therapy. A seven-year-old. He's being treated for delusions."

The skin around Rumple's mouth pulled tight. "Where did he come from, Dr. Hopper?"

"A place no one in Maine believes exists, except in fairy tales."

"He's one of ours."

"Yes."

"Whose?" Rumple demanded. "Who are his parents?"

"His father is unknown. His mother died. Killed by a powerful sorcerer."
"Who, Dr. Hopper?"

"He was brought to this world by his aunt. She decided it would be best for him to grow up outside Storybrooke, out of reach of magic. Where he'd never learn his mother was a witch."

Rumple's teeth flashed. "Zelena!"

Archie nodded.

Grasping the arms of the chair, Rumple pushed himself to his feet. His cane clattered to the floor. One hand flat on the desk to hold him steady, he bent to retrieve the cane as it rolled under the desk. His searching hand grasped empty air. His helplessness wouldn't trap him: he shoved the chair away and leaned on his hands as he rounded the desk.

"Mr. Gold! Where are you going?"

"You must be out of your mind!" Rumple shook a finger at the monitor. "You want me to help the son of the woman who killed my son!"

"Yes!" Archie shouted back. "I'm asking you to save him, because only you can! And because saving him will save you!"

Rumple limped to the door. The toe of his shoe caught on the threshold and he tripped; he would have fallen if he hadn't managed to clutch the doorknob. With a sound that was half-growl, half-sob, he realized he'd never make it home without his cane, so, still grasping the doorknob, he lowered himself to his knees, then he crawled across the floor. When he came to the desk he flattened himself on the laminate flooring and thrust his hand under the desk. His fingers wrapped around the cane and security washed over him as he yanked it out. Panting, he lay there on the cool floor, waiting for his strength to return.

"This is as much for you as for him!" Hopper was still shouting. "What would Henry say, if he knew you could have given the truth to a child who's being told he's crazy because he believes his mother had magical powers?"

His breath returning, Rumple pushed himself to his knees, his cane balancing him.

"What would Baelfire say, if he knew you'd been given a chance to rescue an abandoned child, a child orphaned by magic, and you walked away from it?"

"Don't! Don't you dare try to use Bae against me! He died to save Storybrooke!"

"You don't have to die to save this child!" Archie panted, then he lowered his voice to calm himself. "The only thing that has to die is your rage. Let it die, Rumple, and save this child, and save yourself."

"You don't know what you're asking!"

"Believe me, I do. I've relived it all with you, everything she did to you, and I've been with you every step of the way. You've made excellent progress in your therapy, but you can do so much more for yourself if you'll help this child. She hurt him too!"
Rumple stopped his efforts to clamber to his feet.

Although he couldn't see his patient, Archie could hear the sudden silence. He knew he'd gotten through. "He was abandoned long before she came to Storybrooke. He was tended by her flying monkeys, while she cavorted from realm to realm, collecting power for her grand scheme."

Rumple squirmed in guilt. The description struck close to home. To distract himself from the discomfort, he struggled to his feet.

"His first word wasn't 'mama'; it was 'Magwa,' the name of the monkey who raised him. His mother darted in and out of his life, while a monkey changed his diaper, fed him his bottle, taught him to walk. The schools consider him 'slow,' because his language skills are weak, but that's because his mother was barely around to teach him how to talk. Regina was the one who taught him how to eat with a fork."

Leaning on the cane, Rumple came around the desk and dropped into the chair again. His mind caught on the problem Archie was describing, he released his hold on his anger—for the moment. "Can he read?"

"At a kindergarten level."

"What does he know of magic?"

"That it exists, that some people have it, but others don't. When he first came to Augusta, the Hoffmans caught him repeatedly staring intently at the palm of his hand. He claimed he was trying to make fire, like his mother did. One of his lies, which he's absolutely unshakable about, is that he's magical."

"Perhaps he is, and he just happens to live in a world without it."

"He needs help, Mr. Gold. From someone who believes him and understands."

Rumple waved a dismissive hand. "Not me. Let Regina; she's his family."

"She can't leave Storybrooke."

"She will. In December, if not before," he grunted. "I gave my word."

"Tommy needs help now. He's not even allowed to use his real name."

"How do you expect me to raise my torturer's child?"

"Not raise him. Mentor him. You have two days a week off work. Go to him then. The group home will allow you to take him out; Penny will arrange it. The couple who run the home don't have time for him. They're fostering four others. Take him to a ballgame, a park, a museum. Teach him. Read to him. In the course of time, he'll come to trust you and confide in you. What you did for Sam, do for Tommy."

"Don't compare him to Sam. Sam is special."

"So is Tommy. Think about it, Mr. Gold. What if he has the Talent? In a land without magic,
to have magical ability but be unable to express it, and not understand why? He's already angry and confused. The kids at school call him a freak. The kids in the group home are afraid of him."

Rumple lowered his head and shook it slowly. "Dangerous."

"Yes. Only you can convince him he's normal, just—in the wrong place."

His voice was softer now, but still he shook his head. "I can't."

There was a chime and Archie glanced over his shoulder. "That's my clock. It's seven."

"Did you tell her about this idea?" Rumple remembered that Belle had spent some time with Trajan after Regina had brought the boy from Oz. She had a tender spot for children and innocents; she would push him to accept Archie's proposal.

"No. I thought you should have the chance to make the decision on your own."

"Thank you for that, at least."

"I'm going to sign off now. See you next week."

Rumple nodded. Archie dropped out and immediately Skype bubbled again and in a moment Belle was smiling brightly at the monitor. "Hi, Rumple!"

"Hello, sweetheart." He deliberated for just a second, whether to tell her; but he wasn't ready yet. Besides, she was brimming over with news about the city council vote and her pride in Henry for his involvement and her gratitude toward the library board, the teens and Regina. He listened, and as he listened, he was infected by her absolute confidence that next year would be better than this one, and the year after, even better.

Daniel probably had something to do with the infection, too. The Scripture he'd left on the desk urged, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."
"It's ridiculous," he was muttering to himself as he sat down at computer 7A. "I don't even have a car. Augusta is sixty miles from here. What's with these people suddenly wanting me to do things, be things?"

As Rumple brought up his email, an ad popped up in the panel to the right of the Hotmail pane. "Let Greyhound send you on an adventure!"

He grunted. But he clicked on the ad anyway. Two more clicks and he learned that a bus left Portland twice a day and arrived in Augusta ninety minutes later. Round trip tickets were $24, with a 5% discount for travelers age 62 or older. He wondered how Greyhound would react if he told them he was 350.

A plate holding the largest cinnamon roll Belle had ever seen slid across the counter and came to a halt when it clinked into her mug of hot tea. The clink barely registered in her consciousness, however, and Ruby had to "ahem" loudly before Belle dragged her attention up from her book.

"I didn't order——"

Ruby refilled the mug. "I ordered it for you. On the house. You need to eat something. Besides, Granny's experimenting with some recipes she picked up online. This week it's Texas Cuisine: oversized everything. Come back for supper: the special is chicken-fried steak and fried green tomatoes."

"Antacid for dessert, I hope."

"Seriously, I wanted to say thanks." Ruby leaned on the counter. "You inspired me."

"I did?" Belle sliced into the cinnamon roll with her knife and fork. She lifted a slice of the roll to her nose and sniffed it, humming in enjoyment at the aroma, then she nibbled on the edge. "Tell Granny I give a thumbs up to Texas Cinnamon Rolls." She sipped her refreshed tea. "Now in what way did I inspire you?"

"This." Ruby tapped a lacquered nail against the textbook, Introduction to Astronomy. "Going back to school."

Actually, Belle had never attended school—she'd had private tutors during her formative years—but she didn't correct Ruby. "I just want to be a better librarian."

"Well, your example got me to thinking. I want to be a better person. I've started taking night classes at the high school so I can earn my GED." She drew herself up proudly.

"Ruby, that's wonderful!"

"Granny's so proud, she didn't even squawk about having to hire a new nighttime waitress." Ruby leaned forward confidentially. "And all that reading is doing wonders for my love life. Archie and I have so much to talk about that he forgets to be shy."
"Well," Belle blinked. "If more people knew about that side benefit, more would pursue an education. How soon will you graduate?"

"Two years," Ruby winced.

"I have a long way to go too. But it's the journey that counts."

"And that's just the start. Ashley is going to start classes in the fall. She wants to get a degree in child development so she can start a pre-school. Who knows? Storybrooke might have a whole bunch of college grads, thanks to you."

"Thank you, Ruby." Belle floated back to work on a cloud of happiness.

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Archie grinned at him through the tiny computer camera. "So did you decide yet?"

"I told you last week, the answer is no. Now, please, can we get on with my session?"

"Okay. You need more time to decide; that's fair." Archie didn't seem the least perturbed.
"Now this next exercise is sort of a role play. What I want you to do for your homework this week is to start a new journal, but this time, you'll pretend you're Belle."

"What?"

"You'll pretend you're Belle, and you're writing about all the major events of your life with Rumple, from the time you made your deal with him until the time you banished him."

"I'm Belle," he repeated flatly.

"You're writing from her point of view. Describe each event in as much detail as you can remember. Be honest—don't try to manipulate things to shift blame or protect egos."

"Belle doesn't manipulate."

"Exactly why you won't either, in this journal. There will be a lot of guesswork and assumption about why she made certain choices, but do the best you can to see her perspective."

"Ah." He was starting to understand the purpose of the assignment.

Archie raised a warning finger. "Remember, I said, 'From her point of view.' When you write about yourself, it should be as she saw you at that moment—and at no time was that as a monster."

Rumple closed his eyes briefly. "This is going to hurt. You know that, don't you?"

"Every major event, Mr. Gold. Including the ones that made her happy."

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Freshly showered, neatly dressed, with just a hint of make-up to emphasize her eyelashes and heighten her cheek color, Belle sat down on her couch and adjusted her laptop on the coffee table. She's even spritzed on a little perfume; even though Rumple wouldn't be able to smell it, she
would, and it would give her confidence.

She wondered what kind of cologne he was using these days. She'd certainly like the opportunity to discover that answer for herself.

She turned on the computer. Thirty minutes left in his session with Archie. She picked up a paperback that her book club was reading and idly flipped through it. She didn't dare start to read, lest she become engrossed and lose track of time.

Twenty minutes left. She tossed the book aside and noodled on the Net. She checked the weather forecast. More heat and humidity coming. Fifteen minutes left. She jumped to Youtube and browsed some cute kitty videos. Five minutes. She smoothed her skirt, patted her hair. She warmed up Skype. One minute.

There was a knock at her door. Growling "Go away," she dialed Rumple's number. "It's just me, Ms. French," Dove called through the door. "Mr. G. sent me."

"Answer the door, Belle," advised a Scottish accent with a laugh. "I'll wait."

She opened the door and Dove, bearing a picnic basket, entered. "Please, continue with your conversation. Never mind me; I'll just set up a few things and let myself out." He lifted her laptop. "Would you hold this a moment?"

"What?" She scowled but she set the laptop on her knees. "Sorry, darling, bit of a distraction here," she apologized to the screen.

"My fault," Rumple grinned.

"His fault," Dove agreed, flipping a tablecloth into the air to shake out the wrinkles, then laying it on the coffee table. The tablecloth was patterned with red-and-white checks.

"A picnic." Rumple tilted his monitor so she could see he had a checked tablecloth too, and china plates filled with coleslaw, fried chicken and chocolate cake. When she glanced down, she saw Dove had spread out the same meal on her tablecloth.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Jo, for being crabby before. Rumple, this is wonderful! Thank you for thinking of it."

"It's kind of a consolation," he confessed. "I'm sorry, but I just haven't found an acceptable solution for the boundary curse. I'll keep trying, though."

She nodded. "Thank you, Rumple." She didn't dare to ask the question she burned to: If the curse were lifted, would he want to come back to her?

There was a pop on her side of the computer as Dove opened a bottle of wine and poured her a glass. A pop on Rumple's side answered. She smiled at the monitor: he was saluting her with a raised glass. "A toast."

She accepted a filled glass from Dove and saluted the monitor.

"To the future," Rumple proposed.

"To the future." They sipped, then she waved at Dove as he discreetly left. "Thanks, Jo! What's the occasion, darling?"
"Well, I was helping a family move yesterday and they didn't have a dining table yet, so we picnicked on the porch. It made me think of the picnics we had at Mills Lake." He took a plate onto his lap. "Dig in, sweetheart. Granny did the cooking on your side. Mine came from KFC."

He didn't explain what KFC was and she was too busy biting into a drumstick to ask. "Mmm. What a nice idea."

"My only regret," he dared to confess, "is that afterward, I can't lay my head in your lap and listen to you read, like the old days."

She understood the question implied in his comment. "I would have liked that too. Maybe someday?"

He relaxed, reassured that she wanted to be with him again. "Someday."

"Robert?"

Rumple rose up slowly from the oven over which he'd been bent, braising a chicken for today's lunch. He always fed the Phoenix House residents a hearty breakfast and a well-rounded lunch, then went lighter at supper so they could sleep more easily. Right now, the men were enjoying omelets, bacon and made-from-scratch cinnamon rolls to energize them for their morning therapy sessions. In fact, John, the executive director, was still licking frosting from the rolls off his fingers. "Good breakfast, as always."

"Thanks."

"I wanted to discuss an idea with you." John perched on the stool that Rumple often rested upon whenever his ankle bothered him. "Doc and I were going over the residents' charts, and we've seen a substantial improvement in everyone's blood pressure, glucose levels, even their dental health. A lot of that is due to you. Your meals. They're not only nutritious; they're flavorful, and that's got the men eating more."

"Thank you. I've been reading up on the dietary needs of men with substance abuse issues, and applying what I've learned."

"That's where we come in." John grinned. "Robert, how would you like to take a nutrition class at the Augusta Hospital? It would mean going up there one day a week for four months; we'll provide your bus fare, tuition, books, per diem. We'll hire a temp to cover for you here while you're in training."

He almost laughed. At age three hundred fifty, he was about to start school for the first time ever. "When do I start?"

John stood. "Let's do this, then. You start Monday." He clasped Rumple's shoulder. "One step at a time, Robert. We have plans for you, if you can make it through the hurdles. Plans that involve designing a training program for cooks at all the Phoenix Houses along the east coast. But first things first. Are you game?"

"I'm in."

It was only when he held the bus tickets in his hand that the tumblers in his mind clicked. Once a week, beginning on Monday, for four months he'd be traveling to Augusta.
Where Trajan lived.

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Henry took a step back to clear a path for Blue as she carried a banker's box full of handwritten notes to the book table in the corner of Gold's basement. "Remind me to teach you about flash drives," Emma muttered, shoving some books aside to make room for the box. One of the books she shoved landed on Sister Bernie's sandaled foot, and the sister stumbled as she grabbed at her foot to nurse it, and in stumbling, she fell against Regina, who fell into the lab equipment, knocking down a test tube rack, which Belle caught just in time before the vials went crashing to the dirt floor, but in that rescue, a strand of Belle's hair fell out of its scarf, scraped across the Bunsen burner and caught on fire. With a gasp, she patted at the flame, burning her hand; Regina slapped the hand away and conjured a waterball that she threw at Belle's hair, extinguishing the flame but soaking Belle's blouse. With a yelp, Belle stepped back and her high heel drove through Henry's sneaker, causing him to howl.

Standing back against the wall, Emma surveyed the damages with folded arms. "Anybody hurt?"

"Not seriously," Belle assured them. "Sorry, Henry."

"I'll be okay." But Henry was wincing and limping until his mother knelt, touched his shoe and sent healing magic into the toes.

"We need a larger basement," Emma surmised.

"Agreed. Perhaps we should relo—" But before Regina could finish her suggestion, Emma's hands were open, glowing and up in the air, and white magic rolled like an ocean wave toward the southern wall of the basement.

"What are you doing?" Regina squeaked.

"Just a little remodeling," Emma's magic splashed against the wall. "I'll expand it about ten fe—what?!" She spun a 360, her mouth gaping, as her companions made various noises of shock and dismay, for not only had the attacked wall vanished—so had the entire house. "What happened?"

"Where did the basement go?" Henry reached out to touch a wall that should be there but wasn't. The lab was still intact, but it now stood in a deep hole in the ground.

Blue looked up into the sky. "Where did the house go?"

Emma gulped. "Oops."

"Well?" Regina crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently. "Cute joke, Ms. Swan, but we have work to do, so bring it back."

"I don't think I can."

"All you have to do is reverse the spell," Blue advised. "Just remember the spell you cast and repeat it backwards."

"I, ah, can't... can't remember... ."

Belle's lip quivered. "Did you send it someplace? Or did you... erase it from existence?"

"I, ah. . . ."
Belle turned to Regina. "Can't you—?"

Regina and Blue both shook their heads. "It has to be the one who cast the spell."

Blue raised her hand in a stop sign. "Emma, don't try. If you're not sure what you're doing, don't try. Just... rest. Calm down. Collect your thoughts. You'll remember, eventually, and then you can reverse the spell. But—write it out first. Let us check your work, okay?"

Regina huffed, "Never mind." She waved her arms in frustrated magic, and in a puff of purple smoke the entire lab and its workers had been transported to her dining room, and her dining table had been transported to her study. "Let's get back to work." She relit the Bunsen burner.

"Oh well," Belle sighed. "We never did like that house anyway."

"Have you decided about Tommy yet?"

"I told you—"

"You need more time. I understand. On to your homework. Did you get it written this time?" Archie asked. His tone was gentle; he understood how much difficulty Rumple had had in writing the final entry in his Belle journal. He'd tried four times before, but couldn't get it right; "I just can't get out of my own head and into hers," he explained. "It's not that I don't understand her reasons for banishing me the second time, or that I don't think she was justified in what she did. I can see her point of view, and I can see that from her way of thinking, she made the right decision. It's just—I don't know what she was feeling."

He'd had no difficulty writing the story of his first banishment from Belle's perspective; what she had said to him that night, the way her voice shook and the way her shoulders hunched up when she turned her back to him and walked away had told him exactly how she felt. But on the night of the second banishment, he hadn't seen her at all; he'd exchanged only a few short sentences over the phone with her and her tone had told him nothing. "That's where you start, then," Archie had suggested. "Perhaps, that night, she felt nothing."

Now, on his fifth try, he had finished. With a sharp nod at Archie, he read aloud what he'd written.

"Rumple—the man I've sworn to see the good in, the man who swore to me in return that he had changed—'The monster is gone,' he'd vowed—in our wedding vows he'd promised it—stands in the dark just across the town line. I'm remembering the other time; he'd fallen to his hands and knees and he cried and begged me to listen, but I'd been so angry then I couldn't think beyond my own pain. This time, he's standing, leaning on his cane. I can't see his face in the dark, and that's for the best. Whatever his mouth may be saying, his eyes say so much more, and are so much more powerful than his words and his magic. Because I can't see his eyes, I can stay strong. Because Henry, who was almost killed tonight because of his grandfather's selfishness, stands beside me, I can be the hero I should have been all along.

"Those women would have killed Henry. Would have killed me. Rumple has known them for centuries; of course he knew what they were capable of. Henry and I and who knows who else could have died, but Rumple risked it for the sake of that damn dagger. Once again he chose magic over his family. Magic over Baelfire, over Henry, over me. Well, what the hell did I expect? He'd proven himself time and again.

"I thought I was angry last time—this time has it beat. But it's not the same kind of anger. Last time
it was mixed with shock and hurt. This time the anger is mixed with a sense of fatalism. I feel a
cold anger. I test him, but I know beforehand his answer, whether it's a lie or the truth, will not
change my mind. He admits that if he'd gotten into Storybrooke, he would have forced the Author
to write a happy ending for him. Forced. That word alone tells me he hasn't changed one iota. "Go
back to New York," I tell him.

And still he tries to bargain and beg. It's then that my anger heats up. I wheel around and start
shouting. I tell him what a bully he is, and a liar and a con man like his father. He insists that we're
True Loves, and that's true, I recognize that, but that doesn't mean I'll let him use me any more.
Once I've said that out loud, I've made my peace with my decision. I feel my anger slipping away,
and what's left is sympathy for him. I'm afraid that he hasn't changed because he can't change. I do
care what happens to him, and I'm afraid what will if he doesn't change. I tried to help him—and I
understand now what Bae must have gone through, trying to get him to change—but neither of us
could. I can't save him, so I have to save myself, like Bae did. As much as we loved him, we have
to leave him behind or his curse will consume us too."

"Did you use her?" Archie asked after a long pause.

"Yes. I loved her too. I thought I was protecting—" he sucked in a breath. "I started to say, I
thought I was protecting her, and I did, but I also thought I was protecting myself from being
run out on. That if I told her the truth, she'd run from me, just like Bae did."

"But he didn't run from you, did he? He wanted you to go with him, down the portal."

"I have a habit, sometimes, of rewriting history when I don't want to accept it," Rumple
confessed. "It was easier for me to think he'd run away from me in horror than to accept the
fact that—that I had a choice to go with him, and I chose magic over him. I was the one who
did the abandoning."

"The thing about history is, it's over, if we want it to be." Archie chewed on the cap of his
pen. "I don't know what might become of the situation you have now, especially as it
concerns Belle and Henry. I do know that the relationship you have with them is a second
chance. The question is, will you let the past drag you around throughout your future, or will
you draw a line and banish your past behind it?"

"I have tools now," Rumple said thoughtfully, "and awareness."

"Then, Mr. Gold, I have a new assignment for you. I want you to imagine yourself ten years
from now. From that perspective, I want you to write a letter to the present-day Mr. Gold—a
thank-you letter."

Rumple grinned wryly. "I can do that."

Oh, but it wasn't as easy as it sounded. He started and stopped several times, because every
time he daydreamed about 2025, he saw himself with Belle by his side. . . and two sons.

The picture, instead of delighting him, made his skin crawl, because to get there, to get to that
future, he would have to chicken out on his plan to rescue Bae.

"Did you decide about Tommy—"

"I told you—"
"You need more time. Did you get your letter to yourself written?" Archie asked.

With a deep sigh, Rumple read the thank-you letter aloud.

"What's wrong, Mr. Gold?" Archie was puzzled. "That sounds like a wonderful future."

Rumple balled up his letter and threw it in the waste can. "It means I haven't changed."

"I don't under—"

"Because it means I expect to remain in this world! And if I'm still here, then Bae's still in the Vault, and I've abandoned him!"

"Mr. Gold, Mr. Gold," Archie called. "You always told me that Second Sight is the trickiest magic of all, because there's no sure way how to interpret what you're seeing. So I'm asking you: how do you know that that's what your vision of the future means?"

"What? What else could it mean?"

Archie licked his lips nervously. "Mr. Gold, when you envisioned the future you, was he content?"

"Yes." Now Rumple was getting an inkling. . . .

"Can you imagine ever being content, if Bae was still trapped in the Vault?"

Rumple stared down at the keyboard. "No. No, I wouldn't be."

"I posit to you, then: your subconscious believes a future is possible where both Bae and you are free. Listen to your subconscious. Believe it's possible and work to make it so."

"Outwit the magic of the Vault? It can't be done."

"Why? Because it never has been? Before you, had there ever been a Dark One who bottled True Love?"

"No."

"It was unthinkable, wasn't it? And before you, was there ever a Dark One who had a family?"

"No."

"You're the mold-breaker, Mr. Gold."

"It might be possible," he murmured.

"Work to make it so."

Rumple sat, quietly thinking. At last he reached into the trash can, retrieved his thank-you letter and smoothed it out, then folded it and slipped it into his shirt pocket. "Maybe. . . ."

"Watch for it, so when the opportunity presents itself, you don't overlook it."
Rumple nodded.

"Dear Grandpa,

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but—well, how much did you like that pink house, anyway? See, there was a little mishap with some magic—no one was hurt. . . . Well, here's a pic that kinda explains what happened.

"Love, Henry"

"Dear Henry,

"?!"

"Love, grandpa

"PS. Please assure your mother I'm not upset. Just...amazed. To do what she did required a tremendous force. Among my book collection you'll find a small volume she ought to read, and soon: the title, roughly translated from the Fey, is When Your Magic's Got the Better of You.

"PPS. The house is insured. I'll advise Mr. Dove to use the proceeds to buy something in his taste. He never liked that house either."
SEPTEMBER 2015

"Dear Grandpa,

"Hi! I have a sort of job! I say 'sort of' because I'm not getting paid anything, because that would be illegal, since I'm not yet 16, but I'm getting a credit for it at school, so that's sort of payment, right? Anyway, I and Grace and Clarisse are teaching basic computer classes this summer, to the Merry Men (although they don't call themselves that. Friar Tuck says they prefer the term 'expatriated formerly landed gentry.') Clarisse teaches the Intro-to-Intro classes, where she gives them the basic terminology and a general sense of how all the pieces fit together and what they do. After that they do 'mouse-ercises' to learn how to control the mouse and cursor. They have to pass her class before they go on to Grace. She teaches them basic Word. Then it's on to me; I give them an intro to the Internet. Each class lasts 1 hour, 3 times a week for 3 weeks. It's pretty cool teaching adults. They get so embarrassed and flustered. And sometimes we do things too fast for them to see and imitate what we're doing, but we're all learning together, and Belle says after we turn 16, she'll pay us a wage. Sure beats bagging groceries.

"I know Belle's been Skyping with you and you know all about the library plans, but you should see her when she's dealing with the architect (he used to be Little Lord Fauntleroy) and the construction crew (they used to be the Three Billy Goats Gruff and in fact that's the name of their company). These guys are all, like, six footers but she marches in and out among them like she's a general. 'That's not how I want it,' she'll bark at them. 'Change it.' Or she'll look at their invoices and she'll yell, 'Five dollars for a nail?! This is ridiculous! I'll go over to the hardware store right now and buy you a pound of nails for a buck!' And then they hang their heads and mumble their apologies, and when she's gone they talk about how hard she is to please and you can't get anything over on her, and she must have learned that from her husband. I thought you'd get a kick out of hearing that.

"Oh, and before you ask: NO, CLARISSE AND GRACE ARE NOT MY GIRLFRIENDS! Just because we work together—geesh!

"Love, Henry"

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"Dear Rumple,

"I saw a LION! Raaaaar!

"Thanksgiving is two months away. We will be coming on an airplane. If you look up in the sky maybe you will see us!

"your friend, Sam

"PS. When I get there will you read me Crocodile Encounters?"

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"Dear Sam and Jill,

"I'm counting the days until Thanksgiving. I will be happy to read Crocodile Encounters to you. I shall even make an exception this once and read The Whale Who Won Hearts if you like.

"We'll be having our Thanksgiving dinner at the house next door. Do you remember Mrs. Halifax?
We'll have our dinner at her house. Harry is going to be living with her! I will be moving to another house, but not far away. The house we live in now is being sold to a nice family named the Ameperosas. The husband is named Leon and the wife is named Peata and they have a daughter named Terese. She's nine years old. You can meet her at Thanksgiving.

"I'll send you a picture of my new house when I get there. I'll be living with some people that Father Daniel knows. They used to be like us, living in the park, but now we will all have a four-bedroom house to live in. It's closer to where I work, just one bus ride away.

"When you come at Thanksgiving, I'll bring you to my new house so you can see it.

"your friend, Rumple"

Rumple had planned to convey his news to Henry as well, but after he clicked "send" on the email to Sam, he just didn't have the heart to write another message. He should be happy, and certainly, he was: Harry and Sue Ellen were good for each other, and the new housemates that the Coalition had set him up with were, from first impressions, hard-working people who were eager to learn and grateful to be taught.

Still, at Rumple's age, letting go wasn't an easy thing.

"That's it." Regina slammed a book shut. "The last magic book in the entire city." She rested her chin in her palm. "We've been through them all. From here on out, it's all guesswork."

Henry sat down at the opposite end of Regina's dining table, a mountain of books blocking her from his view. "Mom, how long has it been since you used this table for its intended purpose?"

"Are you hinting at something, Henry?"

"I am hungry—hey, I'm fifteen; I'm always hungry. But I meant, when have you had a decent meal? I was just in the kitchen: the plates are coated in dust and the only thing in the fridge is a jar of dijon mustard, and that's dried up."

"All right." Regina rose tiredly. "Let's go to Granny's. We're at a dead end here anyway." She led him into the foyer, where they put on their coats. "Henry, you could turn this project around."

"What do you mean?"

"You're writing to Gold. Ask him what we should do."

"No, Mom, I can't. I promised Emma—"

"We've wasted so much time already. It's been a year and a half. Roland's forgotten me by now. Robin—" she drew in a breath. "I miss him so much, Henry. He plans to propose to me the minute we bring this barrier down."

"I see." Subconsciously, Henry stood straighter, flattered that his mother was sharing this news with him as if he were an adult. "Are you thinking of crossing the line so you can go to him?"

"I'm waiting for you to graduate. Then—we'll see. If you cross over to go to New York, I'll be in the car with you. But I'm hoping we'll be free of this damn barrier before then. So, please, Henry, ask Gold. He knows all there is to know about magic. He'll have a solution. I'm sure the only reason he hasn't broken the curse himself is because he doesn't have access to magic on that side of the border."
"I promised Emma I wouldn't talk to Grandpa about magic. She's worried that would open the 
floodgates and he'd try to corrupt me. Besides, I don't think he thinks about magic any more. He's 
never once mentioned it, or coming back, or anything like that. He seems pretty involved with what 
he's doing now."

Regina pursed her lips. "Once a mage, always a mage. And he was a mage a very long time. If you 
ask, he'll answer. I'll have a talk with Emma. Maybe I can persuade her to change her mind."

--------------------------------------------

"To: mrgoldantiquities 

"From: josiahdove 

"Re: insurance policy 

"Dear Sir,

"As you suggested, I filed a claim on the insurance policy covering the (now former) house at 1 
Gold Ave. Alas, the claim was denied on the grounds that the policy did not cover 'sudden 
disappearance due to acts of magic, intentional or accidental.' Which, according to Miser Insurance, 
any properties you may wish to insure in the future can be covered for in a supplemental rider for 
an additional premium. I informed them that I thought it likely you would decline that offer, and 
that, in fact, they could take their rider and shove it. I should further inform you that, upon Mrs. 
Gold's and my dissolution of our association with them (she and I having by mutual agreement 
taken the business of Gold Properties to a rival insurer, known as Rival Insurance), Miser 
immediately filed bankruptcy, Gold Properties having been their sole customer.

"I hope you will find our decision satisfactory. Mrs. G. and I sure did.

"Sincerely,

"J. Dove"

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"You know our deal." Emma splayed her fingers across her desktop as she addressed not the boy 
standing in the doorway to the sheriff's office but the woman sitting across the desk from her. "Any 
mention of magic from either correspondent—Henry or Gold—would be an automatic invitation 
for me to join the conversation. Not because I don't trust Henry, but because I don't trust Gold. 
What's to stop Gold from parading right back into town, just as soon as he provides the barrier 
buster?"

"So what makes you the right third party to that transaction? Suppose he gives us a spell. Can you 
read Fae? Elvish? Brittonic? Or how about Old Loameth? That's the language Rumplestiltskin 
grew up speaking, and one that he still writes spells and potions in. After going through all his 
original books, I can safely say he's never used 21st century Bostonian to create magic. So even if 
he weren't out to trick you, any spell he'd give you, you wouldn't be able to translate, so how would 
you know if it's intended to bring down the barrier or grant him powers for world domination?"

"You're forgetting Mom's superpower," Henry said in all seriousness. "She can spot any attempt to 
defraud."

"Thank you, Henry," Emma bobbed her head in gratitude.

"But you're both forgetting this is my grandpa we're talking about. He loves me, and on the honor 
of my father, Grandpa wouldn't lie to me. If I ask him to give me a spell that will bring down the 
barrier, that's what he'll give me. And if I ask him to give me a spell that will bring down the
barrier and allow us to control who can get into town, that's what he'll give me."

Emma toyed with a broken paperclip, buying time—whether to come up with a powerful comeback or to reconsider her earlier decision, neither Regina nor Henry could tell.

Since the subject of Baelfire had been raised, Regina felt safe in pursuing it—but she did so delicately, in full awareness that the man's death still pained Emma and Henry both. "Remember, Emma, all that he did to find Bae. Three hundred years of searching, studying, deal-making, and finally, redesigning Nimue's curse so that we would all be brought here. And, even after he had the curse in hand, waiting, a lifetime more, for the perfect caster to be born, and even then, waiting yet another twenty years until he'd finally figured out how to bottle True Love, so that once you broke Nimue's curse, he'd have the magic he needed to locate his son. Now imagine the man who could withstand all that waiting, worrying and work, just for a chance to see his son again. Now that his son is gone forever, do you think that man would deny a request from his son's only child? Especially a request that would give Henry a real future?"

Emma tossed the paperclip into a waste can. "No, I guess not."

"So?" Regina leaned forward eagerly.

"What if we just ask him to send the spell in an email? That way we can examine it first, make sure it's legit."

Regina huffed. "All these months of studying magic, and you still don't know the most basic things about it. All that raw power you were born with is just going to waste, isn't it?"

"What Mom's saying," Henry butted in, in his best diplomatic tone, "is that magic existed long before writing was invented. It's still rooted in the spoken word. Spells are brought into being by speaking them, then later, they're refined and written down for future use."

Emma shook her head. "Sorry. Still not following you."

Regina impatiently picked up the explanation. "Because of that element of speech, pronunciation makes a huge difference. When you're casting a spell that you got from a book, if you've never heard that spell spoken before, you could get it wrong, simply by mispronouncing a word. Take, for example, the word achabran, from Old Loameth. If you pronounce it with the accent on the first syllable, it means 'crow.' Accent the middle syllable, you get 'raven.' Big difference."

"And you couldn't figure out the right pronunciation from the context?"

Regina folded her arms. "Ms. Swan, don't be obtuse."

"Wait, I have another idea," Henry interjected. "Who knows more ancient languages than anyone else in town?"

"The Reul Ghorm," Regina said promptly, while at the same moment Emma guessed, "Blue."

Regina added, "And Rumple doesn't trust either one of them. He wouldn't give her the formula for creating toothpaste."

"Okay." It was Henry's turn to fold his arms. "Of all the people Grandpa trusts, who knows the most ancient languages, pronunciation and spelling?"

"Belle, of course," Emma replied, then she lit up. "Oh. Of course. So if you and her Skyped him together and asked for a spell, you'd get the real deal." She chewed her lower lip as she considered the plan. "Yeah. I'd be comfortable with that."
"Let's do it, then. I'll persuade Ms. French," Regina volunteered, "and Henry will set up a Skype session with his grandfather. For tomorrow night."

"Not so fast," Henry cautioned. "He doesn't have a computer. He uses one at a library, or a friend's. I'll send him the message tonight, but I usually don't get a reply from him until Tuesdays."

"I suppose, we've waited more than a year for this damn curse to be lifted; we can wait four more days." Regina scowled.

Last night the Parnassuses and members of the Coalition emptied the house on Hayes Street of its furniture. It wasn't much, and it wasn't of good quality, Harry and Rumple had admitted; all of it had come to the house by means of "reclamation"—that is, the Sawyers or Harry or Rumple had found it at a dumpster or had bartered for it and after painstakingly cleaning, repairing, painting or mending had brought into their home. Now it was all gone. The four Parnassus girls (including newborn Pansy) would have proper beds to sleep in, not camping cots, and proper dressers to hold their clothes, not discarded boxes acquired from grocery stores.

The way Harry and Rumple looked at it, the Parnassuses were doing them a favor, taking all that furniture off their hands; neither would need any of it where they were going.

This morning they sat on the porch steps to eat a final breakfast. Behind them, on the porch, waited five boxes that contained Rumple's clothes, books, CDs and cookware; all of Harry's things had already been carted next door. There was a time when five boxes wouldn't have been enough to hold even his tie collection.

They watched the Hernandezes go off to school and the Roses go off to work. There had been no goodbye party, since Harry wasn't leaving the neighborhood and Rumple wasn't going far, just a ten-minute bus ride to another Barton Bank foreclosure that he and his new ex-homeless housemates were repairing. Still, "End of an era," Harry said. "It's been, what, a year?"

"It's been a bit more," Rumple answered, "since Shaggy found me and brought me in."

"Wonder what happened to him? If he ever got cleaned up."

"Addiction is a death sentence." Saying it aloud was a way that Rumple reminded himself how easy it would be, if he ever came in contact with magic again, to fall off the ledge. "No one beats it without help."

"Sue Ellen wants me to remind you, we're expecting you for Thanksgiving. Sam and Jill will be staying with us."

"I won't forget."

As Father Daniel's SUV pulled into the drive, the men stood and gathered their dishes. "I'll wash them," Harry volunteered. "You go ahead."

Rumple passed his plate to Harry, then fished his house key from his jeans pocket and passed that over too. "Say hi to Ms. Realtor for me," he tried to grin. "Tell her I left a pan of cinnamon rolls on the counter for the new owners."

"Call when you get settled," Harry suggested. "Or if you need anything."

Rumple stuck out his hand and Harry shook it. "Thanks, Harry. For everything."

"Thanks to you, too." Harry shifted the plates to one side so he could pull Rumple in for a hug.
As Daniel bounded up the stairs, Harry took the dishes inside. Rumple bent to gather one of his boxes and caught a glimpse of his soon-to-be-former housemate brushing a sleeve across his eyes as he passed through the living room. Daniel watched Harry go. "He's in a mighty big hurry. Didn't even have time to say hello."

"The new owners are due any minute," Rumple explained. But they both knew that wasn't the reason Harry had rushed off.

"So Israel began his journey, taking with him all he had." As they loaded Rumple's boxes into the van, Daniel nodded at the pretty little house they were leaving. "How does it feel, knowing you did that?"

"We did that," Rumple replied. "Harry and Sam and Jill and me, and you. It looks nice, doesn't it?"

"Ready to do it again?"

Rumple looked out the passenger window as the van turned off Hayes Street for Cumberland. He didn't answer.

Still, when that week passed and the next rolled around, he found his spirits lifting. The heat wave broke in late September and all of Portland breathed easier. His four new housemates—two young married couples and an elderly lady who looked a bit like Granny Lucas—were, as he told Archie, as Daniel had reported them to be: hard-working and eager to learn, and they organized themselves and budgeted their resources with little nudging from him, and they immediately set to work on repairing their zombie house. Rumple managed to continue his weekly Skype sessions with Archie and Belle, though, between his new classes in Augusta, his new residence and the continuation of his local job, he hadn't much spare time.

But every Monday morning when he stepped off the Greyhound from Portland and took a city bus to Augusta Hospital, he wondered if, after his class, he couldn't squeeze in an extra hour to—But no. Every other objection aside, he had a commitment to Bae; he couldn't allow Trajan to become attached to him, even dependent upon him, when, as soon as the boundary curse broke, he would be leaving for Storybrooke, and then, somehow (he didn't know how yet) realm jumping to the Enchanted Forest.

Tonight, he was presented with a visual reminder of his obligation to Bae. After a brief check-in, Archie yielded a portion of his session time to two other anxious Skypers. As their beautiful, beloved, grainy faces appeared in the monitor, Rumple was rendered momentarily speechless. Belle, of course, always took his breath away, but seated beside her tonight was a tall, dark-eyed, dark-haired young man wearing a "NYU OR BUST" sweatshirt and clutching a tablet, ready to take notes.

"Hi, Grandpa!" Henry greeted.

"Hi, darling! How are you tonight?" Belle chimed in.

He covered his mouth, hiding his emotions behind his hand. "Henry! How much like your father you look now."

"I've grown about three inches since—" Henry cast a quick sideways glance at Belle, then amended what he had almost said. "Since you left."

"He would be. . . " Rumple had to clear his throat. "Bae would be so proud." Turning his attention to Belle bought him a moment's reprieve from the intense emotions. "Good evening, sweetheart."
"How are you?"

"Keeping busy," she puffed. "I got a B-minus on my astronomy exam. What a relief! I'm fine when the questions are about theory, but there was so much math in it—you know me and math. But next semester I'll take American History, so that will play into my research strengths."

"You'll do well, I have no doubt."

"We have a favor to ask," Belle said. "On behalf of Regina and Emma."

"And Blue," Henry chipped in, causing his grandfather's eyebrows to rise.

"I've explained to everyone that you've looked over Formula 51," Belle began, "and that you're concerned that our substitutions for some of the ingredients won't be powerful enough. Suppose we try a different approach. What if we were in the Enchanted Forest? What ingredients would you try?"

Rumple closed his eyes to search his memory. He could visualize every jar and every bottle on his East Tower shelves—he should; he'd spent three hundred years accumulating them. Without his books and his lab equipment, though, working only in his memory, he struggled to provide even one answer to her question. Experimentation with magic was one part luck, one part chemistry, one part timing (a potion produced at midnight during a rainstorm would exhibit different properties than one produced at noon on a dry autumn day). He finally admitted, "Without my lab. . . But I guess I'd start with powdered worthwort and mangleroot, in equal parts. Melted snow from the Interminable Iceberg in the Evernorth Sea. Stirred counterclockwise for 60 minutes with a unicorn horn, then drizzled with baby dragon tears—the dragon must be no more than three months old. . . ."

Henry took notes as Belle prompted Rumple's memory with questions. By the time Rumple ran out of ideas, Henry had a list of twenty-five ingredients, only two of which could be obtained locally, in the woods north of Storybrooke. Three others, Rumple thought could be produced synthetically, but for the rest, he had no substitute. "Even if you were able to obtain everything on that list, in its natural state, my instincts tell me there's something missing. Maybe several somethings." He sighed deeply. He was as invested as any of them in deactivating the border curse—more so, because he couldn't get to the Enchanted Forest without tapping into the magic in Storybrooke. But over the past year he'd so lost touch with magic that it felt foreign to him, even unreal. It would help to have something he could hold to put his mind in sorcerer mode again.

"But I'm not even sure at this point that it's a potion that's required; it might take a spell instead. Belle, there are some scrolls in my shop that might spark my imagination. They're hidden in the porcelain of a black vase that's in the highboy in the workroom. A misshapen vase—I made it so, to make it easy for thieves to overlook."

Henry took the notes. "Scrolls hidden inside misshapen black vase—"

"No, not inside the vase; inside the porcelain. Regina will have to dissolve the vase with a fireball to expose the scrolls—don't worry; they're fireproof. Please make sure Regina does it, or," he winced, "if absolutely necessary, the Reul Ghorm. Not Emma. The scrolls are fireproof, but not indestructible."

Henry and Belle shared a half-smile.

"These scrolls are written in Old Loameth—"
"Which you're the only living speaker of," Belle added.

"And there's a scrambling spell on the text, an early method of coding. Regina or"—he winced again—"Reul will have to unscramble it. This is what they will have to say, three times."

"Wait a minute," Henry said, scrambling for his phone. "Let me record this so we get the pronunciation right."

"Excellent idea, Henry," Rumple praised. He then recited the decoding spell, slowly and distinctly, while Henry recorded it. "Once those scrolls have been decoded, scan them and email the file to me."

"Is one of them a formula for breaking boundary curses?"

"No, sweetheart, but bits and pieces from the scrolls might help me figure out what's missing. Meanwhile, tell Reul"—he winced again—"to go out into the woods just north of Mills Lake during a full moon, and gather these plants." He rattled off several. "She'll need to be very careful to get the entire plant, including the roots. That's why I say Reul"—he winced—"should do it. She has a more delicate touch than Regina."

Henry beamed as he reviewed his notes with Rumple, making certain he'd written everything down, in order. Belle's eyes shone as her gaze moved between her husband and her step-grandson (and in that moment she didn't give a damn if a boy only twenty years younger than herself called her "grandma"). "You two," she said fondly when they'd finalized the notes. "Even a complete stranger could see at a glance you're family."

Henry preened. "Thanks, Belle." And Rumple blinked at Henry's comment. He'd never imagined that anyone—especially a Charming—would be proud to claim Stiltskin blood.
Regina set the tablet aside and folded her hands atop her dining table. Across from her, at the opposite end, sat Belle, quietly sipping tea. Anyone who was into the psychology of seating would find her position at the table telling: she had chosen a location that put her in physical opposition to Regina. Belle, who would study psychology someday soon as part of her Bachelor's degree work, would have been fascinated by this; Regina, who thought such studies at the least, a waste of time, would have taken a more pragmatic view: Belle was sitting at the position farthest from Regina simply because she was still a bit afraid of the most powerful mage in town.

In between them sat Henry. Plainly honest as he was, had he been asked if he'd chosen the seat midway between his mom and his sort-of step-grandma, he would have admitted the choice had nothing to do with fairness or diplomacy and everything to do with the bowl of fruit in the center of the table. Henry was on his second apple and had a little pile of banana peels and grape stems collected at his elbow. He was, after all, in a growing spurt and required fuel. Constantly.

And directly across from Henry sat Emma. She was peeling an orange that she clearly had no intention of eating, as evidenced by the other two oranges she'd peeled.

"This seems to be legitimate," Regina remarked of the notes Henry had taken. Beneath the suspicion in her words, her voice trembled just a little with the power of excitement.

Belle bristled at the implied accusation, but if it was bait Regina was throwing out, Belle was going to ignore it. Two years ago, she would have allowed her temper to rule her, feeling personally insulted by the implication that Rumple might have provided false information. She believed then, and is certain still, that, until Zelena got a hold of him, Rumple didn't lie. In fact, he sometimes had gone out of his way to make sure a customer had the full truth before closing a deal, though the vast majority in their desperation didn't heed his warnings or didn't hear them. But things had changed, because of Zelena; Belle's hope—no, not her hope; her faith—now that Zelena's—and the Dark One's—hold on Rumple had broken was that he felt he had enough control over his life that he could direct it in the way he wanted it to go.

"What did he charge for this information?" Emma asked. She reached for the last orange in the bowl, but Regina rescued it before she could start peeling.

"What?" Henry asked.

"There's always a price with him. What was it?"

"Nothing," Belle said, and Henry added, "He gave it to us because he wants to help us."

"It's in his interests, Ms. Swan," Regina said coolly. "He wants to come back. That's his price."

"He didn't say anything about coming back," Henry snapped. "He wants to help us because he loves us. We're his family, Belle and me."

"Is that correct, Ms. French? He's said nothing to you about wanting to return?" Regina asked.

Belle's eyes blazed but her tone was even. "It's true. He wants to see us again, but he hasn't asked to come back."
"He's the secretive kind," Emma shrugged. "He didn't even tell you about his plans for the sorcerer's hat, and you were his wife."

"He's not that man any more." Belle fixed the sheriff with her firm frown. "I believe him. I trust him."

"Well." Emma sighed and reached for a banana to peel, but Regina slapped her hand, so she shredded a napkin instead. "If that's so—if he's really changed—we'll find out soon enough. And if he has—"

"It's time to welcome him back, if he chooses it," Belle finished, standing up.

"Is that what you want, Belle?" Regina wondered.

"I'm sure. I had no right to control him with his dagger that night, like he was some sort of lesser being. He was, and is, my husband, and he deserved to be listened to."

"He was a danger to the community," Emma pointed out.

"Perhaps," suggested Regina, "if the Evil Queen can change, so can her former mentor. I was wrong about Cruella and Ursula"—she put up her hand in a stop gesture toward Emma—"but he's not like them, never has been." She turned to Belle. "You said many times over that there's good in Rumplestiltskin. As much as it pains me to admit it, you're right. I saw him commit many acts of kindness over the years when he thought no one would notice, or when he could pretend that kindness was really an act of selfishness. So if we bring down the barrier, I vote yes with Belle; we welcome him back. Besides, it would break our budget if we had to station a guard at the town line to keep him out."

Henry cocked an eyebrow at Emma. "Mom?"

"I've slept on the streets too and ate out of dumpsters. It does make you reassess your values. It can make you meaner, or it can make you see that there are good people out there who will help, if you'll get off your high horse and ask for it. I guess we'll find out soon enough which one it is for him. Helping the homeless and the addicted when he's struggling to make ends meet himself, yeah, those are positive signs." She stood too, ignoring the mess she'd left on the dining table and picking up Henry's tablet. "Well, we've got our homework. I'm not much for plants, but I'll take this list to Blue. Regina, you can go with Belle to Gold's shop and find that vase."

"What about me, Mom?" Henry volunteered.

"You thought I forgot, didn't you? You have a biology test to study for."

"Yes, Mom."

Rumple sat in a wrought-iron lawn chair in the back yard of the house he now lived in. It didn't feel like his yet, nor did it feel like a home, but those qualities would come, just slowly; he was, after all, an old man unused to change—although his life this year had been overrun with it.

He'd just come back from the rectory, where he'd discussed the added stress the move had cost him. "Moving is on the list of the ten highest stress-producers," Archie had informed him. "Fortunately, it's a temporary stressor. But I'm hearing something else in your voice."

"Homesickness, I guess. I miss Sam and Jill and Harry."

Archie had smiled at him. "You never would have admitted that a year ago."
"I never would have admitted anything a year ago. Asking for help wasn't my style."

"You've changed. This move will go easier for you because you've learned how to adapt and form new ties."

"You think so, Archie?"

"I do. I'm hoping some of the resiliency you've developed will rub off on Trajan."

Rumple had fallen silent. Archie had the good sense to change the subject: at least Rumple hadn't said no again.

Now as he sat in the yard listening to crickets chirp, Rumple felt the absence of another evening sound: the protests of a child being put to bed. Both Sam and Bae, no matter how tired they were, would struggle against bedtime right up until their eyes closed. Another story, another drink of water, another hug, any excuse to stay awake. It was the only type of fight that Rumple missed.

He wondered if Trajan had bedtime issues.

"Henry." Regina's voice held a note of amused annoyance, just impatient enough to be a warning but amused enough to inform him she wasn't really upset. It was the same tone she'd used years ago when he'd failed to pick up his room or do his homework. "Do I have to ask again?"

"Ask what, Mom?" Henry passed her a stack of freshly rinsed plates so she could load them into the dishwasher.

She jutted her chin toward the calendar magnetized on the refrigerator and he took the hint. "Oh, yeah, my birthday."

"It's only three weeks away. I've asked you a dozen times already. Give me some hints! Something electronic? Books? Clothes?"

"I have been thinking about it," he admitted. "I decided what I really want, but I'm not sure you can do it."

Regina folded her arms. "If it can be done, I can do it."

"I mean, it might require a city council vote."

She lifted a casual shoulder. "Piece of cake."

"All right then." He straightened his back. "You know that stretch of road that goes between Highway 111 and Mills Lake? The unnamed road?"

"What about it?"

"Well, I was thinking, hardly anyone ever goes to the cemetery, but people drive on that road every time they go to the lake. Must be hundreds of times a year that people drive out there."

"That's probably right."

"That road doesn't have an actual name, does it? At least, there's no sign and the map doesn't give it a name. People just call it 'Lake Road.'"

"I believe you're correct. What are you thinking, Henry?"
"My dad. A few years from now, most of the people here won't remember him. And with only a stone in the cemetery to remind them, and that doesn't even have his real name. . . . What would it take to get an official name for that road?"

Regina had to search her memory of the city charter. All the streets in town had come pre-named, thanks to the curse, but the charter, an almost word-for-word copy of the one for Portland, probably addressed the issue. "I don't recall, but I'll check on it in the morning. It's probably a simple matter of a filling out a form, getting the post office and some city departments to rubber-stamp it and then putting it up to the council for a vote. Are you thinking that road should be named for your father?"

Henry nodded. "His real name: Baelfire."

"Have you talked to Emma about it?"

"Yeah. She's okay with it. Better than okay, actually."

"I think it can be done easily enough. But wouldn't you rather have a new game console or sports equipment or. . . ." The determination in his face put an end to her suggestion. "All right, Henry, I'll call Geri and have her look through the charter tonight. I think it's a fine idea. After all, Storybrooke would probably be called Zelenaville if not for Ne—if not for Baelfire." She drew him in for a hug. "But don't be surprised if there are a few wrapped gifts waiting for you at the breakfast table on the 22nd. It's as much fun for me to watch you open gifts as it is for you to open them."

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This time John was polishing off the last of the fresh-baked oatmeal cookies when he came into the kitchen and perched on Rumple's stool. "Hanging in there, Robert?" But the sparkle in his eyes indicated that he already knew the answer and had come to share something Rumple didn't know.

Rumple was washing potatoes at the sink. "Mashed potatoes and roast beef tonight," he informed John. "Yeah, things are good. Thanks for sending me to the nutrition class. I'm learning a lot."

"Yeah, so I heard from the hospital administrator. Top of the class."

"Well, it's only been a month."

"Well, you may feel like it's too soon, but, due to recent occurrences. . . . You know we're building a Phoenix House in Augusta."

"As I was saying, we're building that new house in Augusta. It'll be twice as big as this one: forty-five clients. We'll need two full-time cooks and two part-time dining room attendants. We'd like our lead cook to have a background in nutrition. We thought about hiring someone with a degree, but we decided it's more important that we get someone with a real commitment to our mission. Namely, you."

Rumple's polite smile spread into a full grin.

"Degrees can be acquired; commitment can't. So here's what we're thinking—see what you think: we'd like to send you to Augusta to be our lead cook. It'll mean an increase in pay, another $5000 a year now, and when you have that degree, another $10,000 a year. There'll also be benefits: health
insurance, dental, retirement. Oh, and we'll cover your educational expenses, plus adjust your schedule so you can take classes."

Rumple squeezed the wet potato he was holding so hard it flew out of his hand and into the sink. So tempting, so tempting it was to nod and take the offer as it stood, but being honest meant not just speaking the truth; it meant full disclosure. He struggled a moment, gritting his teeth even as he smiled. He needed that money so bad, and more importantly, this promotion meant that someone believed in him. Oh, but it wouldn't be fair to accept this new job when he had a son to rescue, just as soon as he could return to Storybrooke.

He grabbed at a more believable excuse. "John, I'm fifty years old. By the time I'd finish a Bachelor's degree, I'd be ten years from retirement."

John leaned forward as if sharing a secret. "We know, Robert." He patted Rumple's shoulder. "Fifteen years of work from a smart, mission-driven employee in exchange for tuition and books—we consider that a good deal. Just imagine how many men you'll have helped by the time you retire. So are you in? We'd want you to start December 1, when the Augusta house opens."

"I'm in," he found himself saying, because he was imagining all those men he could help in the days or weeks or longer until he could somehow make his way to the Enchanted Forest. His job was the only element of his life that he could be sure of right now. Besides, of course, the love and support of his friends.

Out on her routine evening patrol of the edges of town, the sheriff swung off Highway 111 and drove toward Mills Lake. She knew the exact spot where she was likely to find business: teens experimenting with drugs or alcohol or sex, far from the watchful eyes of parents and teachers. Sometimes she even caught adults out here, steaming up their car windows or fishing or hunting off-season. The night was rather chilly, though, and no one was out here. She circumnavigated the lake twice, then headed back into town. But along the way, she pulled off to the side of the road just before it intersected with the highway. She imagined a narrow green sign here: Baelfire Road. It made her smile because it would have made him laugh. He never thought of himself as a hero. Yeah, he would have laughed, but in private, late at night just before they fell asleep in each other's arms, he would have confessed that he liked that sign very much. "Fifty years from now, I'll be gone, but that sign will still be here, and every now and then someone driving by will wonder 'Who the hell was Baelfire and why did he rate having a road named after him?' And maybe someone else will answer, 'That was my grandpa.' Yeah, I like that sign, a lot."

Emma murmured, "Yeah, but you'd like it even better if your road was the most traveled one in town." With a mischievous grin she reached for her phone.
"Congratulations, Mr. Gold!" Archie cheered. "A promotion and support for college—that's so—wait, did you say this job is in Augusta?"

"I did. It is." Here it would come. Rumple steeled himself for a fresh volley of pleas on Trajan's behalf.

"How wonderfully convenient! Now you can start vis—"

"I said no last week and the week before and the week before. I've got a dozen reasons why my mentoring Trajan would be guaranteed failure. Now, shall we proceed with my session?"

Archie grinned despite the dressing-down. "When you get to Augusta and get settled in, you can call Mr. Martel at the number I'm pushing to you. He manages the group home. I'm sure any Saturday—"

"Dr. Hopper, please, respect my ability to make my own decisions regarding my life. Now, you'd asked me to imagine what Bae's and my life would have been like if I had taken control of Zoso instead of killing him."

Hopper nodded. "Would your lives have been better?"

"Everyone's lives would have been better, at first. I would have used Zoso to end the Ogres War, bring peace and prosperity to our village, compel the duke to apply the taxes he'd taken from us to pay for the war towards building schools and clean water systems and roads. I would have, yes, done some selfish things, a bigger, drier house, better clothes, food for myself and Bae. But Zoso hated his master the duke, and he would hate me too. I learned that when I lost control of my dagger. It doesn't matter how kind and considerate the master is; being owned by anyone can only lead to hate, desire for revenge, pursuit of one's freedom at any cost. Any command I would have given him to protect me and Bae, he would have found a loophole in. A man needs freedom like he needs air."

"You're free now, free of the dagger. If you got your magic back, you'd be back under the dagger's control, and vulnerable all over again. Would the risk be worth it, to get your magic back?"

Rumple rubbed his forehead. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Magic means freedom from hunger and homelessness. It means the ability to provide for my friends and family. . . But it also means losing my friends and family, driven away by the darkness. And it means living in a near-paranoid state, watching my back constantly for the next Cora or Zelena."

"So what's the verdict?"

"The verdict is no, I wouldn't give up my freedom for magic. But I would give it up for Bae, if there's no other way to release him from the Vault."

"But you don't know that for sure, do you? You'll search for another way."
"I will," Rumple assured him. "That nasty survival habit has remained with me, I've found. Especially now that I have some new goals I'd like to make happen. I want to have a business card printed that says 'Robert O'Neal, RD.' I want to be sitting in the auditorium when Henry receives his Bachelor's degree from NYU, and I want to bake the cake for Belle's sixty-fifth birthday and kiss her after she's blown out the candles."

"Very worthy goals, Mr. Gold," Archie said softly. "I hope all of them come true."

"Oh, Rumple, that's wonderful! I'm so happy for you! College—oh, you're going to love it. Maybe we can take some of the same classes and we can talk about what we're learning. Even though we'll be attending different universities and working on different majors, we'll have to take some of the same core courses. History! I'm enrolling in US History for spring semester. We can take that together—at least, at the same time!"

He laughed. "Sweetheart, your enthusiasm makes me forget I'm too old to be starting school."

"Oh, you're not too old for school. Some nights, your stamina outlasted mine." She blushed prettily.

"Strategy, nothing more. Yes, sweetheart, let's take US History together. I'd love nothing more than to study with you, unless it would be cuddling with you afterward. I love you, Belle."

"I love you too." She blinked. "My husband the nutritionist. I never would have guessed that as a career for you!"

"Nor would I. It just kind of fell into my lap, like a lot of things in my life. . . .except this opportunity feels right. Work that matters and I'm good at, college, enough income I can have my own apartment. It's too good—it's like it was planned." He frowned, overtaken by a thought. "It's like when I found out Henry is Bae's son. Too amazing to be a coincidence."

"A plan of the Fates," Belle agreed. "It will put you in a position to help a lot more people."

This was an opening for him to tell her about Archie's plea concerning Trajan. The thought that the Fates had set this situation up so that he would just naturally fall into mentoring Trajan had hovered over him the past three days, since John had made his offer. He should tell her. Trajan was too important to keep secret; besides, he had vowed not to hide information from her. But he just wasn't up to an argument, and as soft a heart as she had, she wouldn't let him refuse this child in need.

She reached out to touch the monitor where his cheek appeared to be. "It's a reward, Rumple."

"Maybe." But he knew better.

As they said good night, he looked over at Daniel's subtle message for the week. The priest had marked: "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." He would miss Daniel.

"Mom!" Henry spun around from his desk. He heard a muffled answer from the kitchen, so he abandoned his laptop and trotted in, anxious to share the news he'd just received (and raid the fridge, because clearly, with Emma on her knees at the oven, scrubbing off some smelly foamy stuff, dinner wouldn't be coming anytime soon).

"Mom!" His voice squeaked this time; that was happening a lot lately. Gramps assured him he wouldn't have to put up with it or the acne for long. "Guess what? Grandpa's going to college!"
"No, he would've told—oh, you mean Gold." She rocked back on her knees and waved away the over cleaner fumes. Then she pushed her hair out of her eyes, as if that would clear her mind. "Did I hear you right? Gold's in college?"

"U of M in Augusta. His job's transferring him there."

"College! Huh!"

"Yeah, he registered. He hasn't gotten his acceptance letter yet, but he will, and before long we'll have three college grads in the family."

"Huh! Do they know he's never set foot in a school before, or that he's, like, three hundred years old?"

"Mr. Dove helped him with that. Got him a fake birth certificate and a diploma from a school in Scotland which, by coincidence, doesn't exist any more so no one can verify the diploma."

"I suppose I ought to do something about Dove. Can't have fake IDs being manufactured, even if it is for a good cause. On the other hand, that would mean I'd have to explain to the Augusta police that I'm the sheriff of a town that doesn't really exist any more than Gold's high school." She attacked the oven grime once more. "So what's he majoring in, anyway? Pre-law?"

"Nutrition."

"Nutrition?!"

Rumple had learned to maximize his time these days, with all the demands upon it, and so, as he rode buses to and from work and to and from Augusta, Rumple read. It was an odd assortment of subjects he was reading about: magic, from the scrolls Henry had scanned; the nutrition handbook for his class; and the holy books of this world.

It was one of the latter that he was studying as he waited in the Augusta Greyhound station one evening for his homeward bus. He had a 90-minute wait, from the time his class let out until the bus left, and he always used the time productively ("You could be using that time to visit Trajan," Archie had mentioned in a falsely off-hand tone). The bus arrived and he boarded, made himself comfortable in the second seat from the front, elevated his right leg onto the seat and propped his book on his knee. As the bus pulled out of the station, the passengers in the front seat began to converse quietly.

Rumple read, "As also concerning the children who are weak and oppressed: that ye stand firm for justice to orphans. There is not a good deed which ye do, but God is well-acquainted therewith."

"Dad and me are gonna fix my Soap Box Derby car," said a voice.

Rumple looked up, thinking he was being spoken to, but he discovered that the voice had come from the seat in front of his. He listened for a moment as the speaker, a boy of about perhaps nine, delineated his and Dad's plans for the Derby car. Rumple peeked over the seat at the child, with his blue eyes and freckles and red hair.

Something made Rumple slightly uncomfortable. He couldn't put his finger on the cause, but he slipped into his meditation exercises and the unsettled feeling dissipated. Then he sat back, book in his lap, eyes closed, and listened to the woman and her son chat. If he kept his eyes closed, he could pretend he was back on Hayes Street, with Sam and Jill yakking over a dinner he'd cooked. Back home.
Only after the Greyhound pulled in to Portland and he disembarked behind his fellow passengers did he understand what had disturbed him: the soap box builder's coloring had reminded him of Zelena.

Huh, he thought, this meditation stuff really works. He kept his focus on that as he caught the city bus home. Otherwise, he would have found himself wondering how much this red-haired boy might resemble Trajan.

"Nutrition?!" Emma could hear her father yelping in the background, as Snow shushed him.

"I'm sure we heard you wrong, Emma," Snow said patiently. "The speaker on this phone never has worked right."

"Or she's pulling our leg," David commented.

Emma could hear her mother toss over her shoulder, "Emma's not one for practical jokes, dear. I'm sure we just misheard her." The Snow's voice grew clearer as she turned back to the phone. "Now, Emma, you were saying?"

"You heard me right: Gold is registered with UM, to start in January. He'll be working on a Bachelor's in nutrition."


"No joke, Dad," Emma insisted. "Gold's going to pursue a degree in nutrition. It's related to his job."

David mused, "Wow. He really has changed."

"You know, Storybrooke has its problems with alcohol and drugs too," Snow began.

"Don't go there, Snow," David warned.

"You are putting the cart before the horse, Mom," Emma observed. "He still has a ways to go before he's proved he's reformed. But if Gold really has changed. . . ."

"Well," Snow sighed, "who can say what the Fates were thinking when they made him Belle's True Love? But yet, there it is. She misses him; I can see it in her eyes, even when she's laughing with Ariel or studying her coursework or directing construction workers. She makes herself busier and busier, but no matter how busy she gets, she still misses him. I know exactly what that's like, and I feel for her. I almost feel for him, too. I know what it's like to be on top of the world, and then to have it all taken away, to sleep outdoors and forage for food, and worst of all, to have lost a member of your family to a violent death."

"Don't compare him to yourself," David said. "You didn't turn to revenge to take away your pain. He did. He killed to get even with his son's killer. You forgave your father's."

"It might have been different. I had two wonderful role models to raise me. He had Pan."

"And yet, Gold raised Neal. Alone," Emma reflected. "And did a great job of it, from what Neal said, until he became the Dark One."

"But is he, still? Is he still the Dark One?"
"Belle seems to think that when he lost his magic, he lost the curse," David replied. "But the evil he did while he was cursed, how much of that came from the curse and how much of it was his own corrupt nature? And how much of this nice guy he's showing Belle and Henry right now is fake?"

"I'm just saying, it's something to think about," Snow concluded. "Let him prove himself, of course, but we should keep an open mind so that we'll recognize a reformation if we see it."

Emma puffed. "One thing for sure: the Gold we knew would go a long way to set up a scam, but-becoming a nutritionist? Not even his twisty-turny mind would come up with that for a con game."

"Rumple." As Belle flickered into view, he noticed she was dressed in the outfit he'd always considered her most innocent, a knee-length black skirt and a white blouse with a black peter pan collar. Her hair was up in a bun. Her hands were folded atop a newspaper in her lap.

"Good evening, sweetheart," he greeted her. He felt a bit antsy; he needed to share with her his news: he'd already started apartment hunting in Augusta, taking advantage of an apartment locator service.

But, it seemed she had news too, something that made her nervous. Sitting demurely as she was, he had to ask if something was wrong; she just wasn't her usual animated self tonight. Her head bobbed in a jerky admission. "Well, not wrong," she amended. "Quite nice, actually. It just...took me by surprise. I had a call last night—Regina. She—well, she said she would be calling a press conference today and asked if I'd like to join her. I said yes, assuming it had something to do with the Career Center, but—" She drew in a breath.

"What's wrong, Belle? Can I help?"

"She said there'd been a motion made at the City Council meeting last night and it got a unanimous vote, but she wanted to know how I felt about it before she went public."

Now he was really confused. "Regina wanted to know how you felt—?"

"She'd already talked to Henry and of course he was in favor. And it was Emma who made the original proposal, and that motion to the council—Regina did that." Belle swallowed back the lump in her throat. "I said yes. I thought you wouldn't mind." She raised the newspaper to the monitor so he could see the headline.

"Main Street to be Renamed Baelfire Boulevard."

He blinked hard.

"Is it okay, Rumple? If you oppose the idea, I can get them to go back."

The most traveled street in Storybrooke, now named after his son. "No, I don't oppose it. I don't oppose it at all." He searched Daniel's desk for a Kleenex but instead found, as usual, a Scriptural message: "Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free."

"Pretty nice, isn't it, Rumple?" She dabbed at her eyes just as he did, with a sleeve.

"Pretty nice indeed," he agreed.

"Belle!"

"Ruby, good morning. How are you?"
"I'm fine, but did you know, you started a revolution in town?"

"What?"

"Now Granny's signed up for an online class: Strategic Business Analytics from Case Western. Can you believe it?"

"That's incredible!"

"Yeah! As soon as I told her about Gold going to UM, she got all hissy and said, 'Well, if that old codger can do it, so can I!'"

"See you later, Ruby. Got to go!"

"Where are you in a rush to?"

"To light a fire under the construction workers. Storybrooke needs that College and Career Center right away!"

"From: archiehopper"

"To: mrgoldantiquities"

"Re: to help you make up your mind"

"This is Trajan. He likes hamburgers, baseball, airplanes and Tinker Toys (he has a set that you picked out for Belle to give to him as a goodbye present, when he left Storybrooke)."

"See you on Tuesday,"

"Archie"

Attached was a photo of a boy with dark brown hair (like Bae's, like Henry's), a gap between his upper teeth (like Sam's) and angry, defensive eyes (like Rumple's).

"From: jillsawyer"

"To: mrgoldantiquities"

"Re: thank you"

"Dear Rumple,

"I met with a district attorney today. We have filed a motion to compel my ex-husband to meet with the DA to set up a payment plan for child support.

"I was petrified, but I kept remembering something you had said to me once about the mark of a true father being his eagerness to do all he can to give his child all the child needs. It was that, and the picture of Sam I had clutched in my hand, that gave me the courage to face the DA. It was this picture, of Sam in an outfit we bought at the zoo.

"Thank you, Rumple."

"Jill"

She had attached a photo of Sam, wearing a pair of plastic glasses and a little white lab coat with
As soon as the rectory door swung open, Rumple raised a ribbon-bound box as a peace offering.
"Sorry to bother you, Daniel. Maybe these will make up for it?"

The priest, dressed in a bathrobe and slippers, motioned him in and swept the box into his own possession. With a couple of flicks of the wrist, he had the box open, the ribbon fluttering to the carpet. He thrust his nose into the box. "Aaahh! Your made-from-scratch cinnamon rolls! Robert, you put Mrs. Blaskey and Mrs. Earhart to shame. This will suffice as an apology for disturbing my recreational reading. Now, how may I help you?"

"I'd like to use your computer." Rumple had the presence of mind to look sheepish.

"Is that all?" Daniel waved a hand as he sauntered off to the kitchen. "Help yourself. I'll just take these to the kitchen. Don't be too long—resisting cinnamon is the most difficult of all temptations."

Her hair was bound in a bath towel and her face was plastered with an oatmeal mask, but she answered immediately. "Rumple! Excuse my get-up—I was in the bath. What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry to disturb, sweetheart, and nothing's wrong; it's just that—there's a decision I need you to help me make."

She was flattered. "I'm glad to, Rumple."

And Archie's proposal spilled forth. In the midst of the explanation, he found that, although he'd assumed he'd made his decision weeks ago, a ray of light had crept in under the closed door of his mind. Every time he felt the urge to chicken out—"He would remind me of Zelena" or "He would remind me too much of my failures with Bae"—he glanced down at the printouts he had taken from his shirt pocket: the photo of Henry and Bae wooden-sword fighting; the photo of "Dr. Sam"; and the photo of the angry child. Then he would plow on. He was fair to her: he outlined the arguments in full. If he really did want her advice, she need complete information.

He really did want her advice, even though he couldn't honestly say this decision affected her—the way things were going with Regina's curse-breaking team, she might never meet Trajan again. Still, she was his wife; she should be consulted if he were to take on this partial responsibility for a child.

The Belle he remembered would have had a quick, impassioned answer for him, an unequivocal "Do it! This child needs you!" But the Belle who sat in her towel and nightgown on the other side of the computer didn't answer immediately. Instead, she looked saddened. "This must be hard on you. There are so many reasons to say no, but only two to say yes."

"What are those?" But he had a good idea what her answer would be.

"Trajan and you."

"This could either be the best thing for both of us, or the worst thing."

"You have Archie to guide you, if you decide to mentor Trajan. And you have my support, in whatever you decide to do."

"Thank you, Belle."

"Just..." she began, then hesitated.
"Just what?"

"If you do this, I think there's no turning back. He might be able to handle it, if you start mentoring him and when it gets rough you drop out, but I don't think you could."

"I think you're right." He touched the screen as if touching her cheek. "Good night, Belle."

"Good night, darling."

"Good morning, Lucy."

"Good morning, Robert. How are you doing with the Quran?"

"I find myself going back and rereading some of the verses multiple times, to understand them."

"I can get you a book of commentary; that might help."

"Please. And please put the Rigvada on hold for me next."

Rumple sat down at a public computer to read his email. Several messages from various homeless advocacy groups, a hello from Jill, a lengthy message from Belle about the road dedication ceremony; a shorter, photo-driven message from Henry about the same event. A single-sentence from Hopper.

"Dear Mr. Gold,

"I thought this might help you make up your mind.

"Sincerely,

"Archie"

An embedded link in the this swept him to a Youtube video. Oh well, he had twenty minutes left on his computer session, and the clip ran barely two minutes. Besides, it had been ages since he'd watched television. He couldn't listen to the dialog—he didn't have a pair of earbuds and library policy forbade noise that would disturb other patrons—but the clip came with closed captions. The footer on the clip labeled this as a scene from the movie Gandhi.

He'd heard of Gandhi. In fact, he had that name on a list of biographies he intended to read after he finished with the holy books. He wanted to learn something about his world's revered figures. This clip would give him a head start. He clicked.

An elderly gentleman lay in a bed—from his pallor and the weakness with which he held his eyes open, his deathbed. An anxious peasant hovered over him, tossed a bit of bread onto his chest and demanded that he eat. "I'm going to hell, but not with your death on my soul."

Rumple was transfixed—not by the dying man, but by the peasant, whose desperation struck a familiar chord. Resigned to the notion that he was destined for hell—Rumplestiltskin recognized that pain.

The dying man—Rumple assumed that was Gandhi—admonished the other. "Only God decides who goes to hell."

But the peasant fixed Gandhi with wide eyes full of terror, and attempted to shock him into agreement. "I killed a child. I smashed his head against a wall!"
Instead of revulsion or horror, the great man's face filled with pity. "Why?"

"They killed my son, my boy." The peasant leveled his hand waist high, to suggest height—a child of Sam's age. "The Muslims killed my son!"

Then Rumple's eyes burned, for Gandhi offered the suffering man the impossible: "I know a way out of hell."

The peasant could no longer meet Gandhi's eyes. He needed to believe, but he feared the old man was talking insanity.

"Find a child," Gandhi continued. "A child whose mother and father have been killed. A little boy about this high." From under his sheet, Gandhi's trembling hand emerged and leveled at waist high. "And raise him as your own."

The peasant's face lifted in hope. Could it be that easy?

Then came the kicker. "Only be sure that he is a Muslim and that you raise him as one."

The peasant drew back in shock. Rumple knew nothing of the war between Muslims and Hindus, but his mouth went dry as he watched the peasant turn his back on Gandhi. He knew exactly what it meant to ask a father to adopt a child born to the people who had killed his son.

Walk away, Rumple silently urged the peasant. Don't let such a ridiculous notion tarnish your son's memory.

But the peasant turned around again—returned to Gandhi's bedside—dropped to his knees and lay his head in the great man's lap—and Gandhi asked God to bless him.

And a small, helpless sound burst from Rumple's throat.

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He lay in his bed, sleepless, for hours. When it was nearly time to get up to go to work, instead of the kitchen or the bathroom, Rumple opened his closet and brought down from the shelf an early Christmas present he'd bought today: a radio-controlled Batmobile. He held it on his lap as he sat on his bed and remembered. He'd had a short time with Sam, but he'd made a difference in the boy's life. Maybe the short time he would have with Trajan could have a lasting impact too, on both of them.

"Why are you Rumple?"

"You gonna live here with us?"

"Were you too late, Rumple?"

Almost, Sam, he thought. Almost too late.

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"From: mrgoldantiquities

"To: archiehopper

"Re: our conversation

"Give me that phone number again.

"Sincerely,
Chapter End Notes

A/N. The scene described above comes from the movie Gandhi, written by John Briley.
October 2015

"Before you call Mr. Martel—and he's expecting your call, by the way; my colleague Penny Hall has told him about you and what we hope to accomplish with Trajan—but before you call him, I have one more writing assignment for you."

Rumple groaned. "Archie, I did less writing for my college application!"

Hopper chuckled. "Do you realize that next month it will be a year since we began these sessions?"

"Yes, I guess it has been."

"I think this will prepare you to meet Trajan. I want you to write a list of all the people you've helped. Not just in the past year—but include those too, of course—but as far back as you can remember. Put in as much detail as you can recall: names, places, dates, and what you did for the individual."

Again Rumple groaned, but in sincerity this time. "It will be a very short list. I've been preoccupied with my own needs all my life."

"Yes, you've been a selfish bastard. We dealt with that, extensively, this past year. We're done with it." Archie sounded a bit perturbed. "When you go to see Trajan for the first time, I want you to carry this list with you in your pocket. Having it with you will remind you what you're capable of."

Sufficiently chastised, Rumple nodded.

"Do you have a sheet of paper there?"

He moved a few things around on Daniel's desk—including tonight's advice: "Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert." He found a notepad and a pen beside Daniel's phone, and he appropriated a page. "I have one now."

"The first name to put on your list: Jiminy."

Rumple had started to write, but he jerked his head up. "But I—"

"Write it."

"How did I—"

"You gave me a choice, and that gave me the courage to decide to separate from my parents."

"But the potion I gave you to use on them—it was evil."

"You gave me three choices that day. After I took that potion from you, I realized I had three courses of action to choose from: I could have done nothing, continued on as my parents' puppet. I could have used the potion the way I thought it was intended. I knew that the potion was dark magic; I knew it would do evil. I could have resisted it. I could have followed the third course: after talking to you, I had finally found the courage to break away, and that's what I should have done. Just thinking I had a choice gave me courage. It's feeling trapped that causes fear and
despair. Yes, I ended up doing something evil, but that was my choice. It probably seems I'm splitting a hair finely, but for a man who'd never felt he had a choice in how to live his own life, when you told me there was a way out, it was the first time I ever felt freedom was possible. If you think about how you felt in the moment that Zelena dropped your dagger and you were finally free of her, you'll understand. What you chose to do with your freedom—that was a wrong choice, just like the choice I made to use dark magic against my parents. But in that moment, for the first time in a long time, you had a choice, and so had I. Knowing I had power over my own life, I was able to start becoming the man I was meant to be. So write my name, my true name, at the top of your list, and next week, bring me the full list, and then you'll be ready for Trajan."

"Put my name on that list too," Belle said. He'd come into the habit of telling her about his sessions with Archie. Doing so had taken a while; he'd had to fight off the chauvinism that argued with the husband in him: she'll think you're weak. A real man doesn't need therapy, doesn't need any kind of help. But she was so open and frank about her own experiences in therapy that his pride slipped away and he began to share with her—his worries, his fears, his needs.

"Put my name on that list," she reiterated. "Go on, write it. I'll wait."

He picked up the pen again. "But—"

"Rumple, if you want me to name all the ways you've helped me over the thirty years we've known each other, we'll be here all night." Her eyes danced as she made a little pushing motion with her fingers. "But here's the most important one: you loved me as an equal. To Mama and Papa, I would always be a little girl who needed guidance and protection. To Gaston"—she shivered—"I was a prize to be won and paraded around to impress the troops. But to you, I was an adult, with opinions worth listening to, feelings worth considering. So put my name, my whole name, down: Belle French Gold."

His chin trembled as he wrote.

"Hello, sweetheart,

"I received an acceptance letter from UM-A this morning.

"I'm flabbergasted. I never imagined this in my future. I'm also quite nervous. Whether I succeed or fail at this endeavor, I feel that I've already won. I will take two classes in my first semester, one that meets two nights a week, the other, on Saturdays. One of those classes will be US History through Reconstruction.

"I can't wait to study with you.

"Love, Rumple"

"Hi, husband!

"That is FANTASTIC news! I can't wait for Tuesday to talk to you. Any chance of your borrowing your friend's computer tomorrow night?

"Love, Belle"

As instructed, Emma entered the library through the unlocked back door and proceeded to the workroom. Before she rounded the corner and could see into the room, she heard voices, and her hand automatically slipped to her waistband. But she didn't have her handgun—in fact, she hadn't carried it in a year, having finally admitted its near-worthlessness in a land replete with magic—so
she let her hand drop and form a fist instead, and just about that time she recognized the voices as Belle's and Regina's. She huffed at herself a little: there was no need for nervousness; they'd had no invaders or mutinies in ages, not even good B & E to get riled up about. When she'd filed her monthly crime report at City Hall this morning, it had been full of zeroes in every division: zero robberies, zero assaults, all the way down to zero parking tickets and zero citations issued for unleashed dogs. David loved those zeroes, said it was the result of having a sheriff that everyone respected, and he for one was pleased to raise his small child in a town so respectful that no one had so much as dropped a Popsicle stick on the sidewalk. But Emma—well, she was supposed to be the savior, wasn't she? But who was there to save people from?

Then there was her relationship with Hook, which had slipped into a routine, then from there had slid into a rut. His job took him out on the ocean for ten days at a time, then he'd come back and sit on his keister for five days before going back out again. At first they'd made full use of those five days, but recently, she'd found herself looking forward more to that ten-day stretch. It wasn't that he wasn't attentive and adventurous, sometimes even sweet, but there was just something missing. Humor, maybe; a certain way of looking at life, with a confidence that no matter how absurd the world was, everything would work out okay. An outlook that Neal had taught her, and that, given the absurdity of her situation, she needed. Lately she'd been reflecting on something Regina had said about moving to New York as soon as Henry started at NYU—that is, if Formula 58 worked. NYPD always had exciting things going on, didn't they? Between the inactivity in her professional life and the near-inactivity in her love life, she might as well look for something new.

She rounded the corner, her boot heels clacking on the tile, her customary "Hey" greeting drawing the attention of the other two women. "What's up?"

"Hey, Emma," Belle welcomed her and presented her with a cup of cocoa, fresh from the microwave. Regina dipped her head slightly. "Ms. Swan, how goes it with the sheriff's department?"

Emma blew across the cup, sending up a cloud of chocolaty steam that filled her nostrils. "Not much. The most exciting thing that happened today was when I approved David's request for two days' leave. He's having a wisdom tooth extracted."

"How thrilling. I must remember to send him a get-well card," Regina snarked before sipping from a cup of coffee. "So, shall we get down to business? Why did you summon us, Ms. F—Ms. Gold?"

Emma took note of a stack of books on the counter near the microwave—but then again, there were stacks of books, magazines, VHS tapes and cassettes everywhere. Neat stacks, Emma had to give Belle credit for that, on labeled shelves: "TO BE CATALOGED," "TO BE LABELED," "TO BE REPAIRED," "TO BE WEEDED." Belle had a team of volunteers, ranging from teens to retirees, that came in each day to help with these tasks. Seems she wasn't the only bookworm in town. "Something to show us in one of these books?"

"Oh, no," Belle said, laying a protective hand over the cover of Ultimate Bugopedia. "Sorry, no magical news. I asked you two here because I'd like to include you in another project. It won't take much of your time, but it could do a lot of good."

"Fine," Regina said. "Anything that benefits the library, I will support. Proceed. I have a committee meeting at six."

"It's not the library." Belle watched Regina from the corner of her eye as she motioned to the worktable in the center of the room. Her guests took the hint and seated themselves, Belle in the middle, with Regina at the head of the table and Emma at the foot. "It's Trajan."
Regina's cup paused in mid-sip, then came down to the table slowly.

"Zelena's son?" Emma asked in clarification.

"Yeah. It seems he hasn't been doing as well in the foster system as Archie had hoped." Belle used moisture from the bottom of her tea mug to draw circles on the table. "In fact, he hasn't been doing well at all."

"Archie had told me there were problems," Regina said.

"He's been in and out of families, schools; he's run away multiple times. Fights, some of them quite vicious." Belle glanced at Emma, who scowled, but not in surprise. "He's in a group home now and not doing well there either. The kids bully him because they think he's a liar. The adults put him in therapy; they say he's delusional." She glanced at Regina, whose cheeks had reddened. "Because he claims his mother was a witch and he himself has magical powers."

Emma wondered, "He hasn't... conjured anything...?"

"No, but not for lack of trying."

Regina started to say, "Perhaps we should bring—" then she stopped and shook her head. "But it could be years."

"Bring him back here?" Emma asked. "We agreed it was best for him to be away from Storybrooke, considering what his mom did."

"Well, perhaps the people of Storybrooke need to be reminded who his aunt is," Regina raised her chin defiantly, then deflated again. "But we're no closer to bringing down the barrier than we were a year ago."

"He needs help now," Belle emphasized. "And there's one person who can give it. Only one person who knows the truth about Storybrooke. He's already out there, and by some miracle, he's going to be moving to Augusta next month."

Regina's face darkened. "Do you really think, considering what she did to him, Gold is the best choice for parenting Zelena's son?"

"Not parenting," Belle corrected. "Archie's asked him to be a mentor. Trajan will remain in the group home. Rumple will spend time with him, guide him, give him some sense of stability."

"This was Archie's idea?" Emma asked. "Then I guess—"

"Well, I don't," Regina interrupted. "This is a child. We can't 'guess' what's good for him. May I remind you, ladies—"

"May I remind you," Belle butted in, "just a few days ago you were willing to let Rumple come back to Storybrooke. What are you afraid of, Regina? That Rumple will tell him the truth about who we are, who he is, who Zelena was?"

"So he doesn't have to learn it from a storybook?" Emma added.

Regina winced. "I did what I thought was best for Henry. I kept the truth from him because—what would it have done to him, to know that his mother had cast a curse over an entire town, and put everyone in a time lock? I regret it now, of course I do."
"He forgave you," Emma reminded her. "And he's doing great now. But we know from experience that hiding the truth doesn't help. Trajan needs to hear it, a little at a time, in a way that won't push him over the edge. He's got to be told he's not crazy, but yet, he's got to be given the tools for coping in a world that doesn't believe in magic. I think Archie's his best chance, and since Archie can't be there in person, Gold's the next best thing."

"But Gold killed his mother. What will that bit of information do to Trajan?"

"Someday, yeah, Gold's going to have to tell him," Emma agreed. "With Archie helping. I don't know how that will work. But I do know, from personal experience, what Trajan needs now, and I think Gold can provide some of it."

"This isn't our decision to make," Belle said. "Archie has already arranged it with a social worker and the manager of the group home. And Rumple has tentatively agreed. I called you here because there's something we can do to help Rumple. A very small something, from us, can make a big difference to him."

"You want us to give him our blessing?" Regina asked.

"No. That would be a lie, because I know you have doubts. But you can show support for him. What he's about to do will be very difficult. Think back, Regina, to how hard it was for you and Henry to mend your relationship, but think of where it stands now. It will be twice—three times—as hard for Rumple, because he doesn't have a prior relationship with Trajan to build on. And he will have to someday tell Trajan about Zelena."

Emma nodded thoughtfully. "Good thing Archie's got his back."

"Rumple needs for us to have his back too. It's a small thing for us, but it has to be honest: to build his confidence, Archie has asked Rumple to make a list of people he's helped over the years." Belle gave each woman a hard look. "I think if you'll think about it a moment, you can remember many ways he's helped the two of you." When Regina opened her mouth, Belle interrupted, "Many ways. Such as: he killed himself to stop Pan from destroying this town."

"Yeah, I can think of one or two, though they're all jumbled up with his selfishness," Emma considered.

Belle stared hard at her. "Such as: if he hadn't got you elected sheriff you would've gone back to Boston and you wouldn't have David and Mary Margaret and Henry in your life now." She turned to Regina. "Such as: if he hadn't pulled some legal strings, you wouldn't have Henry. Think about it: if Rumplestiltskin had never entered your lives, where would be you be now?"

Regina smirked at Emma. "You wouldn't have been born. George would have married David off to Midas' daughter."

"And you'd still be chasing after my mother through the woods," Emma snapped. "And now, how does that story go—something about a mirror given to you on your wedding day, that you shoved your mother through so she wouldn't boss you around any more?"

"Really, Ms. Gold, this rosy romp down Memory Lane—" Regina started to protest, but she didn't finish her complaint.

"Tonight, one hour from now, my place. One thing, one honest way that he's helped you." Belle stood up, signaling an end to the meeting. "Geri can reschedule your meeting. Henry will be there too; I've already spoken to him. I just didn't ask him to this meeting because I didn't want him to
have to see it if either of his mothers proved too cowardly to get involved. Now, I'm going to lock up. Oh, and I have a little thank-you gift for you that I expect you to wear tonight." She reached over to the counter for two shopping bags bearing a "Karen's Kustom T-Shirts" logo. "See you at seven."

"Hi, Rumple!" Belle giggled in response to her husband's widened eyes as his image filled her laptop monitor. "Do you like them?" She tilted the monitor a little so he could see the person seated to her left. Both she and Henry were wearing forest green t-shirts with white lettering on the chest that proudly proclaimed allegiance to the University of Maine-Augusta. "The local t-shirt shop made them, patterning them after the official design she found online."

"They're great," he chuckled. "I now feel fully supported in my pursuit of higher education."

"Wait," Henry interrupted, "there's more." He raised the monitor to catch the image of his mothers standing at Belle's kitchen bar, sipping something from cups. Both the women were wearing UM-A t-shirts. Regina seemed a little uncomfortable, and indeed, she was; she confessed to Belle that she'd never worn a t-shirt in her life. Emma, however, didn't mind a bit. "Hey, Gold." She raised her cup in the laptop's direction.

"Good evening, Rumple," Regina said, tugging at the hem of the shirt. "We just wanted to show our support for your new endeavor," Belle said.

"There's, uh, something else," Emma set her cup aside and came to the couch and Henry and Belle scooted over to make room for her. Henry shifted the laptop so that his mom's face appeared in the camera. "Belle told us about your project—you know, the list for Archie. We”—she waved her hand to encompass Henry and Regina—"want you to write our names on it too."

"Start with me," Emma sounded more sure of herself, now that she saw he wasn't upset about Belle having revealed to her and Regina that he was in therapy. "There are a couple of things I can think of, things that at the time didn't seem all that helpful, and maybe we thought you were using us for your own ends. But the end you were aiming for, it was good for Henry and me, because it gave us time with Neal."

"Put me down for that too, Grandpa," Henry kicked in. "I never would've met my dad if you hadn't done some of the things you did. Heck, I probably wouldn't even have been born."

"As mad as I am for all the stunts you pulled on me, I gotta thank you for that." Emma slid an arm around Henry's shoulders.

"So must I." Regina's husky voice rose from the background, and she came forward, standing, her back regally straight, as always, beside the couch. "Put my name on your list as well, for Henry, and for teaching me magic."

"I did it for my own gain," Rumple admitted.

"Don't think I don't know that," she smiled wryly. "And I did a whole lot of terrible work with it, until Henry helped me remember I have a choice." She cocked her head thoughtfully. "It's been a long, strange trip for you and me, Rumplestiltskin. Manipulative, hurtful, but yet, somehow, I think, we genuinely cared about each other." She pointed at the screen with her cup. "Not sure even now that I can trust you, but"—she frowned, puzzled—"I have to admit, if you hadn't popped into my life that night, I'd still be living under my mother's thumb. So put me on your list."
"The sword," Emma said suddenly. "I know it was so I could fetch your potion for you, but when you gave me my father's sword, that was the first time I ever felt I could be a hero. So, yeah. You were an asshole, but some good things came out of your assholery. And I guess, if it was Henry that was gonna be dragged off to fight ogres, I'd do some godawful things too, to keep him safe."

Regina waved a dismissive hand. "Okay, enough of the lovefest. I have a city to run, and you, Henry, have a Latin test tomorrow, do you not?" She started to walk away.

"Yes, Mom."

"Don't use that tone, young man. Your grades matter, if you're going to get into NYU."

"Regina?" Rumple called. "Thank you. Ms. Swan, thank you." His smile softened as his eyes turned to Henry, then Belle. "And you, my family, thank you."

"Good night, Mr. Gold. I hope you won't mind if Ms. Swan and I intrude upon your family chat again next week, so we can get back to work on the boundary." Regina didn't wait for an answer. "Up and out, Henry. You're at my house tonight."

Henry gave Emma a quick peck on the cheek and his grandfather a wave. "Good night, Grandpa! See you next week."

"Good night, Henry." Then the former sorcerer said something Regina and Emma had never thought they'd hear him say: "I love you."

"Love you too, Grandpa."

Emma shook her head slightly as she stood up. "Huh! All right, good night, Belle, Gold."

As he rode the bus home from the rectory, he thought about those t-shirts. He wondered if they had been Henry’s idea or Belle’s, but whoever had come up with it, both were equally behind the little scheme. The shirts were a visible sign of community, uniting Henry, Belle, Emma, Regina and Rumple. And their participation in his list—had they forgiven him, then? Had they talked about allowing him back into Storybrooke?

Or maybe he was reading too much into it.

"Hello, Trajan."

The boy was striking angrily at the backyard sandbox with a trowel. He'd dig it in deep, haul up a mound of wet sand, fling the sand over his shoulder, then dig in again. It was a purposeless exercise, the point of which Rumple recognized: it was not unlike the carnage he'd wreaked with his cane. Since the boy ignored him, Rumple tried again. "Hello, Trajan. I'm Robert. Mr. Martel told you about me."

The boy still didn't look up, but at least he spoke. "My name is Tommy."

Rumple longed to crouch, to be on eye-level with the boy, but there was nothing nearby that he could hold onto, to get back up again. He remained standing. He looked about: as he had requested, the Martels had remained inside, allowing him a few minutes of privacy; it was an indication of their high respect for Archie's friend Penny Hall, since they'd never met Rumple before. He suspected they were watching from their kitchen window, however. He made no further move toward the boy, so as not to give them cause for concern. "It is now. Just like my name now is Robert. But your name used to be Trajan. And mine used to be Rumplestiltskin."
The boy looked up now.
The boy was frowning. Rumple would realize later his irritation wasn't attributable to his play having been interrupted, nor this stranger having argued with him over his own name, but rather his inability to access a distant memory that the introduction of the two names "Trajan" and "Rumplestiltskin" had triggered. Rather than ask for information, however, Tommy reacted in typical tough-little-guy fashion. "What do you know? Who the hell are you?"

Rumple shifted his weight just a little on his cane as a nerve in his ankle began to pinch. He clicked his tongue—an old man reaction, but coming from Rumple, it seemed somehow the prelude to a threat. "Such foul language from such a small child."

Tommy cast a nervous glance toward the house and Rumple now shifted his body so that he blocked the boy's view—and escape route. "Your guardians know I'm here. In fact, they invited me. You may wish the world to see you as a hard case, but Master Trajan, I know what's underneath, because I have put that same front."

The boy scrambled to his feet, obviously intending to run, but he ended up gasping and falling back onto his butt instead, staring up into Rumple's face, with Rumple's cane hooked around his leg. Tommy blinked, trying to figure out how the old, crippled man had moved so silently and quickly. Rumple gave a cool half-smile. "I have many more surprises for you, Trajan. If you'll listen, you'll learn a great deal about yourself: who your mother was, where you came from, how you got here and why."

The boy pretended defiance. "What if I don't?"

"Don't what?"

"What if I don't listen?" The boy reddened a bit, seeming to realize, now that he'd said it aloud, how stupid that sounded.

"You will. Because I guarantee I can answer questions that have been driving you crazy. I'll give you this information a little at a time, as I think you're ready for it. As I think, not you. You will respect this, as you will respect me, or the only lifeline you have to this information will be cut. I am here, Trajan, solely for your benefit; I gain nothing, and in fact I lose a great deal of precious time, by coming here. Bear that in mind, and every time you feel tempted to use foul language or speak disrespectfully, you will bite your tongue, lest I walk away and leave you bereft of answers." He waited a moment for a reaction.

Tommy glanced at the crook of the cane, still latched onto his leg. Then he looked up, nervousness—which could easily spill into fear, if that cane wasn't removed soon—yet also excitement at this mystery now laid before him pulling at his mouth and lighting his eyes.

For a moment, Rumple had the impulse to haul the boy up and hug him, Trajan in his coloring looking so much like Henry ten years ago and Baelfire two hundred years ago. But before he allowed the parent in him to take over, he reminded himself that his first job here was to break through Trajan's bully act, and to do that Rumple need only ask how he himself would react if he were in Trajan's shoes. Any show of affection right now would give the boy the excuse to write Rumple off as just another know-it-all old man, too weak to deserve respect. Rumple would have to take Trajan down a notch, then build him up again properly, before the boy would trust him and
want to learn everything Rumple could teach.

Rumple withdrew the cane and visibly leaned on it.

Freed, or so he thought, Trajan scrambled to his feet—only to find himself on his butt again with the weak old cripple smiling placidly down upon him. Now the boy's frown was one of confusion. "What do you want?"

"An agreement. First of many, I'm sure." Rumple slipped a hand inside his jacket pocket. He'd dressed up today, specifically for this purpose. He wanted the Martels to feel just a little impressed and Trajan to feel just a little intimidated by his dark, formal clothes: black suit jacket and trousers, midnight blue dress shirt, and burgundy tie. He'd had the suit cleaned and pressed after he'd bought it at Goodwill. It was an Armani knockoff, but who would know?

"Well?" Tommy feigned impatience—until the cane slid a few inches forward; then he clamped his mouth shut.

"Point one: you will moderate your tone. No sarcasm, no arguments, no insults, no snarkiness—yes, I know your current pose is intended to fake me out. It won't succeed. Save us both the time and adjust your attitude now. You will speak to me in a respectful tone, with courteous diction. No cursing, no street slang. Unless at some point in the future I say otherwise, you will refer to me as Mr. O'Neal. Point two: you will pay attention when I speak to you. You will look at me, you will not interrupt, and in return, I will pay you the same courtesy. Point three: you will rise when I enter the room and when I leave. You will extend this same courtesy to all adults, when you are in my company. I realize it's not something you're used to, but I'm rather old fashioned in this regard. I will be patient with you in this because I know it's foreign to you, but eventually you will come to see that courtesy is in fact a form of power. We'll discuss this in detail later."

Trajan's eyebrows shot up at the magic word power, as Rumple knew it would. Bullies—including the bully Rumple had become after he'd acquired magic—had a deep-seated need to feel powerful, to compensate for some part of their lives that made them feel helpless. They needed to be taught positive ways of exerting power. The expression on Trajan's face informed Rumple that the boy had never thought beyond fists and threats as sources of power.

"Point four: you will respect my time, as I respect yours. I will schedule the times I come to see you. You will be ready: your homework will be finished, your toys and electronic devices will be put away, you will receive no phone calls or visitors. If I arrive to find you unprepared, I will leave. You may think that's what you want, but I guarantee you, you'll soon learn it's not. Do you have any questions so far, Master Trajan?"

"Yeah—" the boy started to sneer but that cane inched forward and adjusted his features. "Yes... sir."

"Very good. Ask your question."

"Who are you?"

Rumple made him wait a moment. It was the same question Trajan had asked earlier, but this time his tone was curious. "You've earned an answer. I'm not ready to give you a full answer at this stage; it's quite complicated and somewhat hard to accept, and I don't wish to discomfit you. In time, you'll be ready for the full story. Are we in agreement that a partial answer will suffice for now?"

Trajan clearly didn't understand half the words Rumple had just tossed at him; Rumple knew that;
but he also knew from experience that talking up would encourage the child to reach up—and to ask if he couldn't figure things out by context. The boy nodded.

"I prefer a spoken answer, Master Trajan."

"Uh, okay." A glance at the cane again. "I mean, yeah—yes. Sir."

"Very good. My original name is Rumplestiltskin. My place of origin is a land called Misthaven. I came to Maine about thirty years ago, to a small town that I will eventually tell you about, because it plays an important role in your history. I currently live in Portland. Have you heard of Portland?"

Trajan started to shake his head.

"I prefer a spoken answer."

"No, sir."

"Very good. If you are able to continue to speak to me as you have been, we will soon get to the good stuff." Rumple used his cane to draw two X's in the sand, one north and a bit east of the other. "This is Augusta, where we are now." He pointed to the upper X. "This is Portland." He pointed to the lower. "It's a distance of sixty miles. I will be moving to Augusta in the near future, however, and perhaps I will be able to spend a bit more time with you when I no longer have to travel so far. Ms. Hall asked me to mentor you. Have you heard the word mentor before?"

"No, sir."

"A mentor is a guide. I will teach you, but my primary purpose is to give you information and advice that will enable you to make your own decisions. A mentor helps a child to grow up and prepare for manhood."

This produced a small smile, as Rumple expected: every boy wants to be considered a man-in-training.

"This will suffice for now. Let's summarize the main points of my proposed deal, and then you can tell me if you accept it or not. What is the first point I named?"

Trajan swallowed hard. "I can't remember."

"Point one: You will moderate your tone. Do you understand this point?"

"Yes, sir."

"And do you agree to it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Point two?"

"No goofing around when you're here?"

"Close. You will pay attention when I speak to you. Do you understand this point?"

"Yes, sir."

"And do you agree to it?"
"Yes."

"Point three?"

"I. . . ."

Rumple tapped the boy's foot with his cane.

"Stand up!" Trajan actually looked proud of himself for remembering.

"Do so, please. Now." Rumple tapped his foot again, and the boy stood. "Good. I will be leaving in a moment, so you may remain standing until I've gone. Do you agree to this point?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the last point?"

"Be ready."

"Good." Rumple didn't mean to, but a sigh slipped out. He was relieved that the first lesson had progressed so far—though he had no illusions that there wouldn't be some backsliding. "I must go now. Can you tell time, Master Trajan?"

"Sort of."

"Then ask Mr. or Ms. Martel to assist you. I will return at 5:30 p.m. one week from today." He started to turn around, then paused. "Point number four, Master Trajan?"

"Be ready. I'll be ready."

"Very good. I recommend you prepare by thinking of the next question you would like me to answer." He walked away, calling over his shoulder, "Remain standing until I'm gone."

"And you trust him with the child?" Robin frowned into the monitor.

"Yes. Actually, I do," Regina said firmly.

"Remember, he would have killed Roland if I hadn't surrendered your heart to him."

Regina gnawed her lip. "I can't deny that. But he isn't responsible for that. The compulsion of the dagger left him no choice. I've known Rumplestitskin a long time, Robin. Yes, he is violent—or was—if his former housemate is to be believed, her blog describes a very different man. 'Grandfatherly,' she called him."

"I still have the scars on my back from his 'grandfatherly' attacks upon me."

"I know it seems contradictory, that the same man who would pulverize an adult could be gentle and kind to a child, but it's true. I suppose, deep down past the Dark One's curse, he was able to retain some memory of his years as a father, because I have seen the proof, as rare as it's been: times he healed a sickly toddler or spared the life of a parent so that a child wouldn't be orphaned. I saw him once cast a spell on a food basket so that it would refill itself magically every night, and then leave it on the doorstep of a family that had been deserted by the alcoholic father. Yes, that same man tortured you and beat Hook into a bloody pulp, but with children. . . . I do trust him." Regina shrugged.

"Well, let me make us both feel a bit better about this situation with Trajan. Find out when he's
scheduled to see the boy, and as soon as I can get a day off work, I'll go out there and observe them together. He will never know I'm there."

Regina chuckled. "If it was anyone but you, I'd say you were talking out of your ass, but you, my darling, could steal the egg out from under a sleeping dragon without provoking so much as a tail flutter."

"If I find anything questionable, we'll insist that Dr. Hopper put an end to this 'mentorship.'"

"And if you find Gold is living up to his responsibility?"

"I'll say no more. You know, it was quite shocking when I first learned the Dark One had a son."

"Equally shocking for me. All those years of training with him, and all the times I visited the Dark Castle, and I never saw the smallest sign of a child."

"It was in the Dark Castle that I met Baelfire, a grown man then. He said that before the Dark curse, his father had been a good man."

"Perhaps now, post-curse, he is again. Or, at least, a better one."

"He's playing me, or so he thinks," Rumple said. "Pretending to agree to my rules, because I promised him information he's been craving for as long as he can remember. He'll revert. The only question is whether he'll show me his bully ways because he wants to impress me or because he's afraid of me."

"And what will you do then?" Archie asked.

"Exactly as I did on Friday. Exactly as I'll do every time he reverts, until something in him breaks and he decides to trust me enough to show me who he really is. I have to be ready to enforce my rules, every time."

"He needs that. More than any other kid, he needs consistency, boundaries and discipline. Firmness, but not anger, when he acts up and reward when he obeys." Archie surmised. "I think you've got it right."

"It's a good start." But Rumple's face darkened. "I just-I've been piecing together how I'll tell him what I did to Zelena. I have no idea how to do that without making everything else between us a lie."

"There is no answer, Mr. Gold. You'll just have to deal with it when it comes up, and hope that when it does, he's strong enough to cope."

Belle's eyes widened as he related his first meeting with Trajan, and they remained widened as he confessed, "This scares me. I don't know how not to screw this up."

She offered him her best encouragement. "If he can be rescued, you're the one to do it. You're the only one who has a chance of getting through to him."

"Because I'm a bully too?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

He made a stop sign of his hand. "But it's true. From the first moment I felt magic pulsing through my veins, I turned inside out, a coward into a bully. I thought I'd never fear anything again. But it
wasn't true: I still feared everything, so I made a public spectacle of my cruelty. Crazy and unpredictable, uncontrollable, and powerful to the extreme, that's how I wanted the world to see me. But there were always those who had to test me."

"Like Robin Hood," Belle reflected.

"Every time I took one down, I felt justified. I was reinforcing my status, and I was getting even for everyone who had ever bullied me."

"Did it make you feel better?"

Her question could have been provocative, judgmental, but she asked it in such a gentle tone that he believed it to be a sincere question. He answered carefully, trying to be precise. "It satisfied some part of me. But of course, it solved nothing. It didn't take away the anger I felt against all those who'd shoved me around when I was crippled. It didn't lessen the hurt I felt over the way my father treated me. It didn't make me forget the insult Milah handed me when she chose Hook over me, or Cora when she chose a title over me."

"Do you still hurt, when you think of those people?"

He thought for a long moment. "Yeah, but there's a gulf between those feelings and where I am now. It's like I'm standing on a hill, watching as a little boy named Rumplestiltskin get bullied down below. The pain I feel is his, not mine." He released a cleansing breath. "You can separate from the pain. That's what I hope to get across to Trajan, before I have to tell him I killed Zelena. Because once I do that, there's nothing else I'll ever be able to tell him again."

"Dear Grandpa,"

"Thank you for the great birthday present! Mr. Dove came by this morning before I left for school and he gave me the birthday card, and when I opened it, there was the certificate from the Wells Fargo Driving School. With Mom's permission, I called them up right away and scheduled my first lesson for Saturday. I can hardly wait! Except for the one time that Gramps tried to teach me, I haven't gotten to use do any driving. But over this last year I grew almost three inches and my voice has changed, so people are taking me more seriously now. I also got B's in all my classes last year, except English, where I got an A-, so my moms agreed I could start taking those driving lessons. Being able to drive will be very useful because I'm writing for the Bugle now, that's the high school paper."

"Thanks, Grandpa! You're the greatest!"

"Love, Henry."

"Master Trajan!" The bark carried from the Martels' gate across the backyard. "Did I not instruct you to ask for help if you're unable to tell time? And now, here's an entire five minutes of my time—of your time—wasted." The quick strikes of the metal tip of Rumple's cane against the sidewalk clicked like the second hand on the Martels' hallway clock, forcing Trajan against his will (but in compliance with his better judgment) to dig his heels into the dirt to bring his swing to a halt. The boy licked his lips as he warily watched the old man stroll up the sidewalk and stop at the edge of the playground. "Master Trajan! Have you forgotten stipulations three and four of our agreement?"

"What's a 'stipulation'?"

"A promise, young man." Rumple stood tall with his cane front and center. "We made promises last week, did we not? And even though our contract was oral, it is nevertheless binding, both by
law and by honor." He lowered his voice a bit. "And to a gentleman, his honor is his law."

The boy snorted and defiantly started up his swing again. He glanced down at his sneakers, toeing the dirt, and that was his next mistake, for the next thing he knew, he was flat on his back in the grass and his tailbone ached. He stood up to massage out the pain, and the old man took advantage of the availability of the boy's ankles to whack them with his cane.

"Ow, you son of a bitch!" Trajan squealed.

In a shot, Rumple was up in the kid's face, so close Trajan could see a gold tooth glint and feel hot breath ruffle his hair. "And what did I say last week about foul language?"

Trajan tried valiantly to stand his ground, but he couldn't bring himself to look the old man in the eye. "Back off—". But he couldn't finish his threat either. That gold tooth flashed like a warning light.

"You have violated our contract. The penalty for that is the loss of the opportunity to ask me a question." Rumple turned about, using his cane as a pivot.

"Wait! You said I could-"

Rumple threw over his shoulder, "You broke your promises to me, Master Trajan, which makes any agreement we had null and void."

"Wait! Please! I'm sorry!"

Rumple paused but didn't look around. "I accept your apology." He started walking away again. "But you must learn, Master Trajan, there are two elements to a request for forgiveness: the apology, yes, but also an acceptance of the punishment. Accept your punishment with grace and learn from the experience."

"Wait!" The boy caught up to him and planted himself in Rumple's path. "Who's my mother?"

"Not graceful, dearie." Rumple sidestepped deftly and proceeded out the gate.

"Please!"

"Quite correct." Archie shoved his glasses up his nose and made some notes. "He now realizes he can't play you."

Rumple smiled modestly. "He butted heads with a master manipulator. I'll return next week, at the scheduled time, as we'll start from the beginning. If he follows the rules this time, he'll get what he wants."

"My friend Penny reports that in the past week, Trajan has been better behaved in school. He's still not doing his homework or contributing in class, but at least he's holding in his temper. The Martels say he hasn't had a fight at home this week. Not a physical one, anyway; he still yells at the other kids and cusses up a storm."

"We'll work on that."

Archie paused for a moment, allowing Rumple to enjoy his success so far. "Mr. Gold, how are you feeling about this venture?"

"I'm not kidding myself. There will be plenty of times I regret taking this responsibility on."
Rumple looked down at the floor. "Times he'll provoke me and make me want to spank him. Times when, through no fault of his own, he'll do something or say something that reminds me of his mother, and then I'll be tempted to abandon him."

"But you won't."

"No." Rumple's mouth twitched. "I don't break deals any more."
Looking for a Soul That's Real

NOVEMBER 2015

"Dear Grandpa,

"The high school decided to start a football team! Whoo-hoo! Right now, all they can do is play each other, but as soon as we can get across the town line, watch out! Here's a selfie of me with the school mascot, the Storybrooke Dragon. Actually, the ‘dragon’ is Angela Gates (you probably remember her dad, he owns Dave's Fish & Chips). And before you ask, NO SHE'S NOT MY GIRLFRIEND. Really.

"So far, my favorite class this semester is either Journalism or American Lit. No surprise there. In Journalism we study newspaper writing, going back to the 1600s; plus radio and TV broadcasts. You should've seen us bawling like babies the day Mr. Kent played us Walter Cronkite's report of John Kennedy's assassination. We're also studying online reporting and blogs like Jill's. Mr. Kent says with this capability now for instant, worldwide connection and citizen journalism, we will become reporters in the most exciting time in the history of our profession. I don't know, though—it's hard to beat Cronkite's stuff. Anyway, Mr. Kent says when I start applying at colleges, he'll have a letter of recommendation ready for me.

"In Lit we've been reading Scarlet Letter, and Belle and I have been comparing notes, because she studied it last semester. I don't know if you've ever read it but Belle says the way the people of Boston treat Hester Prynne in that book is a lot like the way people of the Enchanted Forest treated women who practiced magic or got involved with sorcerers. She didn't say it happened to her, but I've got to wonder if it did, when she went to live in the Dark Castle. And I remember my dad saying he got snubbed a lot because you were a sorcerer. Reading that book makes me want to say I'm sorry for what you guys went through in those days. I'd like to think it would be different in America, but I'd probably be wrong. People in the outside world, if they knew about Storybrooke, would probably treat my moms and you and the fairies like Hester got treated. I guess that's one of the prices for magic.

"Hey, you remember that kid Quincy I told you about a while back, the one that was bullied? You said that if he had a group of friends, it would make it harder for the bully to mess with him. Guess what? Yup! He joined the theater club and now he has a bunch of friends—and get this! Nearly all of them are girls! There's only two other boys in the club, and eleven girls, so Quin (that's his 'stage name,' he says) has an entourage of girls trailing along behind him when he walks down the hall. It's a sight to behold! Thanks, BTW, for your advice. It saved Quin from a buttload of beatings!

"Love, Henry"

Robin was scratching his beard in speculation as his face appeared in Regina's monitor.

"Good evening, Robin," Regina welcomed him (or at least his visage) into her bedroom as she settled comfortably under her silk sheets, her pillows plumped behind her back. "You look wonderful, although a bit perplexed. What's up?"

"'Perplexed' is a good word for it. You know that dizzy feeling you get when a presumption you've based an entire perception on is proven wrong, in just a matter of minutes?"

"Do you mean like finding out that the sun really doesn't revolve around the Earth? That sort of disorientation?"
"Just like that." Now his scratching shifted from the beard to the scalp, signaling her that the longer he thought about whatever was confounding him, the more perplexed he was becoming.

Perplexed, but not angry or depressed, so Regina wasn't worried; on the contrary, she would enjoy this small opportunity to be helpful to him (since she had only frustrating news about the boundary curse to share). They made a great thinking team together, he with his street smarts, she with her political savvy. "What is it?"

"Well, I had this Friday off, and it was Marian's weekend with Roland, so I hopped a bus to Augusta. I found the address you gave me, and I hid myself in an oak tree that overhangs the Martels' backyard."

She shivered in sympathy. "Rather cold, wasn't it?"

"I lived outside for ten years, remember. I'm used to the cold. Anyway, right on the dot at 5:30, Rumplestiltskin came out from the house. He was wearing a suit like usual, except it was a bit faded and frayed. And he had a box under his arm, and Trajan was with him. They were chattering away like old friends. Trajan's grown a couple of inches since we saw him last. He kept calling Rumplestiltskin 'sir' or 'Mr. O'Neal.'"

"Rumple has been going by the name 'Robert O'Neal.'"

"He called Trajan 'Master Trajan.' Not Tommy."

"Interesting," Regina replied. "That means Rumple's started telling him about his past. I wonder how far they've gotten in that discussion."

"They went into the garage, so I climbed down from the tree and went around to the Martels' yard to hide behind the garbage cans. I could see into the garage. Rumple set his box down on a workbench and unpacked. There were bits of wood and a bag of nails in it. He told Trajan they were going to work on a project together over the next few weeks. Working together is a good way for people to get to know each other, he said. Trajan wanted to know what the project was, and Rumple said they'd start out small, with a birdhouse, but eventually they'd work their way up to a Soap Box Derby car, whatever that is. So they started drawing a design and talking about what kind of bird it would be for, and where they'd erect it. They went out in the yard and searched the trees, and I was glad then that I hadn't stayed in the neighbor's tree. When they came back in the garage, they had decided the birdhouse would be for chickadees, which they'd spotted in their yard. So Rumple told Trajan, 'Your assignment for next week is to go to the library and get some books about chickadees. We need to know how big their house should be, and how big to make the opening.' Trajan said, 'And what's their favorite color, so we can paint it.'"

"Then Rumple checked his pocket watch and said he had to catch his bus, and at that point Trajan said, 'Hey, do I get my question? I didn't cuss or nothin' and I stood up when you came in the house.'"

Regina raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like he's been enforcing some old-fashioned rules of etiquette with the boy."

"Seems so, because Rumple reminded him he needed to say 'please,' and he did. 'Very good, Master Trajan,' Rumple said. 'You may ask your question.' Trajan's question was "You said I was born someplace else. Where?'"

Regina drew in a breath. "Uh oh."
"It was obvious that Rumple had prepared an answer, because he said he wasn't ready at this time to give a full answer, but he would tell him a part of it. They seem to have some sort of agreement that that's okay, because Trajan scowled but he didn't argue."

"That's Rumplestiltskin for you, making deals with kids."

"Rumple told Trajan he had been born and raised in a territory called 'Winkie Country' in a land called 'Oz.' 'But you won't find it on a globe or map. Someday I'll tell you why, but not yet. You were brought to Maine after your mother died. The people who brought you here thought you would be safer here than in Oz.'

"Then Trajan wanted to know his mother's name, but Rumple stood there like a statue holding his cane, and he said, 'Remember our agreement, Master Trajan. You've had your question for today. You'll have to save that question for another time' and he started to leave, but Trajan grabbed his coat and begged him to promise to come back, and he said, 'A gentleman honors his agreements. When the time comes that I cannot or need not return, I'll tell you first, and I will come to say goodbye. Now, it's nearly dark. Go inside and do your schoolwork.' And then he walked away."

"Hmm. It seems to be working out."

"Regina, he had that kid standing up when he entered the room, and saying 'please' and 'thank you' and 'sir,' and not once did he raise his voice or his hand to the kid. The same man who flogged the flesh off my back, and he treats Zelena's offspring like—"

"Like a gentleman."

"Yeah." Robin pulled at his earlobe now. "I can check on them again in a couple of weeks to make sure, but I got to say, for now anyway, I think Trajan's in good hands. I don't pretend to understand it."

"Perhaps it's just proof that anyone can change."

"I never would've believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

Rumple rested his forehead against the frosted window, the bite of the cold keeping him awake. So tired at the end of a busy week at the end of a very busy month, he still had hours to go before he could sleep.

If he could sleep tonight. When he'd answered Trajan's question about his birthplace, in the depth of his gut he'd felt a hot, sharp pain that had taken his breath. That pain was a warning that a dagger command was coming. In another moment his throat would tighten, locking down his voice, and his spine would stiffen and his head snap up and his hands drop whatever they were doing, because his Master wanted him. Whatever she asked of him—lap water from a dog dish, kidnap a baby, kill Belle—the magic that had infused every nerve, muscle and blood cell of his body so many years ago when he killed Zoso would jerk him into motion. Her will be done, the keeper of the dagger, not to be ignored, not to be disobeyed, not to be outsmarted.

Just talking, so vaguely and briefly, about his Master's home had brought him to this. How would it be next week when Trajan asked her name, or the week after when he asked how she had died?

Thank the gods, in body type and coloring, Trajan didn't resemble his mother, and since she'd had little to do with his upbringing, he had absorbed few of her mannerisms or speech patterns. Every now and then, however, a certain quirk of his lip or tilt of his head echoed Zelena to one who had spent a year in her "company."
That rule about answering just one question each session wasn't just a device for easing Trajan slowly into the truth. It was a device for decreasing the anxiety for Rumple as he resurrected the past.

Sweating in the cold, he fumbled for the list in his pocket: everyone he had helped. In the flickering light of passing street lamps, he read the list and practiced the meditative breathing Archie had taught him. He wished so much he could call any one of these people, just to hear a voice that could anchor him to the present, keep him from drifting back into her cage. But most of these people were beyond the reach of his phone, and it was too late at night to disturb the others. He couldn't talk about Zelena to Harry, Daniel or Jill, anyway. They'd think he'd snapped.

He extracted from his coat pocket the book he'd been reading this week. The light was insufficient for in-depth reading, but he was able to snatch enough moments of light to read one verse: "No one can push a boulder away while standing on it; you cannot be free from anxiety while all the entrances through which it sneaks in are open."

Repocketing the book, he closed his eyes and breathed.

"Hi, Rumple!" Belle gave a small wave and a big smile at the monitor. "I hope you don't mind, but Regina and Emma are here, and Henry, with some questions."

"We won't take up much of your time," Regina said in her wine-rich voice. "And I do apologize for intruding, but we've made no headway in our research. Could you spare a few minutes?"

(This extraordinary act of courtesy on the mayor's part became the topic of conversation during the Golds' alone time. "If I didn't know better," Rumple commented, "I'd say she actually respects us." "I do know better," Belle remarked. "She does. She really has changed. Not to say she isn't still occasionally selfish, rude, arrogant, intolerant and impatient; just not as consistently so, as she was in the past.")

But for now, as Regina settled onto Belle's couch, she was all business. "Well, I wanted to discuss some ideas I had for substitutions on the potion we've been developing, but first, what did you learn from the scrolls Henry emailed you?"

Rumple sat back in Daniel's office chair, making himself comfortable and steepling his fingers. This was his teaching posture of old, and though he went to it subconsciously, it put both him and his pupil into a more relaxed mode. As Regina listened intently, waited patiently through his rather longwinded and sometimes history-laden explanations, and asked, as she used to, practical questions, Henry took notes.

It felt good to be teaching again, Rumple had to admit as he came to the end of his instruction; it felt even better to see the expressions on his listeners' faces, which told him that, despite all the conflict that had passed between them, when it came to magic, they considered him not only the leading expert, but also the most trustworthy source. For a brief time, he slipped back into his memory of the Dark Castle days, when he tutored a young, impatient Regina, and then later, when he allowed Belle, who showed no Talent whatsoever but whose broad-reaching curiosity and deep reading of the books in his library made her his best student, to watch as he worked in his lab. Someday, if she chose, she could write a book about magic, her knowledge was that extensive, though gained strictly through reading, questioning and observing. It was a shame she lacked the smallest sparkle of ability to apply what she'd learned; her magic would have been quite artistic, delicately woven, beautiful to see.

He wondered if Henry had any level of Talent. If he had, it should manifest soon. He would have loved to stand beside him, watching him feel his power for the first time, guiding him gently.
Henry would have been a most interesting student, a theorist like Belle, yet a practitioner like Regina, and with his own talent for negotiation and persuasion, he would have eventually convinced Emma and Bae that magic need not be as corrupting as they thought it was.

Emma listened intently too, as Rumple instructed Regina and, indirectly, Henry. Her arms folded, she darted her eyes between the monitor and her son. It wasn't Rumple's knowledge or honesty that she doubted; it was the influence he had over Henry, as a mysterious, dangerous figure who'd hovered in the Storybrooke shadows all of Henry's life. And that influence had doubled, now that they shared the unbreakable bonds of blood and grief. She feared, not that Gold would hurt Henry or intentionally turn him dark, but that the temptation to connect with his father through his grandfather would lead Henry down the wrong path. But she knew from her own experience that she could only detour Henry, not push him away from his search for his family. So she listened and watched as her son took notes, his fingers flying on the keyboard, his expression no more or less fascinated than the one he wore when he did his algebra or chem homework.

Emma relaxed a little. After all, Regina would catch him and reel him back in if he got too involved with magic, and with half his bloodline consisting of Snow White and Prince Charming, the boy had too much goodness running through his veins to turn dark. As she listened to the gentle voice on the other end of the computer and watched quick glances of affection pass between Gold and Belle and Gold and Henry, she sized the man up again. If she'd just now met him, dressed as he was in a second-hand buttoned-down and faded jeans, his cane dangling from the back of his chair, he wouldn't have given her cause for concern, and not just because of his small size, his limp and his shaggy, more-gray-than-brown hair. It would have been his overlarge eyes, irises larger than normal, deep crow's feet drawing attention to them. In his eyes she saw shyness, as though he expected to be rejected, and humbleness, as though he felt as small as he looked, and a need to be accepted and loved—some of the same qualities she saw when she looked in the mirror.

Her head snapped up as Regina said, "Thank you, Mr. Gold, for your time. It's getting late, and we've intruded on your time with Belle for too long. We'll be going now." She rose, making a small gesture to Henry and Emma, and they too reached for their jackets. "Good night, Grandpa, and thanks," Henry said, sliding his Ipad into his jacket pocket. "Talk to you later."

Emma looked at the face in the monitor one last time. "Yeah, thanks. Good night. 'Night, Belle" was all she said, but a small sigh hidden under her words suggested she considered something else concluded besides the lesson. As she shrugged into her jacket, the tension had fallen away from her shoulders, and as she opened the front door and walked out onto the landing, she tilted her face toward the stars, and moonlight washed over her.

Out on the street, Henry asked, "So, we're okay. You'll let me talk to him again? And you won't censor what I write to him?"

She rested her arm across his shoulders and had to reach up to do it. "You're almost a man, Henry. You know what's right and what's wrong. Yes, you can talk to him about whatever you want." She opened her car door. "There's something different about him, and it's not just the lack of magic."

Henry slid into the passenger seat. "What do you mean?"

"I get the sense he wants us to like him."
Under his feet, the frozen grass crunched like potato chips, and Rumple's stomach growled. To catch the bus from the hospital to the Martels' suburban home, he must skip supper, and the granola bar that he consumed at the bus stop only whetted his appetite. As he walked up to the front door of the ranch house, he was working up some hints he could drop to inspire the Martels to invite him to stay after his visit for supper, although that would result in him missing the bus to the Greyhound station, which would result in missing the bus home. . . .

Instead of a birdhouse, he should have told the Martels he would teach Trajan how to cook.

He knocked, and Trajan opened the door to admit him. In the back of the house, where he presumed the kitchen was, he could hear the clatter of pans; in the living room, which the front door opened onto, four other kids were strewn about, draped on couches, lying on their bellies on the floor, or slumped in chairs in front of laptops. The kids were all several years older than Trajan, which Rumple figured might contribute to the battles that frequently broke out between him and them.

Trajan glared up at him. "You lied."

Rumple was thrown off-guard. "What?"

Trajan hissed again, "You lied. You said I came from Oz."

"That's the truth."

"It's a lie. I went to the library at school. I looked it up. Oz is a story. A made-up place." The deeper he went into his explanation, the angrier the kid got. His fists balled and a drop of spittle flew out of his mouth. "It isn't real. I asked the librarian to make sure." His fists unclenched and for a second Rumple dared hope he was gaining control of himself, but instead the boy pushed against Rumple's chest, knocking him backward. He stumbled, dropping his cane, and only the door at his back prevented him from falling. Trajan took advantage of this and punched at him, but his aim was off and his effort weak, and Rumple caught his fist and pushed back. Trajan stumbled, tripped over an untied shoe string and fell back onto his butt. Rumple left him there panting for several moments, then he silently picked up his cane, balanced himself, reached down and grabbed the boy's shirt and set him upright. Trajan's mouth fell open; obviously he'd assumed the old, lame man to be weak.

Rumple glanced past Trajan to the living room, where the four preoccupied children remained absorbed in their TV, laptops and game consoles. In the background a microwave dinged and a female voice ordered someone to set the table. "Remember our rules. Stand up straight and listen. I did not lie to you. As your distant memories have already informed you, there is much about your past that doesn't fit well with your present reality. And as the remains of that black eye"—he lightly touched Trajan's left cheek—"testify, you are different, very different, from those who were born here. Eventually I will reveal it all to you, but you're not ready to absorb the information yet. I see your question on your face, and though you've violated our agreement, I will answer it, and then tonight's session will be terminated. Nor will I return next week, because your behavior tonight warrants a harsher punishment. I will return the Friday before Thanksgiving, and we'll start over. Do you understand, Master Trajan?"
The boy's eyes widened but still he tried, oh, he tried, to remain defiant, to stand tough, and Rumple felt it all radiating from him: the fear, the anger, the insult at being betrayed, and overriding all, the sense of helplessness. Rumple wanted to embrace him and assure him he would be protected from the darkness in himself, and accepted in spite of it; Rumple remembered clearly as a child having yearned for his father, and later his aunts, to react to his own tantrums with sympathy and affection. But they'd ignored him (his father usually too drunk or self-absorbed to notice, his aunts informing him that bad behavior would not be rewarded with attention), and his tantrums would be short-lived, and by the age of five he'd given them up as ineffectual. A few years on, he'd learned the hard way that, being smaller and slighter than other boys, he needed to keep his feelings to himself; to express himself would invite taunts or worse. By his teen years, he'd figured out how to make himself nearly invisible to the village. It had saved him, as Henry would have phrased it, a buttload of beatings. Only after he'd acquired magic had his long-buried tendency to bully reemerged.

Trajan had to learn too. Not to become invisible, because that would only isolate him and make him a coward; not to wear his emotions on his sleeve in the desperate hope that someone would take pity and protect him; but to follow a healthier way. He would have to learn how to control his emotions while still firmly announcing his needs and declaring his right to be heard. Developing this strength in him would take years. In the meantime, he had to be taught that punching was an unacceptable way to express anger, and that forgiveness followed apology and punishment.

Rumple leaned on his cane, a signal to himself as well as the boy that he had control of his own emotions and, therefore, the situation. "Do you understand what I've just told you?"

"Yeah." But Trajan's lip curled; he wasn't ready to let go of his anger.

"You're not calm enough to listen," Rumple surmised. "So the most I can ask of you right now is to remember what I'm about to say so you can reflect on it later." With some struggle, he lowered himself to one knee and urged the boy to come closer so he could speak without being overheard by the living-room players. Trajan huffed but he did obey.

"Your birth name is Trajan. You come from a place called Oz. It's not just distant from Maine; it's inaccessible."

"What's that? 'Inaccessible'?"

"It means you can't get there from here. Or from there to here. Not by normal means. But there are some places in this world where people with special abilities and special knowledge can do the abnormal, the supernatural. When your mother died, knowing that your father wasn't involved in your life, two of those people went to Oz to fetch you. They were concerned that your caretakers in Oz couldn't raise you properly. I happen to think they were right to do so. When you are an adult and ready to make your own decisions, perhaps you will want to return to Oz, and perhaps it will be possible. For the time being, this is what you need to know—and believe: Oz exists. Because you were born there, you are different from them." He nodded towards the living room. "That doesn't mean you can't fit in; you need to, or you'll continue to bully and be bullied, and you'll never find peace or satisfaction in living like that. I can personally guarantee it. The Martels, Ms. Hall and I will do our best to help you adjust. You do that, and I promise you, when you reach adulthood you will be ready to choose your path in life. And you will have a choice." He sighed. "That's a lot to take in. Try to remember it and think about it over the next two weeks."

"Yes, sir." Trajan's anger had seeped away, replaced by confusion.

"Master Trajan, where were you born?"
"Oz. I was born in Oz."

"Very good." Rumple turned around and opened the door to leave. "By the time of my next visit, you will have a design drawn for our birdhouse. Mark on it the dimensions our chickadees require: the height, the width and the length of the house, and the size of the entry. You will also tell me how high the house needs to be placed on its pole, and where in the yard the house should be placed."

Trajan followed him out to the sidewalk. "How can I know all that?"

"Read. Ask the librarian for books."

Drained from all the energy she'd put into today's story time, Belle left the tidying up to her volunteers and started for the workroom with the intention of microwaving some Thai noodles and catching up on her astronomy homework during her lunch break, but as she passed by the library's entrance, she found a dark-suited, dark-haired figure standing at the circ desk. For just a second her heart leaped and a whispered "Rumple!" escaped, but then the visitor turned around and smiled coolly, and her heart fell back into its slow, steady rhythm. "Ms. Gold, good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Madame Mayor." Belle tucked her story time selection under her arm. "Have you come to check on the construction progress?"

"No, your monthly reports have been quite thorough. Thank you."

With a sweep of her hand, Belle invited Regina back into the workroom and offered her a chair. "Then you've come about the boundary curse."

"No, not today, and I'm not here about the paper Henry's writing about World War I." Regina smoothed her skirt as she sat down, and Belle, feeling a mess by comparison, patted her French braid back into place before moving to the sink.

"Tea or coffee?"

"No thanks," Regina said. "I won't be long; I have a lunch date." And Belle caught a faint blush in the queen's cheeks. "I came to ask if you have plans for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Well, I hadn't given it much thought, I've been so busy and Thanksgiving is three weeks away. I suppose I'll have my dad over, and probably Mr. Dove. Maybe buy one of Granny's banquets-in-a-box."

"Well, how would you like to come to my house? I'm holding an informal dinner party, starting at noon. Emma and Henry will be there, of course, and David and Snow and Baby Neal, the Lucases and Dr. Hopper. A button-down kind of thing. Your father and Mr. Dove will be welcome too."

"Oh!" Belle nearly dropped the mug she was filling with water. "I—thank you, Regina. I'll check with Dad, but I'm sure he'd been glad to."

"My caterer can adjust the menu to accommodate any dietary requirements."

"Uh, yeah, Dr. Whale put Dad on a low-sodium diet." Belle wondered just how much information Regina possessed on her constituents' medical conditions. "Is there anything I can bring?"

"Just yourself." Regina stood and brushed the back of her skirt again. "I wanted to say thank you for all the research you've been doing to help break this curse. And I know Henry and Emma feel the same. I'll be mailing out invitations later this week." She started to leave, but a pile of picture
books on the worktable caught her eye. "That reminds me, Robin and Roland will be joining us by
Skype. We could do the same for your husband."

"You. . . would. . . ?" Belle cleared her throat. "You would welcome Rumple at your party?"

Regina nodded. "It's not the same as having our loved ones at the table with us, but for now, it's the
best we can do."

Belle picked up a towel, presumably to dry her hands, but in reality, to give herself a distraction. "I
think. . . ." She bobbed her head. "Thank you, that's very nice. I'll ask him."

Regina paused, then said in a husky voice, "I've been reading The Scarlet Letter, along with Henry.
I know he's been discussing the book with you. It occurred to me. . . ." She drew in a breath. "Well,
the way Hester was treated for her adultery, it rang familiar for me; in the Enchanted Forest, I saw
so many women get treated badly because of the people they'd chosen to love. And I. . . and I. . . ."
She tightened her jaw. "I took advantage of that. After I captured you, I went to the Dark Castle
and I told Rumplestiltskin that the people of Avonlea thought you were tainted by your association
with him, and so your father summoned clergymen to purge you of the darkness by flogging you."

"To escape their torture, I jumped from a tower and killed myself," Belle finished, her own voice
shuddering. "Rumple told me what you'd said to him."

"It was how I kept him in line," Regina confessed. "If he went looking for you—"

"He would have found me."

"And that would have been the end of my partnership with him."

"But why did you lock me up in the first place?" Belle pondered. "I've always wondered about
that. You didn't use me to control him, which would have been the obvious thing."

"Oh no," Regina answered with a note of alarm. "I knew him too well for that. If he'd known then
that I had you in my tower, he would have rained down upon me such hell that I would never have
survived it. You'll find this an unsatisfying answer, Belle, but the truth is, I captured you on a
whim. You were there, and I grabbed you, simple as that. I instantly regretted it. I couldn't use you
and I couldn't let you go, and your presence in my castle put me at risk. It was a typically impulsive
act, but untypically stupid of me. I kept telling myself I'd think of some safe way to use you, but
—" She shrugged. "Anyway, I brought this up because Henry pointed out the similarities between
Hester Prynne's story and yours, and I felt guilty. Do feel guilty, for what I did to you and Rumple.
All the ways he and I tried to torment each other, this one went way over the line." She squared her
shoulders. "So, I just wanted to say I'm sorry." Her voice dropped. "I really am."

Belle could see no defensiveness in Regina's posture, so she let down her own guard. "I accept your
apology. And your invitation to dinner."

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"Of course we can!" Daniel exclaimed. "Nothing easier. The Coalition has a travel router we can
borrow, and I'll bring my laptop. We'll set it all up in the dining room and we'll all have
Thanksgiving dinner together, them and us. It'll be like having your side of the family and your
wife's side of the family get together for one big celebration."

"Thanks, padre. I'll clear it with Sue Ellen and Harry; don't want them to feel like I'm crashing their
party."

"Oh, they'll love it. And Sam will think it's the best show going, better than the Macy's parade. It'll
be like he's on television." Rumple could practically hear Daniel's grin across the phone. "I have to confess something, Robert: ever since you told me you were separated from your wife, I've been praying for you and her to have a second chance. I usually leave these decisions up to God—if people aren't meant to be together, He'll know. But the look on your face whenever you'd mention her, I couldn't help but butt in. So I hope the mending that you and she have been doing will continue, and that someday you'll see her again, face-to-face."

"Thank you, Daniel. I do too."

Bundled in a coat and tuque, Trajan was waiting beside the Martels' mailbox. He was hopping from foot to foot until Rumple, in his black wool coat, rounded the corner, and then he ran down the block to greet him. "You came back." Little clouds of condensation carried his words.

Rumple continued his trek toward the Martels' house, and the boy fell into step beside him.
"Gentlemen honor—"

"Their agreements," Trajan finished. He looked down at his red plastic boots, which cut patterns in the thin layer of snow decorating the sidewalk. His voice fell. "I'm sorry."

Rumple had to require him to face the bad thing he'd done, not hide behind a vague apology.
"What are you sorry for?"

The boy's voice fell even further. "For hitting you. Last time. And pushing you."

"I accept your apology. Tonight we start over. Have you completed your assignment? Have you completed the birdhouse design?"

"Yeah—yes, sir. It's on the kitchen table. Mrs. Martel says to tell you supper is ready and would you please join us because next week is Thanksgiving and we want to say thank you, because, you know, you teach me."

"I would be honored to be your guest, and I thank you for the invitation. Now, before we go in and join your family, tell me why we should build our birdhouse. Why do birds matter to us?" Rumple felt a pressure on his free hand and he glanced down to find a mitten seeking out his glove. He opened his hand and allowed Trajan to clutch it. They walked down the block and across the lawn to the front door, mitten in glove, as Trajan recited lines he'd memorized from the books he'd read. "And we need to get a feeder and put sunflower seeds in it. And peanut butter—they like peanut butter! I want to see them eat peanut butter."

"That would be amusing."

"Mr. Martel says he'll buy a feeder when we finish the birdhouse."

"Very good. I shall look forward to the day our first bird eats from the feeder and sleeps in the birdhouse."

Trajan opened the front door, but before Rumple stepped inside, the boy said, "Mr. O'Neal?"

"Yes?"

"I'm also sorry I said you lied. Because you didn't."

"I will never lie to you, Trajan."

"I won't lie to you either."
Rumple offered his hand. "Let's make that a new agreement and shake on it."

"Because we're gentlemen." Trajan accepted the handshake.

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"This is incredible." Harry shook his head in amazement as Daniel finished setting up the router and laptop on an accent table he'd parked beside Sue Ellen's twelve-seat dining table. "What a world we live in, eh, Sammo?"

Sam glanced over his shoulder at the laptop and shrugged: he'd been Skyping most of his life, so this was no big deal to him. He was far more interested in the platters and bowls that his mom, Sue Ellen and Rumple were carting in from the kitchen. Every so often, when a new serving dish was set down on the table and the adults turned their backs, he'd pluck at the food, stealing bits of turkey, marshmallow yams, mashed potatoes, Jello and rolls—the cranberry sauce and the salad he ignored.

"All righty then." Daniel straightened and brushed his hands against his slacks, and then he too cast a longing glance at the ever-growing banquet. He pressed the power button and as he waited for the laptop to warm up, he snatched an almond-covered string bean from a bowl. Just at that moment, Sue Ellen rounded the corner from the kitchen, carrying a bowl of pudding and a serving spoon; she used the latter to smack Daniel's wrist. "Shame on you, Father, setting a bad example for our young guest!"

"Sorry, Sue Ellen." Daniel hung his head but when she returned to the kitchen he winked at Sam. "Rumple! I've got the group call set up."

That summons brought everyone away from the kitchen and even drew Sam from the food, momentarily. "Just click the call button," Daniel instructed. Rumple turned a chair sideways so he could face the laptop, and he made his connection with bated breath. His Portland family gathered around him as Skype buzzed, and Sam slid into his lap.

"Hi, darling!"

The Portlanders cheered as the bluest eyes in Maine lit up the monitor. "Belle!" A lump formed in Rumple's throat, preventing him from saying more, but Sam saved the day. "Hi, I'm Sam! Are you Belle?"

Belle laughed and waved. "Yes! Hi, Sam. I'm pleased to meet you at last. I feel like I know you already, from Rumple's emails and your mom's blog."

Sam reached up to grab his mother's elbow. "Belle! This is my mom! But you should call her Jill."

"Hi, Jill!"

"Hi, Belle!"

"And congratulations on the Hillman, Jill," a male voice butted in, and Belle shifted her laptop a little so that Henry's face appeared in the camera. "I'm Henry, by the way, and I'd love to ask you some questions, because I'm going to be a journalist too."

"Sure, Henry, I'd be glad to."

"Before we get twenty different conversations going at once, let's make introductions." Rumple had found his voice. "Sweetheart, you start on your end."

As Belle moved her laptop around and introduced each guest at Regina's table, the Portlanders sat
down, moving their chairs away from the irresistible meal and squeezing them in as close as possible to the accent table. By prior agreement, the Storybrookers used their "American" names and had been cautioned to avoid any mention of magic. When Belle came around to Dove and introduced him, the raucous tone shifted for a moment as the loyal employee and his grateful boss exchanged a greeting that surpassed words. "Good to see you again, Mr. G.," the big man bent his head in acknowledgement. "Good to see you too, Mr. Dove," Rumple replied softly. "And thank you."

Then it was Regina's turn, and after she exchanged greetings with Rumple and the Portlanders, she announced, "And these two handsome gents coming in from New York are my fiance Robin and his son Roland."

Robin barely got a hello in before Roland butted in: "I got an Amazing Spiderman!" He displayed it for Sam, who pronounced it "Cool" and started chattering about his own toy collection.

"Wait, wait, boys," Regina insisted. "After dinner, we'll give you ten minutes to talk together about Spiderman and Iron Guy and the Hunk, okay? But for now, let the grown-ups talk."

Rumple nodded his approval and said quietly, "You've made a mother of the fine sort, Regina."

She raised her eyebrows. "Thank you, Rumple."

Belle brought her laptop around to Archie now, who was grinning ear-to-ear. "Happy Thanksgiving, everyone."

"Happy Thanksgiving, Dr. Hopper." With a sweep of his hand, Rumple indicated the entire party. "This is possible because of you."

"And because of you, Mr. Gold. Well done."

Belle leaned over to kiss the psychiatrist's cheek. She returned to her seat next to Henry, resettled the laptop beside her and brushed her palm against her eyes. "And that's us. Now it's your turn, Rumple."

One by one, each of the Portlanders, excepting Sam, was introduced—Sam had snuck back to the dinner table and was gnawing on a turkey wing he'd yanked off. Realizing that it would be impossible for their guests to remember so many names, Regina had made placecards for her side and Sue Ellen had made name tags. "May I suggest, for the sake of order, we have a system for communication, so everyone doesn't talk at once?" Regina suggested.

Snow provided the method. "If you want to talk, raise your hand."

"Like in school!" Sam chirped. Everyone looked around at him, and then he realized his mistake. He set the stolen wing back onto the platter and mumbled, "Oh oh."

"Sam, swiping food is rude," Jill chastised him, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Am I punished?"

"You'll write me a paragraph about dinner manners—tomorrow."

He grinned, revealing the gap in his teeth.

"He has a point," Sue Ellen said. "The food's getting cold. Now that we all know each other, let's eat."
A scraping of chairs and a clatter of silverware as everyone on both sides of the Internet prepared for the task of dining, and then Daniel stood up again, raising his hand. "I'd like to say the blessing. I know each of us in this gathering has his or her own beliefs, so if you would prefer not to join me, I understand. But for those of us who are believers, if you'll bow your heads. . . ." And he offered up a brief prayer of thanks. The Storybrookers sat quietly, their heads lowered respectfully, until Daniel opened his eyes and sat down again. "Sue Ellen, Rumple, Jill, this meal has been tantalizing me all morning."

"Thank you, Father," Sue Ellen said. "It's been a long time since I had a household to cook for. I hope I remembered how."

"You always do just fine for me," Harry assured her as he reached for the carving knife. "Thanks for getting the bird started for me, Sammo."

As platters were passed and plates and glasses filled at both tables, conversations sprang up between the two parties. Even Sam, having gotten into trouble once, remembered to raise his hand when he wanted to say something across the Internet. From government policies concerning homelessness and substance abuse to recipes for apple pie, everyone found someone across the Internet divide to share thoughts with.

When the meals were finished, Sam and Roland got their promised ten minutes, then were sent off for baths, and Henry got his career advice from Jill. At last, with the dishes cleared away, the adults bade their new acquaintances goodbye and retreated to living rooms to watch football, leaving the Golds alone with the laptops.

"We did good, didn't we, darling?" Belle said.

"We did very good."

"Sam's a cutie. I wish—" Belle interrupted herself and shook her head.

"What is it you wish, sweetheart? It's all right. You can say it." He touched the monitor with his fingertips.

Her voice dropped. "I wish we had one like him." She cocked her head. "Is that okay? We never talked about having children."

"No, we didn't."

"I thought about it," she admitted. "But I thought you might not want to."

"What made you think that?"

"Well, after Bae. . . ."

"I've thought about us having children too." He pulled at his lower lip. "I used to think it would be best if we didn't. I'm the Dark One. I already know what kind of parent that makes me. But lately. . . ." He cast a glance over his shoulder to something she couldn't see. "With Sam and Trajan, I think maybe I have something to offer a child."

"When we bring down the barrier, can we start again? It's not too late for us, is it?"

"No, sweetheart, it's not too late."

A laugh in the background caused Belle to look over her shoulder. "That's Regina—laughing!"
"I don't think I've heard her laugh before," Rumple mused.

"If she and Robin can—"

"We can. Sweetheart, thank you for today. This has been one of the happiest days I've had in many years."

"Me too, Rumple." Her hand reached out abruptly, then slowly withdrew as she remembered she couldn't actually touch him. "Shall we do it again at Christmas?"

He nodded, but he meant something quite different from the Skype session she was referring to. "At Christmas."
They'd finished cutting the pine into five segments and now they were studying their diagram to figure out just how the pieces should fit together. Trajan bounced on the bench, still a bit overexcited from having operated a saw for the first time. Rumple's hands had guided the saw, but it had been Trajan's hands, underneath Rumple's, that had actually moved the mighty blade. He was struggling to calm down in the realization that a little quiet concentration was called for right now, and Rumple gave him full marks for effort. "It's time to pound in the nails," he said.

Trajan hooted and ran off to his foster father's toolbox to fetch a hammer. "I never hammered before."

"Take a deep breath then, and shake your hands." Rumple demonstrated. "Like this, to get the all nervousness out. Hammering is a subtle skill, requiring a steady hand and an eagle eye."

Trajan lay the hammer onto the workbench and jumped up and down, shaking his hands at his sides. After a deep breath, he plunked down on the bench. "I'm ready."

Rumple took Trajan's hand in his and positioned it on the hammer. "Hold it firmly but not tight. Good. Now the nail in your left hand. . . ." Rumple reached into the paper sack for a galvanized nail. He held it between his thumb and forefinger for Trajan to take, but in the moment before the boy accepted the nail, a streak of pain rushed up Rumple's spine and took residence in the base of his skull. He heard a harsh laugh in the back of his mind. "That's Milah's. The first nail in the coffin."

"No." Later he would wonder if he'd said that aloud.

"And one for Malcolm. And one for Zoso."

"Mr. O'Neal? What's wrong?" Trajan shook his shoulder.

"And one for me."

"Mr. O'Neal?" Trajan patted his face now. "Please, Mr. O'Neal! Should I get Mr. Martel?"

"Trajan!" Rumple opened his arms and Trajan sank into them, clutching the front of Rumple's suit jacket. Nails clattered to the concrete floor as Rumple drew the boy in closer. Trajan's cheek pressed against the J. C. Penney tie. Rumple sucked in a breath. "It's okay. I'm okay. I just need a moment. A headache, that's—" He stopped himself. He'd vowed never to lie to Trajan, and even if it meant sparing the boy anxiety, he wouldn't break his vow. But he needed to bring his pounding heart back into its normal rhythm before he tried to speak, so he rested his cheek against Trajan's head and patted the boy's back.

After a while Trajan pulled back. "Do you want some water?"

"That would be good."

The boy started for the house, but Rumple called to him, "Don't alarm your parents, Trajan. I'm almost fine now; let's not mention this episode to them."

Trajan frowned but gave a nod before running off. He returned with a tumbler of warm water,
which Rumple sipped slowly. "Thank you."

"They're not my parents."

"I'm sorry?"

"You called them my parents. They aren't."

"Oh."

Trajan bent down to pick up the fallen nails. He dropped them into the sack, then sat down beside Rumple. "What happened to you?"

"It's, ah, hard to explain. Something bad happened to me about two years ago, and since then, sometimes, I . . ." He shrugged. "The memories come back and they make my head hurt."

"Did somebody hurt you?"

"Yes." He squeezed Trajan's shoulder. "But don't worry. A doctor has been helping me." He picked up the pieces of wood and set them carefully into the box they'd been storing them in. "Let's put the birdhouse aside for tonight. Put everything back on the counter, please."


"No, not yet."

Trajan scampered to complete his tasks as Rumple finished drinking the water. "Okay, come and sit down, and let's talk for a while. You know, we'll soon be done with our birdhouse. Let's talk about our next project. How would you like to learn a game? An ancient game that tests your courage and your cleverness?"

Trajan beamed, reassured that he hadn't lost his mentor.

DECEMBER 2015

"The furniture's outdated, but then, so am I." Rumple emptied the contents of his jacket pocket—keys, phone, wallet—onto the counter, then reached into the box he'd carried in for a couple of mugs. "Thanks for driving me up here. Tea? Coffee?"

Daniel raised a finger in a stop gesture. "Better. Be right back." He trotted down the stairs—three flights; he'd noticed how Rumple had struggled to get up them—fetched two bags from his SUV and chugged back upstairs, slower this time. Setting the bags down on the counter, he reached into it with a dramatic flourish. "Ta-da! Housewarming wine. But just a smidge, because I'm driving."

"'A smidge' it is," Rumple repeated, uncorking the bottle. "Thanks. And not just for the wine." He filled Daniel's cup, then his own, then saluted him. "You've been a good friend."

"You too, Robert. I'm gonna miss our weekly dessert sessions." Daniel unzipped the second bag and set its contents onto the kitchen table. "For you, from the Coalition. It's refurbished but it works like new."

The gift was a Vaio laptop. Rumple ran an admiring hand over its top. "It's beautiful."

"You'll need it for all those college essays. And I'm hoping you'll Skype me every now and then."

"Thanks, Daniel. I'll get wi-fi hooked up tomorrow." He smiled proudly. "I can afford it now."
"Don't forget, if you get any time off at Christmas, come down. I do a beautiful midnight mass on Christmas Eve."

"I'm sure you do. But I'm afraid you'll never convert me, though I don't mind you trying." Rumple led them into the living space—since the apartment consisted of one room, it wouldn't have been accurate to call the space the "living room." They seated themselves, Rumple on a ripped up leather easy chair, Daniel on a worn fabric couch. "I'm still reading across the religions." Rumple gestured to a stack of books on the coffee table. "So you see, you did get through to me on some level."

Daniel picked up the top book, the Quran, and glanced at the cover before setting it down again. "What have you learned?"

Rumple sat back in his chair, sipped his wine and thought a moment. "So far? That no matter where you live, or when, or how, everyone needs something to believe in, something beyond this life and this earth. Something more powerful than humankind, but at the same time, wiser and kinder, capable of infinite forgiveness. And most importantly, capable of unwavering, everlasting love."

"God," Daniel supplied. When Rumple didn't answer, he pressed a little more. "You said 'everyone.' Everyone needs God. Including you?"

"I need... something bigger than this world to have faith in." He reflected over the beliefs he'd held throughout his lifetime. As a small child, he'd placed his faith in his father, but that had quickly soured. Under his aunts' tutelage and the influence of the village in which they lived, he'd come to believe in a hodgepodge of witchcraft, animism and polytheism. As a young man, he'd come to believe that whatever gods there might be out there, they had no interest in the likes of him, so he focused his attention on something attainable: family. Then the Dark One had taken over his life, and from then on, his faith had been placed firmly and solely in magic. He'd been an obedient to its laws, a dedicated student of its texts, a loyal practitioner of its rites and rituals. It, too, had failed him, or he had failed it. Or maybe both. He didn't know what he believed in any more, but he did understand why people like Daniel had reached out for God as they had, and he wished for himself the same peace of mind that they had.

"You'll find it," Daniel assured him. "The important thing is, you're seeking, and God always opens the door to seekers."

The phone rang, and Rumple went to the kitchen to answer it. When he returned, he was grinning. "That was Harry, wishing me luck. And it seems Sue Ellen has already been decorating the house for Christmas."

Daniel grinned too. "Can't wait. I better get going. If you need anything, call." Rumple walked him out to the landing.

"See you, Robert." Daniel patted his shoulder.

"Thanks, padre." He watched as the SUV backed out onto Deuel Drive. Then he went inside, put some soup into the microwave for supper, and sat down to read.

Tucked inside one of the books he found a handwritten note: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you."

"And this is the kitchen. As you can see, it's too small for a table, but there's a bar with two stools
—the apartment came furnished—and there's a dishwasher, and a microwave built into the stove."

He held his new-to-him laptop against his chest to support it, the monitor facing out so she could see the rooms of his new apartment, but he couldn't see her reaction. And just as well, because as he showed her around the cramped kitchen with its 1970s avocado refrigerator and its plywood cupboards—four of them, not even enough to contain their glassware back in the now non-existent pink house—she winced. She held in a regretful sigh, mentally kicking herself; they'd had so much fun cooking together in the spacious, stainless-steel kitchen back home, where they'd had every piece of equipment a chef could want, from a garlic press to a breadmaker. Their Wedgewood & Bentley china, their Waterford crystal, their Reed & Barton sterling silver flatware—he'd moved in his kitchen like a prince moving among his subjects, and now, look what he was reduced to: Melmac plates, Walmart pots and pans. When she banished him from Storybrooke, she took away his beautiful kitchen, his Vividus mattress, his Turkish cotton bath towels, his Dolce & Gabbana suits. . . .

"This is the latest photo Henry emailed me. That's a driver's ed car he's leaning against—I guess you know he's been taking driving lessons. And here's one of him with his pre-SAT scores, grinning so hard he must've gotten a jaw ache. And this is a drawing Sam made of his downstairs neighbor's dog, and a photo of him and Jill at the zoo—she had to buy them a season pass, they go so often. And them at Thanksgiving—that's Harry lifting him up so he could put the dishes away. I ran out of space on the refrigerator, so I've been sticking stuff on the cupboards: that photo is Trajan with Jack Martel, and here's Trajan learning how to use a measuring tape, and this drawing is one of the early drafts of his birdhouse design: he wanted to shape the birdhouse like an airplane. He's fascinated by planes. One of these days I'll take him to the airport to watch the planes take off. And this is his mid-term report card; the Martels wanted me to have it. C's in everything except language arts; his reading comprehension is still behind the curve, but we're working on that. When it's too cold to work in the garage, we sit in the den and he reads to me. He's working extra hard in math because he wants to be an aeronautics engineer. . . ."

As she listened, the regret clutching at Belle's throat released its grip, chased away by a strange new thought: Rumple didn't have his Waterford and his D & G and his big pink house or for that matter, even so much as a Discover card, but as he gave her the grand tour of his studio apartment, he spoke with pride, especially as he linger over the photos and drawings tacked up throughout. In the corner, next to the fold-out couch, he had a Christmas tree, festooned with popcorn strings (and under its branches she spied several wrapped packages). He'd never bought a Christmas tree before.

"And that's it. I'm on the third-story, which is kind of rough, particularly when there's ice on the steps, but it's a start. I'll be making more money now, so I'll be able to save a bit, and eventually I'll either move to a bigger place or buy a car. I'm in walking distance of U of M and a single bus-ride to work; two buses to the Martels'. Best of all, we can chat more often now."

"And in private," she added. "You're smiling."

"Am I?"

"Are you happy, Rumple?"

"I guess I am." She followed his gaze as it shifted to the Christmas tree. "Just a few things missing for me to be content."

A jealous little monster in Belle's head tossed up the possibilities: power, magic, money. But as she looked past his shoulder to the framed photos on his living-room wall, she beat down that monster with a stick, because right there in those frames was the explanation of what he missed: Baelfire,
Henry and her. The dragon-tamer in Belle's head rose up and demanded that as soon as this call concluded, she should phone Regina and get back to work. They had a curse to break, because her husband deserved to be content.

----------------------------------------------------

Oh, this was going to be a cakewalk! His first day on the new job began at 9 a.m. and would end at 6 p.m. At the moment, the Augusta Phoenix House was unoccupied, the building not quite ready for residents: Rumple had been summoned up a month before the grand opening so that he could prepare the kitchen. He would be selecting the ovens and stoves, the pots and pans, the utensils; he would stock the pantry and the refrigerators. He would even be involved in hiring the junior cook and the two dining room attendants. As he stepped off the bus, he slipped his current reading selection, the Dhammapada, into his coat pocket, one verse in particular lingering in his thoughts: "For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule." He would like to discuss this verse with Daniel—and now he could, by Skype, when he got home at 6:30 (6:30! Not 4 a.m. His toes wriggled as he relished that thought.). Rumple had had three centuries of living that proved the truth in that verse.

After January 1, his work schedule would become more challenging as he began cooking again, and as he added two college classes to his week. The Dark One, an undergrad. What would Bae have made of that? Rumple would give anything for a chance to ask him.

As he walked through the staff parking lot to the back entrance, he paused to admire the new building in which he'd spend the biggest part of his days to come. He took some photos to send—he had so many people now to share photos with. He barely leaned on his cane at all as he pushed the back door open and entered his new kitchen.

A box of kolaches and a note waited for him on his worktable: "Welcome, Robert, and good luck from your old friends at the Portland Phoenix." And a voice called to him from the dining room: "Is that you, Mr. O'Neal?" Heels clattered and his kitchen doors swung and a pant-suited woman who looked exactly like Granny Lucas, except without the snarky attitude, entered, her hand already extended to shake his. "Hi, I'm Carolina Hotchkiss. Call me Carolina. May I call you Robert?"

"Of course." He shook her hand.

"I've heard great things about you." She planted her hands on her hips and surveyed the kitchen with its gaping holes. "I can't wait to try those famous cinnamon rolls of yours—and to finish this kitchen! It looks so barren without the appliances. But every good cook I've ever known as been picky about their equipment, so we've been waiting for you to come so you can make the selections yourself. Kip—that's our maintenance guy—he'll be back in a minute; he's out washing the van. All that slush we've had this week! As soon as he gets here he'll drive you over to Winthrop; there's a restaurant supply company there called C. Caprara. Take your time shopping; go back tomorrow if you need to. Most important thing is to get a kitchen you'll be happy with." She chattered on, but he didn't mind a bit. His mind kept wandering back to what she'd said first: "I've heard great things about you."

Heard great things. About him. Huh!

----------------------------------------------------

Slowly, painfully quietly, Geri eased open the door to Mayor Mills' elegant office and not for the hundredth time wished the mayor had chosen carpeting—the thicker, the better—instead of marble and granite for her floor. Ah, but Geri had learned her lesson long ago; these days, when she entered the office while Ms. Mills was on the phone, she pulled her heels off first and pattered barefoot to the desk. Regina had her back turned to the door; she was staring out the window onto the Court House lawn, upon which—oh gods! Geri could see it for herself and she cringed: some
joker had built a snowwoman upon which sat the head of a string mop, with the strings dyed black. A black blazer had been slipped over the stick arms, and in the place where the snowwoman's mouth should be, a shiny red apple had been stuck.

Geri laid the morning mail onto Regina's desk and hurried out again, typing and cringing and typing and cringing because any minute now Mount Mills was gonna blow and Geri was gonna drown in all that lava.

A click. The phone had been disconnected. Any minute now.

And there it was! A burst of sound-Regina exploding—no, Regina exploding with laughter! And Regina yelling—no, calling—"Geri, bring your phone! You have a better camera than mine does. I want a picture of this—Robin will crack up!"

Well. Geri fumbled in her purse for the phone. Will wonders never cease.

Regina opened the small ivory envelope atop the stack of morning mail. Inside was an embossed ivory card, an invitation: "You are cordially invited"—Regina paused here to check the envelope again, to make sure it was addressed to her—"The Honorable Regina Mills plus one"—"cordially invited to attend an engagement party"—Regina paused again to check the return address on the envelope: Gertrude Lucas, 3611 Moncton—"party given in honor of Ruby and Archie on December 19, 6 pm, Granny's Diner."

Huh! Regina wondered what the rules of etiquette had to say about bringing along a "plus one" via Skype.

"—And Ruby and I would like to invite you and Belle." Archie concluded. "Of course, we'd rather have you there in person—"

Rumple suspected that "we'd" really meant "I'd"; the Lucases had never trusted either Rumplestiltskin or Gold.

"But if you could attend via Skype, at least we could see you."

"Archie, that's wonderful news. Congratulations!"

"We've set the wedding for June 1. We hope you and Belle will be there too; we'll send our formal invitations in May. We want to hold it at Mills Lake, a sunrise ceremony."

"That will be lovely. You're going to need a bigger apartment. As Belle's and my gift, I'd like to offer you an apartment, rent-free in perpetuity. Mr. Dove can show you what's available."

"Mr. Gold, that's—that's tremendously generous—too much—"

"Don't turn it down, Archie, for money's sake. What you've done for Belle and me can never be repaid. Emma may be the savior, but you're the mender."

"Then—thank you. We accept. Ruby will be over the moon."

"And I would be delighted to attend your engagement party. Belle can borrow Henry's Ipad so I'll be more portable." Rumple quirked a grin. "Thank you for the invitation. I've never been to a wedding before, other than my own."
"Never?"

"I know, that’s saying something, for a guy who’s three hundred and fifty years old. Best of luck to you, Archie. Ruby's a remarkable woman."

Archie blushed. "She is. She certainly is."
Space heaters that the Martels had installed in the garage had made the space comfortable enough for Rumple and his mentee to work on their birdhouse, but Trajan was unusually silent as Rumple set a can of paint on the work bench. Rumple said, "I brought green. Thanks to your research, we know now our chickadees will be happiest if their home blends into the scenery." He pried off the lid and presented Trajan with a stirrer. "Here, stir the paint."

Rumple watched him as Trajan gave a few half-hearted swishes to the paint. "What's wrong, Trajan?"

The boy tightened his chin. "I don't want to say."

"Why don't you want to say?"

Trajan's voice and his gaze dropped. "Because you'll leave."

Rumple thought for a moment. "I can't promise that I won't, if you've done something that warrants punishment. But I will promise I'll listen carefully to whatever you have to say before I make any decisions. Is that fair?"

Trajan shrugged.

"I prefer a spoken answer."

Trajan struggled within himself—between the relief that would come from unburdening and the fear that his listener would despise him. Rumple had felt that exact same conflict many times, and not just in childhood. Waiting for Trajan to open up, Rumple had a pretty good idea now how Belle must have felt during their marriage.

"I got in a fight."

Rumple removed the stirrer from Trajan's hand and inspected the knuckles, then pushed up his sleeve and inspected his forearm. "I see. You've sustained minor lacerations and contusions."

Distracted by the vocabulary lesson, Trajan momentarily forgot to pout. "What's that? Lassations and confusions?"

"Lacerations are cuts. Contusions are bruises. But it sounds so much more dangerous to say 'lacerations and contusions,' doesn't it?" Rumple rolled the sleeve back down and returned the stirrer to Trajan. "Fortunately, your injuries are reparable. I heard about this fight. I'm glad you decided to tell me. How did the fight come about?"

"There was three of 'em." Trajan peered up through his eyelashes, hoping his account would impress Rumple. "Two of 'em was third-graders."

"Were," Rumple corrected.

"Were," Trajan repeated obediently. "They jumped me at recess."

"Go on."
"I was—were—"

"'Was.'"

"I was playin' wizard." The boy abandoned the stirrer and held his palm upright. "Like this." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Except I wasn't really playin'. I was tryin'."

"Trying to what? Conjure?" Starting to feel uncomfortable with the direction this conversation was headed, Rumple shifted on the bench.

"What's 'conjure'?"

"Use magic to make something happen."

"Yeah. Sometimes I try..." He rubbed his forehead as if a headache had come upon him. "Sometimes I sort of remember."

"You saw someone conjure something."

"Yeah. My mother." He stared at his empty palm. "She did like that and she made things appear. Like once she made a peach for me. And a lot of times she made fire. She would throw it at the fireplace and the wood would catch on fire, and then the room would be warm."

Rumple's heart stopped. Would this be the end already? Would he have to tell Trajan so soon what he'd done to Zelena? "What else do you remember about your mother?"

"She was green." He rubbed his cheek. "Her skin. Everywhere. She had red hair. She was gone a lot."

"Do you remember her name?"

He shook his head. "Just 'Mother.' Or 'Sabrina,' I think."

Rumple made a quick decision. "Her name was Zelena. With a 'z.'"

Trajan looked up hopefully. "Did you meet her?"

"Yes. Long before you were born."

"In Oz?"

"No, she came to my home. She wanted me to teach her."

"Teach her... how to read?" Trajan guessed, but the brightness in his eyes revealed his real guess was quite different.

"No. She was a grown woman when she came to see me—or, almost. She was very unhappy. She wanted me to help her."

Now Trajan got to the point. "Help her conjure?"

"Yes."

Trajan leapt to his feet. "You can do magic! I knew it! You can! Teach me how!"

"No, Trajan, I can't. I—"
The boy grabbed Rumple's arm. "Yes, you can. You taught her. Why won't you teach me?"

"I can't." Rumple spread his hands. "Magic doesn't exist here. Do you remember I told you there are special places where people with special knowledge can do supernatural things? That's what I was talking about. Magic exists only in certain special places. Not in Augusta, not in Portland."

"In Oz and Misthaven," Trajan remembered.

"Yes. And we can't go to either of those places."

"I will," he said stubbornly. "When I'm grown up."

"Listen, Trajan; this is very important." Rumple lifted the boy's chin and watched him closely. "The people in this land don't believe magic exists anywhere, because they've never seen it. They think it's fiction—pretend. And since we have no magic here, we can't prove them wrong, can we?"

"I guess not, but—"

"Trajan, you must not talk to them about magic. Not to your teachers or classmates or your foster family, or anyone else who wasn't born in Oz or Misthaven, because they won't believe you, and they'll think—"

"I'm lyin'. That's what they always say. I'm lyin' or I'm crazy." Trajan flopped onto the bench again. "And I can't do nothin' because there's no magic here."

"That's right. You'll never convince them, and the longer you argue with them, the worse it will get for you. You can't win that fight, Trajan. But listen: for now, it's enough that you know you're right. That you and I know you're right."

"I can talk to you about magic, can't I?"

"It will have to be our secret for now. Someday, maybe we'll meet others who know, but for now, keep it a secret. It's very important you do that. I need for you to learn how to get along in this world. That's why I'm here, because I had to learn it too, and because I owe you a debt."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not ready to talk about it yet, and you're not ready to listen. But I took something from you, and so I need to help you manage to have the best life you can here. I can't make things right, but I can make things a little better for you. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Do you understand what I said about not talking to other people about magic? Just you and me?"

Trajan inspected his bruised fist. "Yeah."

"Do we have an agreement, Master Trajan? You will tell no one about magic or Oz or Misthaven?"

"Yeah." The boy shook his head. "I don't want 'em to call me crazy any more."

Rumple slid an arm around the kid's shoulders. "You aren't. You know something they don't. Something they never will. You have far to go, Trajan. You must learn how to live in this world. That means learning how to get along with the people here, and learning how to appreciate them and everything this world has to offer. It has no magic, but it's special just the same, and the people
here can be quite wonderful." He stroked Trajan's hair, as his aunts used to do for him, centuries ago. . . as Belle used to do for him, just a short time ago. "Though they don't believe as we do, be tolerant; their beliefs are based on the laws of this world, just as ours were shaped by Oz and Misthaven. Open your ears and your heart to them, because no matter where we came from, we all need the same things: understanding, kindness, love." He tilted his head to make eye contact. "As for the bullies, you'll find them everywhere. Don't add to that population. Let's talk now about better ways to deal with bullies." He patted Trajan's injured knuckles. "Ways that will safeguard your body as well as your ego."

"Aren't you going to punish me?"

Rumple reflected upon the form of punishment that Jill favored; he found essay writing suitable for this occasion. "Yes. And I appreciate the fact that you recognize the need for it. Mr. Martel had to leave his job to go talk to the principal of your school. I think you owe your punishment to him. Write him a letter of apology. And then I want you to go to the library and read some books that will answer this question: why do birds matter?"

Trajan raised his eyebrows. "You're not going to leave?"

"Not this time. I think there's more to learn from your fight than a lesson in manners. Now bring the brushes over."

A weight had lifted from the boy's shoulders and the difference showed as he trotted to the counter.

Emma tapped the invitation against her fingernails as she considered her options. Deep down, though, she already knew what she would do; she only needed to find the nerve to act on it. Killian would have heard about this party—probably hadn't received an invitation of his own, as Archie didn't know him at all and Ruby knew him only well enough to prepare his to-go coffee correctly. This was the time, though. Couples tended to look upon engagement parties as excuses for ramping up their own romances, as if Killian needed an excuse.

She made two quick phone calls, in both cases, reaching voice mail: "Uhm, Killian? Can you meet me at the pier after work? We need to talk."

"Regina? Is Henry's dress suit at your place? The navy blue one? I'm going to take him as my 'plus one' to Archie and Ruby's party."

"Birds do many good things that help people and the planet. Birds carry seeds around and that helps plants to grow. Birds eat insects like roaches and wasps which we don't like. Birds have nice music. Some birds are good pets. Some birds lay eggs that we eat. Some birds have pretty feathers that we make things with. Birds are good and we should take care of them. The End." Trajan folded his Big Chief sheet into neat fourths as he nervously waited Rumple's judgment.

"Very good, Trajan. More than I expected. Much more." It wasn't just the essay that Trajan had gifted his mentor with: since 5:20, the boy had been standing on a chair so he could watch out the window embedded into the front door. As soon as Rumple had passed the mailbox, Trajan had jumped off his chair and pushed it out of the way, and by the time Rumple had stepped onto the porch, Trajan was waiting in the open doorway.

The sight stirred an old memory for Rumple, of little Bae watching and waiting from the doorway of their hovel as Rumple hobbled home from market. Rumple hid his emotions behind the chore of knocking snow off his boots. By the time he looked at his mentee, he'd regained control and could greet the boy without his voice breaking.
They were perched on their workbench in the garage, with their completed birdhouse sitting on the table awaiting their judgment.

"Now you know the benefits that birds bring to this world. There was another reason that I had you study this subject, not just to learn about our chickadees. You also learned that insects have a purpose, and plants—"

"Because they feed birds," Trajan said.

"And they have other functions too." Rumple reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "Hold out your hand, Master Trajan." As the boy made his palm available, Rumple fished some change from his wallet. "Count." One by one, he dropped pennies into Trajan's palm.

"Five."

Rumple replaced his wallet. "Five pennies weigh about 11 grams. Are they heavy?"

"No."

"Eleven grams is about how much a chickadee weighs."

Trajan's eyes rounded. "No kiddin'?"

"No matter how small a creature is, it has value to the world. That's what I want you to see. Every living thing has value. Every life matters. Even old men who walk with canes—"

"And kids who get into fights because they're different."

"Exactly. When someone gives you a hard time, remember that. You were created for a purpose. The world needs you."

Trajan peeked up at his mentor. "Do you? Do you need me?"

"Indeed." Rumple slid an arm around the boy's shoulders and hugged him tight.

Trajan grinned. "Can I keep the pennies?"

A clack of heels across the linoleum (really, Belle thought, that ugly floor covering must be replaced, and she quickly jotted a reminder to herself to begin working on the next fiscal year's budget) brought Belle's attention from the book she was cataloging to the dark figure now standing before the Circ Desk. "Madame Mayor." As closely as they'd worked together this year in Regina's in-home magic lab, and even after the lovely Thanksgiving dinner they'd shared, Belle found her skin prickling. Rumple had explained those prickles to her once: "You're sensitive to the presence of magic, just as some people are sensitive to dog dander or peanuts." A magic allergy, then, and Regina's magic in particular, especially on a winter's day when the windows were closed and no fresh air circulated, could make Belle itch—more psychological than physiological, Archie had suggested; from all those years locked up in the queen's tower and the mayor's underground asylum. Their relationship was improving, though, and Belle dared hope someday she would no longer need to pop a Benadryl after spending significant time in Regina's presence.

"Ms. Gold." Regina picked up the book that Belle had been cataloging and read the title. "I Could Pee on This and Other Poems by Cats. An interesting use of taxpayer dollars."

"A patron requested it."
"Ms. Ginger, no doubt." Regina set the book to the side.

"All patron requests are confidential." Belle plastered on a smile. "What can I do for you today, Regina? More material for Henry's World War I report?"

"No, I . . ." Regina licked her lips, revealing a smudge of lipstick on her central incisor, and somehow that flaw in her otherwise immaculate appearance enabled Belle to relax. "I received an invitation—I'm sure you did too. I understand she's a friend of yours."

"Ruby and Archie's engagement party. Yes."

"Well, I thought you might have some suggestions for a gift. I don't know Ms. Lucas all that well, and anything I'd choose for Dr. Hopper—coffee mugs and pen-and-pencil sets—isn't—couple-y. I went by the shop but Mr. Dove was out running errands."

The shop. It had been several weeks since Belle had set foot in the pawnshop. She tended to avoid it, unless she needed to see Josiah; its walls still echoed of a warm Scottish accent and the tapping of a cane across the wood floor.

"Perhaps on your lunch hour, you could let me in, if you still have a key?"

"I do."

"And help me select something? Afterwards, I'll treat you to lunch."

Shopping. With Regina. In the pawnshop. Belle glanced meaningfully at a stack of books waiting to be cataloged; she had the perfect excuse right there. But even as the apologetic sentence formed on her lips, Belle noticed that Regina's gloved hand kept smoothing down the fabric of her black wool coat. Nervousness. Regina was concerned she might be rejected. "That will be fine. It'll give me a chance to ask you for advice on a gift for Henry, from Rumple and me."

Regina's hand released her coat and she smiled. "At noon, then. I'll meet you at the shop."

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Mentor and mentee stood together in the chilly, moist evening. "Mr. Martel told me you and he installed the birdhouse this afternoon. Let's go see it." They walked out onto the lawn, away from the lights and clatter in the house behind them, and away from the growling engines passing on the street. Past the sandbox and the swingset they walked, until they came to a line of trees that separated the Martels' property from their neighbors'. They stopped then under the oldest oak tree and looked up.

"There," Trajan pointed.

"I don't see—"

Trajan grabbed his hand and directed it. "There."

"Ah, yes. Our chickadees will have a lovely view, won't they?"

Trajan nodded. "In the spring. They'll come in the spring and lay their eggs in our—in their house. Mr. Martel will put up a feeder tomorrow."

"Very good. Soon these trees will be full of song." Rumple raised his face to the sky. "We'll have snow tonight."

"How do you know?"
Rumple pointed. "Look at the moon."

"There's, like, a circle around it."

"That's called a moon halo. It means there are ice crystals in the clouds. As the clouds come closer, they'll release snow."

"Cool."

They listened in silence, then Rumple asked, "Why do birds matter, Master Trajan?"

"Because they do many good-

"No. This time, tell me why they matter to you."

The boy remained silent for several minutes, whether he was formulating an answer or deliberating whether to reveal it, Rumple wasn't sure. At last Trajan said, "Because they can fly. Maybe they can fly to other worlds. When I watch them I think if I had magic, I'd fly too."

"They matter to me too. They help me remember," Rumple said. "Long ago, when my son was as young as you, and younger, after I tucked him into bed I would sit beside him and we would listen to the night birds sing until he fell asleep." He closed his eyes, enjoying the bird songs. "That's one of my happiest memories."

"What's his name?"

"Baelfire."

"Is he back there? In Misthaven?"

"Yes."

"If you had magic, you could go see him."

"Yes." Rumple grasped his cane more tightly. "I'd give anything to see him again, but I don't want magic."

"Why not?" Rumple could sense Trajan's eyes searching his face in the darkness. "If you had magic, you could do anything."

"Many things, but not everything. I've known many people who had magic, but the magic always disappointed them. And worse, it drove other people away."

"Why? Wouldn't it be cool to have a friend or a dad that could magic stuff?"

"For a very short time, it's cool, but after a while, it becomes frightening."

"Oh." Trajan mulled this over. "Was he scared of your magic? Your son?"

"Yes." Rumple bent a little to share a confidence. "To tell you the plain truth, so was I."

"So you're glad it's gone."

"Most days I am."
"He helped bring me out of it," Rumple concluded, shaking his head in disbelief. "Trajan didn't trigger the flashback; the nails did. His presence brought me back to awareness."

"It sounds like one of the most severe flashbacks you've had. Certainly one of the most lucid. It's a lucky thing someone was with you. I think we need an EMDR session tonight," Archie suggested.

"Why do you think I'd have a flashback now, when my life is so much improved?"

"It's December. You have a very stressful decision to make this month, a decision that you wouldn't have to make if Zelena hadn't inserted herself into your life. If not for her, where do you think you'd be now?"

"Sitting on a private beach in Barbados," Rumple answered promptly. "Pouring a mimosa for my wife and watching my son and his wife play in the sand with Henry's baby brother or sister."

"Really?" Archie sounded dubious.

"No. I probably would be standing in my shop, watching the street in the desperate hope that Belle and Bae would forgive me for the latest stupid thing I'd done. And they would, eventually, with Henry's intervention, and life would be wonderful for a while, until my next stupid decision."

"Your life is a far cry from where it would have been, but it's not so bad, is it?"

"No, not so bad," Rumple reflected. "I think the relationships I have now are more solid, based on who I am, not on how useful I am."

"You are loved, Mr. Gold. And at last you've allowed yourself to appreciate it."

Snow was falling. Streetlights illuminated the falling flakes against the night sky; a faint wind drew circles and lines in the little hills of white dotting the street beneath his window. On his window sill, the flakes gathered until a ghost wind carried them up again, then released them once more. Behind him, his bedroom was dark, marked with darker shadows of sparse furniture. As he watched the snow, he counted the days until Christmas, but with dread rather than joy; if Regina didn't break the boundary curse by Christmas Day, he would have to fulfill the promise he'd made to Archie, to release the Apprentice—and that would mean he'd never get back to the Enchanted Forest to free Bae.

On his desk, the monitor of his laptop glowed, waiting his return. He'd finished his studies for the night and had read his emails: greetings from Henry and Daniel ("Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby"), a meeting invitation from the Augusta Homeless Coalition, photos from Belle marking the progress on the College and Career Center. And then a surprise: a note from the ex-Marine he'd met at the Portland Phoenix House, requesting some of his recipes. It seemed an ordinary enough request; he'd dashed off a quick reply, providing the recipes, with some tweaks based on what he'd learned from the Augusta Hospital nutrition class, and he'd congratulated the veteran on his new life outside the House. Rumple had been pleased to be consulted by a former patient, flattered to have been remembered; he'd given himself a few minutes of preening before moving on to the rest of his email.
But at the end of the new emails was a two-word reply from Regina to his inquiry regarding progress on breaking the boundary curse: "Nothing yet."

He'd accomplished a lot over the past year, a lot that he could be proud of, but the task that mattered most, he would not complete. Because he'd made another rash promise, Bae would remain trapped in the Dark Ones Vault.

He pattered into the kitchen and poured the last of Daniel's housewarming wine, and then he returned to his computer to scour over the scrolls that Henry had scanned for him. Once more into the breach.

--------------------------------------------------------------

The citizens of Storybrooke had learned long ago that when Ms. French-Gold went out walking, they became her de facto guardians. No matter the weather—even in heavy rain—Belle couldn't seem to manage to walk from one end of a block to the other without bending her head over a book, and that meant, with both her eyes and her mind elsewhere engaged, she was likely to step out into a crosswalk without checking the traffic or wander into a shop she had no intention of visiting or step on the heels of the pedestrian walking in front of her. No one took offense, and no one seemed to mind having to grab her arm to haul her back from cars. She wasn't being inconsiderate, they realized; she was just being Belle. Her devotion to books—that was how they chose to interpret her walking habits, not as absentmindedness—was, the public decided, a good quality for a librarian to have, so they indulged her.

But today, instead of one of her college textbooks or a novel, she was bent over a pocket-sized notebook, and her head was shaking back and forth as her pen struck out words on a list. Finally, she came to the end of her list with everything crossed out, and she looked up to find herself at the Candy Dish. She'd overshot her destination—Granny's—by half a block—not too bad, for her; typically she'd overshoot by two or three blocks. But she was frustrated nonetheless, for on her list were items that would have made wonderful Christmas gifts for Rumple, but there was no way to deliver any of them to him.

The owner and chief candymaker of the shop looked up from sweeping snow off the sidewalk. "Afternoon, Belle."

"Afternoon, Candy."

"You look rather perturbed. What's wrong?"

Belle sighed as she admired Candy's window display, with all its delicacies: chocolate castles, white fudge, apple-shaped lollipops. When they were dating, she and Rumple used to drop in here after dinner, and she'd have to pry him away from the shelves. Candy used to joke that Mr. Gold's business alone paid her rent every month.

"Oh, just—Christmas shopping frustrations."

Candy patted the sleeve of Belle's coat. "I have just the thing. A fresh batch of Curly Whurlies."

Only her thorough childhood training in etiquette brought Belle into the shop to sample the wares. As she left with a sackful of the chocolate-and-caramel confection, she batted at the tears stinging her eyes. Curly Whurlies were Rumple's favorites, and she knew he would have loved to have some for Christmas. Here in her hand she carried an entire sackful; she would have given her entire bank account for the privilege of sharing this candy with him, cuddled on the couch before the fireplace in the master bedroom of their silly pink house.

By the time she'd entered Granny's, she'd brushed her tears away and had typed a text message to
Regina: "Lab work tonight?" Then she erased the question mark.

"Hi, Belle," Ruby greeted from behind the counter. "Chamomile or Earl Grey?"

"English Breakfast," Belle decided. "I need to energize. I'll be working late tonight."

"Got an exam?" Belle shook her head. "Got a curse to break."

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Something unique, something that would last, something to show her that he noticed the small things. For this Christmas, he wanted to give her his best gift ever. The idea came to him as, half-asleep, he rode the bus home one night. The idea was so perfect that he emailed Dove just as soon as he got in the front door. Dove emailed him back the next morning: "Marco says if money is no object, he can get the project done by Christmas Eve. He will hire students from the woodworking and welding classes."

"Please do so," Rumple emailed back.

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Rumple was where he longed to be: in his wife's tender arms, sort of. At least, she was carrying the Ipad she'd borrowed from Henry, and thanks to the travel hotspot the young man had also provided, Rumple had a presence at Ruby and Archie's engagement party. When she—or rather, they—had first arrived at Granny's, she moved about the restaurant to say hello to everyone and to give them the chance to greet him. Most of the townsfolk had little to say to him: they'd never really gotten to know him while he lived in Storybrooke, as aloof and antisocial as he'd appeared to be, and as intimidated by him as they were. The situation was made all the more awkward by their knowledge of how he'd been forced out of town, and by whom: few people could understand the change in the Golds' relationship that now brought them together as a couple. Granny and Leroy, in fact, expressed their doubts openly: obviously the Dark One had bamboozled his bride. How else would she have (sort of) taken him back? Belle and Rumple had expected, and in fact were used to, this reaction, and they fought to maintain an air of civility and optimism as they made the rounds at the party.

Eventually Belle settled at a back table with people who had taken a significant part of the last year's journey with them, people who had watched them both change and who had struggled to change themselves: Regina and Robin, with Henry and Emma floating between the Outlaw Queen's (as Henry's friends had dubbed his mom and someday-soon kinda stepdad) table and Snowing's. Although her pride prohibited her from saying it aloud, Regina seemed a bit relieved to have Belle's company. The mayor merely smiled coolly and joked about this being the official date-by-Skype table, and then she fell into a serious talk about the boundary curse with her former teacher. For something to do, Robin and Belle discussed books for Roland.

Rumple would have felt shabby in the company of two such well-dressed ladies, Belle in Stella McCartney and Regina in Victoria Beckham, but a glance at his fellow Skyper set him at ease, for Robin's suit was just as second-hand as his own. Not so many months ago, Gold wouldn't have been caught digging weeds in the suit he was wearing tonight, a knockoff of a Sears; tonight, Rumple felt proud of the patchwork he'd been able to do on the formerly frayed and baggy Goodwill purchase. The people who mattered knew what this suit had cost him; let the others who'd snicker at Gold's comedown go to hell. He chatted easily with the Mills-Locksleys and his wife, and soon enough, Archie, and even a grateful Ruby, who wanted to share photos of the apartment they'd chosen. "Delightful party," Rumple congratulated the betrothed, and he meant it. He was enjoying himself.
And then Henry popped over to the Outlaw Queen/Rumbelle table, and Rumple forgot whatever it was he’d been talking about, because Henry looked so tall and so poised and so grown-up in a three-piece suit designed by local tailor Sam Browning. He greeted his grandfather warmly, as though there was nothing odd about how Rumple was attending the party, or why he had to attend that way. They talked about their usual stuff: driving lessons, soccer, NYU. Ten minutes after Henry was called back to Emma's side, Rumple couldn't have repeated any of the specifics of the conversation, but days later, he was still impressed by Henry's appearance. His grandson, as he related to Daniel, looked ready for manhood.

Ready, Rumple admitted to himself as he rode the bus to work the next day, for university. Too bad a huge roadblock was in his way: his Grandpa Gold.

Belle's feet slowed as her heart sped up as she followed her friends across the parking lot across the street from a place she'd sworn she'd never enter again: the Rabbit Hole. Even though its employees and regulars were fully aware that her conduct during the weeks she thought she was Lacey was not her responsibility, they still looked at her oddly sometimes when she encountered them in the grocery or the park or Marine's Garage. She suspected that her high heels and short skirts reminded them of Racy Lacey, though the ring on her finger and the occupation on her business card surely discouraged any disparaging comments, for fear that either their rent or their library fines would get hiked up.

Besides, she had always strived to be a responsible leader in this community, a role model for young women like Grace Hatter and Annabeth Marine. Lacey, with her reputation (never actually carried out, however) for public drunkenness (yes, that one she had to cop to), disorderly behavior (supposed she'd yanked out a handful of hair and blackened an eye or two in a couple of cat fights), promiscuity (though, in reality, the only man she'd ever slept with was the one she married) and foul-mouthiness, gave Belle cause for deep embarrassment. She thought she'd made up for Lacey by rebuilding the library and adding the career and college center to it, and indeed, she'd earned a great deal of respect, among both the political and business leaders in town as well as their children, and she'd hoped to continue down that path for the rest of her career.

But then came Ruby. Ariel, who would be Ruby's maid of honor, had arranged a bachelorette party for the week after the engagement party, and she'd asked Ruby what sort of festivities she'd enjoy. Ruby's answer had come out of earshot of Granny: Ladies' Night at the Rabbit. Ladies' Night meant more than half-price drinks decorated with tiny paper umbrellas: its big draw was a trio of male strippers. For Ruby, this was her last hurrah: she'd sworn that as the wife of the town's only psychiatrist, she would lengthen her skirts, lighten up her makeup, and stay out of bars and liquor stores. Besides, she confessed, she'd grown out of finding entertainment in those places. So this would be Ruby's last visit to the Rabbit, where she would bid farewell to Magic Mike (yes, he really was magic, a very low-level sorcerer who employed a few simple tricks to enhance his modest assets), Harry the Hardhat (he really did work construction during the day), and Gaz the Magnificent (not an overstatement, Ruby assured them). Belle really wanted to be included—she needed friends and an occasional break from her nonstop work—but she really really didn't want to stuff her hard–earned twenties down Gaz's G-string, no matter how Magnificent he might be, nor did she want to sip swill when her time with Rumple had refined her palate, and most of all, she didn't want those Racy Lacey quips to resurface. Torn, she finally accepted the invitation and offered to serve as designated driver. This gave her an excuse to drink sodas and maintain her respectability.

"Oh, don't worry," Ruby assured Ariel and Belle. "They leave their G-strings on. After all, they've got to have some place for the ladies to tuck in the tips."

"Hey, Rubes! Hello, Ms. Ariel, Sheriff Swan, Mrs. Gold," the bartender greeted them. So far so
good—until he asked, "Your usuals, ladies?"

Belle shot him a warning look, and he backedpedaled. "I mean, what can I get for you, Mrs. Gold?"

"A Coke please, and a plate of chili fries." Belle said. "I'm driving."

The other ladies accepted their usuals: a wine spritzer for Ariel, a beer for Emma and a boilermaker for Ruby. "The floor show doesn't start for another hour," Ruby informed them. "Anybody for a game of pool?"

Three pairs of eyes slid to Belle, who reddened and shook her head, until Emma saved the day by standing. "I'll play you, Rubes. Winner buys the next round."

As the sheriff and the waitress grabbed pool sticks, Ariel stood up too. "Let's dance."

"What?" Belle blinked.

"Aw, come on, Belle, I want to dance and I'm not going to ask any of these losers. I'm a married woman; can't give them the wrong idea."

Belle shrugged and stood up. "Okay. I should warn you, though, I'm kind of klutzy." She followed Ariel to the jukebox.

"So am I. I used to have a tail, remember?" Ariel leaned over the screen. "Hmm, which one would be good to dance to?"

"B17. 'Jump.'" Belle suddenly frowned. "I hate that I know that, and that I know the scotch is watered down and that in the third stall from the left in the ladies' room the seat is broken."

"Ah, Belle." Ariel rubbed her arm sympathetically. "I never met Lacey, but I don't think you should feel so embarrassed by her. She was a part of you, just as Ruby is a part of Red. From what I've heard, Lacey had some bad habits, but she had some of your best qualities: your courage—"

"She was an exhibitionist," Belle muttered.

"Her outspokenness—"

"A loudmouth whose single-syllabled, grammatically incorrect sentences were peppered with innuendo and cursing."

"All right, I get it; we'll drop the subject. But I hope someday you'll accept her. She's part of who you are now, just like the mermaid is a part of me. Now," Ariel punched a random button on the jukebox. "Let's dance."

"Uhm, well—" Belle pointed to the jukebox and giggled as "You're Having My Baby" blared across the bar. Ruby dropped her pool stick to plug her ears and Emma glared at the bartender. "You owe me another drink. That crap you call music just curdled my beer."

"Oh, I don't care," Ariel laughed and seized Belle's hand, twirling her once, then leading her in a simple box step. Ruby and Emma applauded, and in a few minutes Belle had caught the laughing bug. She danced with Ariel to "Baby Got Back," "Wind Beneath My Wings" and "Barbie Doll."

It was a disappointment when the house lights went down, the jukebox cut off, and an MC came on stage and announced beginning of the show. The bachelorette and her friends took their seats, Emma and Ruby teasing the dancers by waving fistfuls of tens and twenties. Magic Mike was first,
performing some kind of a contortion to the tune of "Hot Hot Hot" and causing his costume to vanish piece by piece. Belle leaned over to Emma to whisper, "Is this a comedy act?"

Emma chortled. "I've seen more impressive packages on a mouse." She selected a five from her wallet and tucked that into Mike's G-string.

Then came Harry, who had a bad head cold and wheezed whenever he twirled. Emma and Ruby gave him twenties for trying.

Gaz was last. He was the cutest, Belle thought, and the most acrobatic, as he sashayed to "I'm Too Sexy," but yet when Ruby queried, "What do you think?" Belle merely shrugged. "He's attractive, but he's no Rumple."

Ruby thought for a moment. "You know what? You're right. He's no Archie either." She folded her money and put it away. When Gaz twisted his hips in Ruby's direction, she waved him away. "Sorry, Gaz. I'm moving on, I guess. I have something real waiting for me at home."

"You girls have got it bad," Emma mused. "Not criticizing. I had it bad once too." She stood and stretched, ignoring Gaz's continuing performance. "Another game of Eight Ball, Rubes?"

"Let's play pool too," Belle suggested to Ariel.

"I don't know how."

"That didn't stop us from dancing."

Two hours later, the women piled into the Caddy. They all were giggling but none were drunk. "I won't have to arrest myself for drunk and disorderly tonight," Emma decided drily.

"I had a good time," Ruby said. "And I didn't have to get smashed to do it."

"You're growing up, Rubes," Ariel declared.

"Got a reason to," Ruby said.

Belle watched the blocks pass by her windshield. She had a reason to grow up too. Tonight she'd send him an email, and she'd thank him for those months when she was Lacey and he took care of her, shielding her from the predators who would have taken advantage of that. She'd put him in a rotten position, pushing him away until he'd begun acting like the bad boy Lacey found exciting—and that behavior had pushed Bae away. Rumple had risked his relationship with his son so that he could protect her from herself. She hadn't realized that before. He'd stood by her when she didn't remember him and again when she was behaving nothing like the woman he'd fallen in love with. He'd had no reason to hope that Belle would recover, yet he'd stuck with her in her dark hour.

She felt guilty all over again that she hadn't shown him the same support. But as Archie had taught her, healthy guilt had a short shelf life. What would do her and her husband some good would be a simple acknowledgement of his faithfulness during her Lacey months.
I'm Someone that You Might Know

DECEMBER 2015

It was almost a vacation, crisscrossing the state to make his purchases. He planned his new kitchen down to the smallest detail. In his years as Mr. Gold, he'd developed some picky preferences in cooking utensils, and he leaned on that learning now, filtering out those preferences that came from a place of snobbery and selecting instead the best tools for the job, with an eye towards economy. He did his homework, reading professional cooking magazines and websites to compare appliances and kitchenware, and he made durability a priority. He applied what he'd learned in his nutrition class to the selection of every ingredient, even if it meant, as in the case of ceylon cinnamon (known to help reduce blood sugar), having to special order it online. But once his kitchen was complete, another two weeks remained before Augusta Phoenix would open for clients, and so Ms. Hotchkiss granted him a real, paid vacation. "Rest, spend time with family," she advised. "You'll be busy enough, between us and your classes, come January."

In a way, he supposed, he was taking her advice: he spent the majority of those two weeks Skyping with Regina, Henry, and Belle, exchanging emails and scanned documents, as they labored into the wee hours of each night in search of a cursebreaker. Henry, out of school and finished with his drivers' ed course, welcomed each excuse his elders provided to chauffeur Regina or Emma out to the town line to test another potion or spell. They'd come back, a half-hour or hour later, quiet and sullen.

He started dreaming magic.

Was his involvement self-harmful, like an alcoholic working in a brewery? He asked Archie for assistance in staving off the psychological cravings for magic; his body, free now for more than a year from the physical craving, and well fed and daily exercised, felt stronger every day, and he yearned to hold on to that feeling. He'd lose all he'd gained in an instant if he ever let magic once again seep into his lungs and his pores, instead of the invigorating bite of cold, crisp fresh air as he hiked the U-M campus, mapping out the locations of his upcoming classes, and as he hustled through crowded stores to purchase a few holiday gifts, and as he ambled to the bus stops to catch the Route 96 to the Martels'.

"You have one advantage over other substance abusers," Archie pointed out. "You can't access your drug of choice."

"Not yet, anyway," he agreed, "but we're working on it."

"I know. Regina hasn't been seen on the streets in weeks, and Belle's closed the library, presumably for the holidays, but we all know she's spending every waking hour in Regina's lab. Even Emma's sleepless these days, dividing her time between her job and the research. But, Mr. Gold, I have to ask—"

"No, you don't," Rumple sounded a bit cranky. "I promised that if the curse isn't broken by Christmas, I'd free the Apprentice, and I won't go back on my promise."

"I know you won't. That wasn't what I was going to ask. I was going to ask, with Christmas only a week away, how are you coping with the stress of that promise?"

"Not so well," he admitted. "I try not to think about it. I stay focused on breaking the curse."
"Keep practicing your meditation skills. Email me anytime you feel stressed. I check my messages frequently."

"Archie?"

"Yes, Mr. Gold?"

"Keep your fingers crossed for us. For Bae's sake."

"Dear Grandpa,

"You know how I keep saying I don't have a girlfriend? Well..."

"Here's a pic of me and Annabeth Marine. (You probably know her folks. Her mom owns the shoe store and her dad owns the car repair shop). We're all dressed up because we're going to the prom. So now you can ask: yes, I have a girlfriend!"

"love, Henry"

Daniel called, offering to drive to Augusta to pick Rumple up on the morning of Christmas Eve. "You can stay at the rectory with me; Jill and Sam will be staying at Sue Ellen and Harry's. I'd like you to be my guest at the Midnight Mass, but I won't push."

Rumple surprised himself. "I'd like to."

"Yeah?" Daniel practically yelped.

"Still not a convert, and not likely to ever be, but I'd like to attend the service." He thought for a moment. "I guess I'd like to be around people who've found something to hang onto."

"Many of my parishioners have, and they come to celebrate. Many are still searching; they come to hope."

"Maybe I fit in that latter category. The more I read, the more benefit I see in having faith in something." Or maybe he was just grasping at straws in his last hours before the promise would have to be fulfilled.

Rumple sat quietly in the hard plastic chair, ignoring the noise and the press of holiday travelers. He gripped his cane, squeezing it as a distraction from the emotions welling inside him. A few feet away, Trajan stood pressed against the window, watching planes ascend and land; beside the boy stood a woman in a bright blue uniform, a set of stripes on each shoulder. The woman, a friend of a friend of Daniel's, had to talk rather loudly to be heard over the intercom announcements, the yammer of passengers, and the rumble of luggage wheels; Trajan leaned into her to catch every word. She slipped an arm about his shoulder and with her free hand, pointed out onto the tarmac. The boy and the pilot stood at the window quite some time, sharing their passion for flight.

Watching them, Rumple touched the envelope in his jacket pocket. That was his Christmas present from Trajan, given to him this afternoon at a Day-Before-Christmas-Eve dinner that the Martels had invited him to. The present was a colorful drawing of a chickadee—draft nine, actually, Trajan had admitted; the other eight had been inadequate, not good enough for his mentor. This gift would join in Rumple's memory the other precious gifts he'd been given over three hundred years of living: his first spinning wheel, from his aunts; a woolen scarf knitted for him by Milah and presented to him with his first kiss; a museum of drawings of knights and carvings of lambs made by Baelfire, from age three to thirteen; a handkerchief embroidered by the Lady Belle, and plumb
puddings and lemon tarts and honeyed dates for every small occasion she could think of, because she knew her employer's secret craving for sweets; and from his fiancee the librarian Belle, gourmet dinners and message bouquets (daisies for loyal love, gladiolus for faithfulness, yellow irises for passion).

As he reflected on the sweet gifts he'd been given over his lifetime, an image of Zelena tossing a nail at him slashed across his memories. He breathed in deeply, focused his mind on chickadees and lambs and scarves and handkerchiefs, and kisses, a lifetime of kisses from people who had chosen him to include in their lives.

Her hand still on his shoulder, the pilot guided Trajan back to his mentor. "I'm afraid I must be going now. I'm flying to Boston this evening." She crouched to offer her hand to Trajan. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Tommy, and after the holidays, you can expect that call." She straightened, explaining to Rumple, "A friend of mine is an engineer at Boeing. He'll be delighted to talk to a new recruit to the profession."

Rumple stood and offered a handshake. "Thank you, Captain Craig. You've been more than kind."

Trajan didn't need to be nudged. He snapped to attention and offered a handshake too. "Yes, ma'am, thank you! It was the best Christmas present ever!"

She chuckled and squeezed his shoulder fondly. "My pleasure. Good luck, Tommy. I can't wait to fly the planes you'll design. It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. O'Neal. Merry Christmas."

"It is indeed," Rumple said thoughtfully. Tomorrow, Daniel would drive up from Portland to pick him up, and he would have two full days with the Sawyers and the Halifax-Harridges. By Skype, he would have Christmas Eve dinner with Storybrooke. They would exchange gifts (sort of; Dove had bought gifts to give out on Rumple's behalf, and Belle, bless her stubborn little heart, had a stack of gifts labeled "to my husband" under her Christmas tree, and she would pick them up, shake them to tease him, then set them back under the tree unopened to wait for the day, not long from now, she swore, when he could open them in person). Then the family members would politely draw away, leaving the lovers to exchange vows and hopes for a better new year, and they would talk of nothing that anyone else would find consequential but that meant everything to the two of them.

Trajan was right: it would be the best Christmas ever.

After he returned Trajan to the Martels, he took his two buses back to his third-floor apartment and navigated his way carefully up the stairs. It was dark now, but strips of light bled through his neighbors' window blinds, lending a false warmth to the night. He could hear them moving around in their apartments, talking on their phones, listening to their TVs. In the apartment below his, a girl in her first year of college was dancing to Swan Lake. She wanted to be a ballerina, she'd told him when they'd chatted in the laundromat, but she was majoring in Elementary Education just in case. In the apartment above his, two young men starting their junior year were sorting out lives and their feelings for each other. Two buildings over, on the ground floor, lived the super and his family; they'd arrived in the United States less than a year ago and were still struggling with American customs and expressions. They hadn't been blessed, as he had, with the sudden knowledge that a magical curse could deliver to a stranger in a strange land.

As he unlocked the door to his apartment and snapped on the lights and the heat, Rumple took a quick head count of all the people he'd met in the month he'd lived in Augusta, and he compared it to the number of people with whom he'd been on a first-name basis back in Storybrooke, after thirty years. Things had changed, so quickly, so remarkably. He had changed.
He let his keys dangle from his fingers before sliding them onto the hook beside the front door. The light from his living room ceiling reflected off the ornaments on his Christmas tree. His apartment was warm and full of books and photos and children's drawings. His life too was full. 

Upstairs, the college juniors turned on their radio to Christmas pop songs: "All I want for Christmas is you," the singer crooned.

All Rumple wanted for Christmas was to keep what he had right now. But there was a price to pay; the world could not balance itself until he'd paid for the magic he'd taken out of it.

Ever since he'd learned of Trajan's existence, he'd worried about how he would explain to the boy what he'd done to Zelena. He'd thought he could wait until the boy—and he himself—were ready to understand. He'd expected the right time would come. But if it would, he wouldn't be here for it. He sat at his desk, drew a new package of paper towards him, and began to write. He filled the page, drew out another sheet and filled it: "Dear Trajan," his letter began; and it related everything, from the night he'd killed Zoso to the night Trajan had rescued him from his flashback. He told it plainly, but he didn't refrain from revealing what Zelena had put him through. Nor did he hide the truth of his emotions: "Killing her was act of evil, and it gave me no relief from my pain, but I cannot say in honesty that I regret my action. I have lived a life apart from humanity for too long to feel sympathy for one who would hurt my family, even though I understood perfectly the madness that drove her. I had lived with madness too, for centuries, so I understood her, but I felt no pity for her. She had caused my son's death and would have called for me to kill my wife, and so I killed her. Whether it was for revenge or to stop her from killing someone else, she had to pay. I didn't know about you then. If I had, I don't know if it would have stopped me.

"My life has changed completely since that day. I am a different man. I can't say that I am sorry for killing Zelena, but I am deeply, irrecoverably sorry for having orphaned a child. I am sorry, Trajan.

"In the moment I decided to kill Zoso, I set myself on a path that I could not leave. Everyone I ever loved has paid a penalty for the decision I made that night. This is what I most wish to teach you, Trajan: don't walk that path. Don't let the evil that your grandmother, your mother, your aunt and I have done push you toward hatred. 'For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule.' Rage at me, I deserve it, but don't hate me or anyone else because it won't make you feel any better, ever. Choose love, Trajan. Every chance you get, choose love."

He signed the letter "Rumplestiltskin."

And then he sealed the letter inside an envelope, and wrote a second note, a brief one, asking Daniel to deliver this letter to Trajan on his sixteenth birthday. He tucked the envelope into the Bible Daniel had given him.

From his old familiar seat in Daniel's office, Rumple shared a brief but intimate Skype session with his wife. Both would be going out tonight, she first, with several members of the community in an Edwardian-style caroling party; he later, with Daniel, to Midnight Mass. In the hour they had to themselves, they exchanged expressions of affection, wishes for the upcoming year, and Christmas gifts. "Since I couldn't send you anything, I had to get really creative," Belle explained. She punched up a photo on her laptop. "This is my gift to you."

He was a bit confused at first: she was showing him a photo of a wingback chair and ottoman that he'd kept in his study at the pink house for as long as he could remember. When she'd first started living with him after being freed from the asylum, Belle had repositioned the chair next to the window, so that sunlight would stream in over her shoulder as she read, while Rumple worked on his business records at his desk. He had fond memories of those quiet afternoons, and he'd come to think of the chair as Belle's, but he couldn't figure out how it represented a Christmas present. And
then she punched up another photo, taken at a greater distance, and he could see the chair in context: behind it was a shelf of picture books and the window that overlooked Main Street—no, Baelfire Boulevard, now. From that window, one could see the pawnshop, and in their happier days, during lulls in the library, Belle had sometimes walked to that window, looked out across the street and phoned him on her personal phone just to say hello. He had fond memories of that window too. Now the chair and ottoman were positioned so anyone who sat down could both look out the window or look across the children's area.

On the chair lay a book, The Velveteen Rabbit, which had been Henry's favorite when he was small; and a stuffed animal, a white lamb. Rumple had told her once that he'd hand-sewn a stuffed lamb as a gift for Bae's sixth birthday, a few weeks after Milah had left: Bae had clung to that toy every night for the next three years, until he'd finally decided he was too old for stuffed animals. When Bae put the lamb away in his clothes chest, it had occurred to Rumple then that he wasn't just taking a step out of childhood; he was giving up on whatever faint hope he'd clung to that Milah might return. Bae had come to understand by then that people didn't return from death, and he had believed his father's claim that Milah had been killed by pirates. Letting go of the lamb was Bae's way of letting go of the mother he never really had.

On one of the shelves behind the chair was a sign: Grandpa Gold's Corner.

"Unfortunately it's not the original chair—that disappeared when Emma made our house vanish—but Emma conjured this replica, and I think she did a good job. I invite parents and grandparents to sit here and read stories to their kids. Even Ms. Ginger comes here sometimes—she brings one of her cats and she does 'Read to a Cat' sessions for kids who are struggling with reading. I use this corner when I do story times," Belle said. "This chair is close and cozy, and when I sit in it, I kind of feel like your arms are around me, so that's why I brought it to the library."

He had to clear his throat. "It's perfect. Thank you, sweetheart."

She brushed the back of her hand against her eyes, then lightened the mood. "Dove came by the apartment this morning and brought me an envelope with 'Sweetheart' written in your handwriting. How did you manage to send that across the border?"

"I didn't," he confessed. "It was an envelope I'd made out while I was still in Storybrooke. It originally had a note in it, asking you to pick up my dry cleaning. Dove found it in a drawer and repurposed it."

"There was a lovely letter inside."

"I scanned that and sent it to Dove to print out. I wish I could have been there in person to give it to you, but. . . ."

"It was beautiful just the same. It said everything I felt, and I'll cherish it always."

"There's more." Rumple's eyes danced. "You'll see this tonight when your caroling club passes by it, but for now, look under your Christmas tree."

She ran to the tree, discovered a square box there wrapped in gold paper, and brought it back to the couch so he could watch her open it. "Oh, it's lovely!" The box contained a silver-plated carousel music box. She recognized it from the window display at Neighbors General Store; she'd admired it one day as she and Rumple had been out walking. She turned the key to operate the carousel, and as the little horses on it went up and down and round and round, a song played: "Tale as Old as Time."
"You remembered that I collect music boxes! Thank you, darling!"

"Wait, that's just the stand-in. Here's the real thing." He keyed in a command.

She opened the files he sent and found, first, a photo of the Storybrooke Park sign; then a photo of another sign that read "Belle's Fairyland Carousel." A distant shot revealed a merry-go-round with mirrors and rides. Another photo showed close-ups of the rides: a pink horse, a yellow lion, a green grasshopper, a white duck, a boat shaped like a swan, and a teacup.

"You—you had a carousel—an entire, working carousel—built for me in the park?" she sputtered.

He nodded. "Do you like it?"

"Oh, Rumple, it's magnificent! How did you know? When I was a little girl, my father took me once to Meraux, in the eastern Marshlands—you know, it never snows there—and in the town square was a carousel with four horses. I rode it and rode it until I was dizzy. My father just sat on a bench and waved at me every time my horse passed him. It's one of my favorite memories, and I've loved carousels ever since. How did you know?"

"Well, I emailed your father and asked him to tell me some stories from your childhood."

"You emailed my father?" Her eyes went wide. "Rumple, that's a wonderful gift all on its own! Thank you, darling!" She clasped the music box to her chest. "I love you so much, Rumple."

"I love you, sweetheart. Happy caroling. I'll see you at dinner tomorrow." By Skype, of course—if only it could be in person.

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He wore his second-hand suit, his only suit, and he sat in one of the pews at the back of the church to avoid being noticed. But as soon as he seated himself, he realized he'd worried for nothing: the parishioners would not take his faded and worn attire as an insult to Daniel; in fact, some of them were wearing jeans and flannel shirts. He picked up a hymnal from the book shelf on the pew in front of his, and with the program he'd been handed at the entrance, he located each of the hymns that would be sung during the service. He had a pretty good idea what to expect during the program; Daniel had walked him through it last night after he'd admitted he'd never attended a church service in his life. Far from judging him for his faithlessness, Daniel had remarked that he was flattered Robert had chosen his Christmas Eve service to be his first.

The candles, the poinsettias, the arched windows, the fir trees, the white robes, the chants, the prayers spoken in unison, the censer, and the choir—it was all beautiful, but most beautiful of all were the expressions on some of the parishioners' faces: joy, serenity, and gratitude to their God for the blessings that had been bestowed upon them this year, and the blessings to come. Rumple felt a faint stab of envy as he surreptitiously glanced around: how different might his and Bae's lives have been if they'd had the support of a community like this after Milah had run away. But, as Harry was fond of saying, "There's no crying in baseball," so Rumple pushed the what-ifs aside and concentrated on the elegance of the service. The antiquities dealer in him reveled in the knowledge that he was participating in a tradition going back two thousand years. He didn't take communion with the parishioners—that wouldn't have been appropriate—but he did sing along with the communal hymns and he did recite the Lord's Prayer. And when it was over and the parishioners stood to greet each other, his hand was repeatedly shaken, his shoulder was repeatedly clasped, and one octogenarian waggled her finger at him to get him to stoop toward her, and when he did, she hugged him.

As he walked home with Daniel, the street lights caused the snow beneath their shoes to sparkle. "Thank you," Rumple said, "for including me. It was a night I won't forget."
Once again, his Storybrooke family and his Portland family convened for a holiday meal. This time, it was a bit more intimate and solemn on the Storybrooke side; though Regina's caterer had provided a spread as delectable and appealing as the Thanksgiving meal had been, the guests, though decked out in their silk, velvet and wool finery, seemed more reserved. One glance at Belle’s dark-circled eyes told Rumple why: their redoubled efforts to break the curse had come to naught.

The Portlanders politely overlooked the Storybrookers’ lack of enthusiasm; besides, Sam filled in the gaps in conversation, regaling the adults with full spoiler details of The Force Awakens, which he and his mom had attended with Harry yesterday. As the food was served and wine glasses filled on both sides of the Internet divide, the Storybrookers livened up a bit. Still, their party broke up before eight o’clock.

As for Rumple, his heart lay with the Storybrookers, but when a full belly and two hours of minding his table manners wore Sam out and the boy climbed into Rumple's lap and whispered, "Tuck me in," he reasoned with himself: his life hadn't gone so badly, so far. Why should he not hope for a miracle?

He rubbed the child's back, then lifted him, struggling a little to manage the boy and his cane too; Sam wrapped his legs around Rumple's waist and his arms around Rumple's neck to assist in the carry. He rested his cheek against Rumple's chest and was asleep well before his head touched the pillow.

When Rumple came back to the party, he smiled at Jill. "He's a special little guy." Then he turned his glanced at the clock—Belle would be home now—and he dialed her number.

"I'm a lucky man," he said as she answered his call.
"I'm a lucky man," he murmured as he carried the laptop into Sue Ellen's sewing room. "A lucky man." The phrase became a mantra for him. He was tempted to take this conversation to the guest bedroom, where he'd just tucked Sam in; the child's presence would calm Rumple down, remind him to think of the bigger picture. But it was time learned to confront his fears without a crutch, so he sought out privacy.

"Sorry? What were you saying, darling?" Belle asked.

"I transferred us to another room, away from the party." From the brightness in her eyes, he deduced that she assumed he wanted to whisper sweet everythings in her ears; he hated to disappoint her. He glanced down at the digital clock in his laptop. "Nine," he said, then swallowed hard.

"Sorry?"

"Nine. It's nine o'clock. I can't put this off any longer."

Now she was worried. "What?"

"Belle," his words rushed out, carried on the last breath of hope. "The boundary curse—is it still intact? No signs of wearing down? Not even a crack?"

"No, but, Rumple, we're not giving up—"

"Belle, give me a minute. I'm sending you a message." His hands shaking, he began to type. He had to stop and correct several typos caused by a mixture of extreme reluctance and blurry vision, but he finally got it done and before the dark voice in his head could make up excuses, he sent it to her, with copies to Archie and Regina. "It's done," he muttered, clicking back to Skype. "Bae. . . ." He shuddered.

"What's wrong, Rumple?" A note of alarm in her voice brought him out of his grief. "What's happening?"

"I just sent you instructions—a spell and instructions to open—to reverse something awful I did."

"Rumple? What are you—"

"What I did to the fairies—remember? The hat?"

"Yes, but we got the—"

"You got the fairies out, but there's another victim that needs to be freed. You can do this without releasing Ursula and Cruella. You must do this, because I can't. Because I never should have—I trapped a man in there, the Apprentice, to take his powers like I would have the fairies', like I would have Emma's. You have to release him. Not just to fix what I did, but to give Storybrooke a chance."

"I don't understand." But she did; she just didn't want to believe it. She wanted to cling to the image she'd formed of him, these past few months. She wanted to pretend the Dark One had vanished and
with it, all of its wrongdoings. He could see all this in the set of her jaw, the purse of her lips.

"You do," he argued. "And if there's a chance for me to hang on to the man I've tried to become, we have to fix this, together. I trapped the Apprentice, knowing he was the last remaining power that could traverse realms. Knowing there were no more magic beans, no more magic hats, no more scrolls, no way that the door between Storybrooke and the rest of the world could be opened. I'd made my deal, you see, with the Snow Queen, for you and me and Henry to escape. The rest could go to Hell. My heart was so black then I didn't care what happened to anyone else. I've been holding out on you, Belle, withholding this information, keeping you and Henry and everyone else trapped in Storybrooke."

"What are you saying?"

"The Apprentice can draw portals. Remember the one in his house, to Arendale? He can draw one that will allow the people of Storybrooke to go out into the world. Do you see now, sweetheart?" He watched the confusion fall away, replaced by shock, then anger. "Oh, Belle, please forgive me."

"Rumple, it's been more than a year! You kept that poor man trapped a year and a half! Why didn't you tell—" Belle was shaking, but she suddenly interrupted herself and went into a controlled breathing exercise that Rumple recognized from Archie's teachings. He was tempted to leap into the lapse in conversation and pour out excuses, but he granted her the space to take control of her emotions, and the ensuing silence proved, as Archie had predicted, to offer time for self-healing. When she spoke again, her voice was steady and her eyes sympathetic. "This is about Bae, isn't it?" By looking at the world through Rumple's experiences—as a vindictive, dog-eat-dog place—she had come to realize that most of the time, when Rumple made a drastic decision, the root cause was his desire to protect either her or Bae.

He nodded, half-ashamed, but half-defiant. He reined both of those emotions in and tried to speak calmly. "Belle, one of the laws of magic is that the rarer the product of the magic, the higher the price, and the highest-priced magic of all is the saving of a soul. To save a body from death, the life of another body must be surrendered, but to save a soul—which is eternal and indestructible, and therefore matchless—it requires the surrender of another soul. That price is truly forever."

"When Bae released you from the Vault of the Dark Ones, it wasn't your body he was freeing, was it?"

"No. When I plunged the dagger into Pan's body, it passed into mine, but didn't kill me. As you know, dead is dead and there's no coming back from that. It was my soul that was taken, and it was my soul that Bae released from the Vault. Belle, did he know, when he unlocked the Vault, that magic would extract the ultimate price from him?"

"No. He was in hurry. We expected consequences—I begged him to let me research it first—but he said he'd do anything to return to Henry and Emma."

Rumple ducked his head. "Hasty decision-making seems to be a family trait when it comes to love."

Belle worked out the math. "You're saying that price for freeing your soul wasn't the sacrifice of his life, but rather, the sacrifice of his soul." Rumple nodded, giving her time to move to the next conclusion. "So does that mean his body is... alive?"

"I think so. I'm not certain; this goes beyond even my rather long experience. And because the soul is immortal, I believe it can be brought back, if I make the trade."
"The trade being—Rumple!" she moaned. "You'd sell your soul to save his?"

"Please don't cry," he reached out toward the monitor, but of course he couldn't comfort her. "It should be me in that Vault. It's proper payment for all the evil I did in this and many other worlds. Knowingly, knowing the consequences of my actions, knowing the penalties I was racking up. The Dark One is immortal; everyone knows that; I thought I was the Dark One. For all the care I took to follow the letter of the laws of magic, I thought the Dark One's soul was the exception to the rule. But I came to realize too late that Rumplestiltskin and the Dark One share a body and a mind, but not a soul."

"No! You don't have to do this! I don't accept this—you've changed, you're not the evil one any more—a man who changes deserves to be forgiven!"

"The laws of magic are immutable on this subject: a life for a life, a soul for a soul. I don't grieve for my own soul; it's only right that I pay for what I've done. Me, not Bae—never should the child have to pay for the parent's sins. But what is unbearable to me is that in fixing what I did to the Apprentice, I've made it impossible to rescue Bae. You see, I made a vow that if the boundary curse was broken by Christmas, I'd return to Storybrooke, reclaim my magic, release the Apprentice, and then find a portal back to the Vault, to release Bae. But I promised Archie, if the curse wasn't broken, I'd tell you how to release the Apprentice; he can make a portal that will enable you all to come and go from Storybrooke out into the world, without allowing outsiders to come in."

Belle caught on immediately. "And because of what you did to him, the Apprentice will prohibit you from coming back here."

"Apart from any feelings of revenge or forgiveness he might bear toward me, simply as a protection for Storybrooke, he must keep me away from magic."

It was Belle's turn to look ashamed. "That's what we would have said, a year ago. What I would have said. Protect us from the Dark One, protect the Dark One from himself, by withholding magic. I don't feel that way now. I swear I don't. The man you are now, I would gladly welcome back. Storybrooke needs you."

"Even with magic?" Before she could answer hastily, he admitted, "I'm not so sure. I honestly don't know how far I might backslide if Dark magic became available to me again. I only know I would. But it's a moot point, now." He sighed. "I've told you how to free the Apprentice; you have to do it."

"I could... wait... give you time..." But her voice trailed off into doubt.

"No, you couldn't. The woman I admire wouldn't be able to live with herself if she left an innocent person trapped in limbo. And I wouldn't want you to be anything other than who you are, sweetheart." The fingers of his right hand began to rub against each other, as if working thread from a spindle; she recognized it; it was one of his nervous tics that had first endeared him to her. His eyes darted to the digital clock at the bottom of his monitor. "It's almost ten o'clock. Take the dagger and the hat and the spell I emailed to you and go to Regina. Let her free the Apprentice."

"And when his strength is back, he can draw the portal that will release Storybrooke."

"And keep you out," she said bitterly. "Rumple, this is my fault—"

"No." He put up a hand in a stop gesture. "It's a just punishment; it's just that Bae has to pay the final price."
"If there's one thing I learned about magic, after all the studying I've done, it's that we shouldn't give up. We'll keep at it, all of us—I'll make sure Regina doesn't sit on her duff after she gets Robin back. We'll figure out a way to release Bae without trapping you back in that Vault."

He shook his head slowly; her stubborn optimism sometimes crossed into denial of incontrovertible truths. Where he saw what was and asked why, she saw what could be and asked why not. However their relationship might proceed from here, he'd never quite understand her idealism, but he accepted it as a source of her strength, and he would continue to borrow from it. "Go. Get Regina." His mouth twitched into a wry smile. "Just break the news gently—we don't want to send her into apoplexy before she can cast the spell."

"I will, but Rumple, promise me, promise me you won't—" Then she interrupted herself, reminding herself once again to see through Rumple's eyes. "No. I can't ask that of you. If there's a way to free Bae, you have to. Just promise me that you'll work with us to find another way."

He needn't point out to her that once the Apprentice was released, the continuation of his banishment would make his original intention impossible. "Of course. Go on, sweetheart. Tell Regina I wish her and Robin the best of luck in their upcoming nuptials."

"There is another way," she gritted her teeth, "we have to find it. We will find it."

"Henry isn't Storybrooke's only Truest Believer."

Regina set the boxed hat down atop the covered well and glanced up at the night sky, as Belle finished lighting the flame on four torches they'd set around the wishing well. "The conditions are optimal for powerful magic. A full moon, midnight, this well."

Belle ran her glove over the rough stones of the well. "Rumple told me once that this well contains waters that originated in Lake Nostros, where things that are lost can be restored."

"So the legend goes," Regina said. "Or it may just be one of the fantastical stories that the curse put into our heads."

Belle grinned wryly. "Which curse?"

Regina grinned back in an uncharacteristic moment of companionable feeling. "Which number are we on now? I've forgotten."

"Hmm, three boundary curses—or is it four? Two town curses—no, wait, three—unless you count the Shattered Sight Curse, then it's—" Belle sighed. "Well, someday we'll have to sit down with Henry so he can write it all out accurately."

"Someday." Regina agreed. "But right now—stand back." She waved the Dark dagger in a slow circle counterclockwise over the enclosed hat. "As I recall, there's quite a light show that comes with this."

"I'll never forget it. Blinding." Belle winced.

"Light magic likes to make a display of itself." Regina chanted the spell, having to pause once to confirm the wording with the printout in Belle's hand. Then she tapped the hat box and jumped back as cold flames of light shot from the box, slashing through the darkness. Both women had to shield their eyes until the light drew back down into the now opened hat, so they missed the excitement of the release. Later, when Roland would ask how a full-grown man had managed to fit into a box six inches in diameter, Regina could only shrug. She hadn't seen the Apprentice go in or
come out. Roland, who had been introduced to a little basic science in school, would then answer decisively that someday, when he had become a physicist, he'd explain magic to her. Robin had chuckled. "You do that, son."

"Could someone help me up, please?"

Both women spun around to find, in the shadowed light offered by the torches and the moon, an old man lying flat on his back in the snow. Belle and Regina dropped to their knees, on either side of him, and helped him sit up. "Don't try to stand yet," Regina advised. "You've had quite a journey."

"Indeed," he panted. He was sweating, even though he wore only cotton trousers and a thin cotton shirt covering a t-shirt. Regina conjured a coat for him; he drew it tight around him. "Thank you. Perhaps a cup of water? Or better yet, coffee. Black. I could use the caffeine."

"Are you injured? Do you need a doctor?" Belle wondered.

He assessed his condition before shaking his head. "Just a good night's rest in a warm bed. And a hot meal. Something with a lot of gravy."

Regina blinked. "This particular magic creates a craving for gravy?"

"No. It just takes a lot of gravy to give Granny's cooking any flavor." He pressed his hands to the ground and pushed, struggling to get his feet under him. The women carried half his weight as between the three of them, they got him to his feet.

"Pardon me for asking, but—who are you?" Regina set his right arm around her shoulders, and Belle did the same with his left, and they managed to take a trial step. He nodded, indicating his ability to continue, so Regina waved a hand over her shoulder to extinguish the torches and Belle stuffed the now closed box into her tote bag. They proceeded slowly, mindful of the slippery snow, down the hilly path and back to the road. "I thought I knew everyone in town, but I don't recognize you."

"That's because your curse didn't bring me. And I haven't lived in your town long; I was sent here to keep an eye on the Snow Queen."

"But not to stop her," Belle surmised.

"That's correct. I was to report her actions back to my master. He instructed me not to interfere."

"Why not?" Regina griped. "You could have saved us a whole lot of trouble, including yet another curse that prevents us from leaving town."

"She was a test. One of several, including that," he gestured toward Belle's tote bag.

"Well, I hope she got an F, because in my books, she failed miserably, even if she did reverse herself at the end."

The Apprentice's foot slipped and the women had to grab him to prevent his fall. "Sorry," Regina said. "I'd transport us down to the car, but after that—" she gestured to the well—"my energy's too low for a three-passenger transport."

"Quite all right," the Apprentice said. They paused to rest, and Regina conjured a thermos of coffee and three cups.

"Thank you, Ms. Mills." The Apprentice blew cool air across the cup, then took a sip. "Very good.
"Hot and rich."

"That's the way I like it," Regina agreed. "So how did she do on her test?"

"The Snow Queen? She wasn't the one being tested."

"Who was?" Regina looked a little nervous.

"No, not you, Ms. Mills," the Apprentice chuckled. "You're doing well all on your own."

"Then who?"

"I'll explain it all in due course. For now," he dipped his head toward the thermos. "Our coffee break is over. Let's proceed to Granny's."

Regina hastily made the refreshments vanish, and the trio continued down the rocky path. "You seem to know our names," Belle said. "May we know yours?"

"Balthazar."

Belle jerked up her head in recognition. "Where have I seen—oh! Then your master is Merlin!"

Regina's head jerked up too. "Merlin! The only sorcerer more powerful than the Dark One."

"The only sorcerer capable of containing Dark magic," the Apprentice amended.

"I have to see him!" Belle exclaimed. "Please!"

"In due course, Ms. Gold. My master's existence is long, longer than that of the three of us combined, and his vision is expansive. You may trust his judgment."

"But my husband—"

"Merlin is a just man."

"That's what we're afraid of," Regina muttered.
Rumple sat beside the narrow window of the rectory's guest bedroom. The snow had stopped falling, but there was a bit of wind, lifting and swirling and sketching signatures in the snow on his window sill. He didn't have to wonder what Belle was doing now, in the midnight hour. Being Belle, being a born hero, she would not have hesitated, despite the late hour and the cold: she would have rushed back to Regina's mansion and pounded on the front door, yelling up at the second-story windows until the mayor threw one of them open and leaned down to hiss, "What in the name of Medusa do you want at this unnatural hour, Mrs. Gold?" Belle would not have stopped to contemplate whether the Apprentice's entrapment could be turned to her own advantage, as Rumple once would have, nor whether it was safe to release a very powerful and (likely) angry wizard, as Charming would have stopped to contemplate, nor whether bringing yet another master of magic into the sleeping town would upset the hard-won balance of power, as Snow would have pondered. Belle, being Belle, would do what her heart demanded and trust that doing good would lead to good outcomes.

Rumple didn't wonder what she would do, or when. He only wondered how long it would be before the Apprentice got his magical strength back and drove a permanent nail into Bae's coffin. Rumple's hand closed on air. He could have sworn he felt a child's hand slip from his grip.

"Sorry to disappoint, but Granny's won't be open now," Regina explained as she swung her Mercedes into her driveway. "It's after midnight, and a holiday."

"Christmas," Belle clarified, then, shamefaced, added, "2015."

The Apprentice's white eyebrows shot up but he said nothing. Regina filled the silence. "But I have plenty of leftovers, so welcome." She led her guests across the snow-dusted sidewalk to the porch and unlocked the door. She was about to flip on the house lights when Balthazar suggested, "Allow me" and did it magically. "I needed the exercise. It's a bit cramped in the Hat."

"About that," Belle gnawed on her lip. "Rumple is very sorry. He's not the man he was then. He never would do something like that now. I hope you can forgive him eventually."

Again the Apprentice said nothing as Regina led them to her kitchen and invited him to be seated. Belle, falling back on the habits of a year ago, went to the fridge and prepared a plate as Regina started the coffee. As they waited for the coffee maker and the microwave to finish heating the meal, Regina and Belle sat down at the table. "I, ah, can open the library tomorrow; I have the last year's issues of the Mirror, if you'd like to get caught up on everything you've missed."

Balthazar nodded, and spontaneously Belle reached across the table to grab his hand. "Please—he doesn't even have his magic any more. He lives in Augusta. He doesn't have his money or his car—he's been working as a cook—he's, he's going to school to be a nutritionist. He works in a substance abuse treatment center and he's mentoring a child—"

"My sister's son," Regina added. "She died."

Balthazar didn't look surprised.

The microwave dinged and Belle got up to fetch the plate as Regina poured the coffee. Setting the
overfilled plate before him, Belle continued, "He was homeless for several months. Sleeping in a park." Then she brightened. "He's been in therapy with Archie—by Skype—"

Regina set a napkin and silverware beside the plate, then sat down, drawing her cup of coffee toward her. "About that. We have a little problem we're hoping you can solve." She glanced down into her cup, then conjured a flask of whiskey and added a thimbleful to her cup. She passed the flask to Balthazar. "I imagine we all can use this."

The Apprentice nodded and doctored his coffee before passing the flask along to Belle, who added a generous splash to her cup. He tucked into his food. "Thank you. This meal is most welcome."

"I understand that one of your special skills is portal making," Regina pressed. "Yes."

"We happen to be in need of one. There's a curse over the town that prohibits us from leaving."

"Again?" Balthazar smiled wryly.

"Snow Queen," Regina explained, then frowned. "At least, I think it was hers. It's hard to keep track."

"We can't leave and no one can come in," Belle said. "Not even people who belong here."

"We'd like to regulate admission," Regina said, "for obvious reasons. I'm sure you'll agree."

"The non-magical world must not learn about Storybrooke," Balthazar said. "One of many poor decisions Rumplestiltskin made, bringing magic here." He looked at Belle, who reddened but met his eyes and insisted, "He's not that man any more. Besides, he had reasons—his son—"

"Merlin is aware of those reasons."

"And sympathetic?" Belle prodded. "Or at least, does he understand why Rumple did some of the things he did?"

"Merlin is a just man." He turned to Regina. "I can create the portal you need. After my powers have fully restored."

Belle added another splash of whiskey to her cup.

Regina grinned and pushed a platter of dinner rolls toward him. "Eat up, then."

Regina watched her a moment, then stepped in on her side. "Justice is important. Of course it is. And must be served if balance is to be maintained in the world. But most of us in Storybrooke feel that justice has already been served in Rumplestiltskin's case, and we think it's time to move on."

"You want him back." Balthazar's expression revealed nothing.

"He's one of us. He needs to come home."

"And the savior? What does she say about this?"

Belle started to answer, but Regina cut her off with a frown. "We'll ask her, first thing tomorrow."

"His son," Belle interjected. "Baelfire. He sacrificed himself to free Rumple from the Dark Ones Vault."
"Merlin knows."

"Can you help him?"

"There is a way—"

"Without someone else switching places in the Vault."

"That cannot be done. The Vault requires a soul for a soul. It is one of the sacred laws of magic."

"Then magic be damned." Belle slammed her hand on the table, causing the silverware to rattle. "After all he's been through—after all they've sacrificed—"

Surprisingly, Regina was the one to offer hope. "Don't jump to conclusions, Belle. Let's get some rest. It's been a long night." She stood and her guests did the same. "You're both welcome to spend the night here. I have plenty of guest rooms. You too, Belle. It's too cold to go out again tonight." She waved a hand and produced two pairs of pajamas. "Shall we retire for the night?"

"Thank you, Madame Mayor," the Apprentice hid a yawn behind his hand. "Your offer is most welcome."

"Yes, thank you." Belle scooped up the smaller bundle, running an appreciative hand over a pair of pink silken pajamas that she recognized as having come from her own bureau. "This is very thoughtful."

"I thought you'd feel a bit more comfortable in your own nightwear. And you'll find pillows from your home waiting on your guest bed." As they climbed the stairs, Regina whispered to Belle, "Don't push your luck. We'll take him to Emma tomorrow—and Henry."


"But listen to me yammer," Daniel chuckled. "It's you that should be yakkin'. You've got big changes in your life now. Do I remember right, you finished your class at the hospital the other day? How'd that go?"

"Very well." Rumple stared out the passenger-side window, watching the highway signs fly by. "I learned a great deal."

Daniel glanced over at him, then gripped the steering wheel a little more firmly. "Something wrong, Robert? You're quieter than usual."

"Oh, just thinking." He watched the road instead of returning Daniel's glance. "It's kind of hard to say goodbye again."

"Yeah," the priest agreed. "Sam kinda grows on you, doesn't he?"

"He does that." But it wasn't Sam that Rumple had left behind.

After a hearty breakfast that Belle cobbled together from the mismatched ingredients in Regina's larder and fridge ("The fastest way to a man's heart is through his stomach, our head cook used to say," Belle mused—to which Regina snarked, "The fastest way to a man's heart is straight through his chest, my mother used to say.") Regina offered to escort her guests to the sheriff's office to meet with the savior.

Surprising—and for Regina, worrisome—was Balthazar's polite refusal. "If you don't mind, I need
to go home and see if any of my plants are still alive, after so long unattended. I'll visit the savior later." He added, "I prefer to speak to her privately."

"If it's her candor you're worried about, my presence never stopped Emma from expressing her point of view," Regina argued. "Sometimes in rather crude language."

"In due course, Madame Mayor," he smiled gently and rose from the table, gathering up his dishes. "Please allow me to repay your hospitality by washing the dishes."

Regina exchanged a puzzled look with Belle and whispered, as Balthazar carried his dishes to the sink and started to run the water, "He's washing them by hand? When he could just—" she flicked her wrist.

Belle shrugged. "Rumple and I enjoyed washing dishes together. It was a good time to talk." She nudged Regina with her elbow. "To talk." Then gathered up her dishes and carried them to the sink. From under the sink she fetched a bottle of liquid soap and a sponge, and as she assisted Balthazar in preparing the dishwater, she struck up a casual conversation obviously set to prove how domestic Rumple could be, as though that should count toward forgiveness.

Regina started to cast a quick spell to convey the leftover food to the fridge, then she sighed and stood up and reached into a drawer for the Saran Wrap.

Regina brought the Mercedes to a stop in front of a tired little Cape Cod on Ivy Lane. Its sidewalk and the short flight of steps leading to the front door were buried under snow, and one of the storm windows was cracked. The house really needed a paint job. Regina saw in it an opportunity.

"Balthazar, how would you like a bigger house? I know just the place, a lovely four-bedroom Queen Anne situated on five acres on the northern edge of Mills Lake—"

"Zelena's house," Belle muttered.

The Apprentice shifted in the passenger seat to face her squarely. "Mayor Mills, do I hear a deal coming on?"

"Well, I just thought, after all you've been through. . . ."

He unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door. "One of the first lessons my master taught me, some five hundred years ago, was to never use magic for personal gain." He slid out, then leaned in again to continue, "Besides, you needn't try to deal for the portal you desire. It's already yours. I will begin to work on it when my magic is fully restored." He looked at Belle in the back seat.

"Thank you for the breakfast, Ms. Gold, and thank you for the pajamas, Ms. Mills. Happy New Year."

Regina reached into her purse for her phone. "I'd better prepare Emma. If he catches her before her morning cocoa, we're likely to get a portal that leads to Wonderland."

He went for a long walk across the nearly deserted campus of the University of Maine-Augusta. He paused to admire the buildings in which he would be taking his classes next month, and he paused to bid good morning to a maintenance worker erecting a "Faculty Parking" sign. He wandered into the library, also deserted except for an attendant at the circulation desk and a librarian at the reference desk. He strolled through the stacks, and in his mind he saw Belle beside him, running her fingers reverently over the book spines and begging him for "just one more hour" to stay and admire the treasures here.

He did his best not to notice that the young circ attendant, with a mop of dark, unruly hair,
somewhat resembled Bae at twenty-four. At least, according to a photo Emma had on her office desk.

After dropping Belle off at her apartment, Regina spun the Mercedes around—she was pulling a U turn on Baelfire Boulevard, but the main street was empty, with everyone tucked cozily into their homes on the day after Christmas. Besides, she was the mayor and sort of related to the sheriff; she could blow off a traffic ticket. As she pressed her foot on the accelerator, she smiled at the houses flying by. Soon, now, just a day or two, and this town would know what she and Belle had done last night, and this town would be set free. Soon, just a day or two, and this street would be filled with cars loaded with suitcases, cars and trucks and vans all headed for the town line, families off to explore the world, young adults off to find their fortunes in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. Her smile wavered just a little, as she passed the closed pawn shop; some of the Storybrookers wouldn't be coming back. She'd been Out There; she knew how tempting the world could be.

As she passed the closed candy shop, she raised her smile again. Okay, so some wouldn't come back, but most would. They belonged here. When they'd run out of money or grown tired of the noise and the crime and the trash Out There, they'd turn their cars around and hurry back over the town line. This was their home.

And at the top of the list of returners: Robin Hood. She rolled through the stop sign at No. 1 Road (really, she should have been a bit more creative with the street names). She had important business that couldn't wait for a stop sign: she had a fiance to call.

Rumple had to stop twice on his trudge up the stairs to his apartment; the cold weather had done a number on his ankle. The building was unusually quiet, probably because most of his neighbors had left for the holidays. Most had gone home to families, but the young couple upstairs had taken off for Cancun. He hung up his coat, pulled off his snow-crusted boots and pattered to the kitchen area. He set a kettle on the stove—somehow, preparing tea the old fashioned way seemed more civilized—then slid Let It Be into his CD player and leaned against the window sill, looking out across the empty parking lot. "Get back, get back, get back to where you once belonged," McCartney advised, but there was little chance of that now, because Rumplestiltskin had honored his promise.

"You've done the right thing," said Archie in an email. "If you need to talk before our regular session, I'm available."

"Happy New Year, Grandpa!" Henry wrote. "Mom said there was another guy in the hat, but she and Belle got him out and he's back at home now, resting up. Mom said you sent her the spell to get him out. That's so cool, Grandpa. I think it ranks right up there with my other mom fighting the dragon or my Gramps fighting off the Royal soldiers with one hand while he was holding a baby. Maybe it's not as dramatic, but I think it's just as heroic, and Mom says it won't be long before we have a gateway out of Storybrooke. NYU here I come! So thanks, Grandpa—you're my hero!"

"She didn't tell you, apparently, how the Apprentice got in the hat to begin with," Rumple muttered. He supposed he should share that bit of the truth with Henry, so as not to take credit he didn't deserve. He would do that, and he would admit to Henry that he had failed once again in his duty to Bae. Just not yet. He had to get his own grief under control first.

His kettle whistled and he turned the stove off as the Beatles suggested helpfully, "When I find myself in times of trouble/Mother Mary comes to me/Speaking words of wisdom: Let it be."
As he prepared his teapot, Rumple forced himself to recite the words with McCartney: "And in my hour of darkness/She is standing right in front of me/Speaking words of wisdom: Let it be.” But he couldn't. He'd failed Bae once again; he couldn't let that be. He turned off the CD, abandoned his tea and sat down beside his window, waiting for the miracle that would never come.
Belle had offered to open the library so that Balthazar could read the last year's worth of newspapers and catch up on the doings in Storybrooke, and a Gold never breaks a deal. But as they hadn't specified a time for the opening, it gave Belle the perfect opportunity, so she felt (and she giggled mischievously) to, as Rumple might say, "massage the situation" a bit. Besides, she couldn't let another hour go by without pressing her husband's case.

As soon as she got into her apartment, she grabbed a notepad from her desk and sat down to build her army. It went against her nature to plan an attack: when she fought, she did so spontaneously, marching forward in the confidence that her heart would lead her true, but one of the qualities she admired about her husband was his patience in planning. His schemes involved such intricate detail that their victims never saw the attack coming, and even afterwards, were usually left scratching their heads in confusion over just what Rumplestiltskin had gained—or whether he were involved at all. She couldn't afford to make a mistake this time, nor could she afford to let much time pass. She had to attack fast and strategically. First thing in the morning, she started at the top of her phone tree.

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Emma carried her phone out to the back yard, leaving Henry at the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal and his homework. "You know I've had doubts about this, but you've changed my mind. Yeah, he has too. He's not the Gold of old. So yeah, Belle, count me in. But I'm leaving Henry out of this; I haven't told him what you said about Gold's theory about the vault. If it's just wishful thinking—and I'm afraid it is—I mean, I watched Neal die. I held him as the life went out of him. I think Gold's just a desperate dad who's imagining the impossible, and I don't want Henry to get caught up in that and have his heart broken all over again."

"But you'll come? And speak on behalf of bringing Rumple back?"

"I'll be there. Henry will be in school, but I'll be there."

"Naturally." Regina's voice was cool and smooth, as always. "It's for the good of community. Having another experienced magic practitioner in town will offer us a second line of defense, particularly since Emma and I seem likely to be spending quite a bit of time in New York, in about three years."

"Yes, he should," Snow said thoughtfully. "Seeing him as he is now, so community-minded, so giving—the people he's surrounded himself with are such a good influence. Watching him at the party yesterday with Sam—I just couldn't believe it was the same Rumpelstiltskin. In fact, I know it's not. We've come to know a whole new man, these past months, and it's been as inspiring watching him change as it has been with Regina." She sat back on her couch and gave a nod to her husband, signaling him that it was his turn to speak. He leaned toward the phone—the volume control on its speaker had always been dodgy—with a frown and his lips pulling back in the "no" position until Snow slapped his arm and he had to change his answer.

"Yeah, I think—yeah, he should be allowed back, if he wants to. We gave Regina a second chance, and she hasn't let us down. . . too much," David said hesitantly. "Fair is fair, right?"

"I'll make a few phone calls," Snow broke in, her quick determination making up for her husband's foot-dragging. "I'm certain at least four of the dwarfs will want to come."
"Of course I'll be glad to help in any way I can. I'm not the most forcefully persuasive of men—"

"Exactly why I need you, Archie. Your gentleness and sincerity will counterbalance Regina's imperial demanding nature and Emma's coarse bluntness. Your patient logic will counterbalance my emotionalism and Snow's ethical arguments."

"Well! Since you put it that way, perhaps I can be of service after all—what's that, honey? Oh, of course. Belle, Ruby says to tell you she'll come too."

Rumple eased his way up the stairs to his apartment after he'd collected his mail. Apart from a letter from U of M informing him that he'd been granted a unit of college credit for the hospital class he'd completed, the rest was junk mail that he tossed in his recycling bin. He filed the letter in a hanging folder in his desk drawer and he sat down to read from the Kojiki. But he couldn't concentrate: his attention kept wandering to the coffee table, where his Christmas gifts lay: the chickadee drawing, the photos of Grandpa Gold's Corner, a White House snow globe from the Sawyers, a copy of The Joy of Cooking from Sue Ellen and Harry, and St. Augustine's The City of God from Daniel. His treasures, they were: not of themselves but of the affection they represented. The understanding warmed him, and the warmth burdened him with guilt. He didn't deserve any of this, not when his son burned in the Dark Ones Vault, paying the penalty Rumple should be paying. The Beatles taunted him: "Baby, you're a rich man/Now that you've found another key/What are you going to play?"

Emma, barely discernible beneath her oversized leather parka, pounded on the cottage door, and when the old man pulled it open, she reached in, clamped a gloved hand onto his bathrobed sleeve, and declared, "Good morning! I'm here to extend a breakfast invitation."

"Sheriff Swan?" Balthazar blinked into the rising sun. "Pardon me, but it's hardly eight o'clock. I usually sleep until nine. Semi-retired, you know; I require more rest at my age."

"Sorry to wake you, but fact is, we have a houseful of people at Regina's anxious to welcome you back."

"A Hallmark card would have sufficed."

"They're also anxious to talk to you." She gestured to his checkered bathrobe. "So how about if I give you a little assist here..." Not waiting for an answer, she cast a spell that changed the pajamas and robe into woolen trousers and a plaid shirt.

"If this is about the portal, I already agreed to build one, as soon as I get my strength back."

Balthazar clutched at his shirt, drawing it tight against the cold, and Emma muttered an apology before conjuring a sweater and coat for him. "It's other stuff too. See, we've been waiting a long time—we worked a long time to free ourselves—and we've got a town full of people who are antsy to see that barrier come down. And then there's the business about Gold, and," Emma ran a gloved hand over her mouth, "I'm not so sure I believe this, but a couple of people think there's a chance Neal might be alive and you could get him out, and he's Henry's dad, not to mention Gold's son, and I don't know what he is to me any more, but we've got to get him out if it's true."

"Pardon me?" Balthazar seemed thoroughly confused.

"Never mind, Belle will explain it." She tugged at his sleeve. "My car's right there, already warmed up. I left the engine running, so could we just go?"

"All right, sheriff." He stepped out onto the lawn, pulling the door closed behind him. As he followed her to the VW, he rubbed his bristly cheek. "Do wish you would have let—". She
conjured an electric razor in his hand before he could finish his complaint.

After he'd settled, awkwardly, into the passenger seat of the little car, she slid behind the wheel and pulled away from the curb. "I had intended to sleep in today, then take a leisurely breakfast and catch up on my reading. I was halfway through Black Hawk Down when the Dark One captured me. I want to see how it ends."

Emma winked at him. "The good guys win, like always."

"Yes, but how?"

"We were hoping you could tell us. Our kids need a future, a chance to get out in the world, see things, meet people, go to college."

"I assured Ms. Mills last night I could provide the portal you need." He clicked the razor on and rolled its blades over his grizzled cheeks.

"We figured the 'could' was in the bag." He shot her a scowl for the clumsy Hat reference. "The part we figured needed work was the 'will you.' And there's a bit more. We'll explain after we've fed you."

"So I'll feel obligated for the meal."

"No, so we'll have had time to win you over." The Bug drew up in front of Regina's mansion, though Emma couldn't park in the vehicle-crammed drive.

Not that they could even see what was in the drive, for all the people cluttering the yard. "What is this?" Balthazar squinted.

"They're here to state their case." Emma led him up to the front door, where Regina stood, dressed her in mayorly finest. As Emma took the Apprentice by the elbow and steered him inside, the crowd in front of them parted, and the crowd behind them followed inside. It certainly appeared that they wouldn't all fit in the mayor's dining room, where Emma led Balthazar, but the house seemed to stretch itself and the dining table lengthened and chairs that weren't there before appeared as soon as people poured into the room. "Gotta get Regina to teach me that trick," Emma mumbled. On the table, bowls and platters of food and pitchers of drink appeared. "Please," Regina withdrew the chair at the head of the table—her chair—and indicated he should sit in it. "Be seated." A quick look from her and the crowd fell silent, and she smiled graciously, seating herself at Balthazar's right. Emma took a seat at his left, and beside her, her parents, and beside Regina, her assistant Geri. Belle sat at the far end, surrounded by dwarfs. Dove and others found seats throughout the room.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," Charming quipped, to which Snow added, "Thank you for inviting us, Regina." She turned to the Apprentice and said her meeting-leader voice, "Thank you for coming."

"Emma was rather adamant on that point," Balthazar murmured.

Regina picked up the cup from Balthazar's place setting. "Coffee or tea or juice?"

"Uhm, coffee, please," Regina poured for him and herself, then prepared a plate for him, and the dishes began to circulate around the table. Amazingly, there was food enough for all, though at least forty people must have come in. Although magic radiated from eight of the breakfast guests and from the walls of the house, no one cast any spells on the food—Regina could have sensed it as she passed the plates—and yet, there was more than enough for everyone. She puzzled on that:
when she'd called her caterer at six o'clock this morning, she'd ordered service for twenty (and had paid for three times that, since it was a rush order). She mentally shrugged; one of the first lessons Rumplestiltskin had taught her about magic (after the endless "All magic comes with a price" and "Magic can't be used to make someone love you, to raise the dead or to change history" yammering) was sometimes magic had a mind of its own and the practitioner just had to accept that.

She made a quick scan of the table—as much as she could see of it—and determining that everyone had a filled cup and a filled plate before them, she gave a small nod to Snow, who then set down her toast triangle, brushed the crumbs from her fingers, and began the discussion of the moment. "Mr. Blake—"

The Apprentice's fork paused in mid-air and he politely set it down, casting the briefest glance of longing at the bite of omelette it carried.

"Oh, no, please, continue to eat," Snow urged. "We needn't stand on formality here." So Snow had taken the time to find out the Apprentice's full name. And that, Regina speculated, was a mark of Snow's innate leadership: her ability to maintain decorum while still making her guests comfortable. A useful trait in times of peace. Now as for leadership in times of war, Regina raised her chin as she sipped her coffee: no one could beat Queen Regina for cunning, quick decision-making, confidence in the face of danger, and knowledge of military maneuvers. What a shame things hadn't gone differently in the Enchanted Forest: Regina would have loved to hand over the social aspects of her job to a savvy princess, so she could concentrate on expanding and maintaining her territories.

To encourage the informal atmosphere Snow wished to set, her husband and her daughter tucked into their breakfasts (but were careful to take small bites and use their napkins). Balthazar picked up his fork again and savored his first taste of egg in more than a year. Pleased with her family, Snow eased into the reason for this meeting: "Regina tells us you work for Merlin. That must be very interesting."

"It has been," Balthazar acknowledged. "Many of my service years have been spent in seclusion, guarding precious objects, to keep them from falling into the wrong hands, but I've often been asked to seek out information or to search for people, places or things. It's been an interesting five hundred years."

"Wow." Ruby jerked upright. "Five hundred years? So you're—" Then she clamped her mouth shut as her granny kicked her ankle in warning.

"Old," Balthazar finished. "Even though I did enter service as a small child."

"Working for the greatest sorcerer ever, that's pretty impressive." David nudged the conversation forward, then glanced at Snow, inviting her to take up the thread.

"Yes, and we understand you have impressive powers yourself, for instance, the ability to create portals."

"A specialty of mine. I spent decades perfecting it."

"We have a realm jumper in our group," Charming nodded toward the end of the table, where Jefferson offered a jaunty salute.

"Jefferson, at your service. But I have to use a hat. I hear you can draw portals from thin air. I would love to watch you in action sometime."
"Ah." Balthazar dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. "Yes, I thought that might be where this discussion would lead."

"You must forgive us." Snow set a hand on their guest's arm. "We're overeager. It means so much to our future."

"Some of us have poured all our free time into trying to bring down that barrier at the town line," Emma grumbled. "And got nowhere."

"Well, that can soon be rectified," Balthazar said, sneaking a little taste of bacon.

Snow wondered, "And your master, will he permit it?"

Balthazar nodded. "He and I both believe that with certain precautions, good will come of opening the border to allow the citizens of Storybrooke to travel."

A cheer went up, beginning at the foot of the table and rippling forward, catching Charming, Emma and Belle up in it. The born royals, Regina and Snow, reacted with greater dignity, smiling and thanking their guest for his agreement to aid in their efforts. Balthazar used the opportunity to spear up a strawberry and chew it. As the cheer died down, he raised a warning hand. "As I said, there are precautions we must take, and that will slow down our progress. But they are necessary."

David agreed, "The curse we had before kept outsiders out for thirty years, but then two intruders managed to get through it. We need something durable. If the outside world found out there's magic here—"

Blue finished, "We'd all become slaves to cruel masters, like the Dark Ones have been."

Regina added, "And our loved ones held hostage to those masters."

Balthazar nodded. "It must not happen. I can create such a portal, but it will take time. So that the portal can identify who belongs here and who should be kept out, the magic will require a sample from every resident of Storybrooke, from the smallest babe to the—well, to me, as I believe I'm the oldest resident."

Emma clarified, "Like a DNA sample?"

"Just so. A strand of hair will do nicely."

Regina said decisively, "We'll get organized immediately. I'll call Whale this morning and we'll get a donation station set up in the hospital."

"Hold your horses, Your Majesty," Leroy broke in. "Supposin' one of us out there on vacation says somethin' to one of them about magic bein' here? Like Gold said once, in a day's time we'll have tour buses cruisin' Main—err, Baelfire Boulevard."

"Do you have a proposal, Leroy?" Snow asked.

"Not a magician, Your Majesty. I'll leave it to them that are."

"Like a spell of some kind that will prevent people from talking about magic?" Tom suggested.

"Bad idea," Regina and Balthazar said unison, the latter adding, "Any spell that takes away free will would require the use of Dark magic."

"Besides," Belle pointed out, "once you cross the border, you're out of range of any magic."
"Or most of it, anyway," Balthazar said.

"I think," Snow decided, "the honor system is our best bet. I think we all know how dangerous it would be to our families and friends, not to mention our way of life here, if we spread tales out of town."

"Not to mention that anyone who starts chattering about magic will be branded a kook; nobody will believe 'em," Emma said.

Archie lowered his eyes to his empty plate. "Maybe even call them delusional and make them go to therapy."

"Or lock them in an asylum," Belle added quietly.

Regina hung her head.

"We have to trust our young people," Snow said. "I think we can."

"I do too." David backed her up.

"I think we all remember what happened the last time outsiders got into Storybrooke," Belle suggested. "We won't let it happen again."

"Greg and Tamara," Emma growled.

"John and Michael," Ariel said.

"Pan and Felix," Granny said.

"Cora and Hook," Regina said. "Well, Cora, anyway."

"The Snow Queen," Balthazar said.

Belle shuddered, "And Zelena."

"Perhaps we if remind ourselves from time to time of these threats, we'll remember the necessity of guarding our privacy," Snow said.

"To guard our lives," David concluded.

"Very well then. To continue," Balthazar conjured a pen and began jotting notes on a napkin. "The portal will require regular maintenance, and I was sent here for another purpose. I will need an assistant, someone who intends to stay here—" his eyes passed over Regina and Emma—"someone with magic."

Both women hesitated, but Regina volunteered, "Robin plans to settle here. We would like to honeymoon in Paris, but that would only be a couple of weeks."

"I'll be here then," Emma offered. "I'll be visiting New York a couple of times a year to see Henry at NYU—"

"As will I, but we'll plan for those visits not to overlap," Regina said.

"The responsibility need not fall on your shoulders alone," Blue stood up, spreading her hands to draw everyone's attention to the fairy-nuns seated to her left and right. "Besides Balthazar, we have eight magic practitioners in town. We'll all do our part."
"Things have truly changed here," Balthazar observed.

"There could be nine," Belle piped up.

"Yes, there could be nine," Emma picked up the thought.

"Which is the other reason for this gathering," Snow said. "Balthazar, we ask your help in reuniting our family."

"Your. . . family. . . " Balthazar repeated, glancing from face to face.

"My husband is missing," Belle explained. "I need him back."

"He did some shady stuff," David admitted, "but a lot of that can be laid at Zelena's door."

"She tortured him for an entire year, physically and psychologically, taunting him, humiliating him, dragging him through a psychological Hell," Archie said. "He and I have worked for a long time to bring him to recovery."

"I saw the cage she kept him in," Emma said. "You can't even stand up in it. She made him eat out of a dog bowl. Can you imagine living like that for a year? It's like he was a prisoner of war."

"He was," Regina commented. "My sister was insane."

"And all that time, Gold was sharing brain-space with his son, trying desperately to keep his soul alive after Zelena killed him," Emma said.

"Too many voices,' he said," David remembered. "Three consciousnesses living in one head. No wonder he went crazy."

"And meanwhile, the Dark One was manipulating Rumple's soul." Belle pleaded with Balthazar. "You've been fighting Dark Ones for centuries. You must know."

"I have seen many men and women possessed by the Dark One," Balthazar admitted, and Belle's eyes brightened with hope until he added, "I have seen a few rise up and fight back against the evil in their souls, but I have never seen one win."

"He has," Belle insisted. "He's out of reach of the Dark One. Where he is now, he's safe from magic, and he intends to stay that way."

"He's done so much for the community he's living in," Snow said. "He's an advocate for the homeless, a mentor to troubled youth, a worker in a shelter for addicts-""

"So I heard, last night," Balthazar interrupted. "I've heard all the reasons why a few of you want him back."

"Except one. One I didn't mention last night, but it's the most important one." Belle held her head high. "I love him."

"So does Henry," Snow put in.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to use that word," said Regina, "but I find I need him here. . . and in my life. As a sort of stabilizer."

"And you, Ms. Swan?" Balthazar asked gently.
"I want him back," Emma declared. "Henry needs to know both sides of his family. And for me. There's a lot I never knew about Neal. Gold can provide some of missing puzzle pieces."

"And after he's done that?"

"Yeah, okay, you want to hear me say it? Fine. I want him back because I wouldn't be here if not for him. If he hadn't pulled those con games of his, I would've jumped right back in my Bug and run back to Boston, soon as Graham died. Twisted and self-serving as his schemes were, they kept me here, and I found my family here. So yeah, I want him here to remind me not to run when things get too weird. And yeah, the town just doesn't feel right without him struttin' down Baelfire Boulevard every morning. I just look at that empty crosswalk between Purbeck's and the hardware, and—" she tightened her mouth. "I want him back."

Snow revealed, "That's really why we're all here. Regina had told us you'd agreed to build a portal for us; we weren't really worried about that. We're here to ask for you to intercede with Merlin, to allow Rumplestiltskin to come back."

"And to rescue his son from the Vault of the Dark Ones," Belle finished. "Without risking Rumple's life."

"Belle and I have not forgotten what you said about the laws of magic," Regina said. "Believe me, I've run afoul of those laws enough times to know they're unbreakable. But we also know that there's never been a mage more powerful and more knowledgeable of magic than Merlin, and we're placing our hopes in him to bring both our absent family members back into the fold." Her steady stare made her statement a challenge rather than a plea.

"It cannot—"

"Have you tried, before?" Ruby interrupted. "Have you got anyone out of the Vault before? Or has Merlin?"

"No, but the Vault is meant as the eternal prison of the souls of all who were consumed by the Darkness, and the law requires—"

"Can't we try?" Belle pushed.

"Look, I don't know how it happened that I'm the savior. If it was Fate or True Love or what. But if I'm the savior, I've got to take every chance I can to save everyone, so here goes." Emma stood up and addressed the crowd. "It's you guys' turn now. You know why you were called here. If you think Gold should be allowed back into Storybrooke, whatever your reasons are, if it's because you like the guy or you think people deserve a second chance or he's your landlord and you want to suck up to him, stand up." She glanced at Balthazar. "Just joking about that last part."

A horrendous noise filled the elegant dining room for a few seconds as chairs scraped back and heels clapped down on the marble floor. When quiet settled around, only Balthazar was left seated. His tired eyes roamed over each face, taking that person's measure. When he'd come back around to Emma again, he relented slightly, "I'll share this information with my master, as I do all relevant information." He glanced at Belle. "But the laws of magic are immutable; please adjust your expectations accordingly." His fingers crept toward a slice of bacon.

"We've stated our case," Snow re-seated herself. "Let's finish this wonderful breakfast Regina and Karen's Katering provided." She shot a firm look at Belle, who remained standing as everyone else sat down. Belle frowned but gave a short nod and passed a tote bag up the table. "As promised, issues of the Mirror from the last year. You may return them to the library when you've finished
"Thank you, Mrs. Gold."
"If you think Gold should be allowed back into Storybrooke, whatever your reasons are, if it's because you like the guy or you think people deserve a second chance or he's your landlord and you want to suck up to him, stand up. Just joking about that last part."

Forty people, some whose names he hadn't bothered to learn, some who would have merrily burned him in effigy at the Miners' Day celebration for all the kids in town to watch, scraped their chairs back from the table and got to their feet.

Rumple had to remind himself to close his mouth. "This is real? Not one of those 'aliens from outer space visit the White House' cut-and-paste jobs?"

The solemnity in Archie's eyes made it unnecessary for him to answer, but he did anyway. "It's real. I was there; I saw it myself."

"You stood up."

"I stood up. So did Ruby and Granny and a whole lot of other people."

"Thank you."

"It's what I think."

"You stood up for me in the beginning, with Henry."

"I did. I think the town was wrong to banish you."

Rumple noticed Archie's use of the town, not Belle. Whether it was to avoid blaming Belle or to place responsibility across several people's shoulders, Rumple wasn't sure. Maybe both. His hands folded in his lap, he replayed the vine that Hopper had emailed him. When it was over, he closed the email and returned to his Skype window. "How did Balthazar react?"

"I couldn't tell. His expression was unreadable."

Rumple nodded. "He's been Merlin's reporter for centuries. His face wouldn't give anything away because he's learned to depersonalize his observations."

"A bunch of us talked afterwards, after Emma drove him home. We couldn't come to a consensus about what we think he'll do, but we did all agree we want you back."

"Thank you." Rumple fumbled for something meaningful to say. "And Ruby. Extend my thanks to Ruby."

"No need to thank us for simply stating our opinion." A frown creased Archie's brow. "Mr. Gold, what do you know about the relationship between Balthazar and Merlin? I mean, how much of an influence does Balthazar have? And has he ever acted against Merlin's wishes?"

Rumple stared at the carpet as he sorted through his memories. Finally he replied, "I can't recall ever hearing of a disagreement between the two. I would suppose it's happened; over the course of five hundred years, how could it not? But from what I've heard of Balthazar, I think he avoids having opinions and wouldn't presume to question Merlin's decisions. He trusts Merlin completely.
I think he thinks of himself as an extension of Merlin's ears and eyes, but not his brain."

"And is Merlin as powerful as his legend claims?"

A wry smile tugged at Rumple's lips. "Probably more."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Archie told me about the breakfast yesterday. Thank you for—" his voice broke.

So did hers. "I want you to come home. And Baelfire—I want you both to come home."

"I'd like that too, but, Belle—"

"No, I know what you're going to say, but I don't accept it." She banged her fist against her coffee table. "I know what the laws of magic say; I've read every book of magic in town. And one of the things I learned is that love is the strongest magic of all; love is the highest law—every book says so—and so it supersedes all the other laws, including the 'eye for an eye, soul for a soul' one."

Rumple started to object, but he remembered something he'd said not so long ago: "Surely I've learned by now not to argue with you. Keep believing, sweet one, and I'll keep hoping."

"How long do you think it's gonna take?"

Regina raised an eyebrow. Henry was the most patient teenager she'd ever known—he rivaled his Grandpa Gold and his Grandma Snow in that regard—but today he was chomping at the bit. So jumpy he was, he'd hardly eaten anything at breakfast: just three eggs, a half-pound of bacon and a bowl of oatmeal. She couldn't blame him, though. She could smell freedom in the crisp winter air too.

"I don't know. A few days? He's an old man, and he was trapped in that Hat for more than a year. Give him time."

"You don't think he'd—"

"No. He'll give us that portal, I'm sure of it. Tell you what: why don't we go over to the library today and browse some of those New York travel guides?"

"Maybe we should stop by his house to make sure he's all right."

"Let him rest, Henry. A day or two, okay? The Apprentice will call us when he's ready."

Lying on his side on his fold-out couch, Rumple half-watched through heavy eyelids the rolling wave of Christmas lights that adorned the doorway and windows of the apartment directly across from his. First the red lights flared on, then they went out and the green lights took a turn, then they went out and then both sets of lights came on together. The latter rotation, he thought idly, was too intense. Little Bae would have loved it, though: he thrilled at intensity.

Rumple rolled over onto his left side, face to the back of the couch, but those Christmas lights cast muggy red and green shadows against his white wall. He could have gotten up to close his Venetian blinds, but he was just a few deep breaths away from sleep and he didn't want to wake himself. He pulled his quilt ($25 from a rummage sale) up to his ears and turned his face into his pillow, and that provided enough darkness that he could slide into sleep. There was a small smile on his face as he did. "If you think Gold should be allowed. . . ." Forty people. He could see each face in his mind's eye. He counted them; it relaxed him even better than counting sheep had, back
in his spinner days. Belle and Emma and Snow and Charming and Henry and Regina and Archie and Ruby and Granny and Whale and Sneezy and Dopey and Doc and Sleep—

He'd overslept. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. Despite the thinness of the fold-out's mattress, he'd been so comfortable under his quilt, his arms wrapped around his pillow (how it got from under his head, he couldn't guess). He shaved in the shower and, though he put on the suit that he always wore when he visited Trajan, he stuffed the tie into his jacket pocket; he'd mess with it when he got onto the first of the two buses to take him to the west side. He trotted, as best his cane and the snow would allow, to the bus stop and arrived just as the 9:15 arrived. Panting, he jumped aboard, flashed his monthly pass at the driver, and dropped into the first empty seat he could find. He tied his tie—awkwardly, without a mirror, but at least now he felt properly dressed—then settled back against the window and reached into his coat pocket for a book to read. He expected the Kojiki—he was certain he'd left it in his pocket after last night's bus ride—but instead his hand came away with a white envelope, unopened but unaddressed. He frowned as he slid a fingernail under the flap: perhaps someone had mistaken his coat for their own, when he'd taken it off in Katz Library yesterday. He had wandered away from the study carrel a few times, leaving his coat unattended.

He pried the flap free from its glue and withdrew the contents, a single handwritten sheet of smudged ink and splatters of something dark that he couldn't identify, until he brought the letter closer to his face to try to read the tiny, archaic handwriting. As his nose tingled, he squirmed in his seat, suddenly feeling hot and itchy, and then the scent triggered memories: a snail... stains on his boots... He recognized the scent then and his stomach, though empty, churned. The scent of old copper—but not.

"Dearest Papa."

For just a second he wondered—but no, this handwriting was tiny and sparse: Bae's was big and wild.

"Dearest Papa,

"When we parted, you kissed my forehead and promised you would find a way to bring me home again, but we both knew the falseness of that hope. Mama was so ashamed she could not bring herself to come out to the road and bid me farewell, but as I mounted the strange horseless coach that the Dark One had sent for me, I could hear my new baby brother cry, and I imagined her clutching him protectively to her breast as she fought back tears she cried for me. It was, as the Dark One had said, a fair deal, a life for a life, me to serve in his household for all my years, in return for the magic that healed my brother. I agreed then, and I agreed when I arrived in Misthaven and found the snug, comfortable cottage in which I would work, and the smaller, but comfortable separate home I would have all to myself, and the boy I would care for and come to love. The winter passed, the spring came, the rivers and the lambs were fat, the war had ended—some said, put to a sudden stop by the magic of my master—the young soldiers returned, and in the village the priests burned sacrifices to the gods, but a few burned sacrifices to the Dark One, for the blessings they believed he had bestowed upon them. I do not know the truth of that. He speaks to me only in brief commands, and his son, who speaks a great deal, seems confused as to which blessings and which disasters can be attributed to his father. Sometimes I lapse into complacency, so comfortable am I with the living my master provides me: I eat like a courtier and I can have a new dress or new hair ribbons whenever I desire them. Sometimes I forget that he is called the Dark One for a reason.

"But just when I am lulled into blindness, he reminds me with acts so horrific that I cower from him, though he has never raised a hand to me, and I would run away with my gold and my dresses,
if I could, but he would find me, and I fear he would do to me what I have seen him do to any who have affronted his son, intentionally or not. I fear him, Papa; his temper is unrestrained and his power, unlimited. I fear that a simple frown from his son would unleash the fury of the Dark One upon me. But then, in the same breath that he casts his evil magic upon a hapless carter, he hugs his boy to his chest and he calls for me to bring their supper, and he lavishes me with praise and gifts for the small favors I render them. I am as confused as Baelfire.

"The boy speaks to me of running away. Of course I cannot answer him, but I try to tell him with my hands that he must not; I fear what the Dark One would do to both of us, if Baelfire ran.

"Papa, this evening as I carried in their supper, I overheard the Dark One tell a secret to his son, an awful secret I would never divulge even to you, in fear for my life. I have determined that I must run away, and take Baelfire with me if I can, to protect him. In the village they talk of small beings whose magic is given freely to those in need. I must find these beings and ask for their protection for myself and the boy.

"Light a candle for me, Papa. I can never come home again, for he would find me.

"Honora."

His hands began to shake and his mouth went dry. The bus' stop signal rang and as the bus rolled to a stop, Rumple lifted his head, his eyes searching the eyes of his fellow passengers. Had they heard something, seen something in him? Would they report him? But the passenger disembarking paid him no mind, and the seated passengers remained seated, ignorant of the beads of sweat now collecting on Rumple's forehead. Licking his lips, he looked back at the letter to fold it, shove it in his pocket, destroy it as soon as he was alone—his eyes burned and he wanted to cry. She, who had taken such good care of his son and his house—she, who, along with Morraine, had been Baelfire's only friend—she had been mortally afraid of the Dark One, to the point of seeking aid from fairies. To the point of seeking to run away and take Bae with her, for his own safety.

And she was right. The Dark One had killed her, though she'd done nothing to threaten or offend. Had killed her for what she knew.

Rumple's chest began to fill and sink. His nose began to run. He couldn't keep his pain in.

"Dear Papa." His eyes blurred as he reread the salutation.

Except it wasn't. It wasn't "Dear Papa" any more. It was "Dear Occupant."

Utterly confused, he rubbed his eyes and stared at the letter. "Dear Occupant, Are you paying too much for TV? Cut the cable!"

The letter fluttered to the dirty floor. He bent to pick it up, but the bus stopped again and instead, he looked up at the departing rider. And then he looked into the rear view mirror and caught a pair of ancient blue eyes staring back at him. Shuddering, Rumple bent and picked up his "Dear Occupant" letter. When he got off at the next stop, Rumple dared to look into the driver's face, and he was confused all over again, for the eyes the driver turned upon him were dark brown.

When the 10:45 pulled up at the corner of Elm and Welder, a little boy bundled in a Kylo Ren jacket was waiting. Rumple sighed in relief as he stepped down from the bus. Trajan rushed forward, his arms open, whooping, "Mr. O'Neal! Mr. O'Neal!"

Rumple returned the hug, then stepped back and straightened his tie. Whatever had happened—or hadn't—on the bus, he had a job to do now, a boy who needed him to be steady and strong. He
pulled himself together. "Good morning, Master Trajan. Have you completed your homework?"

"It's Christmas break. No school."

"Ah. So it is. Well, then, come along." He held his hand out and Trajan clasped it. "Tell me what you've been reading during your holiday."

He had work to do, a boy who needed him. Thank the gods.

Mayor Mills never let herself be caught disheveled, but today she made an exception. She'd been cleaning her oven when the doorbell rang, and, having a pretty good idea who her caller might be, she ran to the door with her hair bound in a kerchief and her hands sheltered by hideous yellow rubber gloves. Henry was close behind her as she yanked the door open. A pair of ancient blue eyes smiled at her. "Madame Mayor, good morning. Perhaps you and your son would like to accompany me to the town line."
With the Apprentice's permission—who, in turn, had gained Merlin's permission to complete his portal promise—Henry texted Emma, Blue and Belle to summon them to the town line, and now the five dedicated researchers waited just behind the orange stripe. Regina spared a moment's thought to all the power gathered here: the long-time leader of the united fairy tribes; the lifelong (extraordinarily long-lived) servant of the most powerful sorcerer ever to walk the earth, and the inheritor of all of Merlin's secrets; the product of True Love, the strongest of all magics; the chosen mate of the Dark One, possessor of all his books, potions and charms; and the Evil Queen, warriorsorceress. And beside them, one whose powers were yet to be discovered, but who had already demonstrated a supernatural skill in uniting former enemies. Regina had no doubt that if these five combined their magics, they could turn this planet inside out. For now, though, she'd be quite content just to knock down the Snow Queen's invisible wall, which Balthazar was now studying.

The Apprentice sent a bolt of magic across the town line. His blast seemed to connect with something, for it came to an abrupt halt, then sputtered, skidded around and spread out like a pat of butter dropped onto a hot skillet.

In her hand Regina held a product of the magic that world across the orange line possessed: a smartphone. She touched a single key and the phone purred. As she waited for the connection to be established, she chewed her lip, and her companions looked on curiously. An openly nervous Regina was a rare sight.

The purring stopped, there was a click and a puzzled face appeared in the tiny window. "Regina?"

"Hello, Robin." A small tremble in her voice revealed that Regina was more excited than her words let on. "I'm calling from Storybrooke. From the town line, actually. Several others are here with me."

"How did you get the phone to—good lords! Did he break—"

"Not yet, but he's working on it. Apparently he's made a crack in it."

She smiled down at the smartphone. "Darling, I realize that you're probably at work right now and we ought to keep this call short, so," she took on a formal posture, "Mr. Locksley, on behalf of the City of Storybrooke, Ms. Gold and I wish to offer you the position of Career Counselor at the public library, effective—" a giggle broke through her facade—"just as soon as I can get to New York to pick you up and bring you back home."

"Regina!"

She checked her Piaget Depose. "It's eleven o'clock now. I think I can get there by ten p.m."

"Regina, my heart's pounding so loud I can barely hear myself speak."

"So is mine," she admitted. "Greenwich Village." She tried it out. "I like the sound of it. Greenwich Village."

As his mom concentrated on the driving directions Robin was sharing, Henry lowered his backpack from his shoulder and unzipped it. Balthazar quietly said something to him, and he took a boomerang from the bag. Balthazar's glowing fingers sketched out a large rectangle in the air, and
the sound of shattering glass made everyone jump back, unnecessarily, since there was no actual glass to break.

"Now, Henry." Balthazar lowered his hands.

Regina stared into the stretch of empty highway on the other side of the town line, almost forgetting her phone call. As Henry positioned the boomerang between his fingers and thumb, she caught herself and turned the phone face-out. "You might want to see this, Robin."

Henry chuckled nervously as he raised his arm. "Hope this works. This is my last boomerang." He let the toy fly.

"Comebackcomebackcomebackcomeback," Emma chanted, and Blue crossed herself. Belle squeezed her hands into fists. "It's going to work! It's got to!" Then she suddenly dropped to her hands and knees. "Duck!"

"I'm sorry, Belle!" Henry came running to retrieve the now fallen boomerang from behind Belle. "There was more wind than—Moms! It came back!"

Emma scooped the boy and his toy into her arms and whooped. "I don't mind," Belle laughed, brushing the dirt from her knees as she rose to her feet. "I don't mind at all!" She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted down the highway, "Rumple, pack your bags!" Then she thought of her phone and dug around in her tote bag for it.

"Robin, did you see?" Regina flicked her phone back and forth from the boomerang in Henry's hand to her own broad smile. "Did you see?"

"Marry me, Regina," Robin blurted. "Tomorrow. The City Clerk's office opens at nine. Get here as fast as you can and marry me!"

"Do you mean it?"

"Marry me! You deserve a big wedding, but I can't wait."

"I've had a big wedding. Now I want love. There's a garment bag hanging in the back of my car with my favorite Roland Mouret dress, the royal blue one with the offset collar."

"I like that dress. I like you in that dress."

"I'd like to get married in that dress."

"So that's a yes?" he yelped.

"That's a big yes, Milord Locksley." Regina touched her son's shoulder. "Henry, I know I promised you a visit to NYU, but would you like to attend a wedding first?"

"Mom!" Henry threw his arms around her, nearly causing her to drop her phone. He shouted into the receiver, "Congrats, Robin!" Then he grabbed Emma's arm: "Mom! Mom's getting married tomorrow!"

All heads, even the Apprentice's, turned and handshakes were offered; Belle paused in her attempt to find her phone and instead started to hug Regina, but, after all, she was still a queen and a hug was too familiar. "Well, permit me to offer a small gift," Blue said, and she conjured a small box; when Regina lifted the lid, she found a gas station gift card inside. "To aid you on your long drive."
"Thank you," Regina said sincerely.

"Hey, yeah, my turn." Before Regina and Belle could stop her, Emma had sent a glowing cloud of magic toward the Mercedes. The cloud swallowed the car, and a groan escaped Regina's lips, but then the cloud dissipated and the car reappeared, safe and sound. Puzzled, Regina asked, "What did you do, Ms. Swan?"

"Look around back."

Regina walked behind her car, then chuckled. "Very good, Ms. Swan. Robin, Emma's made a gift for us." She positioned her phone so he could see the string of cans tied to the bumper and the words "Almost Married" soaped to the rear window.

"Well, that gives you something old," Belle pointed at the cans, "and something from Blue, so . . ." She slipped a thin gold bracelet from her wrist and presented it to Regina. "Here's something borrowed. Rumple made this from gold he spun himself."

"Thank you, Ms. Gold. I'll wear it tomorrow, for luck."

"And now for my gift. As I recall, 'something new.'" Balthazar stepped to the very edge of the orange line waved his hand. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, the air shimmered, a bright light burst in mid-air, and when it vanished, a tall door stood in the street. "Simply symbolic, of course. Only people on this side can see it. But it will serve as a reminder that this is a controlled access point," Balthazar explained, pressing his palm against the ghostly door; the door responded by vanishing. When he dropped his hand, the door appeared again. "You can drive a Mack truck through it. Now, as in all our excitement we seem to have forgotten to bring your DNA samples from the hospital, may I have a strand of hair from each of you?"

Regina conjured a pair of barber's shears and snipped a few hairs from Henry's head, then her own. She passed the shears on down the line, to Blue, Emma and Belle, and each woman snipped a lock of hair to lay in Regina's palm. She presented these to Balthazar, who blew on them, sending them flying into the portal. "Now the door knows you and will let you back in."

"Ms. Swan, may I borrow our son for a couple of days?"

"Of course, Madame Mayor. But just a minute—" Emma snapped her fingers and a suitcase appeared at Henry's feet. "Now you're ready." She kissed Henry's forehead, then opened the driver's side door of the Mercedes. "Stay under the speed limit, Regina. Don't make me come to the Sixth Precinct Station to bail you out."

"You'll continue to make sure the DNA collection runs smoothly in my absence, won't you, Mother Superior? And Emma—"

"Yeah, I'll make sure no one leaves until Balthazar's done his thing with the hair samples."

Regina looked longingly at the orange line, then glanced at Henry. "Well, young man, are you ready to conquer the big city?"

Henry grinned. "Can I drive?"

"No way, Henry, no way. Get in. We've got a long drive ahead." Regina nodded at the Apprentice as she slid behind the wheel. "Thank you."

The small group waved as the Mercedes rolled slowly over the orange line—and safely. Once across, Regina tooted her horn and pushed her foot to the pedal. The car roared off, quickly out of
sight. Emma shook her head in mock disappointment. "Looks like I'm going to need to borrow bail money from you, Belle, before this weekend is out."

Belle chuckled appreciatively, then spun on Balthazar. "Beautiful work, Balthazar, but what about Rumple?"

"My master is considering your request." Balthazar seemed to consider that the end of the discussion, as he offered his arm to the nun-fairy. "Shall we return to town, Reul Ghorm?"

"That didn't answer my question." Belle, fists on her hips, planted herself in front of Blue's Toyota.

"Actually, it did." The Apprentice opened the driver's side door for Blue. "However temporarily. When Merlin has made his decision, rest assured, I'll call you immediately." He walked around to the passenger side.

"That's not fair!" Belle sputtered, but the Apprentice was holding the door open for her. With a huff, she started to seat herself and continue her complaint, but she was interrupted by the hum of an approaching engine. Puzzled, she and Balthazar both stopped and stared at the Caddy that drew up alongside the Toyota. Its window rolled down and the driver leaned out. "Mrs. Gold?"

"Mr. Dove?" Belle walked over to the Caddy, blinking at the driver, then peering into the back seat, which was loaded with suitcases. A luggage carrier had been attached to the roof and boxes peeked out of the overloaded trunk. "I apologize for the short notice, but I'm taking a short vacation. Perhaps you'd like to come with me?"

She giggled and ran over to the passenger side. "To Augusta?"

"Where else?" He winked at her, then tilted his head toward the back seat. "I packed a few things that I thought Mr. Gold could use."

"A few for me as well? Not that it matters—I'd go in my bathrobe if I had to!"

Dove drummed his fingers on the roof of the car. "The cases in the carrier are yours. I apologize for the invasion of your closet and your dresser."

"No apology necessary. And thank you. Just how many cases did you pack?"

"I lost count." Dove reached for the gear shift, but a sudden knocking on driver's side door stopped him.

"Mr. Dove, unless you don't wish to return to Storybrooke, a hair sample, please!" Balthazar waved his shears invitingly, then suddenly dropped his arm and laughed as Dove ran a hand over his bald head.

"I'm afraid I can't accommodate you—"

Balthazar leaned into the open window. "Ah, yes. I can work with this." He pressed a glowing hand flat to the back of Dove's head; when he removed it, a full crop of luxurious gray locks sprouted from the scalp, not unlike the Apprentice's own hairdo. He snipped a curl, then sent it flying into the doorway. "There. You're free to go now."

"Uh, if you don't mind," Dove tugged at his new-grown hair and grimaced. "I've kept it shaved for a reason. I went prematurely gray."

"Of course." Balthazar snapped his fingers and restored Dove's baldness. "Sorry about that." He
stepped back, waved farewell, and returned to the Toyota.

Dove rubbed his head and checked his appearance in the rear-view mirror, then snorted in indignation. "Now, as I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted, I wasn't sure what you'd like to wear this weekend, so I brought your entire winter wardrobe." He pointed to the floorboard under her feet. "And your purse, your credit cards, about ten thousand in cash, and the novel from your nightstand." He cleared his throat. "If you don't mind—if it's not too much of an intrusion—I'd like to visit with him too before I come back to Storybrooke. I've made a reservation for myself at the Augusta Holiday Inn. I thought I'd take the train back on Monday," he glanced at her meaningfully, "that is, if you decide to extend your visit."

She patted his knee. "Mr. Dove, you are amazing."

"Your phone is in your purse."

"Hello?"

"Hi, Rumple! Did I wake you?"

"No, I was just rea—Belle?! How are you—but the phones—what's happening?"

"Mr. Dove and I thought we'd take a drive. If you're going to be home this afternoon, how about if we drop by?"

"Belle?!"

He knew, logically, it would take about two hours for Belle to arrive, maybe two and a half, considering the snow; Dove was a very responsible driver. "Good," he said aloud, "good. Give me time to tidy up." He went to fetch the broom and the mop, but as he opened the closet, it occurred to him that they'd be hungry when they arrived; they probably would be too excited to stop for lunch. So he hurried off to the store for some supplies, rushed back and threw together a simple meal: lobster bisque, brochetta with olive oil, mixed greens with vinaigrette, and a chocolate souffle (Belle's favorite). The ingredients cost him a full day's pay, but he was proud to do this much for his guests. As the soup simmered, he swept and mopped the main room and scrubbed the bathroom and changed the linens on his fold-out bed. He stared forlornly at the bed: what if she—he shook his head, chastising himself for jumping to conclusions. She'd informed him that Dove would be staying at a hotel, but she hadn't mentioned where she intended to sleep, where she wanted to sleep.

He straightened the books and CDs on his shelves. Among all the new acquisitions was the copy of The Day the Cowboys Quit that he had appropriated from the honor rack at the Portland Library. He was sleeping under an overpass then, washing in the public toilets of a park. He'd come a long way. Belle knew his story. Belle knew how far he'd risen and she was proud of him. That was all that mattered. She didn't need the Wedgewood & Bentley china, the Waterford crystal, the Vividus mattress, the Turkish cotton bath towels—just a warm meal and warm arms to wrap around her. He could provide those.

He should probably have warned them about the need for driver's licenses in this world.

He glanced at his wall clock: twelve-thirty. He lowered the flame under the bisque, set the oven on "warm," set the dining table with Walmart cutlery and Melmac plates. He set out his tea things, then hopped into the shower. "Love is patient, love is kind." She would be kind; he would be patient.
Belle fished a highlighter from her purse and spread the road map across her lap. "ME-27 North," she dictated, then a glance at the driver assured her that of course, Dove already knew the route. She looked out the window at the passing banks of snow and the crystalline tree branches. She sneaked glances at the clock in her phone. They'd gone only five miles or so when Dove slowed the car. "Mr. Dove? Why—oh." She looked in the direction he was pointing. To those who lived on this side of the Storybrooke town line, the sight would've been nothing special, just a truck stop, only three semis and a bus parked in its lot. Even the Christmas lights strung along the windows seemed cheap. But for Dove and Belle, this was a remarkable sight.

"Our first truck stop," Belle breathed, then corrected herself. "Our first anything." She didn't have to explain. It was the first sign of life in a world foreign and new to them.

Dove stopped the car. "Do you want to go in?"

She read the paint on the windows: "Christmas dinner $12.95. Ham or turkey and all the fixin's. Pumpkin pie $3.99."

"Are you hungry? It is lunch time."

She shook her head fiercely even she answered, "Yes, I'm hungry. I'm sure Rumple will have something ready for us, though. I can wait another two hours. Can you?"

Dove shifted gears. "There are some cheese crackers in the glove compartment."

"You think of everything, Mr. Dove."

---------------------------------------------------------------

His laptop pinged: a new message had arrived. Combing down his unruly hair, Rumple plopped onto the couch and opened his email.

"Hi Grandpa!

"Here's a pic of me and Mom at the rest stop on I-95 just north of Portland. We had to take a bathroom break. Yes, that's right, I said I-95! We're on our way to New York City and tomorrow Robin and Mom are getting married!

"Yup, it happened! But I'm sure you know that by now. I saw the Caddy behind us after we crossed over the town line!

"More pics as we take more rest stops!

"Legally speaking, does this make Robin my stepdad?

"Love, your grandson"

Rumple admired the photo: a grinning Henry flashed a thumbs-up as an even broader-grinning Regina posed in front of her Mercedes. Regina, using a public restroom! Regina, getting married!

Things were changing so fast.

---------------------------------------------------------------

"EXODUS! Curse Broken!"

Emma sniffed at the Mirror's afternoon headline. She understood the excitement—she felt it too, and she'd be leaving town herself with Henry in two weeks for Parents Weekend at NYU—but four travelers hardly constituted an exodus.
The excitement was infectious, though. She had to whistle between her teeth to get Ruby's attention over all the chatter in Granny's this morning. Ruby rushed over with a refill on the cocoa. "So when are you leaving?" She bounced on her toes as she flipped her order pad open.

"January 5. I'll have my usual. We'll be gone a week. A tour of the campus, the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, the Met—all the touristy stuff."

"Me and Archie plan to go to Miami for New Year's. Stretch out on a beach, sipping daiquiris in the middle of winter," Ruby squealed.

"Sounds great."

"Granny doesn't want to go anywhere, though. Not even for a weekend. She says she's got plenty going on right here, but I think she's scared to go out there."

"A lot of people are. Some of them will change their minds when their neighbors start coming back with souvenirs and home movies."

Ruby lowered her voice. "Can I tell you a secret? Me and Archie are talking about maybe not coming back."

"You may be surprised how quick you get tired of Miami," Emma said wisely. "But the thing is, at least now, you have a choice."

As Ruby hurried off to place Emma's order, Emma scanned the rest of the front page. "Our Hero!" The caption over the photo didn't specify which of the subjects was the hero: the old mage standing next to his colorful shimmering portal or the sharp-dressed mayor posing beside him.

Emma sniffed again. Oh well, let Regina gloat. She'd earned it.

-----------------------------------------------

A polite, patient knock on his front door pulled Rumplestiltskin out of his reverie.
Belle grew quiet when they passed the "Welcome to Augusta" sign; she went still as they turned onto Deuel Drive. Dove glanced over at her but said nothing; he was a man of discretion who had learned early on in his employment with Mr. Gold when to pretend to ignore silence and when to make a gentle inquiry. Belle needed the silence to meditate on the second thoughts she was having—not over whether it was right to come, or how she felt about her husband or her marriage, but on her sudden intrusion into his new life. When she had called this morning, she'd invited herself here; she hadn't really given him the opportunity to refuse. What if he felt it was too soon for a reunion? Or worse, what if he felt backed into a corner by her sudden appearance in his new life? In typical Belle fashion, she's jumped in with both feet without testing the waters first. She hadn't meant for her visit to be anything more than an affirmation of the new bonds they'd been forming strand by strand over the past year. She had no designs on his future; she'd assumed they'd take it one day at a time. How to reassure him of that, however. . . .

She stiffened as the sign "Pleasant Valley Apartments" came into view.

Dove pulled into the nearest empty parking space; there were plenty to choose from. "Guess everyone's on vacation," he mused. "That's the building." He pointed.

"Third floor," Belle counted up the flights. "Apartment 309." She tightened her coat around her and pushed her car door open. Standing outside in the snow, she held onto the door, as if trying to decide whether to get back into the car. She filled her lungs with cold, invigorating air. "Don't steal from today by worrying about tomorrow," Moe liked to say; if she focused on the moment right in front of her, she might find she was making a memory to hang onto. She leaned back in to pick up her purse; everything else, she would leave until she knew for sure he wouldn't jump to the conclusion that she was moving in.

"I'll give you some time alone before I come up," Dove said.

She nodded and closed the car door. She picked her way carefully up the icy sidewalk.

----------------------------------------------

Rumple fiddled with his CD collection. He couldn't concentrate well enough to read, so he thought he'd pass the time listening to some music, but then he found he couldn't concentrate well enough to select an album. He gave up. He went to the kitchen to check on the soup and the brochetta, then he wandered to the west-facing window, the one that looked out on the parking lot, then the south-facing window that looked out on other buildings. With each trip, he paused to glance at the kitchen clock.

It must have been his tenth trip when a new thought occurred to him: what if she'd changed her mind?

And then the knock.

----------------------------------------------

Any apologies for the sudden self-invitation or any justifications for all those suitcases and boxes stuffed into the Caddy flew out of her head when the door was flung open. Later, she tried to remember but couldn't, which had happened first: had he opened his arms and then she swept into them, or had she run at him first? From the way he was brushing her hair back from her face and kissing her mouth, it didn't matter who had made the first move; they were of the same mind. And it didn't matter what apologies or explanations she'd concocted or what welcome speeches he'd
practiced: they couldn't speak anyway. In the open doorway she let her purse slide off her shoulder and onto the concrete landing, and he pressed her against him as closely as her coat would allow.

"You're cold," he realized at last, brushing the back of his hand against her ruddy cheek.

"You're cold too." She imitated the gesture. "Your hair is as soft as I remember."

"Your skin is as soft as I remember." He blinked, as if awakening from a daydream. "Come in and get warm."

"Is it all right? I just—I can stay at a hotel, if it would be awkward—"

He chuckled as he tugged at her coat, urging her inside. "It's all right. It's what I've hoped for." He started to close the door, until she remembered, "Mr. Dove! He's down there in the car."

Rumple stepped out on the landing and scanned the parking lot. "You brought the Caddy." He stepped back inside, closing the door, then drew her coat from her shoulders and unwrapped her from her scarf and gloves. "Five minutes. He'll understand. The Caddy has a terrific heating system."

"Rumple." She pressed against his chest, sharing his body heat. "I forgot how well we fit together. My head against your chest."

"My arms around your waist."

"My lips against yours." She lifted her face to be kissed. "Five minutes."

"Five minutes." Looking past his shoulder, Belle could see the kitchen clock. "We really shouldn't leave Mr. Dove out there in the cold any longer."

"I have a pot of soup on. I imagine you're hungry." Rumple disentangled himself from her arms and stepped out on the landing to wave in the direction of the parking lot. Leaving the front door ajar as an invitation to Dove to enter, he took Belle by the hand and led her to the kitchen, withdrawing a chair at the table for her. Once she was seated, he put the tea kettle on and stirred the bisque. Belle sniffed appreciatively.

A light rap at the door was followed by Dove poking his head in. "Good afternoon, Mr. Gold."

Rumple momentarily forgot he was the big man's employer—it had been more than a year, after all—and, steadying himself on his cane, came to the doorway and greeted him with a hardy handshake, an enthusiastic welcome and an affectionate slap on the shoulder. "So good to see you, Josiah! I'm glad you could make it." And then they chuckled at the ordinariness of the greeting, in light of the extraordinary circumstances.

"You're looking well, sir. Very well," Dove answered with equal warmth.

Rumple offered him a seat at the table. With only two matching chairs for the kitchen, he'd had to pull up his desk chair to seat himself, but no one seemed to notice. He ladled the soup out into three bowls, then plated the brochetta and set out three small dishes of olive oil for dipping. By this time, the kettle was whistling, so Belle got up to prepare the tea. As they worked side by side, shoulders brushing in the cramped kitchen, they shared frequent smiles. Sitting down to eat, the trio chatted more easily than ever before: Mr. Gold had no more underhanded plans to keep secret, no enemies breathing down his neck. He was just a middle-aged college student with a blue-collar job and a totally different lifestyle than he'd ever known before. As he ate, he was fully aware of the differences between the man he was now and the one he had been when he'd last shared a meal.
with Belle and Dove. Despite his reduction in circumstances—or because of it—he felt quite satisfied at what he could he provide for his family now: not just the meal, but the parts of himself he was now able to share. They noticed it too, the relaxed openness and the easy-going humor he brought to the conversation, and there was a grin on Dove's face and a brightness in Belle's eyes that hadn't been there, the last time they'd eaten together. Robert O'Neal was indeed a rich man.

They washed dishes together, Dove with his big hands sunk into the soapy water, Belle drying, Rumple putting away. Then they sat in the living area and chatted, until at last Dove suggested they really ought to get some business done while it was convenient, and he popped a flash drive into Rumple's laptop, accessed its files and reviewed the past year's report on Gold Properties Inc. "We did suffer one major loss: the home on Gold Avenue. Sheriff Swan has promised to either restore the home, as soon as she figures out how, or reimburse you for the loss, but. . . ."

Rumple just chuckled. "That house came to me by a curse. Magic giveth, magic taketh away."

"I'm much more comfortable in my apartment anyway," Belle remarked. "That elephantine house was too much to clean."

Rumple, holding her hand, gave her a long, meaningful look but he avoided asking the question they were all thinking: did he want to go back to Storybrooke? For either him or Belle to bring the subject up would be the equivalent of an invitation to resume living together, and it was too soon for such a huge decision—though all the signs indicated they'd soon be ready to make it.

Dove unfolded himself from the rocking chair and stretched. "It's been an enjoyable afternoon, Mr. G., but I'd better get over to the Holiday Inn before they give my room away." He raised an eyebrow inquiringly in Belle's direction as he slipped into his coat.

Rumple took the hint and squeezed her hand. "Stay. Please." He probably should explain that he only had one, fold-out bed to offer, but he didn't really feel the need to apologize for what he lacked: his thoughts were focused on what he did have.

Belle nodded, blushing.

"I'll bring in your suitcase—oh! Nearly forgot: we brought some—well, all—of your personal effects, Mr. G. Your suits and books and such."

"So kind of you to go to all that trouble, Josiah. Thank you." Rumple had neither use nor room for those old belongings, but to say so after Dove had gone to so much effort would have been ungrateful. He'd find space somewhere.

Belle suggested, "We could hire a storage locker to keep them in until you've had a chance to sort through them. Or you may want to leave them packed, in case. . . ."

"That's a good idea, Mrs. G.,” Dove said. "I'll take care of it this afternoon. It'll give me a chance to look around town." He opened the front door. "You know, this is my first visit to the big city." As he stepped out, Rumple and Belle laughed. "I'd hate to disillusion him, but the population here is only 19,000," Belle said. "I read it on the road map."

"Well, for him, that is a big city. He's only ever lived in Storybrooke, population 3,000, and the Dark Castle, population two, unless you count the mice."

Belle lay in Rumple's lap, looking up at him drowsily after a full meal, and Rumple just as drowsily toyed with a lock of her hair. He chuckled to himself, and she worked up enough energy to ask what had amused him. "When you first came to live with me, I had magic to try to impress
you with. When you came to live with me again, I had money. Now all I have is bread and soup and a fold-out couch, but we're more comfortable here than we were in the castle or the mansion."

"Maybe we're more comfortable in our own skins." Belle fell silent a moment. "I almost hesitate to bring this up, but . . . " She reached over to the coffee table for her purse and dug out the bank deposit bag Dove had passed along to her. She pressed it into his hand: "You're not rich, but you have more than you realize."

"What is this?"

"A withdrawal from your bank account. Josiah thought you could use some cash."

"How much is it?"

"Ten thousand."

He coughed. "Did you say 'ten'—not 'one thousand'?"

"Ten. It's a drop in bucket compared to what you have in Storybrooke, remember."

"It feels like so much now, though. I could pay my rent for a year and still have money left to take my girl to the movies. Do you want to go?"

She giggled. "Sweeten the deal with popcorn and I'll take you up on it."

"You drive a hard bargain, Mrs. Gold."

"I suppose one of us could get up to call the movie theater to find out what's playing."

"You do it. You're closer to the phone."

"But I'm not familiar with the local theaters. I wouldn't know which one to call."

"If I get up and call, will you get up and put on your coat so we can trudge through the snow to the theater?"

"Uhmmm. . . Maybe tomorrow. I'm too warm and comfortable and well-fed."

"That's what I thought."

They did manage to rouse themselves as darkness fell, and they ordered a pizza and invited Dove back to dine with them. The good man begged off, pleading weariness from the long journey ("Two hours?" Belle was skeptical, but Rumple shrugged. "When you've lived thirty years in a town you can drive across in seven minutes. . . ." But they smiled knowingly at each other: Dove was giving them the gift of privacy.)

When they could keep their eyes open no longer, Rumple finally could no longer delay the awkward question. "Sweetheart, I, ah, only have this fold-out—"

She looked him straight in the eye. "Yes."

"'Yes' you want to sleep with me?" He added hastily, "It doesn't have to be more than that."

"You think too much, Rumplestiltskin."

Buttery morning light seeped through the slats of the window blinds and crept, inch by inch, up
Belle's chill-pimpled body: her feet (which she'd always been self-conscious of, because of their flatness—Rumple wondered sometimes if that was why she punished them so with high heels), exposed because she'd kicked off the covers during the night, driving her to throw a leg over his, to absorb his body heat; her legs, which had become exposed when her impractical silk nightie had slipped up to her hips; her bare arms, one tucked under her head, the other draped over his chest; and her cheeks, flushed with sleep.

As subtly as he could manage, he adjusted the quilt to cover her, then eased out from her grip to hobble his way to the bathroom. When he'd taken care of nature's business, he stood over the bed and deliberated whether to risk awakening her by climbing back in. The strength of the morning light now filling the living room/study/bedroom convinced him he wouldn't be able to return to sleep, so he showered and shaved and brushed his teeth and pattered back into the main room to stand over the single garment bag that he'd allowed Dove to haul in. He unzipped it to find it contained three D & G suits that, a lifetime ago, he'd coordinated and attached to wooden hangers.

Each suit—one black, one charcoal gray, one midnight blue— Included a waistcoat, slacks, jacket, silk shirt and pocket square. In a box that he'd also allowed Dove to bring in was a pair of black Italian loafers. Rumple fingered the fabric. His practiced touch would have assured him, if his memory of purchasing these suits hadn't, that the price of these three suits together could have bought a new, lesser-brand car. . .or (when his stomach growled) fed a family of four for more than a year. He remembered the first time he'd tried on these suits at his tailor's shop (and how odd it felt now to "have" a tailor): he'd judged the quality of the fabric and the workmanship of the tailoring, and determined them worth the price, by the standards he'd developed over thirty years of spending; but when he'd stood before Mr. Browning's full-length mirror, adjusting the cuffs and twisting at the waist to inspect the view, he'd felt nothing. Not pride in the ownership, not conceit in the trim waist and broad shoulders the cut of the suit gave him, not amazement at the ease with which he wrote out the check to pay for his purchases. Nothing. Now, zipping the suits back into the garment bag, he felt queasy. Yes, he argued with his old self, he could (then) easily afford these clothes. Yes, he'd had an example to set and social standards to meet as a town leader. Yes, the suits were his armor, protecting him from the barbs his tenants threw at him and shielding his self-respect. But good lord, had he really needed twenty five-thousand-dollar suits? The contents of his closet could have sent a smart kid to Harvard. A smart kid like Sam. Could have housed a dozen Harrys and Jills. Could have provided therapy for a dozen Shaggys, nursing care for a dozen Foggys, tools and construction materials to reclaim a dozen zombie houses.

Yes, he wanted to show Belle how much she meant to him by dressing attractively for her today, by cooking her favorite meal for her, by driving her around town in a comfortable car, by escorting her to the symphony or the ballet, as she'd often dreamed of attending. But her memories of their best times together, as she'd shared them with him last night, had involved Sunday afternoons curled up together on the couch, watching Bogey and Bacall movies or listening to the stereo or reading aloud to each other (she, fiction; he, histories and biographies). It was a sunny Saturday picnic at Mills Lake that brought tenderness to her voice, a twilight stroll down down Main Street (her leaning into him, clutching his arm; he tilting his head toward her ear so he could whisper compliments and promises) that brought color to her cheeks, a spring morning on their knees in the front lawn, planting flowers along the walkway, that brought a haziness to her bright eyes. He doubted whether she could name the designer of the shoes or the color of the tie he'd worn on any of those occasions. In fact, he clearly recalled her clicking her tongue in annoyance as she dug through his dresser in search of jeans for him to wear ("You'd look so sexy in Levi's." "But far less powerful, dear.")

He hung the garment bag in his one and only clothes closet. He felt ashamed, but tomorrow he'd rectify that: he'd keep these three suits for ballets, weddings, funerals, Christmas Eve mass, and the rest he'd donate to Career Gear, where the clothes might meet a higher purpose than intimidating.
business competitors or scaring the rent out of tenants.

He dressed in his newest pair of jeans and his nicest Goodwill dress shirt, bypassing a tie, leaving the top two buttons undone, and he put on a pot of tea and a skillet of scrambled eggs. Springs squeaked, feet pattered across the kitchen linoleum and a pair of arms encircled his waist, a cheek and breasts pressing against his back. There, he decided: if he'd worn his suit, he wouldn't feel her soft warmth seeping through the fabric to his skin. "Morning," she yawned. "I slept great."

"So did I." He set down his spatula to turn and kiss her forehead. "Aren't your feet cold?"

She wiggled her bare toes. "Yes." She pressed tighter against him. "But the rest of me is warm. Especially my heart."

He combed through her disheveled hair with his fingers. "What would you like to do today? Not a lot will be open, since it's a Sunday and so soon after Christmas. Even the public library and the university library are closed, but we could go to a movie or take a stroll around the campus. . . ."

"Let's be decadent and spend the day in bed. Breakfast, old movies on TV, and. . ."

"Other activities?" His hands slid up from her waist.

"Perfect."

---------------------------------------

On Sunday evening, as they watched the sun set from his balcony, huddled together into one coat, he pressed his cold cheek against her hair. "We should start supper soon."

"We should. And we should call Josiah, make plans for tomorrow." She peered at him through her curtain of hair.

He tightened the coat and his arms around her waist. "It's time," he agreed.

"Be honest—" she started to say, then corrected herself, for in the past year they'd both been careful to always be honest with each other. "Be plainspoken with me, about what you really want. We have years and years ahead of us now. I know I tend to act impetuously sometimes, and I don't want to risk what we have now by moving too fast."

"There's no guarantee I can even come back through the portal, is there? The Apprentice hasn't said anything to you?"

Belle stared at her feet. "Merlin hasn't decided yet. Hasn't passed judgment yet." Her voice became brittle. "What gives him the right?" Then her voice splintered. "What gave me the right? I just took it. Just took your dagger and—took the decision onto myself."

"Shhh." He kissed her hair. "That's over. We've discussed it. I'm not that man; you're not that woman. We're free of them. Mizu ni nagusu. Let it be. If Merlin decides to allow me to return, I will, but Belle, you must remember, I have another obligation to fulfill. If there is any way that I can do it and remain in Storybrooke, I will, but if I have to choose—I have to release Bae." He tried to lighten his tone. "But until that time comes, we have a decision of our own to make: where do we go from here? What we have now is new; we're new. We're not the same people we were before. I don't value what Gold valued; his materialism shames me. I don't want to live the way Rumplestiltskin lived, isolated, in a cold war with the world. I don't think the same as I did before. I don't feel the same. And I think that's true for you too."

"It is. Touring the world, having adventures, winning the admiration of my kingdom, those are dreams of the past. What I want now is build something that lasts, for the sake of my community,
and to have the adventure of watching the children around me grow up and strike out on their own, and to see the world each night in my husband's eyes."

"Although there's nothing wrong with the notion of weekends in Paris and holidays in Rome."

"No, nothing wrong at all, as long as my father and my husband and my step-grandson are safe and happy. So. Do we try to continue to build upon this new relationship we've started?" She swallowed hard and looked up at him with frightened eyes.

"I don't want to let you go."

She released a pent-up breath. "That's what I want too. Us together."

They grinned at each other and kissed, and beneath the coat, he stroked her back. She rested her forehead against his chest. "Belle, is it too soon to talk about your moving here? Or if it is, how about a middle ground: you could move to Augusta but have a place of your own. The university has a library science program. There are public libraries, school libraries, Katz Library—you can find work here. If we're not ready to resume living together, at least, we can be together."

"The College and Career Center—"

"Yes." There was a note of disappointment in his voice, but pride as well. "You deserve to be there when it opens in March. You've worked so hard on it. But then?"

She lifted her face to his. "By then I could have hired a replacement."

"And in the meantime, you could continue to visit here on weekends. We could continue to build on what we have now, between us."

"I like that idea just fine."

He gathered her hands in his. "I noticed you're wearing your wedding ring."

"I noticed you're wearing yours." She toyed with ring on his left hand. "I'm yours; distance won't change that." She twisted her ring around on her finger. "I wear this as a promise to both of us that someday soon we'll be together completely, as husband and wife. I'm certain of that. In the meantime I can be patient."

"And for all your patience, I will be kind," he vowed.

When Dove arrived, bearing bottles of white and red wine ("I didn't know which would be appropriate for the meal"), the Golds were cooking together again, bumping and brushing against each other again in the cramped space and laughing. The big man watched them from the rocking chair; even if there had been room for him to help, he wouldn't have intruded upon their fun.

Belle ran back and forth between the kitchen area and the living space, chilling the white wine ("we're having chicken alfredo," she said, as if that explained everything), tossing a salad, setting plates and glasses on the coffee table. "We rented two movies for tonight," she informed Dove. "We couldn't agree, so we each chose one, and we'll leave it up to you to choose, Josiah: The Librarian: Quest for the Spear or Conan the Barbarian." She wiggled the box for the former and smiled charmingly.

"Uhm, can't we watch both?"

"Well done, Mr. Dove," Rumple called from the stove.
But Belle's exaggeratedly disappointed expression prompted Dove to add, "But let's start with The Librarian."

"Supper's ready," Rumple announced. Belle held each plate as Rumple dished up the meal. When she brought him his plate, she informed Dove, "I'll be driving back with you tomorrow morning."

"Oh." His face fell and he glanced from her to Rumple.

Belle amended gently, "To wrap up my work at the library, and to pack. I'll be moving here at the end of March."

"Oh" was all Dove said, but his tone this time was completely different.

Filled glasses and filled plates on the coffee table, The Librarian in the DVD player, and they were ready to settle in for the evening. Belle presented Dove with the remote. "You'll have control of the TV," she declared as she fetched in the ice bucket. "I'll have control of the wine."

Dinner, dishes and the first movie behind them, they turned the lights out and settled in even deeper for the second show, Dove stretched out on the floor, pillows bracing his head, and the Golds cuddling on the couch. Just ten minutes into Conan, a small snore caused the two men to look down at Belle, then glance at each other in puzzlement. "She must've been very tired," Dove commented. Rumple shrugged. "How could anyone fall asleep on Conan?" But when, two hours later, the movie concluded and Dove gathered his coat to leave and Rumple nudged her awake, Belle murmured, "It was a perfect night." And she meant it.
Aching to Be Somewhere Near

December 2015

He wandered aimlessly around his apartment. It wasn't as if he had nothing to do: there were plenty of books to read, and he should start studying the profiles of the clients who'd be joining Phoenix House Augusta next week, so he could plan individualized nutrition programs. There was an emptiness in his heart and his gut that couldn't be filled with busy work, career advancement or noble ideas. He returned the DVDs and walked home, ignoring his ankle. He polished off the last of the alfredo and wine, then stood on his balcony, watching some of his neighbors return with their suitcases and backpacks.

Remembering the red pouch Mr. Dove had been so thoughtful as to bring, Rumple closed his window blinds and sat down on his couch, the pouch sitting squaring on the coffee table. He left it unopened for quite a while; having this much money in his apartment made him uncomfortable. In fact, having this much money, period, made him uncomfortable, when he remembered all the pockets he'd picked and all the half-eaten sandwiches he'd stolen—he could face that word now, because that was exactly what he'd done: he'd stolen. He'd try to ease his conscience by giving back to the homeless as much as he estimated he'd stolen.

He finally opened the pouch and sorted the money into denomination piles. Dove had provided a thorough mix, ranging from $100 bills to $1s. With a deep sigh he rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. This money would buy him security for the next year, if Merlin made him wait that long. But to squirrel it away to pay his rent wouldn't buy him peace of mind. He glanced at his phone and his laptop: these tools were his lifelines to the people who had helped him find peace of mind since his exile. As long as he had Belle, Dove, Henry, Archie, Daniel, Jill and Sam, Harry and Sue Ellen, the Portland and Augusta Coalitions for the Homeless, he had security. He settled back against his couch, relaxing: as long as he had those friends, he could move bravely into the future.

And then he realized something else, something that had never occurred to him in all his long life: he had himself. His imagination, his insight, his knowledge, his resourcefulness, his two good hands and his strong heart, his newfound ability to reach out and accept help, and give it back in return. He had everything he needed. "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

His body eased back into his bones. His decision was made. He scooped up a fistful of the ones and deposited them into his desk drawer: these small bills would serve as bus fare for several weeks. He counted out 30 twenties: he would pay February's rent with it. He counted out ten tens: he'd buy something nice for Trajan and take Belle out to dinner. And the rest, he split into three even stacks: one would go to the Portland Coalition, the second to the Augusta Coalition, and the third to Father Daniel, to dispose as he saw fit. He tucked those three stacks into the red bag, tucked that into his coat, and walked over to the bank where he had a modest account. After making the deposit, he wrote out three checks and put them into the mail, then went back home, feeling rather relieved.

He wouldn't tell Belle what he'd done with the money, unless she pressed him to: she'd praise him, and that unearned praise would only make him feel awkward. After all, he had restitution to make—and he hadn't done anything to earn that ten grand, anyway. It had all come from property awarded to him by the Dark Curse. (Now the $39 remaining in his checking account, he had earned, and he could spend it with a sense of satisfaction.)

As night fell, he Skyped Belle to make sure she'd gotten home all right, and then he Skyped Archie
to fill him in on the news. His first glimpse of the psychiatrist took him aback: sunburnt, scruffy-chinned and wearing a palm-tree print, short-sleeved shirt, Hopper was sipping something pink and orange in a tall glass. "We're honeymoonsing in Daytona Beach. Today's high: 72 degrees with a slight southern breeze. Two weeks of sun and sand!"

"Congratulations, Archie. You and Ruby have earned it."

"I can highly recommend Florida for your honeymoon. That is, if things are still going well between you and your sweetheart?"

Rumple described their first visit and their decision to get to know each other all over again.

"Wise," Archie judged. "Taking it a weekend at a time. That gives your relationship time to grow naturally. When you're both ready—and I'm sure that time will come—you can pick up your marriage again. Perhaps remarry, as new people in a new world."

"I like that idea. But suppose Merlin chooses to let me into Storybrooke. What becomes of my new marriage when I get my magic back and return to the Enchanted Forest?"

"And trade places with Baelfire in the Dark Vault?" Archie surmised. "She will grieve as a widow. But if Merlin chooses to uphold your banishment, she can come to you as a wife."

"Archie. . . it's too tempting. . . ."

"To refuse, if Merlin offers you a chance to free Baelfire?" Archie adjusted his glasses. "Yes, it is. How does a man choose between his wife and his son? I couldn't. Bae's life or Belle's happiness: either answer is both right and wrong at the same time."

"I have to stay on target. It's more than his life; it's his soul."

"No one should ever have to make a choice like that."

"You'll help me resist the temptation, when the time comes?"

"When the time comes."

"And look after Belle, if I'm not here."

"And look after Belle." Archie paused. "Mr. Gold, you're the bravest man I know."

Rumple snorted.

DECEMBER 31, 2015

Rumple leaned on the railing of his balcony, listening to the parties going on upstairs and down, "Uptown Funk" clashing with "Hotline Bling" and "Country Nation." He let his ungloved hands dangle over the edge and he sorted out the voices from the music. Above and distant from the apartment complex, fireworks were being shot off. He'd just spent two hours on Skype with Daniel, comparing and contrasting various religions' beliefs concerning the human soul, and now he needed fresh air to clear his mind. Belle would be arriving tomorrow morning for their second weekend together. On Rumple's insistence for fear of whatever drunk drivers might be out on the dawn road, she'd be accompanied by Dove once again. The day after tomorrow, Rumple would start back to work, and next weekend he'd take Trajan to the Motorsports Expo; it would be their first venture away from the Martels' home. Right now, on his coffee table a "Happy New Year" card handmade by Sam leaned against a stack of books Rumple would need for his history class at
U of M, which would begin January 19.

Rumple's life was on the upswing. He was happier than he could remember ever being. That happiness, he realized, could drag him into the pit of complacency and away from the Dark Vault, hence, his conversation with Daniel. He needed to stay on target.

Some people in this world believed that magic existed in this world. Rumple didn't, except in whatever small charms or potions that practitioners might convey from the lands of magic. But he did believe in Merlin, and he was quite certain he detected the faint scent of magic in the "Dear Occupant" letter that had been slipped into his coat pocket last month. So with Storybrooke closed off to him, Rumple could think of no other possible way to reach the great sorcerer, and he carried the letter in his pocket out with him to the balcony.

He now retrieved it, holding it firmly between the thumbs and forefingers of both hands in hope of feeling just a tiny thrum of magic. He felt nothing but the thump of a pumped-up bass traveling through the concrete of the balcony from the apartment two doors down. He closed his ears to the music and his eyes to fireworks, and he tried to feel Merlin, since he couldn't visualize, having never seen the man. The Merlin legends didn't suggest how to summon him, so Rumple tried the old-fashioned way: he called out three times. And waited.

Nothing happened.

A second and a third attempt produced the same result, that is, none at all. "Merlin, the Dark One summons you! I want a deal!" He opened his eyes and listened through the darkness; a female voice answered him, "I can show you incredible things/Magic, madness, heaven, sin." It took a moment, but he finally recognized the tune as something at the top of pop charts. With a grunt of disgust, he shoved the letter back into his coat and went inside.

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JANUARY 2016

A grim-faced Trajan stood on the porch waiting for his mentor. As soon as Rumple had climbed the steps, the boy raised the paper he'd been holding. "I got a F."

Rumple shifted his weight onto his left leg as he took the paper and glanced at it. It was a branchless family tree. "Not your fault," he said, handing the paper back. "I have something for you. Let's go inside." Ms. Martel greeted them; she had cups of cocoa and a plate of Rice Crispies treats ready on the table as they seated themselves. She discreetly retreated to another room.

The boy's face brightened. "What is it? What do you have for me?"

From his coat Rumple produced a small, slim book and slid it across the table. "This is yours. Your aunt helped me to assemble it."

A tiny frown—Trajan perceived any books gifted to him as extra homework—faded as soon as he opened the cover. Beneath a cellophane sleeve, a red-haired, green-eyed woman smiled up at the viewer. There was something off about her smile, something not quite right in her eyes, but Trajan was too young to understand that. "This is your mother Zelena."

Three additional pages contained photos of the same woman, from the same days she'd held Storybrooke in thrall. In one photo, she wore an English nanny's uniform; in the others, a form-fitting black dress. Rumple waited for questions, dreaded what the answers would have to expose, but when they came, they surprised him in their ordinariness. "Was she a teacher? What was she like?" He answered them easily.
Trajan turned the pages to a pair of photos of a straight-shouldered, stiff-backed woman whose
dark hair was piled high upon her head and whose heavy satin-and-lace clothes suggested an age
long ago. "That's Zelena's mother Cora."

"Her clothes look scratchy," Trajan observed. Then: "She looks mean."

"She was unhappy, most of the time. She had expectations for herself that fell short, and her plans
for her family, though they came to fruition, proved disappointing."

"What did she want?"

"She wanted to be a queen. She wanted people to look up to her."

"Did she get to be a queen?"

"Not quite, but her daughter did." Rumple turned the page and tapped on another photo. "Her other
daughter, Regina, married a king named Leopold."

"Then was Cora happy?"

"She was pleased but not satisfied. And Regina was not happy at all. She didn't want to be married
to Leopold. But she's not married to him any more; she's married to a man she loves. And she's not
a queen any more; she lives in Maine. She's very happy now."

"Is Cora happy?"

Rumple considered the question. "In the end, she was, because she learned that Regina loved her,
and love is more important than anything."

"Can I see them?"

"I'm sorry to tell you, Cora died."

"Like my mother," Trajan said thoughtfully. "Did she have magic, like my mom?"

"Yes, and so does Regina, but Trajan, having magic was not good for them. They did some bad
things with it."

"But why? Why didn't they, like, fix people's houses and protect the chickadees and—" He pointed
down at Rumple's foot. "Why didn't you fix your leg when you had magic? Couldn't you do it?"

Rumple self-consciously rubbed his leg. "Yes, I could have, but..." He struggled for the words
that would explain to a child something he wasn't sure he could explain to himself. "I didn't, because
this injury made me remember what I was like before I had magic. Someday I'll tell you
that story, but I'm not ready to, now. What I do want you to know is—that boy who bullied you,
what was his name?"

"Franco."

"Franco. And who's the strongest boy in your class?"

"Franco."

"Sometimes being stronger than everyone else isn't a good thing. When you're stronger than
everyone else and you know it, sometimes it makes you think you should be the boss. And if
people don't do what you want them to—"
"You beat them up."

"And sometimes you beat them up just to show them you can. Just to keep them scared. Right?"

"Franco did that."

"So did Cora and Regina and I, with our magic. Before we had magic, each of us had been picked on by bullies, and so, when magic made us stronger than everyone else, we fought back, and later, the power went to our heads. We became bullies. It happened to your mother, too."

"She was a bully?"

Rumple couldn't look him in the eye. "Yes."

"I don't remember." Trajan studied her photo. "Did she bully you?"

"Yes." He had to change this subject; they weren't ready to go where this was leading. He fumbled for a thought he could distract Trajan with, but as he had many times before, the boy surprised him.

"I'm sorry."

Words spilled out before Rumple could weigh them. "And so am I, for all the bad things I did. For all the times I hurt her." He closed his mouth, searching his feelings; he'd promised he would never lie to Trajan. But the emotion that had swollen up in him was genuine: it was regret.

Trajan turned over the pages of the photo album. "My mother died. Cora died." He stopped at Regina's photos. "I want to see her. Regina."

"Oh. . . ."

"Please? You said she lives in Maine. She could come here. Or you could take me to her house."

"I can't go where she lives."

"Because that's where the magic is?"

Rumple nodded. He started fashioning a generic explanation that would avoid having to introduce banishment and Merlin into the conversation, but Trajan found another reason, something that Rumple had hinted at before, that cut to the heart of the matter. "Because magic makes you sick and you got to stay away from it."

"Yes. That's the truth of it."

"She could come to my house."

The boy was persistent. And right—he had the right, surely, to meet his only blood relative. In this thought Rumple saw a possible solution to a problem he'd been worrying about: if Merlin decided to allow Rumple to return to Storybrooke, what would become of Trajan? Abandoned yet again, how could the boy regain the emotional ground he'd worked so hard to take? Trajan needed Regina in his life, and though she didn't recognize it, she needed him too. "I'll see what I can do." Rumple smiled a little: he might not have magic in this world, but he still had the power of persuasion.

On the second visit, Belle and Rumple were both a little nervous. The first visit had gone so well that Belle feared she and he had both been holding back and covering up whatever negative
feelings continued to exist between them; Rumple feared that he would screw up, scare her away with a burst of temper or, worse, push her towards a commitment she wasn't ready for. So when she appeared at his doorway, suitcase in hand, and they waved goodbye to Dove in the parking lot, he fumbled as he tried to hug her and stepped on her foot, and when she leaned in to kiss him, she misdirected her lips and landed on his ear instead. They chuckled, embarrassed, and tried a second time, and got it all right, but the kiss was dry and short-lived. He took her suitcase, stood aside with the door propped open with his good foot, and once she was in, he helped her out of her coat. From his CD player, the Beatles prompted, "She loves you yeah yeah yeah/And with a love like that, you know you should be glad."

"I am," he murmured, then shook his head as Belle turned hers to ask, "What?"

"I am," he said again. "Glad." Then he raised his gaze from the floor to her eyes, and he grunted at his own foolishness, and he seized her waist to pull her in for a husband-and-wife kiss. "That's better," he judged when he released her.

She rested her gloved hands on his chest. "Why are we nervous?"

"We need to reassure ourselves. Like this." This time the kiss was messy and energetic on both sides, a reunited-lovers kiss, and the strength that each of them put into it provided the reassurance Rumple had prescribed.

It also stirred the embers. Belle yanked off her gloves and scarf, tossed them toward the kitchen table (they landed on the floor), laced her fingers through his and tugged him toward the couch. "If a kiss could reassure us, lovemaking would relax us, I should think." She threw the cushions aside and tugged at the steel bed frame. He hooked his cane on the doorknob and helped her fold out the bed. "Now," she started in on his shirt buttons as the Beatles inquired blushingly about holding a girl's hand, "Rumple, I'm so glad to see you. Let me show you how glad."

"I've been glad for the past hour." He nibbled on the lobe of her right ear, which, he had learned years ago, was her third most erogenous zone. By the time her sweater and his shirt had fluttered to the floor, McCartney had pledged all his loving to the hand-holder, and Rumple's voice had dropped an octave as he bid his beloved, "Welcome home, wife."

They'd piled the cushions back onto the bed to serve as a sort of makeshift table, and now they were sharing a plate of baked goat cheese and baguette crisps that he'd had warming in the oven for her arrival. They shared their news, even tidbits that others had previously informed them of. Henry had emailed a batch of grainy photos from Robin and Regina's City Hall wedding, followed by a batch of sunny-day photos of the newlyweds loading Robin's few possessions into the Mercedes' trunk, and ending with a selfie of the three returnees posing on the porch of 108 Mifflin. Archie had sent pictures of Miami's sand and waves. Rumple had sent Belle pictures of Trajan in his new Cub Scout uniform and Sam showing off the textbook for the fourth-grade math class he was permitted to sit in on, even though he was only in second grade.

"How was your first week of operations at the new Phoenix House?" Belle asked as she fed him a messy crisp.

"Delicious, if I do say so myself. The cheese, I mean." He licked his lips, then her fingers. "It went well. We opened on Monday with a full house already. It's a diverse group: the youngest is a twenty-two U of M dropout. The oldest is a dentist who lost his license for being drunk on the job. Each resident is a nutritional challenge. I think I can make a difference here. And the College and Career Center? How's the construction coming?"

"Resumed Monday after a two-week holiday, but so far, on schedule; we'll open March 1. Robin
and Mary Margaret will begin meeting next week to shape their curriculum. I've ordered their books already." She glowed with pride. "Our first shipment of new books arrived from Boston yesterday. New York Times bestsellers, computer books, the Diary of a Wimpy Kid series. I was so excited I put them out to circulate even though I haven't cataloged them yet. I'm trusting the borrowers to remember they're library property." She accepted a crisp from his hand.

"Trajan got sent to the principal's office again. As I understand it, the teacher had given them an assignment to draw their family tree. He turned in a drawing of a branchless tree."

"Oh." Belle deflated, understanding the child's dilemma.

"The Martels explained his situation to the teacher and she agreed to allow him to draw their family tree instead of his own, but he got upset, balled up the paper and threw it at her. The Martels had to attend a conference with the principal and the teacher. When I went over to the house for our regular session, he was still angry."

"Poor guy."

"We sat at the kitchen table together and I told him never mind about the Martels' genealogy; we'd work on his, as much as I knew."

Belle pulled in a breath. "Cora."

He nodded. "It was a lopsided tree. No branches on Trajan's father's side, not even a name. But Zelena's side, I was able to fill in back to both sets of her grandparents. We had to fudge on certain facts, like the absence of last names." He sighed. "And the work led to a discussion I wasn't ready to have: who Cora really was and what she'd done to Zelena. I wish I could say that remembering all the evil Cora had done made me more sympathetic to Zelena, but it didn't. I do, however, regret, for Trajan's sake, that I killed her."

Belle rested her head on his shoulder and was about to answer when the CD skipped over the last verse of "I Feel Fine" and jumped into "Carry That Weight." She ran a comforting hand down his chest. "That regret is a good thing, Rumple. It shows how you've changed. It's time, I think, for you to forgive yourself."

"Someday I'm going to have to tell Trajan what I did. I just hope, for his sake, that he can forgive me. I don't deserve it, but without forgiveness he'll never find peace of mind."

"He needs you." She glanced up at him and he brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "And you need him. If he turns away from you, you'll find him again."

She'd drifted off to sleep in his arms. Her comfort gave him ease. He couldn't change the past, only himself.

The two discs of the "Red" album had cycled through three times while the Golds were talking. As the CD player clicked over to Disc One for the fourth time, he slipped out of bed and made his way in the dark to the bookcase shelf. He reached up and pressed the "off" key, silencing the room. As he returned to bed, his mind's ear recycled the song that had played while he talked about Zelena: "Boy, you're gonna carry that weight/Carry that weight for a long time."

Odd, his memory commented as he fell asleep: "Carry That Weight" wasn't on the Red album.

"Morning. Scrub down that table," Rumble instructed as his assistant walked in the back door of Phoenix House. "You'll need it spotless for when you knead the dough." He shrugged out of his
coat, slipped on his white jacket and went to the pantry for canisters and boxes.

The ex-Marine, a former patient of Phoenix House Portland, grabbed a sponge. "What are we cooking?"

His back to Martin, Rumple didn't see his expression as he answered, "It's time for me to teach you my secret cinnamon roll recipe. No one, not even my wife, has this recipe. I entrust you with it, but I'm asking you to keep it secret." He did, however, hear the whoop.

The desk attendant glanced up from her paperwork as a nice-looking middle-aged man in jeans and a white jacket approached. "Good afternoon," he said, and she returned the greeting, along with the standard, "May I help you?"

"I have some suits I'd like to donate." He swung down a garment bag that he'd been carrying across his shoulder and laid it carefully across her desk, then unzipped the bag. He took out one of the suits for her to see. "These are perfect," she noticed first, "not a stain or a tear. Our clients will get excellent use out—" she gasped as she spied the tag sewn into the pants lining. "This is a Dolce and Gabbana!"

"Yes," he admitted, "they all are. I was a bit of a loyalist."

"There are three of them!" She sorted through the garment bag. "These must've cost—". She bit her tongue, realizing her crassness was making her donor uncomfortable.

"Actually, I have a few more. I wonder if someone could give me a hand carrying them in? In the back seat of the taxi."

She came around her desk and started for the door, but he called her back. "You'll need a cart. They're rather heavy."

"How many are there?" Her eyes had widened.

"Seventeen."

"Happy New Year to us!" She whistled between her teeth.

The apartment was filled with delicious aromas. Rumple stepped back from his kitchen table, his hand stretching out toward Belle's, and she accepted the offer. Together they admired their creation, a three-tiered white wedding cake garnished with whole red apples. Atop sat a bride and groom figurine made of sugar. Belle took some photos to send to Katering by Karen, who would be hosting the reception. "It's beautiful," she gushed. "We work well together, don't we?"

"We could open our own shop," he agreed. "Now we have to disassemble it and box it up, so you and Dove can drive it back to Storybrooke tomorrow."

"I wish you could come too." Regina and Robin, with the assistance of Snow White, had worked closely with a wedding planner ever since returning from New York. As his final assignment before retirement, Father Benedict would officiate before the formal wedding of the mayor and the career counselor, to take place in the high school gym, the only indoor venue in Storybrooke capable of accommodating three hundred guests as well as twenty Merry Men. The Golds' gift to newlyweds was this carefully crafted wedding cake.

"Regina wanted you to come. She asked Balthazar, but—" Belle shrugged. "Well, you can accompany me by Skype."
"I attended her first wedding." Rumple's eyes twinkled.

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Quite a formal affair. Cora spared no expense. And that woman could be extravagant to the point of gaudiness. Royals and nobles came from hundreds of miles; Leopold had many friends, and those who weren't friends of his were afraid what would happen if they refused Cora's invitation. The wedding lasted five days—that is, the parties before and after; the ceremony itself was over in two hours. In the days preceding the wedding, Cora exhausted herself, floating from guest to guest, making sure every goblet was filled, every hand was shaken—and every gift collected, cataloged and filed away. Funny thing: on the day of wedding, though, Cora went upstairs to help Regina dress, and that was the last anyone saw of her. Well, until the pirate brought her to Storybrooke."

Belle couldn't resist: she picked up the pastry bag they'd used to ice the cake, and she squeezed out the last of the frosting onto her finger, then licked it off. "I have a feeling you had something to do with her disappearance. What did you give as your gift?"

His cheeks dimpled. "A mirror."

"For spying, I presume."

"No, better. This was a portal." He whispered into her ear. "Few people know this, but Regina used that portal to send her mother on a little pre-wedding vacation."

"One of your smaller infractions. I'm surprised Cora invited you to the wedding at all."

"She didn't. She invited the Sultan of Hala-Alab."

"Whom she'd never seen before, but I'm sure was reported to be quite rich and powerful."

"And quite a poet."

"And who just happened to be you."

"Let's start boxing this cake, sweetheart. And when we've finished, perhaps you'd like to hear some of the Sultan's poetry."
Belle was staring at the wall—or more specifically, at a photo of Trajan on the wall above the couch, when Rumple emerged from the shower. As he padded into the main room, cinching the belt of his robe, she took a sip from the cup she was holding but kept her eyes fastened on the photo. Rumple came up behind her, encircled her waist with his arms and pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. When he raised his head, he too was looking at the photo. "Would you like to visit him?" he asked quietly.

She raised her cup to shoulder-height and he accepted the silent invitation, taking the cup from her and enjoying a sip of chamomile before returning the cup to her. "You've met everyone else—well, sort of met. One of these weekends, we'll go down to Portland and you can meet Daniel and Harry and Sue Ellen in person. But I'd like for you to become better acquainted with Trajan."

She turned in his arms, set the cup down and rested her hands on his chest. Beneath his U of M sweatshirt she thought she could feel the reliable beat of his heart. She read the message in his eyes and understood: even if he hadn't realized it himself yet, Trajan was part of his family, in a role that had no name: not grandson or son or nephew, but something just as real and precious and just as permanent. Meeting him again and bonding with him was just as necessary in cementing her ties with Rumple as connecting with Bae and Henry had been. Even if it hadn't been, Belle would have wanted to see for herself the interesting youngster Trajan had developed into over the last two years. "Yes, I would too."

"How would you like to go to a car show next weekend?"

Rumple held the passenger side door open as Belle slid out of her seat. Before she could stand, a dark-haired boy in a blue coat had flown past her and come to a sudden halt an arm's length from Rumple. It was evident what the boy wanted, but the presence of a stranger had detoured him, so Belle did her best to put the boy at ease by greeting him warmly. "Hello, Trajan! Do you remember me? We met about two years ago."

Then it was Rumple's turn to relieve the boy's nervousness; he closed the car door carefully, then opened his arms and welcomed Trajan into them. That single gesture was enough, as far as Trajan was concerned, to reassure him that whoever Belle was, she was a friend-to-be. "Trajan, this is my wife, Ms. Gold. Belle, you remember Trajan."

"Of course." Belle offered the boy her hand and he shook it before stepping back, a little closer to Rumple.

Belle cast a hasty glance at Rumple: would it confuse the boy that Rumple had introduced her as "Gold" instead of "O'Neal"? But after two years in the modern world, Trajan had seen all sorts of familial relationships. He accepted the newcomer as introduced; besides, he was focused on impressing Mr. O'Neal with his manners. He bowed to Belle. "Good morning, Ms. Gold."

"Good morning, Trajan. It's good to see you again. You've grown, I'd guess, two inches since I saw you last. . . ." But the boy was losing interest in his guest as his attention was being drawn to the Cadillac. Dove had polished it to a high shine for Belle's first solo outing; Trajan could see his face reflected in the hood.

"Is this yours?" Trajan stroked the hood.
"It belongs to Mr. Go—Mr. O'Neal and me."

"It's nice."

"Do you like cars?" Belle inquired. "I hope you do, because there will be a lot of them at the Civic Center."

Trajan blinked up at her in surprise. "You know about cars?"

"Not as much as I'd like," she admitted. "I was hoping you could teach me."

"Formula 1 cars are gonna be there." Trajan swung around to face Rumple. "Can we go now?" He jumped into the back seat without waiting for an answer. "Do you like Formula 1, Ms. Gold?"

After exchanging a sly smile, Belle and Rumple took their places in the Caddy. "Call me Belle, Trajan. I don't know much about Formula 1. Tell me about it."

Shifting into Drive, Rumple leaned over to whisper to Belle, "You've just made a friend for life, sweetheart." He half-listened to the content of the conversation as he navigated the car into traffic; he was more interested in the tone, which reassured him. He hadn't doubted that Belle and Trajan would get along, but what had worried him, no longer did. From Trajan's wide eyes and Belle's warm smile, Rumple was certain that if he were to vanish from Augusta—if Merlin granted permission for him to return to Storybrooke and he reclaimed his magic and found a way to get back to the Enchanted Forest—Belle would pick up where Rumple had left off. She would make certain that Rumple was always represented in Trajan's life.

That, above all her acts of bravery and sacrifice, made her a hero, in Rumple's opinion: that she would take on responsibility for a child she had no legal or moral obligation to, and she would do it not just in remembrance of her husband, but in recognition of the child's needs. When he was ready for it, Trajan would know the full truth of his heritage, if not from his beloved Mr. O'Neal, then from the compassionate Ms. Gold.

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Emma stood off to the side, out of view of the opening door, as her son knocked. Her arms folded across her chest, she permitted herself a good smirk at the thought of how shocked Gold would be to discover his grandson had grown to six feet since they saw each other last. But when the door swung wide and a short, completely gray, heavily wrinkled man in a white cook's jacket positioned himself at the entrance, Emma's smirk vanished. Without his fancy suit, his gold cane, his haughty glare and his customized men's hair products, Gold wasn't Gold any more. There was nothing scary about this tired-eyed cook. This wasn't the Dark One; it was just a slob like any on a bus.

But the slob's eyes lit up as they fell upon Henry, then a crooked smile made the wrinkles less obvious, and that velvety voice broke the silence. "Henry! What a wonderful surprise. Hello, Ms. Swan." He couldn't see her from this side of the door; how had he known it was she and not Regina who'd brought Henry? But she reminded herself she was an investigator and with a quick scan of the scene she found the culprit: her signature perfume. She stepped out from hiding. "Hey, Gold."

"Come in, come in." He ushered them. "Excuse the mess; I just got home from work. Take your coats off."

"What mess?" Emma muttered. Apart from that slush she and Henry had just brought in, she figured she could safely eat off any surface in this apartment.

In a flash he had the coffee table cleared of his textbook and notes. "My homework," he confessed. "U. S. History. Yesterday was the first meeting."
"Sorry to drop in unannounced, but we've been on the road." Henry stretched mightily as though he'd just spent the day cramped behind a steering wheel (it had actually been two hours, and he'd only driven half of it but he was still young enough to want to impress his grandfather).

"It's good to see you both." Rumple opened his arms; he was immediately engulfed in Henry's bear hug. Only Emma seemed aware that this was their first hug—and to think, Gold initiated it. "What are you, six feet now? You're an inch or two taller than Bae is." Rumple blinked hard as he stepped back to size up his visitors. "Hope you two can stay a while."

"We can only stay a couple of hours this time, but next time, I'll come for a full visit." Henry unzipped his jacket to expose his U of M sweatshirt.

Rumple paused in mid-step. "Henry, did you change your college of choice?"

"No, I'm still an NYU man. I wore this in honor of you."

"Well, I'm flattered. Sit down, make yourself comfortable." Rumple turned to Emma. "Ms. Swan, may I take your coat?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, thanks." She slipped out of the red leather jacket and he carried it, along with Henry's new bomber jacket, to the closet to hang up. He then limped off to the kitchen area and brought down a tray and three mugs. "Coffee, tea, cocoa or orange juice?" They both opted for tea, so he put the kettle on. "Can you stay for dinner? We could order pizza."

"Pizza sounds good," Emma said. She remained at the front door long enough to remove her boots. "We just stopped by to say hello. We're on our way to the Parents Weekend at NYU. Truth told, Henry's been pester ing me ever since the barrier came down to bring him out here."

"Had to see my other favorite grandpa." Responding to Emma's nudge, Henry bent down to take off his boots, then strolled into the kitchen. "Can I help?"

While Rumple was busy in the kitchen, Emma snooped around. From the books on the shelves and the photos on the walls, if she didn't know otherwise, she would have sworn a minister with a wife and three sons lived here. It kind of creeped her out. Where was the Dark One she'd come to know and—well, not love?

She sifted through his CDs: classical (yeah, that was Old Gold), pop (those would be Belle's), and the Beatles' complete works (too many to be Belle's). The religious books, the kids' drawings, the cook's jackets, sweatshirts and jeans hanging in the closet were totally unGold.

His cane tapped across the worn carpet as he carried in a carefully balanced tray of cookies and tea. He settled it on the coffee table, poured a cup for Emma ("As I recall, you like yours with Sweet and Low, no lemon"—she nodded) and a cup for Henry ("two sugars and a teaspoon of milk"; Henry beamed, "You remembered!"). He reached for his phone. "What toppings should I order?"

Emma watched him with a slightly opened mouth. Pizza. Cookies. Bibles. Jeans. Yup, Gold was gone. "I was right," she muttered.

"Excuse me, Ms. Swan?"

"Oh." She shook her head, bringing her attention back to the present. "I was just thinking, I was right when I told Balthazar to let you back in. You're a whole different dude, man." She thought for a long moment as Henry munched cookies; Rumple took the break in conversation as an opportunity to look up the number for Amato's Pizza. "How about if I order El Supremo? Pepperoni, sausage, bacon, onion—"
Emma interrupted, "I'm kinda picky about my pizza." Henry quirked an eyebrow but said nothing. "Henry knows what I like, so let's send him out to pick it up." She tossed her son the keys from her jeans pocket, then fished two twenties from her wallet. "We passed a pizzeria about ten blocks down. Okay, Henry?"

Rumple put out a staying hand and reached for his own wallet. "Let me get this, Ms. Swan. You're my guests."

Emma couldn't help but glance around the tiny apartment, and she searched for a polite way to say she thought Gold couldn't afford to feed three adults, but he let her see the contents of his wallet. "It's all right; I'm flush. Dove made a withdrawal from my Storybrooke account."

"Okay," she repocketed the money, then turned to Henry. "Get a large Supremo for you guys, and a small with my usual toppings."

"Sure, Mom. Back in a few!" Henry grabbed his jacket and dashed out the door before Emma could change her mind. When his footfalls had faded from the stairs, Rumple sat down on the couch beside Emma. He rested his elbows on his knees. "Okay, now you can tell me what that little white lie was for. You're not a picky eater. You've been known to scarf down everything from Granny's meat loaf to roast chimera."

Emma avoided making eye contract; instead, she pretended to examine the framed photos on the wall above the TV. The images there made the discussion no easier: two of those photos were of Neal. "It's him," she said lowly.

Rumple sat quietly, giving Emma time to collect her thoughts.

"It's what you said about Neal and the vault. That you can get him out."

"I'm not sure I can, but if I ever can access my magic again, I'm sure the hell gonna try." His teeth gritted. "He's not supposed to be there."

"Here's the thing." Emma sucked in a breath before twisting in her seat to face him. "What I came to tell you. I don't think you should." Her voice shook. "Don't get me wrong: I want him back as much as you do. I love him too."

He reached across the couch and clasped his hand over hers. "Thank you for telling me, Ms. Swan. Why do you think I shouldn't release him?"

"Because—now don't get bent out of shape, but I think the time you spent in that vault screwed you up." She stood and gnawed at her lip as she faced away from him. "You were devious and sneaky and villainous before, but after you came out you were going to leave the entire town to Ingrid! She would've killed everyone, Henry included! And when your deal with her fell through, you made Killian your slave and you were going to kill him before Belle stopped you. You did a lot of shady things before, probably a bunch of nasty things we'll never know about, but after your time in that vault..." she shuddered. "You were a cold-blooded killer then. Your own grandson, Gold!"

He nodded slowly. "I was evil incarnate. My soul was darker than it had ever been. So you think it was my time in the vault that made me that way, not my time with Zelena?"

"I don't know." She stuffed her hands in her jeans and turned to face him. "I was hoping you could tell me for sure."

"There were four life-changing events that happened all in the same moment, when Bae released me from the vault: I was reborn as a Dark One, my son perished in my arms, I took his sentience..."
into my body, I became Zelena's slave. Any one of those alone was enough to drive me into insanity. To be perfectly honest with you, I can't separate one event from the others, to say which caused my degeneration. But I will agree with you that after that moment, my soul was black as sin. I cared only for those who were of my blood; everyone else could go to Hell. Even those I claimed as my family, I made fools and puppets of. I claimed to love them, but I was incapable of such a selfless emotion. It makes me sick now to remember the demon I was." His head bent over his slumped shoulders, his thinning gray hair curtaining his face so she couldn't see his eyes, but she had a pretty good idea what they would have revealed. Her built-in lie detector flat-lined: his shame and regret were sincere.

"Yeah." She couldn't lessen the guilt for him: his reformation required that he feel it in full. "You were the king of bastards. But not any more."

"I must remind myself I'm still capable of terrible acts, even without magic. I'm constantly aware of the change that would take place if I crossed into Storybrooke and allowed the Dark One to take me again."

"You sound like you think there's a choice."

Rumple turned his face upward to her gaze. "There's always a choice, though just how much of one is debatable. Deep down, each of us has a craving for power. When the Dark One batters a soul, it's tempting, for most of us, beyond endurance to grant admission, just a little, just for a moment, just until I can save my son or stop a war—or—whatever it is. In every minute after granting that initial permission for Darkness to enter, you always find something else to justify leaving the door open, one more act of necessity. And in a short while, the Darkness no longer frightens you. In fact, it becomes your guide, your protector and your comforter. You begin to think life without it would be unbearable."

"It sounds like you're saying you could've driven it out of you at any time."

He smiled bitterly. "That's what the Dark One wants you think. 'When you don't need me any more, close the door. You can be human again. Whenever you have enough, done enough, when there's no more good for you to do, send me away.' But the Dark One lies. In that initial moment when you grant him the smallest of admission to your soul, you're changed forever. There have been a hundred souls taken by the Dark One, a hundred bodies controlled by it, but only ever one Dark One. The legends about the Dark One being immortal are true-those it possesses are not. For many of its victims, there comes a point when they can't bear to live under its domination any more, and they set themselves up to be killed. It's never hard to find the next victim. In the thousands of years that the Dark One has chewed up and spit out its puppets, no one has found a way other than violent death to be free of it."

"Except you." She stared at him in amazement.

He shook his head. "I'm not free; it waits for me in the lands of magic. I've just made a jail break. Belle did me a great favor, banishing me from magic: you don't lose if you don't play. But what I'm trying to say, Emma, is that I had a choice and in an instant, as I held Zoso's dagger in my fist, I made it. A moment before, a moment later and I might have made a different decision, but that's how life is, isn't it? It can spin on a dime. I killed Zoso to take his magic. I thought I could control the Darkness. I learned otherwise. It's my name on the dagger now; that vault is my destiny. Not Bae's. The Dark One was ensnatched in me at the time Bae was sent to the vault. His soul is untouched."

Emma blanched. "What's in that vault? The other victims?"
"Yes, and worse. Every evil act you've ever done or dreamed of doing." Rumple folded his hands in his lap. He probably didn't intend it so, but to Emma, it kind of looked like he was praying. "Bae is an innocent in that vault; the first one. But that doesn't mean he's safe from the evil there. He's done some rotten things and thought of doing much worse. He's tormented in that vault. That's why we have to get him out, if we love him." He bent his head back and talked into the air. "That's why Merlin has to help us get him out, if Merlin loves justice. Because for Bae, going to the vault was not the consequence of an act of free will."

Emma sat down slowly beside him. "So that's why you think, if we get him out, he'll be like he was before. Not like you were."

"That's why I know it." His eyes burned, but she wasn't sure if it was with anger or madness.

"So how do we do this?"

"Not you: me. Merlin has to allow me back into Storybrooke. I have to allow the Dark One to take me again. Once I have the power, I can find a way back to the Enchanted Forest: a bean, a hat, a hidden door. A curse if I have to. I did it before. The rest is simple."

"I need to work on Bal—" The front door popped open, interrupting her, and Henry grinned in the doorway, stomping snow from his boots and balancing two pizza boxes in his palm. A six-pack of sodas dangled from one finger by their plastic holder. "Mom and grandpa, I'm home!" he chirped.

As Henry deposited his gatherings in the kitchen, Rumple leaned forward to whisper to Emma, "You stood up for me with Balthazar. I thank you for that, and I'm asking you to do it again. If there's any chance of rescuing Bae, help me to try."

A clattering in the cupboards was followed by Henry calling out, "Hey, grandpa, where do keep the glasses?"

"I'll work on him," Emma whispered back. Then she cocked her head to puzzle over the old man as he limped into the kitchen. "Middle shelf, to the immediate right of the sink. I'll get the forks and knives."

Henry chuckled. "You eat pizza with a fork?"

"Of course," Rumple said indignantly. "How else to keep the pepperoni from dropping onto your shirt?"

Well, Gold might be a good guy now, and some kind of hero, to be willing to venture into the bowels of Hell for his son's sake, but at least one thing hadn't changed about him: college life hadn't made a slob out of him.

"I don't know why I agreed to this," Regina fretted, "and on my honeymoon, too. We could be in Paris by now." Nevertheless, she allowed Robin to hand her into the back seat of the Caddy."

"No, we couldn't," Robin said reasonably as he climbed in beside her. "We'd be in Brunswick at best. You're just nervous, darling."

"Of course I am. He's going to ask questions."

"So answer them or don't. You're the adult; you decide." Robin patted her knee. "You do just fine with Roland; you'll do all right with Trajan."

"What if he's like her?"
Rumple answered from behind the steering wheel. "He's nothing like her. He's a confused little boy who's struggling to be good."

"As they all are," Robin finished.

Regina leaned forward to tap Rumple's shoulder. "Tell me again, how much does he know about me?"

Rumple shifted into Reverse and backed out of the parking space. He cast a last glance at his apartment building, appraising it through Regina's eyes: to her it must be tiny, shabby, only half a step up from the hovels most of her subjects had lived in, in the old days, and a mile of steps down from the pink Victorian. He had seen the judgment in her eyes—an embarrassment for him—when he'd opened the door to her and invited her into his studio apartment. She'd carefully tucked her coat under her as she accepted his invitation to sit in his rocking chair. He and Belle had ignored that and poured their guests some tea. Robin had plopped down on the arm of the couch as if he belonged there. "Thank you for the cake," he'd said. "It tasted as good as it looked. Too tempting for Roland, I'm afraid: he got his sneaky little fingers into it before Regina and I could cut it. Sorry it didn't work out for you to be there, Rumplestiltskin." Belle and Rumple exchanged a glance of agreement: Robin was good for Regina. He'd keep her ambition in check; she'd keep him facing forward.

Now, Rumple avoided the temptation to use the rear-view mirror to glance at her. He shifted back into Drive before answering her question. "That you were once a queen. That in Storybrooke, you have magic. That you have two sons—he has a vague memory of playing with them. And most importantly, that you're his aunt."

"What did you tell him about Zelena?"

"He knows she and I fought. I haven't told him the outcome. He's not ready to hear how his mother died, or what she did to us. Someday I'll tell him, but for now, he needs to think well of her."

"And us," Regina added. "I fought with her too. He knows about the magic. I suppose he'll want magic tricks. He'll want me to perform like some evil panda."

"He understands that magic works only in Storybrooke."

"What is he looking for from us, Rumplestiltskin?" Robin asked.

"He's only seven. He has no expectations. He just wants to meet you." Rumple leaned back in his seat, getting comfortable. He'd forgotten how much he'd enjoyed driving.

"I guess we owe him that," Regina settled back in her seat too and went quiet.

As soon as Rumple pulled up to the curb and opened his door, a mass of polyester and wool flew at him, seizing him around the waist. "Mr. O'Neal! Hi, Mrs. Gold."

To his guests' surprise, Rumple bent and embraced the child. "Hello, Master Trajan. It's good to see you again."

"Thank you, sir." The boy peeked past Rumple's shoulder. "You brought her!"

"I did, along with her husband." Rumple wobbled a bit on his bad leg as he set Trajan down. "Master Trajan, may I present Robin Locksley."

He shook Robin's hand. "Good evening, Mr. Locksley."
Rumple positioned himself behind Trajan. "Very good." He straightened and held out his open palm in Regina's direction. "And this is your aunt, Regina Mills-Locksley."

Trajan trotted around to stand within arm's reach of the mayor, and he bowed, more deeply than he had for Belle, and peered up in admiration. Momentarily he forgot his manners. "You're beautiful!"

Regina's wary expression broke. She knelt on one knee, opening her arms, and the child ran into them as he had for Rumple. "May I kiss you, Trajan?"

The boy presented his damp face for kissing. "I wanted to meet you," he mumbled. "A long time." He disentangled himself, now remembering his manners. "My foster mom says 'Will you please come in?' She made a coffee cake." He held out his hand expectantly.

Regina straightened and took the offered hand. "I'd be honored."

When they returned to the Caddy, before Robin could open the car door for her, Regina lay a staying hand on Rumple's arm. "Gold, before you take us back to our car, we'd like to invite you and Belle out to dinner. Our treat."

Rumple and Belle exchanged a puzzled glance, but Belle nodded, so Rumple accepted.

"You and I need to talk about Trajan's future." The former queen seemed to deliberate for just a moment before adding, "And my place in it."

"Let's talk."

Climbing into the back seat, Regina mused to Robin, "He didn't ask for magic or money. He asked to get to know me."

"Quite a kid," Robin agreed.

As Rumple opened Belle's car door, she winked at him.

Belle went back to Storybrooke (she no longer referred to it as "home") Sunday afternoon, but she'd left her clothes in his closet and dresser as a visual reminder of her commitment to him. After she'd gone, he took their laundry to the washeteria and sat on a bench, reading, as their clothes tumbled together. He had a busy week ahead, between work and his class and Trajan and so had she, between her class and the library. The busyness would keep them from missing each other, they said, but of course that wasn't true.

He'd fallen in love with her, for the first time. Before, he'd admired her, been fascinated by her, craved her, needed her, but he'd been too consumed by darkness to love. What he felt for her now was clean and simple, unguarded and sure. That love was giving him second thoughts about his obligation to Bae. He had to stay on track. He could continue to love her, but he had to be ready to let her go, if Merlin showed mercy. His will to do the right thing was slipping.

Before he went to bed that night, he stood on his balcony once again with the "Dear Occupant" letter in hand. He spoke aloud, but he didn't raise his voice; if there was any magic at all in this world, Merlin could hear him. "This was you, wasn't it?" Rumple lay the letter on the cold railing and smoothed it with the flat of his hand. "Testing me. The bus driver, he was yours, watching my reaction to this. Tampering with my stereo, that was you too. Apparently I didn't pass your test. But I'd argue it's not my failure here; it's yours. The man of vision you're supposed to be would know I don't matter in all this. It's not even about my son, if you see the big picture; it's about course correction. The rules say, there must be darkness for there to be light. The rules say, there must be
free will for there to be justice. The rules say, love dies when justice does. But where is justice when a man is robbed of his free will and forced into the Dark Vault to burn for eternity? Every Dark One, from Nimue to me, chose the power, but Bae, he chose love, and now he burns for it. Where is free will, where is justice? And why are the gods not standing up for the one who sacrificed himself for love?"

There was no sign of a reply.

"A soul for a soul, the law says. But when a light soul is exchanged for a dark one, how is that obedience to the law? For some reason, the gods chose you as their champion, so stand up, Merlin!" Rumple ripped Dear Occupant into strips and let the wind take them.

"Are you happy?" Belle whispered against his chest.

"Happier than I've ever been. Are you happy?"

"Happier than I've ever been." She sighed, then turned the page on her history textbook. He kissed the top of her head before turning the page on his.

Faintly, from the stereo, McCartney urged, "Remember to let her into your heart/Then you can start to make it better."

"Consider this my challenge," Rumple stared up into the starless sky from his balcony. "I'm throwing down the gauntlet, Merlin." In his hand he held a letter he'd just composed to Sam. This letter would go into an envelope addressed to Jill, so that she could pass the letter along to her son when she deemed him ready to receive it. The letter gave a little bit of advice, a lot of encouragement and an apology that Rumple couldn't be there to see him grow up.

In the nights to come, there would be letters to Daniel, Harry, Regina, Emma, Henry and Archie. It made him chuckle, just how many people he had to say goodbye to. The last one, the letter he was putting off writing, was the one for Belle. When he signed his name to that letter, he told himself, he would truly be ready to leave, but he wasn't there yet; he wasn't ready to let go.
He'd been feeling creeped out all day, after having awakened from a strange dream that he couldn't remember but that left behind an unsettled feeling. He got up to shower, reminding himself that today was his day off and after a few chores, he could prop up his feet and study, but he couldn't wash away the eerie feeling that followed him around the house. As he opened the fridge to carry out the orange juice, he thought he heard an unfamiliar voice call his name, though when he turned around, no one was there. As he dropped two slices of bread in the toaster, he thought he saw the face of a blue-eyed old man reflected in the chrome. He blinked and the face disappeared.

There were no more odd occurrences after that, so he ate breakfast, listened to the radio as he washed the dishes, and went off to the grocery store with his folding shopping cart. Rumple preferred to get his shopping done before the workday crowds filled the bus. He went about his shopping without incident, and even experienced his usual flash of pride when he reached into his wallet to pay: the fact that he could pay always set him into a good mood.

When he returned from the store, dragging his cart behind him, he nodded a greeting to his neighbor, who was taking down her Christmas decorations, and he slid his key into the front door's lock. A jolt of electricity shot through the metal and into his fingers, stinging him and causing him to drop the key. He stepped back, startled, but before he had time to figure out what had happened, the door swung open.

Rumple raised his cane, ready to pounce on the burglar. His looked across the living room toward the couch, where an elderly man sat, a cup of coffee in his hands.

Rumple recognized the visitor immediately. His face drained of color.

"Hello, Rumplestiltskin," the man said softly, setting his cup on the coffee table.

"Hello, Balthazar. What did you come for?" But Rumple didn't really need to ask: what else but revenge would drive a mage into the land without magic?

"It's not what you're thinking." Then Balthazar did something strange: he waved a hand in the general direction of the front door, and light shimmered in the doorway. "A sound barrier," he explained. "In case your next-door neighbor is nosey."

"How did—" But Rumple clamped his mouth shut. He wouldn't give Balthazar the satisfaction of catching him uninformed.

"I always carry a few trinkets on me when I come out into the world, little stores of power." Balthazar picked up the coffee pot and poured a second cup. "I'm an old man and this is a violent world. I need a little protection." He held the cup out. "Please, join me. I'm only here to talk. Nothing more."

Though he knew better, Rumple felt compelled to come forward and accept the cup. He added a spoonful of sugar, then sat down in the rocking chair, the coffee table between him and his guest. It was of course no protection. Nothing would be: the Sorcerer's Apprentice was the third most
powerful mage in all the realms. Maybe the second—Rumplestiltskin had never challenged him to find out. But it was common knowledge that Balthazar didn't lie, just as it was known that Rumplestiltskin didn't—in the old days, anyway.

"Your friends told me you'd changed. I came to see for myself. The fact that you gave them the spell to release me suggested it might be true."

"Friends?"

"Dr. Hopper, Henry, Ms. French. They've been advocating for you, with the mayor and the sheriff. They want you to be permitted to return to Storybrooke." Balthazar sipped his coffee. "If you choose. Or come and go. I see you've made a life here for yourself, and you may wish to retain it."

"You're not here... to seek retribution?"

"Who would I seek retribution against?" Balthazar's eyes twinkled. "It's apparent to me that the man who trapped me in Merlin's Hat no longer exists."

Rumple set his cup down, the coffee untasted, and folded his hands to keep them steady. "I don't understand."

"Forgive me for letting myself in, but I wanted to take a tour of your home before you were here to stop me. I think one can learn a lot from the objects with which a home is filled. The Apprentice looked up and around at the walls, which bore photos of Harry, Jill, Sam, Harry and Rumple, playing together, working together, laughing. More recent photos of Trajan were framed side by side with those of Rumple's former housemates. There were photos of Henry as well, printed out from the email attachments Henry had sent over the past year, and drawings that Trajan had made. Rumple followed the Apprentice's gaze as it passed slowly over the walls, then to the boom box sitting on a handmade bookcase and the stack of Beatles CDs beside it and the stacks of books on the shelves below it: cookbooks, children's books, westerns, and to the Apprentice's amazement, a collection of books of religion.

"Your friends told me about your life here. I read Ms. Sawyer's blog to confirm what they'd told me." Balthazar smiled gently. "I saw for myself, the man who lives here is a worker, a friend, a father. A good man. Someone who ought to be allowed to return home."

Rumple cleared his throat. "You want to help me?"

Balthazar nodded.

"No."

Balthazar's hairy eyebrows shot up. "No?"

"Not to go back to Storybrooke. I need to go back to the Enchanted Forest. Baelfire—"

"Ah." The Apprentice sighed. "Yes. I know about Baelfire. You want to free him from the Dark Ones' Vault."

"He doesn't belong there."

"Indeed, he doesn't. The vault is meant only for the Dark Ones. Certainly not for a hero."

"It's meant for me."
"You want to exchange places with him."

"No," Rumple smiled a little. "To tell the truth, I'd rather not. But the laws of magic require a soul for a soul, and it's right that that soul should be mine. Not his."

"I agree."

"You'll help me, then? Create a portal to take me to the Forest?"

"What about your other son?"

"He's not my son." Rumple couldn't help but glance over his shoulder at a photo of him and Trajan building the birdhouse just a few short weeks ago. "Not by blood, not by law."

"From the look on his face in those pictures," the Apprentice jutted his chin toward the wall, "he'd beg to differ. And from the look on your face right now, I'd say the same for you."

"It's what the law says that matters," Rumple murmured. "He's in a group home right now, but someday some young couple will come along and adopt him."

"Not you; that's what you're saying."

Rumple scowled. "I'm hardly adoptive parent material. You know what I am."

"Was," the Apprentice corrected. "From what your advocates tell me, from what I see here, you're something different now. But if your mind is made up—"

"Bae's soul must be released."

"Agreed."

"And the laws of magic can't be broken."

"Agreed. The law must be fulfilled. An eye for an eye, a soul for a soul." Balthazar took another sip of his coffee and speculated for a moment. "When would you like to leave?"

"Tonight. As soon as I say goodbye to a few people."

"Tonight?"

"Before I lose my nerve," Rumple added lowly.

"You are certain, then," Balthazar surmised.

Rumple reached for his phone. "Give me time to tie up some loose ends?"

Reaching for his coat, Balthazar hauled himself to his feet. "I'll wait outside."

Hands shaking, Rumple dialed. As he waited for the connection to be made, he walked over to his desk, reached into a drawer and withdrew the stack of goodbye letters he'd been writing this past month; he propped those up against a stack of books, with the letter to Daniel up front. His call connected with Ms. Hotchkiss' voice mail; he left her a brief "calling in sick" message. It was all he could think of: he couldn't bring himself to resign, though that would have been the fair thing to do. To Belle and Henry, he told the full truth, leaving them brief video messages of love and farewell. He was grateful that Balthazar had come at an hour when his loved ones were not at home; had either of them picked up, he probably would have lost confidence in his decision.
His last calls were to Sam and Trajan. He'd been thinking about this a long time, and he'd prepared a small speech for each boy that would offer words of encouragement to remember him by. When he spoke them, though, they felt artificial. What he wanted to say was much different: I want to stay here! I want to live, for as long as nature will allow me, even if it's just five years or ten. I want to see you graduate school, go out into the world, become men, find yourselves, find your loves. I deserve to see that. But he spoke the words he'd planned to, and he closed his computer.

He walked around his apartment, making sure all the appliances were turned off, the dishes were put away, the clothes were hung neatly in the closet. In his message to Dove, he'd asked that all of his furniture be delivered to the Coalition for the benefit of their next homeless client; all his books and photos, though, were to go to Belle, and all his CDs to Henry. The few DVDs he owned—Westerns, mostly—now would belong to Dove. Apart from the furniture, he could fit everything he owned into two boxes. He could remember the time when two boxes wouldn't have been enough to hold his collection of tie clasps and cufflinks. He slipped on his coat, picked up his cane and walked out onto the balcony, closing the door behind him.

Balthazar was leaning against the railing. "Ready?"

He locked his door and pocketed the key.

Balthazar straightened, drew in a lungful of fresh air. "It's a lovely day. Reminds me of the first day of spring, back in Camelot."

They started down the stairs, but when they came to the second-floor landing, Rumple's hand darted out to grab Balthazar's elbow. "Does it have to be this way? Isn't there another way?"

"You know the rules."

To Rumple's surprise, instead of transporting them with magic, Balthazar led the way down the stairs to the parking lot, where a Toyota Avalon waited. He unlocked the doors electronically. "Get in." When Rumple hesitated, he chuckled, "You didn't expect a pumpkin drawn by six white mice, did you? On this side of the border, my magic is very limited."

They drove in silence, each mile feeling to Rumple like an eternity and a nano-second at the same time. He tried to settle his chaotic mind. As they passed it, he recognized the truck stop that had been his introduction to the Land without Magic; he wondered if Irma still worked there. He watched the orange line loom up against the concrete, and then the car vibrated and his entire body shook and his hands glowed.

"Do you feel it, the power?" Balthazar asked. "How does it feel?"

"Like putting on my dragonhide coat," he murmured. Harsh whispers and crazy cackles swirled around his brain like angry wasps looking for a vulnerable place to sting. He felt his body swell, his muscles tightened and his bum ankle straightened itself. He wanted to smash something.

Balthazar glanced over at him. "I see the Dark One is home," he said dryly, adjusting the rear-view mirror so that Rumple could himself in it. His skin had turned sparkly gold and his eyes had narrowed to serpentine slits.

Disgusted, Rumple waved a hand over his face, casting a glamor. He didn't want Bae seeing him like this. Or anyone else. "Must we go through town?"

"No. We're going to the well. He's waiting for us there." As the Avalon passed the Welcome sign, Balthazar turned off the highway and onto River Road.
"He?" Rumple sat up hopefully.

"Merlin. I'll create the portal, but he'll take you to the Vault." Balthazar nodded to the cup holder between the passenger and driver's seats. "There's a phone. Would you like to call anyone, have them join us at the well?"

He deliberated. Having any of his family there to see him off would shake his resolve, and he couldn't afford that; but to deny Belle and Henry one last kiss would be cruel. He left the choice to Fate: with a deep sigh he called the library. "Sweetheart?"

"Rumple! What's up, darling?"

"Can you meet me at the well, as soon as possible?"

"Meet—Rumple, are you here? Are you in Storybrooke?" she squealed.

"Momentarily," he rushed to inform her. "I'm on my way to the Vault."

"Oh," her voice fell, then broke. "Oh, Rumple, are you sure? No one would blame you if you didn't. . . ."

"If you'll come to the well, we can say goodbye."

"Oh... I... I'm on my way. I'll be there as fast—" there was a clatter, then she explained, "I dropped the phone. I'll be there as fast as I can."

He thought about sending a burst of magic to transport her to the well; the tingling in his hands informed him he had sufficient power for such a complicated move. But he dismissed the thought immediately: she wouldn't like that, and more importantly, he didn't want to. He folded his arms, tucking his hands under to ignore the magic pressing against his fingertips, demanding release. It helped that his stomach was churning: magic was making him queasy. He sucked in fresh air and released it in one of the breathing exercises that Hopper had taught him. When the nausea had dissipated, he phoned Henry.

"Grandpa?! Is that really you?"

"Goooo, Moose!" Rumple growled.

Henry chuckled. "Yup, that's you."

"Henry, how about meeting me at the wishing well, in about ten minutes?"

"Yeah, I can do that." Henry sounded even more surprised by the invitation. "Should I bring anything?"

"No, just yourself. Belle will meet us there."

"Grandpa...this is about my dad, isn't it? You're going to try to get him out of that Vault, aren't you?"

"Yes, Henry. With some help."

"I'm on my way."

Disconnecting, Rumple returned the phone to the cup holder and rested his head against the back of the seat. His foot jiggling, he watched the snow-covered hills and spindly trees fly by. How odd;
he'd spent most of the last thirty years in search of his son, and that was how he'd spend his last day in this world too. Where he was going next, there was no snow, no sun, no wind, no water, nothing to touch, nothing to see, only darkness and the voices of every Dark One that had ever been and ever would be. Rumpel had no illusions that he would be the last: some greedy or desperate soul who'd listened to the legends or read the books would come for him, open the Vault to attempt to make a slave of him or slay him to take his power. It was the Fate he and all his predecessors had been destined for, from the moment they picked up the dagger. He'd known that from the very first, as Nimue had whispered in his ear, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." And then she'd laughed at him.

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Grandpa!" "Rumple!"

He opened his eyes and sat up, amazed. Belle and Henry were waiting for him, but so were Dove, Emma, Snow, David, Archie, Ruby and a good share of the town. As he climbed out of the passenger seat, he noticed that his peaceful clearing had become an unregulated parking lot. Robin and Regina were leaning against her Mercedes, but straightened as Rumple emerged from the Avalon. She bobbed a curtsey, taking him aback: she'd never in her life curtseyed to anyone.

"Henry told us what you're doing," David said. "An act of heroism like that should be witnessed." He offered a hearty handshake.

"Besides, we came to say goodbye to our friend." Snow held onto Rumples's sleeve as she kissed his cheek, then she stepped back, granting the others the space to say goodbye with handshakes, hugs and kisses. The more affection bestowed upon him, the more unreal it felt; his consciousness seemed to dislodge from his body and he watched the scene from a distance. He had to: had he allowed himself to connect to the moment, he would have fallen apart. As Friar Tuck smashed him in a bear hug, Rumples looked around for help. His eyes finally fell upon Belle, and she came to his rescue, elbowing her way through Merry Men and nudging Tuck aside. "Let me though, please!" Her tone left no room for argument, not that anyone would have, anyway; the Merry Men recognized her rights as a wife, and the Storybrookers knew full well the price she'd paid for three decades as Rumples's beloved. Just in case, Dove strode beside her; even Little John literally had to look up to him. The crowd parted and she came to stand beside Rumples, linking her arm in his, with Dove, arms folded, stood watch just behind them.

Henry was nearly the last to come forward. "I don't understand it." Blinking furiously, he couldn't make eye contact. "If magic can't free my dad without taking my grandpa, then I don't want any part of it." He glared in Balthazar's direction. "I don't want to be the Author, if this is how the stories have to go."

"There must be rules, Henry." A new voice spoke up, and the crowd parted to allow the newcomer to approach. "Even the most powerful of us must obey them."

Balthazar's face lit up and he made a low bow. "Master!"

"You're Merlin?" Regina wheeled about, giving the slight young man a critical once-over. "You're just a baby!"

Merlin shrugged. "A good skin regimen does wonders." He offered his hand and Rumples shook it. "Rumples, after all these years, we meet at last."

"It's an honor," Rumples bent his head. "I'd come to doubt if you existed at all. I searched for you for centuries."

Merlin glanced toward the well. "To do what we've come here today to do: find your son."
"You knew, then." Rumple smiled humorlessly. "You were avoiding me."

"I learned long ago, don't interfere with the plans of the Fates. They're far wiser than I am. And, perhaps, reports of your talents made me a bit nervous." Merlin looked out over the crowd. "The plan that brought you all here didn't originate with Rumplestiltskin's search for his son. It served a higher purpose."

Rumple's face darkened. "Are you saying the Fates set it all up, for me to lose Bae?"

"No, but they recognized a golden opportunity when they saw it."

"What purpose?" Belle demanded. "What could be so important that it was worth separating a father from his son?"

"This world is sick," Merlin explained. "It needs magic." Rumple's skin crawled as the familiar words stirred a memory: I'm sick and I need magic. "You brought it here," Merlin addressed the crowd. "You've been so absorbed in your petty in-fighting that you didn't realize all the good you could be doing with the power you'd introduced here."

"Well, perhaps we needed a teacher," Belle suggested, her chin raised in indignation. "Perhaps you were neglecting your duty."

Merlin dropped his gaze to the ground. "Perhaps I was."

"Are you offering?" David asked. "To show us what we're supposed to be doing?"

"If you're ready to learn, yes. But first, I have an agreement to fulfill." He turned his attention to Rumple. "A contract, if you prefer. Are you ready, Rumplestiltskin?"

Rumple opened his mouth to answer, but forty angry voices drowned him out and forty angry bodies spun on Merlin. Rumple could make out a few of the demands: "Be reasonable," Snow was pleading; "Aw, for cryin' out loud, if you're the almighty Sorcerer—" Emma barked; "Have a heart, bro," Leroy beseeched; "Wasn't it enough that Henry had to lose his father? Now you have to take his grandfather too?" Regina shouted; "This man is not who you think he is," Archie argued. "He's changed. I don't give a damn where you come from; in this world we recognize the potential for reform."

And then the crowd parted as a small form pushed her way to the front, jabbing her finger against the great mage's chest. "We need him. I need him. His grandson and his foster son need him. And if you're going to carry out this grand scheme of curing the world of its ills, you need him too."

He didn't raise his voice, but somehow the crowd heard him and fell silent as Rumple addressed them: "Please... your support... I'm befuddled and encouraged. But there's something I have to do, and I'm sure, as fathers—he glanced at Robin and David—"and mothers”—he glanced at Regina, Snow and Emma—"you won't interfere."

Merlin raised his eyes from Belle's and across a sea of faces, met Rumple's. Rumple nodded. "A soul for a soul. I'm ready to pay my debt, Merlin. Free my son."

The crowd fell silent, except for Balthazar, who said hesitantly, "Master..."

"A soul for a soul, Rumplestiltskin." Merlin looked to his assistant. "Balthazar, the dagger?"

Balthazar opened his hand and the Dark One's dagger appeared in it.
"Where did you get that?" Archie protested. "I had that hidden where no one could find it." But he forgot his complaint when the dagger suddenly vanished and reappeared in Merlin's open palm. Merlin let it lie there, simply staring at it; Rumpole knew exactly what the great Sorcerer was feeling, with the dagger warm and humming, and what he was hearing, with the whispers of a hundred Dark Ones luring him in. In the recesses of his mind, Rumpole felt the pull of their siren song: take the power, take the power. No one was—not even Belle had been—pure enough to hold the dagger for long without falling to its temptation. Just a taste. Merlin stared at the dagger, his face impassive.

Regina suddenly growled and raised her hand, summoning a fireball, but at the scent of her magical energy, both Merlin's and Rumpole's heads snapped up. "Regina, don't," Rumpole moaned; whether she meant to rescue him from Merlin or take the dagger for herself, he didn't know for sure; perhaps in that moment she had no intention at all, but was merely reacting defensively as one mage instinctively threatened by the superior power of another. Rumpole started forward to stop her—moving bodily; it had been so long since he'd had magic that he no longer automatically reached for it. But Emma, standing at Regina's side, struck out, reaching for her magic, and with a ball of water squelched the flames dancing in Regina's palm. Regina and Emma exchanged embarrassed looks, mumbling apologies to each other. "Just... force of habit, I guess," Regina surmised, stuffing her hands into her coat pockets.

"Emma?" Merlin seemed to have forgotten the dagger, simply closing his fist around the hilt, as he peered at Emma. As Merlin's hand clamped around the dagger, an electrical jolt shot through Rumpole, forcing his body to stiffen at attention, ready to respond to a command from his new master. Belle felt him go rigid and gripped his arm tighter, whispering his name, but he couldn't answer.

As Merlin called her name, Emma looked like a child caught raiding the cookie jar. "Huh?" She took a small step backwards as Merlin approached, but then she reminded herself she'd done nothing wrong—and as the sheriff, she was responsible for public safety—so she stood straighter and let the great man come to her. He moved slowly and gently, aware of her nervousness, and aware that David, hand reaching to his hip for a weapon that wasn't there, and Snow had closed ranks with their daughter. "It's all right," he assured them, making a stop gesture with his left hand—but their eyes were fixed on the dagger in his right. "I just—if you'll permit me, Emma?" He encircled Emma's hand with his own, just for a moment, then a strange violet light filled his eyes, dying as quickly as it had been born, and he pulled back. "As you're so fond of saying, 'Crap on a cracker!'"

A surprised laugh burst from the entire crowd, most of all, Emma, and she relaxed. "What's the deal, dude?"

"I'd been told you have magic, but wow, some magic! More raw power than I've seen in an untrained mage."

Regina sniffed. "'Raw,' yes, but 'untrained,' no. I personally have spent several hours attempting to teach this 'raw power' how to control herself. And we lost an entire house in the process—sorry, Gold."

"No big deal," Rumpole waved the thought away, merely relieved to have Merlin's mind taken off the dagger for the time being.

"Still," Merlin said thoughtfully, "a tremendous amount of power..." He fell silent as he mulled something over.

"Well, I wouldn't say 'tremendous,'" Regina argued. "Certainly there are three or four of us
standing right here whose powers surpass Emma's."

"I won't argue that you, too, have impressive strength," Merlin agreed. He turned his back on them, rubbing his mouth, then as he made a decision and turned back, his hand tightened on the dagger and once again, Rumple was struck by a bolt of magic that brought him to rigid attention. Merlin noticed and loosened his grip on the knife. "Apologies. Rumplestiltskin, you came here with the intention of surrendering your freedom in exchange for your son's, yes?"

"I did." Rumple's voice darkened; he had no more patience for whatever game the boy sorcerer was playing. "Can we not get on with it?"

"You'd surrender your freedom for your son's sake, but would you surrender your magic? It's been said of you that you love no one and nothing as well as you love your power." There was no judgement in Merlin's tone, merely curiosity.

"At one time, that was a fair assessment," Rumple answered.

"But now?"

"After having been forced to live without magic, I've found I can get by."

"You have it back right now, and you could keep it." Merlin opened his right hand, displaying the dagger. "I'll return this to you and you can"—he waved his left hand—"disappear, your power intact. You can resume your place here, with all your money and your magic. I'll return the dagger, no tricks; all you have to do is summon it to you."

The word broke from his chest, unhindered by fear or power-lust. "No."

"Because of Baelfire."

"Yes, but no."

A ray of hope lit up Merlin's dark eyes. "No? If it were possible for us to release Baelfire from the Vault and yet let you walk away, with everything you had before, that would be a golden opportunity, wouldn't it?"

"No. You know as well as I do, Merlin, the burden of magic." Rumple clasped his hand to Belle's, tucked into his arm. "What you can never know, though, is the unending and inequitable price that dark magic takes from people like me."

"If you were to have your heart's desire, then? You would take your family and go back to that world, where there's no magic and no immortality and you have nothing?"

"If I had my wife and my son, I would have everything," Rumple snapped. "Don't jerk me around, Merlin. I know the law as well you do. A soul for a soul."

"Yes, but you have two souls. One of them belongs in that Vault; the other is just a... highjacked passenger." Merlin pointed the dagger at Emma. "There's far more power present in this community than I had realized, when I sent Balthazar here." He pointed the dagger at Regina. "A tremendous amount of power, dark"—he pointed at Blue—"and light. It's an extremely rare thing, dangerous, but if these forces can be focused and combined, made to strengthen each other rather than repel. . . ."

"That's not so rare," Regina sniffed. "Emma and I combine our powers that all the time."
"Well, not all the time," Emma corrected, "but we have kicked some chernabog booty together."

Blue spoke up. "Are you suggesting that we channel all of our magic—yours and Regina's and Emma's and mine—to exorcise the demon from Rumplestiltskin?"

"That's an apt way to put it," Merlin surmised.

David interjected, "Yeah! Balthazar did it before, right, Snow? We saw him do it."

Snow couldn't face Emma as she explained to the others, "He removed the darkness from our daughter and sent it somewhere else."

"This time, it'll be a bit trickier," Balthazar said, "we'll be extracting the Dark One and trapping it in the Vault. Fighting the Dark One at such a rudimentary level will take all the power we can muster."

"And we mustn't delude ourselves: this is a temporary fix. As long as the knowledge that there is a Dark One exists, there will be plenty of pursuers willing to risk anything to gain control of it."

"But for a time, anyway, maybe we can contain it," Blue said.

"And for this family," Merlin nodded at Rumple and Belle, "they can finally stop paying that inequitable price."

Emma pushed her sleeves up and summoned her magic to her hands. "I'm in."

"Fine." Regina took a deep breath, stilled her body, and her hands began to glow.

"And you, Rumplestiltskin?" Merlin asked. "The Dark One will scrabble and claw to hang onto you with everything it has. The stress on your body will be tremendous, and you're not exactly a spring chicken."

"Don't worry about this stringy old Bantam," Rumple grunted. "I've got plenty of fight left in me. If there's a possibility of getting Bae out without me going in, I'll take it. All right, sweetheart?" He glanced over at Belle, squeezing her hand. "Don't worry about me, Belle. For once in my life, I'm doing the right thing. I love you."

"I love you, Rumple." She allowed Henry to envelope her in his arms and draw her away.

"All right then. Please, everyone, move away," Merlin urged, and between Dove and Little John, the crowd was pushed back, leaving only the six mages in the center of the clearing.

Merlin pointed the dagger downward and everyone stepped backwards as a bolt of electric blue light smashed into the ground, the snow melted, the land began to shake, and gradually, a circular iron plate engraved with runes faded in.

"That's some fancy manhole cover," Leroy could be heard to murmur, but everyone else remained silent.

"I can hold it here only a few minutes," Merlin advised through clenched teeth. Already a sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead. With his left hand he sent magic into the Vault, while with his right, he raised the dagger to the sky.

Balthazar lay his hands on Rumple's chest and chanted something in a language so ancient not even Rumple understood it. A white light encased Rumple's body and he dropped to his knees. "Dark
One, I send thee back from whence thee were created," Merlin intoned, and a legion of black shadows seeped from Rumple's shuddering body, pulled by the dagger's command into the air, to come crashing one by one into the shiny blade. As the dagger blackened, Merlin's entire body shuddered. "Now, if the rest of you will kindly lend us your strength."

With a smirk Regina threw her hands into the air, summoning the full force of her powers and bringing them to bear on the dagger. "With pleasure," she crowed.

"Magic fight! Whoo-hoo!" Emma crowed, but her nervous eyes belied her bravado as she poured her magic into Regina's.

"Emma!" Snow cried out.

"It's okay, Mom! I'm okay. This is what a savior does, right, Merlin?" Emma panted.

"It's what you were created for, Emma," Merlin agreed. "And much more."

"And so were we." Overhead, an army of fairies appeared, led by Tink. "Sisters, give it all you've got!" The fairies trained their wands on the dagger, which burned white-hot; the spectators had to shield their eyes. The force of the magic was more than Merlin could bear, and he dropped the dagger, but it remained hovering in mid-air as the legion of shadows filled it. Then suddenly the dagger went dead and dropped to the ground. The magic users ceased their attack, and their loved ones rushed forward to offer arms of support and words of praise. The white light emanating from Merlin's body weakened; his free arm flailed until David rushed forward, taking the arm about his own shoulders to enable the Sorcerer to stand.

Merlin pushed David away and picked up the dagger. "Stay back." Merlin pointed the dagger at the iron plate. One by one, its runes glowed, then the plate lowered itself into the earth, a black ooze filled the open pit, and the plate lifted again, bearing a hunched form, dripping with ooze. Balthazar transported Bae free of the vault, and when Merlin tossed the dagger in, the plate locked itself and vanished into the snow. Merlin staggered and this time, when David raised him up, he accepted the help.

Rumple clambered to his feet and ran at the form, which now straightened, a face emerging from the slime, then hands, then arms and feet and legs. "Bae!" Rumple took the form into his arms, tried in vain to clean the face with his woolen scarf. "Son, can you hear me?"

"Papa?"

Laughing crazily, Henry ran forward too, ignoring the ooze to bury his face against Bae's shoulder. "Dad!" It took a moment longer for Emma to believe what her eyes were showing her, but once she did, she threw herself into the family group. She waved her hand, sending a little magic over Bae to cleanse him of the malodorous mess. Rumple held an arm out toward Belle, and she joined them, receiving her share of kisses as Bae greeted each of his loved ones in turn.

"Are you all right, son?" Rumple pushed away to inspect Bae.

"I think I'm fine," Bae patted himself. "Just—" he whistled. "Somebody's got to explain to me what happened. Last thing I remember, I was saying my last goodbyes."

"You're alive," Emma assured him. "Absolutely, positively alive, and you're never dyin' on me again, if I have anything to say about it."

After allowing the family a few moments alone, Regina stepped forward with a greeting. "Welcome back, Mr. Cassidy. It's good to see you." Others took this as an opportunity to offer their
own greetings; Emma had to play sheriff to keep the crowd under control. "One at a time, people, one at a time," she ordered. "Don't smother my guy after I just got him back."

"Your guy?" Bae dimpled.

She gave him a small shove. "Aw, come on, you know it as well as I do."

"Where were you, Dad? What was it like there?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Bae moved away from where the vault had been, looking back with a shudder. "But first, I could use some coffee. And a steak." He spread his thumb and forefinger two inches apart. "About that thick."

"Party at Granny's!" Ruby announced. "Give me and Archie ten to fire up the grill." She yanked open the driver's door of her Camaro, and her husband crawled into the passenger seat.

"Come," Regina linked her arm in Merlin's. "As a guest of the city, you shall ride with me and Robin."

"The tab's on me," Dove called out—it was the first time anyone had ever heard him raise his voice. When Rumple and Belle raised their eyebrows, he shrugged. "Mr. Gold has paid me a very nice salary, all these years. You might say I'm rich." He smiled at the family. "In more ways than one."

"Your curse is broken, Rumplestiltskin." Balthazar clasped a hand over Rumple's shoulder. "And with it, your magic and your immortality. Is it, after all, such a terrible loss, in exchange for your freedom?"

"No," Rumple answered. "No loss at all." He glanced down at his hands, a man's hands, callused, wrinkled.

Belle picked up his left hand, her fingers gliding over his ring. "Let's go raise a glass to freedom."
"This world is sick," Merlin said without preamble. "It needs magic. That's why Balthazar and I are here. That's what the savior was born for. Why don't you stay and help us?"

To illustrate his point, Rumple wiggled his finger at the salt shaker. Granny opened her mouth to protest, but when the salt shaker remained in place and intact, she closed her mouth and poured Merlin a cup of coffee before moving along to the Charmings. Rumple shrugged.

"So what?" Merlin said. "You know more about magic than anyone else here, other than me. You know these people. Leave the fighting for the young people. Stay. Teach them with me."

"No. Thank you." Twisting in the booth, Rumple watched his son and his grandson, arms slung around each other's shoulders, punch the jukebox keys, while his wife assisted her friend Ruby in carrying out steak dinners. "I have other work to do. Maybe not so grand as yours, but still, important."

Merlin followed Rumple's line of sight. After a long moment, he sighed and stood up. "I can't blame you. Who, after being released from Hell, would want to return to it?" He walked back to Mayor Mills' table.

"I remember once Henry said he wished his father could take him fishing."

Rumple took the opportunity of catching his son in a rare moment alone, with Emma in the restroom and Henry sent off to bed—the time was, after all, three in the morning. He slid into the booth and slid a glass across the table toward a tired and still perplexed Neal.

Neal sniffed the contents. "What's this?"

"Sheep milk."

"How'd you get sheep milk?" Neal yelped. "Nobody in this world drinks it."

Rumple jutted his chin toward an elderly woman who was chatting with the Charmings. "Ms. Lamb there keeps a small flock. When I still lived here, she provided me with roving for my spinning. It cost me a pretty penny to get her to go home and milk at this time of night, but," he shrugged, "I remembered it was your favorite, in the old days."

Neal took a deep drink and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "Mmm, just as good as I remember. Thanks, Papa. Now what were you saying about fishing?"

"Henry. We should take him fishing tomorrow. He said he wished he could go fishing with you. Or baseball—but that's out of season."

"So's fishing. Emma told me this is February."

"Ice fishing," Rumple smiled. "I caught a rainbow trout on Mills Lake one January. I can take another sick day from work, we can borrow gear from Mr. Dove—one day together, the Stiltskin men, to get to know each other again before the world calls us back to work. Please, Bae. There are things you and I should talk about, before I leave."
Neal finished off the milk as he considered the invitation. Finally he said, "Yeah. I have questions about what happened to me... and what happened to you while I was away. I guess things are a lot different now. All right, Papa, let's go fishing."

"You said you'd tell me about the Vault," Henry said as he dropped his line into the lake. Technically, they weren't ice fishing—the lake hadn't frozen over—and they really didn't expect to catch anything, but no one was complaining. Even Emma, as eager as she was for more time with Neal, didn't object when her beloved made his request; her son's needs had to come first. And so Belle had packed a lunch and a thermos of tea, and Emma had made the guys promise to stay out no longer than three hours, even if it meant coming home empty-handed, and after kisses goodbye, the fishermen drove off, the borrowed tackle riding in the open trunk of the Cadillac.

Rumple drove them to his cabin, where he kept a rowboat, and after a quick lesson, Henry took over the rowing while the older men prepared the gear. In the middle of the lake they dropped anchor and cast their lines and waited—more for someone to begin the conversation than for a fish to bite.

Neal got the talk rolling. "Where are you staying while you're here, Papa? Emma told me what she did to your house."

"Did she tell you as well about Belle and me?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I guess I should say congratulations on your marriage and, you know, patching things up—she told me about banishment thing too. I can see things are good now between you and Belle."

"Better than they ever have been. She's preparing to move to Augusta. I have a very small place there—just a studio apartment—but we'll look for a larger place. Belle will start at the University of Maine in the summer. I'm working towards a degree as well."

"Oh yeah? What's your major?" Neal chuckled. "Never thought I'd say that to my old man."

"Well, here's another shocker: I'm studying to be a nutritionist. I'm a cook at a residential substance abuse treatment center."

"Wow. Things really have changed!"

Rumple went on to describe briefly the events of the past year, with Henry supplying details about the goings-on in Storybrooke. Then Rumple led the conversation to more treacherous waters: "Son, what happened to you—the Vault—I'm so sorry. You never should have suffered like that. It all comes back on me—the Dark One, Zelena, everything."

Neal nodded slowly, allowing his father to take the blame that was rightfully due to him—but not all the wrongs that had befallen Neal were Rumple's fault. "Papa, it wasn't your fault what that crazy bitch did to me—to us. I have memories of every sadistic thing she did: the cage, the dog bowl, the 'tell me a story' shit; everything she did to you, she did to me, while I was in your head."

"I'm sorry, Bae." Rumple stared into the water, searching for words to say more, but he couldn't sort out his roiling thoughts.

"I remember all that. I felt it—physically, I felt it, when she hit you, and when the magic made you do stuff against your will. I remember everything she said to you—"

"And what I said to her?" he asked with growing dread.
"Yeah. About my mother, your father, everything. Papa," Neal reached a hand across the boat to clasp Rumple's. "It's my turn to say I'm sorry, for all that shit other people put you through. I didn't know, not even half of it."

"You shouldn't. A child should never be burdened with the problems of the parent."

"I'm not a child any more, Papa. Now I understand better, and I'm sorry."

"We've both been through Hell, but it's better now, and it can be better between us. I want that more than anything, Neal. Will you give me a chance to get to know you again, and to show you I'm not the monster you remember?"

Neal didn't hesitate. "I expect we'll be seeing a lot of you, me and Henry and Emma. Augusta's just a couple of hours away."

The men fell silent, giving Henry a chance to ask his burning question. "Dad, you were going to tell me about the Vault."

Neal frowned as he concentrated. "Actually, I don't remember anything about it, Henry. I remember your mom holding me and crying, and I told her I loved her and I wanted her to be happy, and that I hoped you would think of me as a good father. I remember my head feeling like it would bust and my heart pounding so hard I couldn't breathe. And I remember my papa wanting to help me, but he already had: he showed me what it meant to love your family so much you'd sacrifice yourself for them. And then I asked him to let me go."

Rumple lowered his head, brushing his sleeve against his eyes.

"The next thing I remember was opening my eyes and seeing all of you last night." Neal patted his body. "See? Nothing damaged, no pain. Just hoping like hell we can put Zelena behind us."

"She's gone," Henry volunteered.

"Gone?"

"I killed her," Rumple clarified. "It was an act of revenge, not protection, and I regret it now."

"I guess that's one we'll have to disagree on, then, because I'm glad. Locking her up wouldn't have stopped her. She would've destroyed this whole town."

"I'm ashamed of the violence I committed, the manipulation, the lies. I can no longer bury my guilt under justifications. When Belle separated me from magic, she gave me the greatest gift I've ever received: she released me from myself. And last night, Merlin and the others saved all of us from the Dark One."

"Papa, you were in the Vault a long time," Neal said thoughtfully. "What was it like for you?"

Rumple closed his eyes. "I'd rather not remember it. Darkness. Cold. No sense of direction or time. No sense of my own body. Seeing nothing, hearing nothing except the voices of the hundred Dark Ones before me, shouting at me, berating me for my weaknesses. Torturing me with memories of every slap, every kick, every insult, every slamming door—my own father throwing me away. My own wife, yelling at me that she wished I'd died in the war. My own son, calling me a coward. I couldn't even die honorably, they said; I had to kill myself. Every moment of terror and rage that I'd ever experienced in life, they threw back at me, and I deserved it, but even then, they couldn't reach all the way through to my soul, because there was something there they couldn't understand: love."
"No matter how hurt and angry I was, I always loved you."

"I believe that's what kept me safe in that Vault." Rumple smiled. "Thank you, B—Neal."

"'Bae' is okay, to you. Just you." Neal watched his bobber ride along a wave as the wind picked up. "This family has been through hell, haven't we?"

"Yeah," Rumple agreed. "But we don't have to stay there."

------------------------------------------------------------------------

FEBRUARY 2016

The attainment of freedom isn't the end a hero's journey; it's just the start of a new adventure. Life, not her books, had taught Belle that lesson, and she shared it frequently over the next year with her beloved, every time he came into their home bellowing and slamming doors because he'd had another argument with Bae. Argue they did, but primarily over expectations, not revivals of past hurts. "No, this is good," Archie debated whenever Rumple fretted that any argument might be the straw that broke the fragile relationship's back. "This is normal; adult children and their parents sometimes squabble. You're both grown men, with independent thoughts and interpretations. You're bound to disagree. Small tussles won't break you. The important thing is, you've agreed not to hold the past over each other's heads, and you're sticking to that agreement. That shows you've forgiven each other. Your relationship has truly evolved."

And so it had. Guided by Archie, nudged by their significant others, and steadied by their determination to keep this family together, Neal and Rumple grew up. They learned to pick their fights more carefully, and when they fought, to ask rather than demand, and to avoid jumping to conclusions. What they learned from each other about fair fighting, they brought home to their spouses and children. It was especially beneficial, Neal reported, in steering Henry through his "caveman teenager" years, when hormones overrode verbal skills. "I'm just glad you're here and you understand the grunts and shrugs of the modern teenage boy," Emma sighed. "Cause if I get one more 'nothin'' for an answer to an innocent question, I'm gonna scream."

"Sports," Neal said with complete confidence, and he and David started a fencing club at the high school to give the boys a physical outlet for testosterone overload (Xena Bellator and Callisto Vindicta led the girls’ team, while not to have their heritage overlooked, Robin and Snow formed a co-ed archery team). "I'm burning off a lot of angst," Henry wrote to Rumple. "Every time a girl breaks my heart, I win another fencing medal. I might even join the NYU fencing team!" (Each of their emails, Skype sessions, phone calls and visits gave Henry another much-needed outlet; Regina, Neal and Emma found it necessary to judge and correct Henry's occasional bad behavior, and Robin and David, while offering a shining example, raised the bar too high for a boy who was struggling between the call of independence and the continuing need for direction, but Grandpa Gold was free to just listen, offering advice only when asked. It was a role that Belle suspected Rumple had long awaited.)

Her own role in Henry's and Neal's lives was something unique. Too young to be Grandma, she found her place with Henry as a tutor, helping him in his college prep studies; for Neal, who was, after all, about four times her age, she became a comrade-in-arms in their struggle to surmount the emotional walls their spouses had built over a lifetime. Neal would text: "She's doing it again, that running away thing. It's pissing me off." Belle knew from experience what to do: "Call her on it. Plain and simple. 'You're doing it again, Emma. Knock it off.' Keep her honest. Works with your father every time." "Every time?" "Well, mostly. He still gets morose sometimes, and I've had to learn to give him the space to work it out on his own." "You must be right," Neal texted back on the night he and Emma received a small, cream-colored envelope in the mail. "Congratulations, Belle. Of course we'll be there. Formal wear?"
For the Golds had decided to marry. Not renew vows, although legally that term would be correct; Belle insisted on the word marry. "I can't exactly explain it, but we feel like we've changed so much from what we were before, it's like we're different people. So—marry."

There was no arguing with that, Emma and Neal told each other. The change in Rumple was obvious and startling; Neal saw it on that first night back from the Vault, just as soon as he sat down to a steak at Granny's. It was evident in Rumple's walk, neither dejected like the spinner, nor cocky like the imp, nor stiff like Gold; he still limped, but his free arm swung loosely, his shoulders sat back comfortably on his torso, his head bobbed in response to greetings from the celebrators, and his eyes, open wide, shone. It was evident in his speech, neither littered with grammatical errors and stutters, as the spinner's had been, not peppered with condescending "dearies" as the imp's had been, nor dripping with sarcasm and Latinate vocabulary meant to put listeners down, as Gold's had been. Now, Rumple talked comfortably in casual phrases, just-a-little-outdated slang and flashes of humor alternating with thoughtful insights.

This was a man a guy could have a steak and a beer with. And when he asked Neal's opinions, man to man, and really listened to the answers, Neal thought he could like this man, as he told Emma when she took him back to her house after the party. "Yeah," said Emma, yawning as she tossed a pair of sleeping pants and a t-shirt at Neal. "He's not half-bad, these days. Now go in there and shower. It's time for bed."

Rumple had changed, from the jeans and sneakers he now wore to the stations he pre-set on his car radio (even the car he drove now, a used Honda instead of the Caddy, showed him to be a humbler man), from the subjects he talked about, enthusiastically and curiously, to the values he espoused, as revealed by how he spent his money (freely, cheerfully) and the political stances he now took. Neal had to get to know him all over again, as Belle had; it was a most welcome task.

Belle too had changed, in ways less obvious. She still glowed when she talked about books and giggled when she dropped things, she still flared up when someone said something thoughtless, she still could be caught daydreaming as pots on the stove boiled over. But she spoke more slowly these days, giving careful thought to her words, and she sought out other people's impressions before she acted, and she encouraged Rumple to keep her honest too, because she'd come to realize she could be evasive too. "We make a good team," she told her lover when he'd pinned her down on an answer she'd been reluctant to give. "How about if we make it official?"

"The people in this world do place a lot of stock in paperwork," he said. "We might have need to produce a marriage certificate at some time or other."

She swatted him. "Is that the only reason you can think of to marry me?"

He knelt on one knee (favoring the weak ankle) then, and took her left hand in his. "Openly and honestly. . . . This family we have, which makes me happier than anything ever has, is rooted in our marriage. I can think of no better way to solidify that foundation than for us to remarry."

"Or marry," Belle corrected. "As Robert O'Neal and Belle Gold. A couple of ordinary, hardworking, middle-class college students who are finding their way in this world."

"Well, maybe not so middle-class. We do still have a boatload of money in the Storybrooke Bank. You know, we haven't really talked about what to do with that. In some of the religions of this world, it's taught that there's a moral obligation to give back, to the extent that one is able, and there are a lot of homeless people out there. . . ."

"We'll do some good with it, have some fun with it, and pretty much ignore it the rest of the time, so that it doesn't corrupt us or come between us," Belle suggested.
"A wise plan. Perhaps we could be a little bit selfish—a room for our books, a pantry, an actual bedroom—"

"Two, so we can have out-of-town guests."

"There's a fixer-upper on Curry Lane. It's just one bus ride from the Martels'."

"But we have a car now. You don't need to take buses."

"Force of habit. We could have two cars, if we trade in the Caddy."

"It's too big to park on campus, anyway."

He shifted his bad leg. "Not to rush you, sweetheart, but this thin carpet is torture on my ankle. Since we're planning our future, can I take it you're accepting my re-proposal?"

"Oh, yes!" She set her hands on his elbows and urged him to stand. "Sorry, Rumple. I didn't mean to leave you on the floor so long. Yes, I'll marry you."

Rumple sat down beside her, drew her in for a kiss, then rested his cheek against her hair. "Thank you, sweetheart. Let's set a date then. I'm sure I can get some time off work, but our classes—"

"And we'd want Henry there, Trajan, Jill and Sam—we have to work around their school schedules—"

"And bring Archie and Ruby up from Daytona, and work around Robin's classes—"

"Boy, we have a lot of friends, don't we? You know, there is always Skype for those who can't take time off to travel. Do you think Daniel would marry us?"

"I'm sure he'd like to."

"Let's get married!"

"Robert, that is fantastic news! Every happiness to you and your bride. I'll be there with bells on."

Daniel gave him a thumbs-up, then blew a kiss in Belle's direction.

She waved cheerily at the monitor. "We're thinking May 1."

"May Day. In many cultures, that's a day of celebration, for the coming of spring. A time for new beginnings."

"We were hoping you'd marry us."

"Thank you, Belle. I'm honored. Does that mean you plan to unite with the Church?"

Belle and Rumple exchanged a glance. "We hadn't really thought about it. Is that a requirement?"

"For us, a wedding isn't just a legal ceremony, it's a sacrament, so if you wish me to marry you at St. Joseph's, you'll be expected to convert. It's a major step," Daniel said. "It's not a quick process, and certainly not one to be taken lightly. I would be delighted to instruct you, but you must be sure you want to become Catholic." He grinned. "That said, it would give me no greater pleasure than to bring you into the faith. I've been working on you a long time, Robert."

"I know you have, and I appreciate it," Rumple said sincerely. "You opened my eyes to a new way of thinking."
"I know you've been exploring various belief systems. That's good; when you come to us, you'll be sure."

"I'm not sure that day will come. I have to be honest with you, Daniel: I find much to respect and take comfort from in all the holy works I've read. I enjoy coming to your services." He and Belle had visited Portland several times, making attendance at Mass a centerpiece of their visit, but it had been more out of affection for Daniel than a commitment to the church. "But I'm afraid I can't, in all honesty, convert. I suppose I'll always be a seeker. Belle, however, may feel differently."

Belle answered carefully. "The church I was brought up in, it's part of my heritage. Is it all right if we continue to visit St. Joseph's occasionally, if we're not going to convert?"

"I understand, and yes, of course we welcome visitors. Especially friends like you." Daniel looked saddened. "I won't be able to officiate at your wedding, but I would be honored to attend as a guest. And if you'd like to get married in another place of worship, I can help with that. I have a lot of contacts—believe it or not, I was a seeker too in my younger days. And if you want a non-religious wedding, I can offer some direction there too."

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MARCH 2016

Ariel and Ruby threw a goodbye party for her.

Belle never realized how much the citizens of Storybrooke thought of her until that last day, when Dove drove off for Augusta in the Game of Thorns van, with her books and CDs and the last of her clothes packed in boxes in the back. She'd come to the library at opening time on her last day, just for one more look and a quick "good luck" to the new library manager, Amina Abaza (formerly Scheherazade). Half the adult population of Storybrooke waited inside and shouted, "Surprise!" as she pulled the doors open, and they showered her with hugs and cards and flowers. Taped to the shelves behind Grandpa Gold's Corner was a paper banner reading "We love you Ms Belle," signed by all the children in the elementary school. Over the entranceway to the College and Career Center, the high schoolers had placed a metal plaque the shop class had made: "Dedicated to Belle French-Gold, who made this center possible." And the middle school choir launched into "I Hope You Dance" as Ariel served punch and Ruby sliced the cake.

"Speech, speech!" Ruby started the chant, but everyone else took it up, even Emma and Regina.

"Thank you." Someone had to fetch a tissue for Belle. "Thank you, everyone. I can't begin to say how much this means to me."

"That's because you mean so much to us!" Ariel returned.

"I, ah, I'm very grateful for all the support and encouragement you've given me over the years, on a personal level and for this library. It's hard to leave, but I know the library will be in good hands, and I know the friends I've made here will be friends for all my life. I won't be that far away; I'll come back to visit, and I hope you'll send me photos and emails so we can keep in touch. It's been a fascinating journey we've taken together, and I'm sure it's not over yet. Thank you," she raised her cup, "and here's to new beginnings."

They were lining Baelfire Boulevard when she climbed into the Caddy and drove away.

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APRIL 2016

"Guess we're full citizens of the Land without Magic now," Belle whispered as they walked out of the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. She wrinkled her nose as she stuffed her brand-new temporary
driver's license into her purse. "I just wish they'd have let me retake this picture. I was in mid-sneeze when the camera clicked."

"That just makes you even more a citizen," Rumple commented. "All of us Americans have bad driver's license photos. It's a tradition."

"Hmph. Well, let's see: thanks to Mr. Dove, we have birth certificates, naturalization records, and high school transcripts; thanks to our own hard work and intelligence, we have ATM cards, debit cards and driver's licenses."

"And a car title and and phone numbers and W-4 forms and tax returns and insurance policies—"

"And soon, a marriage license. Yes, I'd say we're legitimized now. But, even though you're officially Robert O'Neal, can I still call you Rumples?"

"Of course, dear. Nicknames are another American tradition."

"Hello, Ms. Orwell, remember me?"

The young banker smacked her forehead, then gathered her composure and gestured to the empty chair in front of her desk. "It's almost closing time" (there was a note of relief in her voice as she made that announcement) "but. . . come in, Mr. O'Neal. I suppose this is about another of our unoccupied properties?"

"Oh, but you'll like this proposal, Ms. Orwell." O'Neal stepped inside, and it was then that Ms. Orwell noticed the woman attached to her sometime-adversary, sometime-business partner. Ms. Orwell's eyebrows crept up; the old homeless guy and the blushing young woman were holding hands like lovers. "Ms. Orwell, I'd like you to meet Belle Gold." There had to be at least twenty years' difference in their ages, and from the softness of her hands as she shook with Ms. Orwell, this young woman had certainly never been homeless. "My fiancée."

Orwell gestured to the second empty chair. "Welcome to Barton National, Ms. Gold. Please, be seated."

"Thank you. I promise we won't take up too much of your time." Belle perched on the edge of the chair, reached into her tote bag and produced a thick manila envelope, which she slid across the desk to Orwell, and without further ado launched into a business proposal as her fiancé settled into the other chair, sat back and folded his hands with a small, Cheshire-cat smile. "We're here about the three-bedroom cape cod on Curry Lane. As you can see from our photos, it needs extensive work, ranging from new linoleum in the bath to an exterior paint job. In fact, the plumbing will have to be torn out and replaced. The house's not fit to live in as it is now. Surprising that Code Compliance hasn't condemned it."

Now Orwell could guess why Ms. Gold had latched onto O'Neal: they were two peas in a personality pod, both slick-talking schemers. Orwell held back a deep sigh. "You're with the Coalition for the Homeless too, I take it?"

"We're not proposing this as a Coalition partnership, Ms. Orwell," O'Neal said.

"No?"

"No," Ms. Gold said firmly. "We want to buy this house ourselves."

"To. . . ?" Orwell prompted.
O'Neal lifted his shoulders. "To live in. Our marital home."

"Now, we haven't had a full inspection made yet, of course, but we did peek inside, with a friend of ours who happens to be an inspector—"

"And volunteers for the Coalition," O'Neal added. "By the way, were you aware the lock on the back door is broken? You really should see to that immediately. We found evidence of vandals. Most likely just kids—they spray-painted some graffiti and spilled beer on the carpet, but not too much other damage."

"We'll have to replace the carpet and repaint inside," Belle pointed to some photos. "As I was saying, records in the Bureau of Assessing database indicate that this house, when it was built in 1992," she turned to a written report, "was sold for $94,500, but it actually decreased in value with its second selling in 2013, to $84,000, and it's stood empty ever since you foreclosed on it in March of last year—"

Now Orwell allowed herself a sigh. "Ms. Gold, considering it's closing time, let's cut to the chase. How much are you offering?"

"That was fun. You know, if I didn't love libraries so much—"

"Fun? I should say so. Belle, you just paid $50,000 for a house that the bank was trying to sell for $80,000. And I thought I was the dealmaker in the family."

"I learned from watching you. And it probably didn't hurt that I paid the full amount outright."

"I couldn't keep from snickering when Ms. Orwell phoned Storybrooke Bank to ensure your check was good." Rumple encircled her waist as he led her to the parking lot. "Brilliant bargaining, my wife! Now, perhaps I should give you the title to the Caddy and see what you can get us for a trade-in."

MAY 1, 2016

Their first wedding had been rushed, secretive, as though she were ashamed or he were afraid someone would stop them. This time, he was determined to give her a wedding out in the open, for all their world to celebrate with them.

They married on the grounds of the Cape Elizabeth lighthouse, at sunrise on May 1, with a justice of the peace officiating and thirty friends and family, including her father, in attendance. Archie and Ruby served as witnesses and Daniel played "And I Love Her" on the guitar. They spoke original vows.

"You are my best friend, my hero, and my love," Belle declared. "My hopes and dreams are forever intermingled with yours. I draw from our combined experience and feelings in our journey to our dreams. Our understanding powers the harmony in all our days. I take shared responsibility for our marriage, family, community and myself, regardless of our successes or failures. I promise to be forgiving, but not complacent. I promise to be faithful and true to you in mind, body, and spirit; to cherish you and respect you; and to be a source of comfort and support, free and bound by our love, as long as we shall live."

"Together, we have built a home that is compassionate to all, full of respect and honor for others and each other. We pledge to each other to continue to be loving friends and partners in marriage," Rumple vowed. "To talk and to listen, to trust, and appreciate one another; to respect and cherish each other's uniqueness; and to support, comfort and strengthen each other through life's joys and
sorrows. We promise to share hopes, thoughts and dreams as we continue to build our lives, our love keeping us. May our home be forever filled with peace, happiness and love."

"Two of us riding nowhere, spending someone's hard earned pay." Taking inspiration from Paul McCartney, the couple now known to the world as the O'Neals jumped into their Honda. Belle spread a state road map across her lap and with Rumple's hand clamped around her eyes, she jabbed her finger blindly at Maine. "Littleton it is," Rumple announced, shifting into Drive.

"Population 1068," Belle read. "Do you think there's a hotel there?"

Rumple, the intricate planner, shrugged. "Let's find out."

"You and I have memories/Longer than the road that stretches out ahead."

SEPTEMBER 2016

Belle slid her key into the lock of their just-finished home and stood back as the door swung open. Over her shoulder she carried a large tote bag filled with fruits and vegetables carefully selected from the farmers' market; in her hand she carried the suitcase which held all of her summer clothes. Already inside the house sat two additional suitcases bearing her fall and winter clothes. "This is all, Mrs. O'Neal?" Dove had searched the small space of the studio apartment before hauling her suitcases downstairs to the U-Haul. Belle had boasted, "I pared my entire wardrobe down to these three. Everything else went to Goodwill and Dress for Success." Dove had raised an eyebrow but resisted the temptation to remind her that when she'd moved to Augusta, she'd needed three cases just for her shoes.

"I'm so proud of us. We did such a great job of rehabbing this place," she remarked over her shoulder to her husband, coming up behind her with his own suitcase. She wrinkled her nose. "Is that ungracious, bragging on us?"

He shrugged, peering into the cool darkness of their newly remodeled, two-bedroom, one-study/library fixer-upper as Dove carried in a box of books. It had taken them four months to make the house habitable, doing much of the work with their own hands, assisted now and then for the complicated and heavy stuff by Neal, Dove, Henry, Robin, Daniel, Harry and beneficiaries of the Augusta Coalition for the Homeless. Even Regina had driven up from Storybrooke for a weekend and in designer coveralls she'd painted baseboards and hung curtains. "After this experience, I don't think I could bear to ever buy a new house," Belle said. "Not when we have the know-how and the strength to renovate."

"It makes sense economically and ecologically," Rumple agreed.

"And it was good for our marriage." She linked her arm through his. "Planning, debating, compromising. I learned so much from you during this repair job. Your resourcefulness and savvy continually impressed me."

"And I learned so much about you: your ability to learn just about anything blows me away. This project showed me a whole new side to you, sweetheart." He brushed her hair back from her shoulders. "Now that we're almost completely moved in, we'll have a bit more free time. How would you like to join me on the next Coalition zombie house project? We could use a talented plumber like you."

"I would be honored, sir." She curtseyed.

"Excellent. Now, who's hungry?" Rumple rubbed his hands together. "Josiah, I was thinking of
firing up the grill and barbequing some chicken."

"That's my favorite," Dove approved.

"You've earned it, my friend. And a strawberry cheesecake—"

"My favorite!" Belle cheered.

"I know." With a smug grin, Rumple took the tote bag from Belle and sauntered into the kitchen, pleased that he had the skill and the means to provide for his loved ones, and especially pleased that life had retaught him the lesson of listening to the needs and interests of others. He'd known it once, long ago, when Bae was small, but somewhere along the way he'd let magic fool him into thinking he could buy affection. When he'd lost everything and had nothing to give, he'd finally been reminded how to be a good friend.

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A/N. I borrowed the marriage vows from idoagain -dot- com , and the song quoted above is "Two of Us," written by Lennon and McCartney.
2016

The Martels took to Belle right away. Something about her perpetual good humor and openness just made people want to trust her. Rumple, however, had always made them nervous, even though they trusted him with their precious charge: "Perhaps it's the suit," Belle remarked. "The suit just makes you look like you've come to either correct people's grammar or collect taxes."

"You're just saying that to get me into jeans," Rumple complained.

"If you could see yourself from the back when you're wearing jeans—"

He continued to wear his suits when he visited Trajan. But every now and then, he took Belle along, and she'd chat with the Martels over coffee while Rumple and Trajan built model airplanes and Soapbox Derby cars, or she'd play Mice and Mystics or Dixit with "the boys," or help Rumple help Trajan with his homework.

As the summer came on and school let out, the Martels permitted the O'Neals to take Trajan to baseball games or amusement parks, and once, an overnight campout with Robin and Roland. As school resumed, Belle and Rumple began teaching Trajan the Spanish they were learning from their U of M class. Then came Halloween, with pumpkin carving and handmade costumes, and a day-before-Thanksgiving dinner with the Martels, and Christmas Eve Mass at St. Joseph's. The church service, the trip to Portland and staying up past midnight were all firsts for Trajan; since it was two a.m. before they arrived back in Augusta, the Martels allowed Trajan to spend the night at the O'Neals' fixer-upper. Rumple tucked him in and Belle told him a story and kissed his cheek, and as they turned out the light, Belle said spontaneously, "Sleep tight, Tommy. I love you."

And Trajan answered from the depths of his blankets, "I love you."

JANUARY 2017

"Why don't you adopt me?"

Rumple's head shot up. His hammer froze in mid-air.

"Belle loves me. She said so. I think you do too. And I love you guys. You've got enough room in your house. I'm a help to you. Remember how I helped you fix the sink? I don't eat a lot and I don't cost a lot of money, and I hardly ever get into trouble any more. I know you like me. So why don't you adopt me?"

Rumple opened and closed his mouth, then opened it again. "Hand me the tape measure, will you?"

MARCH 2017

She caught him standing in the steam-filled bathroom, chin lathered, shaver in hand, but head bent over the sink. Belle ran in and slid an arm around his shoulders. "Rumple, are you all right? Are you ill?"

He shook his head, and with her arm comforting and strengthening him, that was when he let the tears come. She led him to the bed, sat him down, wiped the shaving cream away, all the while holding him. She supported him silently, allowing him to work out his anguish. She worried that he
might be having a flashback, and she glanced toward her phone, on the night stand; she wondered if she should call Archie. But he'd been free of nightmares and flashbacks for quite some time now, and his meditative practices and careful sleep and nutrition habits had provided him a large measure of relief; his frequent visits with Bae and Henry had reassured him of the importance of his role in their lives. So she let him cry against her shoulder and she stroked his hair soothingly until he regained composure.

"I can't," he started, then grabbed a Kleenex and blew his nose. "He wants us to adopt him."

Belle nodded. Trajan had been working hints into his conversations with her too.

"I love him; I know you do too. And we would be great parents for him."

"We would."

"But I killed his mother, and we can never, ever get past that."

"Someday you'll tell him the truth. Someday he'll forgive you."

"But I can't raise him. No matter how any of us feel now, we have to think of how he'll feel when he knows the truth, and it would be devastating to find out the man you call father is the man who killed your mother."

She continued to stroke his hair. "You're right. We can't raise him, but we can support the people who do."

"The Martels are good people, but I've talked to them: they don't plan to adopt him."

"They're not the right match for him. But we know who is."

She tilted her head meaningfully toward the phone. "You know, spring break is coming up. . . ."

"They're well-meaning people," Regina said, but a "but" hung off the end of her comment.

"Yes," Robin agreed, holding the car door open for her. They'd just left the Martels', the four of them, the Mills-Locksleys and the O'Neals, after a friendly dinner. "They're doing the best they can, but they do have four other kids to look after."

"And they don't believe." There. That was the elephant in the room. Rumple didn't need to elaborate: the other three knew he was referring to magic. Trajan had been asking about it lately, whenever the Locksleys visited, and during his weekly sessions with Rumple. The boy had learned his lesson about discussing magic with non-believers, even loving ones like the Martels, but living in a non-magical world only made him more curious and more isolated.

"It's his heritage," Belle said. "He has a right to the information."

"And the Martels will never be able to provide it," Robin concluded.

Regina sighed as she fastened her seat belt. Then she spoke words Rumple couldn't remember having ever heard her speak: "I was wrong. We should have kept him in Storybrooke."

"It was for his own protection. People in town are still angry about what Zelena did," Robin reminded her, "so if you're thinking what I think you're thinking. . . ."

"Just for a few days, so he can learn," Regina insisted. "So he won't feel like a freak. It's his right."
"And what about people like Leroy and Granny? How will they treat him?"

"Screw 'em," Regina muttered.

"He's just a little boy. They won't punish him for what his mother did," Belle thought.

"Maybe if I talked to them," Rumple suggested. If anyone had a right to hate Zelena, surely he did; Storybrooke, despite whatever grudges it still bore against him, would recognize his right to resentment. "And pointed out to them that a little boy who's bullied because of what his parent has done will grow up to become the worst of bullies himself." There was bitterness in his voice; his companions could hear "as I was" embedded into his claim.

So it was decided, and with reluctance, because the town held bad memories for him, Rumple returned to Storybrooke for a weekend. Hand in hand, he and Belle visited in private with the residents most likely, whether consciously or not, to make Trajan feel unwelcome. Belle was the bulldozer: no one would slam the door in her face, so she would speak first, clearing a path, and then Rumple would explain that this was an opportunity to controvert the creation of a new bully. "All we have to do is remember, he may be Zelena's child, but he's still just a child, and treat him with the same patience and kindness you would any eight-year-old."

"And if you can't," Belle looked sideways at Leroy, "go fishing. Or bird watching or rock climbing or whatever, just stay away from him next weekend. Please."

As they walked around town, Belle allowed Rumple his silence. The stiffness in his shoulders and the tightness in his back were clues enough to his tension; when they passed the pawnshop, he didn't suggest going inside to greet Dove; he didn't even glance at the window. He wasn't being rude—they would dine with Dove later; he was just doing what he had to, to get through the day. "I smell the magic. I can feel it on my skin, itching," he whispered to Belle. "Like a phantom limb."

They made their visits as brief as possible and left town right after dinner.

----------------------------------------------------------------

"I've had some discreet conversations of my own, with people like Granny Lucas and Leroy," Bae informed his father. "I hope you don't mind me buttin' in, but I figured, one more person speaking up on the kid's behalf couldn't hurt, and you know, considering she sorta killed me, and I spent the good part of a year livin' in your head while she tortured you, I've earned my spurs. Anyway, that's how Leroy and most of the others saw it, after I reminded them."

"Thank you, son. That was very generous of you." Especially considering that Bae had been undergoing treatment with Archie for his own PTSD issues. To have to be publicly reminded of that in his "conversations" with Storybrooke residents was, Rumple thought, a large sacrifice that he never would have asked Bae to make.

"Not really," Bae denied. "To be honest with you, Papa, it's, I don't know, doing me good, in a weird way. I guess it's like... I couldn't save myself from Zelena, but maybe I can help us save this kid. You see what I mean?"

"I think I do." Rumple remembered: "I know a way out of Hell. Find a child, a child whose mother and father were killed and raise him as your own." And then he came to realize, no matter whose names appeared on the adoption papers, every Storybrooker—including the two transplanted Augustans—would be raising this child, and for the first time in a long time, he felt blanketed in peace.

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The Mills-Locksleys and Belle brought Trajan to Storybrooke the next weekend. Rumple remained in Augusta, working on a zombie house; he couldn't bear another Storybrooke excursion. After a
restful evening in the mayor's mansion, Regina, Robin and Belle gave Trajan a quiet tour of the town, ending with cinnamon cocoa at Granny's; in between, they answered his questions about Zelena and magic, simply and honestly.

His head swung from side to side as they walked, Trajan's hand in Regina's. The boy missed nothing; he tugged on Regina's hand when he wanted to stop for a closer look. The Locksleys introduced him to passersby, most of whom had no great interest in him. "It's going well," Robin whispered as they exited Clark's store. "Nobody's being a jerk."

Regina curled her lip. "They wouldn't dare."

"I feel funny," Trajan complained as they sat down to breakfast at the kitchen table on Sunday morning. They would be leaving this evening, driving Trajan and Belle back to Augusta, but they'd planned on spending this afternoon with Emma, Bae and Henry, for a picnic in the park.

Regina pressed the back of her hand against his forehead. "You don't have a fever. Does your tummy hurt?" He shook his head. "Does your head hurt?" When he shook his head again, she pulled up his pajama top and inspected his chest and stomach. "No spots."

"Did you get hurt?" Robin inquired.

"It's not a hurt. It's a—" Trajan shrugged. "Like ants." He swatted at his shoulder.

Regina seized his hands, then turned his palms up. His fingertips were glowing faintly. "Oh my gods. . . ."

Robin had seen that symptom often enough to recognize the cause. He whistled lowly. "Magic."

"I wondered. . . .It's to be expected. Zelena and I were born with magic. She told me once that her magic manifested even before she could sit up. Mine didn't show up until I was sixteen. A late bloomer," she made a face. "Another reason for Mother to be disappointed."

"I've got magic?!" Trajan jerked his hands back to admire the glow.

Robin drew Regina aside. "What do we do now? If we take him back to Augusta like that—I know, he won't be able to summon any magic there, but he's going to talk about it, and that whole cycle will start over again, everything Rumplestiltskin told us about."

"The bullying, the accusations of lying and delusions." Regina began to pace, glancing over her shoulder as Trajan squinted and shook his hands, apparently trying to make the magic work.

"Poor kid. Not to mention, this is his birthright. The only thing he's inherited from Zelena—he didn't even get her red hair."

"Let's hope he didn't get any of her craziness. Let's think about this." Regina folded her arms and continued to pace. "We have to take him back. The Martels are expecting him by six o'clock. We can't make up an excuse to keep him longer: he has school tomorrow, and Scouts."

"Regina." Robin grabbed her arm as she strode past him. She stopped, and he said in a whisper, "Regina, he's family."

"Regina's eyes glistened with pride and affection for her husband as he continued, "He's your blood; that makes him part of us, in all the ways that matter. Part of you and me, the same as Henry and Roland."

"What are you thinking, Robin?"
"I know we haven't talked about this yet." He ran his hand through his hair. "But I also know we've both been thinking about it—for a long time."

She admitted, "Ever since I brought him here."

"It's time we start talking about it." He took her hand. "Tonight, as soon as we get back from Augusta."

"And what do we tell him in the meantime?" Regina wondered. "Not what we're thinking. It would be cruel to get his hopes up."

"You're right. But perhaps you can help him to accept that." He tilted his head toward the kitchen table, where Trajan had succeeded in making a salt shaker float. "And cope with losing his powers when he crosses the town line."

"And the necessity of keeping this a secret." Regina sighed. "It's a huge burden for such a small child."

"We've been through this with Roland. He's done very well so far; he's never once mentioned magic while he's at school in New York. How about if I Skype him, get him in on the conversation?"

"I think that would help." Regina stroked his face fondly. "And I think I'm a lucky woman, to have married such a generous man."

He lifted her palm to his lips. "I'm the lucky one, the way you and Henry accepted Roland, as if he belonged here."

Regina cleared her throat. "Well. Then maybe it is time to start talking about expanding this lucky family."

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MAY 2017

They'd known each other a long time now, and they'd gone through some rough stuff together, as collaborators, if not exactly friends, and so it was natural for the O'Neals to invite the Locksleys to stay in their spare bedroom when the latter couple spent the weekend in Augusta. Time and a mutual concern for a child had made this relationship—whatever it was—possible, as the adults put aside resentment and guilt for all the wrongs they had done to each other in the old days, and the ambiance went a long way toward easing tension too: Belle had decorated the spare bedroom with rich earth colors and comforting fabrics, quilts, a rocking chair, oil paintings of the sea, soft-lighting lamps and potpourri; and from the kitchen (with its two ovens) wafted the welcoming aroma of fresh-baked bread. Belle ushered their guests into the kitchen, where Rumple served tea and thick warm slices of bread with homemade strawberry jam.

"You have a lovely home, Belle," Regina said after a long sip of chamomile.

Belle reached her hand out to her left, to take Rumple's. "We're happy here. Busy, but happy. I understand you've been quite busy as well. This is your third visit with Trajan in the past two months."

"Fourth," Robin corrected. "We're going to a baseball game tomorrow."

"It's going well," Rumple said. "Trajan talks about you all the time. And his grades have improved: he showed me his report card yesterday. He's working to bring them up to impress you." From the corner of his eye, he caught Regina blushing, and he suppressed the urge to comment on it.
"He gets along well with Roland," Robin said. "They're building a bird house together."

Rumple and Belle exchanged a glance.

"He adores Henry," Regina said. "Henry says it makes him feel like some kind of superhero."

"Suppose we cut to the chase," Rumple suggested. "Trajan is fine with the Martels, for now, but he deserves a family."

Now it was the Locksleys' turn to exchange glances, before Regina plunged in. "You've been a wonderful influence in his life. He would probably be in juvenile hall if you hadn't intervened. It's obvious, the affection you have for him, and his for you."

"We talked about adopting him," Rumple confessed. "But as much as we love him... as much as he might love me... We've talked extensively with Archie about it and we just can't see a way to make it work, because the fact remains, I killed Trajan's mother."

The room fell silent for several long minutes. Belle refilled everyone's teacups and Rumple passed around the plate of bread again.

"I plan to tell him." Rumple drew in a shaky breath. "I have to. But he's only eight; it would cause him irreparable harm if I told him now, I'm afraid. I don't know that it will be any easier for him to hear when he's older, but... Can you imagine what that would do to him, if we adopted him and he found out the man who raised him was the one who orphaned him? I can't do that to him."

Regina lowered her eyes. "My history is no better."

"But that's in the past," Belle assured her. "You've changed, just as much as Rumple has. You're both good, loving, deserving people and Trajan is fortunate to have you in his life."

"I agree," Robin said.

Rumple surprised them all. "So do I. I think he needs all of us. But in the final analysis, it's just too much to ask of a child to accept being raised by the man who killed his mother, no matter how much love and attention and wisdom I might have for him. But you, Regina—I'd remind you, at the end, when you'd defeated her and you had the opportunity to take revenge, you didn't. You took her magic away, to protect the town, and you put her in jail, to pay for her crimes. And then you forgave her. When the time comes that he's old enough to understand, that's the history you can share with him. Mine is a much more disturbing story." He sat back, rubbing his sweaty palms on his slacks. "I will have to tell him, eventually. And you'll have to be there to comfort him when I do."

"Why?" Three heads swung toward Robin. "Why do you have to tell him?"

"He will ask. Probably sooner than he's ready to have the answer, but he will ask, and we must not lie to him."

"As far as I'm concerned, the Dark One killed Zelena. And the Dark One is where it belongs. Not sitting at this table, baking bread and worrying about the welfare of an eight-year-old."

Belle's eyes shimmered as she silently mouthed, "Thank you."

Regina brightened, well pleased with this solution. "We all saw it, the night the Dark One was sent to Hell. In fact, Henry recorded it on his phone. It's gone, and the man that sits here is darkness-free. That's what we'll tell Trajan, because that's the fact of the matter."
"I appreciate that," Rumple said. "It's my intention—and Archie agrees this is best for Trajan—to continue to mentor Trajan, to visit with him, to teach him, to listen to him and advise him, wherever he's living, here or Storybrooke." He looked pointedly at Regina. "Considering his needs as a burgeoning mage, my hope is that it's Storybrooke."

Four smiles blossomed now, and relief washed over four faces.

"I'm not licensed to practice law here, but I'd be happy to draw on my experience to assist you in pursuing an adoption."

Regina burst into laughter, and Robin thrust his hand across the table for Rumple to shake. "Thanks, man. We promise he'll have a good life with us."

"I'm the one who should thank you, for that very reason."

Regina, Rumple and Robin stood behind Belle as she rapidly typed notes into her laptop. Her husband guided the composition, asking questions, and Belle typed the Locksleys' answers.

"We'll want a statement from Archie, verifying your fitness as parents."

Regina nodded. "Of course."

"Report cards from Henry and Roland will prove that you're meeting their needs. Emma will run a criminal background check."

Robin scowled.

"What? You don't have any speeding tickets or D & D's, do you?"

Regina snorted. "Of course he doesn't."

"Yeah, but I was 'the prince of thieves.'"

Rumple shrugged. "Not in Storybrooke or New York."

"Well, I was just a garbage man—"

"No, you were gainfully employed, that's what matters. You worked hard and supported a wife and child. And in your current occupation, between you and Regina, you make more than enough to support three children. Next question. You'll need three references. I would suggest—" Rumple winced. "As much as I hate it, but I would suggest Blue as one. The word of a Mother Superior is golden. Emma would be another—to have the biological mother of your adopted son as your witness will be a huge plus."

"Will you be the third?" Regina dared to ask. "As his mentor?"

Rumple bowed his head. "Gladly. Next, a home inspection. It's likely that Penny Hall will conduct it; after all, she's been Trajan's case worker all this time. You'll need to be very careful while she's in town that she doesn't see anything supernatural."

"Best behavior." Regina gave the Scout salute.

"It will be tough with Roland. She'll want to talk to him, but he needs to avoid any mention of magic or Sherwood Forest or flying monkeys. Have Whale run a DNA test to prove you're Trajan's aunt. Over eighty percent of all adoptions go to relatives or current foster parents."
"Already done, so we could get through the portal."

"That reminds me: make sure Balthazar fixes the portal so Ms. Hall can come and go without
hindrance. Get a statement from Archie indicating that he'll continue to counsel you and Trajan,
even though it's by Skype; that continuity will lend stability to Trajan's living situation."

"How long before he's ours?" Robin asked.

"Trajan will come to live with you well before then. The case worker will check in on you once a
month or so while you wait for the paperwork to be finalized. In your case, I’d imagine that will
take about three or four months. After all, there's no one who doesn't think this is a good match."

AUGUST 2017

On the afternoon that the Locksleys appeared in an Augusta judge's chambers to sign the final
adoption papers, the O'Neals took a half-day off from the classes and jobs to be there, along with
the Martels, the Hoppers and Penny Hall, as witnesses. Robin and Regina took everyone for a
celebratory supper afterward—at the food court of the airport, at Trajan's request.


"It was a shoo-in. Congratulations, Papa Hood." Rumple couldn't imagine anyone with a wider grin
than Robin's—until he caught a glimpse of the smile that confiscated Trajan's face when Belle
carried out the cake she and Rumple had baked for the occasion. "Master Trajan Locksley," the
inscription spelled out. The boy traced over the lettering with his finger, then licked off the
frosting. "Trajan Locksley. I have a name now!"

Belle and Rumple exchanged a slightly ashamed glance. In all this time, it had never occurred to
them that without parents, Trajan had felt nameless. But the law was making up for that now:
Regina made an indignant sound, then corrected her new son: "That's Trajan Mills-Locksley,
young man. I expect you to remember that."

"Yes, ma'am—yes, mom!" Trajan crowed.

MAY 2019

He still hated coming back to Storybrooke.

The scent of magic—like burning rotten eggs—nauseated him; the tingle of magic teasing his skin
made him itch. And although most people greeted him politely, if not warmly, and he had a few
genuine friends and some loving family members here, he still wondered, as he navigated the
Honda down Baelfire Boulevard, what thoughts of hatred and revenge and fear lay behind the
stares of the passersby.

Even worse, it was graduation week and they'd be staying at Moe's. Not that Moe still bore a
grudge—in actual fact, his feelings toward his son-in-law had gradually warmed, especially when
they'd discovered a mutual interest in soccer, and now Moe openly bragged whenever the O'Neals
came to visit, because it meant he'd be pampered with Rumple's cooking and Belle's cleaning. It
was just that Moe never shut up. . . .

"Did you pack the Tylenol, sweetheart?"

"Yes, dear."

They met Moe at Game of Thorns, where he apologized but handed them his house key. "I need to
stay open late. Graduation week, you know—great for business."

The tension fled from Rumple's shoulders. "Understandable, completely understandable. We'll have dinner on the table whenever you can close shop."

Belle gave him a punch in the shoulder as they left the flower shop.

"What's that for?" he howled.

"You're happy that he has to work late!"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "Now, let's go grocery shopping."

"We haven't even gone to the house yet. You don't know what he's got in the fridge—" Then Belle signed. "Never mind. You're right. Baloney and beer. Let's go by the library too."

He held the car door open for her. "What time is the commencement ceremony tomorrow?"

"One o'clock. And the party's at seven."

"Maybe we can borrow Trajan and Roland, take them out fishing after the ceremony."

"I'm sure Regina and Emma will appreciate that, give them time to get ready."

He kissed her before closing her car door. "How does it feel, being the step-grandmother of a high school graduate?"

"How does it feel, being the grandfather?"

"I would say 'old and creaky,' but then, I'm also the husband of a new college grad."

"Mmm, I'm going to hold you to that gift you promised me."

"I know and I intend to keep it: a whole week with no work, no classes, just us."

"Driving wherever the road takes us, like we did on our honeymoon." She stretched out her legs and wiggled her sandaled toes. "Oooh, that week was so romantic."

"And so relaxing." He climbed into the driver's seat. "Are you happy, Belle?"

"Happier than I've ever been. Are you happy, Rumple?"

"Happier than I've ever been." He glanced into the back seat to make certain the gifts had survived the trip: the vintage Hasselblad camera for Henry and the matching Zebco fishing rods, one marked for "Master Roland Mills-Locksley" and the other for "Master Trajan Mills-Locksley." He lingered as he checked the condition of the latter gift, and Belle caught him at it.

"Do you wish things had turned out differently?"

"That we could have adopted him? Yeah, every day. That I hadn't killed Zelena? Yeah, every day."

"I would never wish for a child to be orphaned, but—if Zelena were still alive, he would still be in Oz, being raised by flying monkeys."

"Maybe. Maybe Regina would have found out about him anyway and gone after him." Rumple shifted into Reverse and began backing out of the parking space. He managed a smile. "But we
can't change the past, even with the most powerful magic, and he's doing well now with two brothers, a mom and a dad who take care of him."

"And a mentor who puts a little boy's needs first," Belle said softly. "I'm proud of you, Rumple."

"Thank you, sweetheart. That means the world to me."

But a few minutes later, as Rumple pulled into a parking space behind the library, Belle had a small disappointment and a larger surprise for him, as she hung up her phone. "About that fishing trip you wanted to take the boys on, tomorrow? Roland's available, but Trajan's got an appointment."

Rumple frowned slightly. "With who? Archie?"

Belle cocked her head. "Merlin."

"Merlin?!" Rumple blinked. "What would Merlin—you can't mean—magic lessons?"

She gave him a moment to ponder, then burst out laughing. "Oh, Rumple, this is delicious! Merlin is building his army of white wizards in preparation for the final battle against Dark magic—and among his first class of trainees is the son of the Wicked Witch!"

Rumple gripped the steering wheel and stared into the rear view mirror. "Do you ever feel sometimes like someone else has been pulling the strings on your life?" he murmured.

"Oh, and just a head's up: Regina says Merlin's been asking how long we'd be in town. Seems he's going to be asking the two of us to come in as guest lecturers: 'Written Resources for Magic Learners,' he's been touting our class as."

"Belle..." Rumple groaned.

She patted her lips as she mused, "I think I'll call my half 'Sorcerers' Library 101'. . . ."

"Belle..." Rumple moaned.

"Now, Rumple, how could I refuse the chance to promote libraries to adolescents?"
The closer I came to this point in the story, the more difficult it became for me to find a resolution. I was so tempted to go back and rewrite the earlier chapters so that I wouldn't have to deal with this, because there can be no solution, no unqualified happy ending: as the OUAT writers wrote it, Rumple killed Zelena, and as I have strived to work within the canon, as it was shown to us up through season 4A, as much as possible, I determined I had to deal with that. It's come back to bite me in the butt. How do I make it morally defensible (never mind legally—Storybrooke seems to ignore societal laws) to have a child mentored by the man who killed his mother, even if I have succeeded in proving that that man has changed? I was stuck between what's morally right and what's emotionally right, so I asked for your help, via a vote, and the more I thought about the option that got the most votes, the more right it felt.

The purpose of my stories has always been to bring peace to Rumple, and I believe that can't happen until the character confronts his past—everything that he's done, good as well as bad, and everything that has been done to him, good and bad—feels true remorse; attempts to make amends where possible, forgives, asks forgiveness, and accepts it when it's granted; and makes sure that he doesn't fall back on old ways by learning that he is and needs to be a part of a community—that he has the right to ask for and accept help, that he has an obligation to give it, and that others have an obligation to offer it when he asks. I think Rumple's greatest failing in life has not been cowardice but rather lack of faith in his fellow human beings and in a higher power. (If this sounds like the 12-step program, I think Rumple would benefit greatly from that program; the OUAT actors and writers have spoken frequently about Rumple being addicted to magic.) I think that after all the times Rumple was let down—ignored, abandoned, laughed at, misunderstood (even by Belle, and yes, it was his failure to be open and honest with her as much as her failure to see his point of view)—by people he trusted, he got the message that faith is for the foolish, that help is for heroes, and that unloved little peasant boys like he is, deep inside, are alone in this life.

All of the characters in Storybrooke are people from his past, so I gave him some new people with which to start his journey toward faith, and I began his new relationships with children because his need to make amends for Bae renders him more open to children. And I had to put Rumple in a position where he had no choice but to ask for help, but from people who were in the same boat as he was, so that he could offer something back. I was kind of surprised, though, about the nutritionist part—that started just because I needed Rumple to have a job in a place where his priest friend would likely have contacts, and I grabbed from fanon the idea that Gold is a gourmet cook. When Rumple's job evolved into another way that he could contribute to the social good, it became a way to ensure his resistance to the temptation of magic. I hope that I was able to convey that the loss of magic would be, for Rumple, the beginning of joy (and I flat-out reject the ending of "Swan Song").

I hope that you'll find this ending feels right. Thank you for having read the story, and if you've commented or added a kudo, my additional thanks.
The front door slammed, Dory the housekeeper could be heard chewing out the new arrivals for traipsing mud across her freshly scrubbed floor, and Regina straightened from the pot of tea she was preparing. With a wry, tired smile, she glanced over her shoulder at her husband. "The boys are home."

Robin chuckled. "So they are. Remind me to apologize to Dory once again for allowing them to sign up for football. Those cleats are the ruination of her floors."

As he accepted a cup from Regina, it occurred to Rumple how much Regina had changed during this second go-round with motherhood. She was still a cunning, ambitious politico—that would never change—but here she stood, in jeans (designer, but jeans nonetheless), placidly sipping tea, as her boys whooped and clattered through the foyer, through the dining room and into the kitchen, where bottles rattled as they jerked the refrigerator door open. "We won, Dad!" one of the boys shouted; the adults, seated comfortably in the parlor, could hear them all the way across the house. "Mom! I scored a touchdown!" the other boy yelled.

"Are you ready for this?" Regina asked, and Rumple nodded, with a hasty glance at Belle, then Archie.

Robin got up and went to the hallway to call for Trajan.

Even in his stocking feet (he had remembered to leave his cleats in the foyer), Trajan dwarfed Belle as he bent to hug her, and towered over Rumple as he shook his mentor's hand. "Hey! You guys are early. Thought you weren't coming in 'til tomorrow."

"We decided to arrive before everyone else. We have something to discuss with you."

"Sounds ominous." Trajan thrust his beefy hand toward Archie. "Hey, Dr. H. Thanks for coming all the way from Miami just for lil' ole me."

"My pleasure, Trajan. Congratulations, by the way, on the win, and happy sixteenth birthday. Sorry Ruby couldn't make it—the twins both have chicken pox."

"Been there, done that." Trajan grinned over his shoulder at Regina. "Lando and I got it at the same time, too, and drove Mom and Dad and Dory crazy, running back and forth with chicken soup and comic books for us."

"Right in the middle of budget hearings," Regina shook her head. "I didn't get a wink of sleep that week."

"Such is the life of a parent." Robin draped an arm casually over Regina's shoulder. "But we wouldn't have traded it for all the gold in Midas' palace."

"Just don't use that as an excuse to go breaking a leg in football," Regina grumbled.

Trajan put up his hands in a stop gesture. "Not me. Lando's the reckless one, remember? So, Rum, what's the thing?"

Rumple rubbed his hands against his pants legs, then waved at the armchair positioned to the right of the couch where he and Belle had been sitting. "Please." He cleared his throat as Trajan flopped into the chair. To his left, Belle reseated herself, and one by one, the Locksleys and Hopper resumed their seats and picked up their tea cups. Noticing the sudden silence, Trajan frowned. "Hey, this isn't, like, to tell me someone's seriously sick or something?"
"No, but it's... I won't pull any punches, Trey."

Trajan gripped the arms of his chair. "We never do. It's always been straight shootin' between us, like we like it."

Rumple nodded. "As we like it. Yes. This is between you and me, but I... I think I'm going to need some help, so that's why I asked Belle and Archie and your folks to be here. What I've got to tell you—I deliberated about this a long time, what to tell you, and when, and how—but it's never been a question for me that I would have to tell you. I hope that... you'll bear in mind that I've always tried to do what was best for you, as best I knew how, because I love you."

Trajan gave a half-smile. "I know. Ever since that day you told me what to do about those kids who were bullying me, I knew then you loved me."

"Please try to remember that." Rumple's gaze flitted around on the carpet, as if he were trying to find answers there, then he raised his eyes to Trajan's. "This is about Oz."

"Oh." That single word was a signal between them, meaning it was time to talk about the past. Over the years, Rumple had revealed bits and pieces of his own story to Trajan, as much as he thought the child was capable of understanding, and with Archie's and Henry's assistance, so had Robin and Regina. Living in Storybrooke, where his pediatrician was a dwarf and his big brother was the Truest Believer, he'd adapted rather quickly to his new reality; Archie said bringing him to a Land of Magic at an early age helped foster acceptance. Just as soon as he'd settled into the big white house (his adoption certificate sitting in a frame on the mantel, where he look could at it if he ever felt insecure about his place in his new family), he was put into a daily routine: school in the daytime, with Snow White his teacher for the "normal" stuff, then magic lessons in the evenings with Merlin, and on weekends, kid stuff like bike riding and treehouse building with his new brothers. Like most children, he had gotten absorbed into the sensations and events of his own life, and his curiosity about his extraordinary past—not so weird to his classmates here—dissipated. It had been a long time since he'd asked Rumple or anyone else about Oz.

Now, as Rumple gazed at him with a mixture of worry, sadness, hope and guilt, the boy knew it was time to revive those questions, once and for all. "I'm going to start with my own history. I think it will help you to understand what I did." Rumple sucked in a deep breath, then released it. "You remember I told you I come from a place called Misthaven. Most of us here do: Belle—she was a duchess there. Her father was the Duke of Avonlea. Regina, as you know, was the Queen of the Kingdom of Sadon, Brom and All Surrounding Territories." Regina ducked her head in a small bow. "And Dr. Hopper was a counselor in the town of Ryia. All of those places are in the land of Misthaven. Your father is the exception: he came from the England, during the reign of Richard the Lionheart."

Trajan nodded. He and Roland, when they were small, had been tucked into bed each night with tales from Sherwood Forest and Misthaven.

"I was born in a Frontlands village so small it didn't have a name. The village became a ghost town long before anyone in this room was born, except me. I think I'm somewhere around three hundred years old, though we never kept track of birthdays in those days. My father was a con man, a lazy one, at that, and so we were run out of more towns than I could count. We often slept in hay mows, or if we were lucky, deserted barns, and we ate whatever we could steal. Whenever caring for me became too much of a chore, my father placed me with two spinsters—that was the name then for women who spun wool. He'd leave me with them a while, then come for me when he had a new scheme going—he always worked me into his con games, because when he got caught, his victims would take pity on me and not have him arrested. It went on like that for years, until one day the
spinsters gave me a portal bean, with the intention that I'd use it someday when I was older, to escape my father. But I had an irrational hope that I could change him if we could just get out of Misthaven, so I gave him the bean, and he cast it and took us to Neverland."

"Henry told me about Neverland and Pan."

"What he may not have told you is that Pan was my father. The magic of Neverland enabled him to revert to boyhood; the price for that magic was me. I was sent back to live with spinsters, where I grew up and became a spinner. I made a fair living, enough to marry; her name was Milah and she was a barmaid. Marriage to a craftsman was considered a step up for her, so at first we were happy. Then I was drafted to fight in the First Ogre War—I went willingly, ignorant of the hopelessness of the situation. You've seen pictures of ogres in Henry's storybook, so you know what I'm talking about."

"Nasty giant buggers," Trajan winced. "And, uh, cannibals, if I'm not mistaken."

"As soon as I arrived at the war front, I saw how things really were. We didn't stand a chance. Then a Seer foretold my future: a son, who would grow up fatherless because of my actions on the battlefield. I needed to run, for his sake, I told myself. My son must not grow up fatherless, as I did. I maimed myself." Rumple tapped his bum ankle with his cane. "And the army threw me out."

"So that's how that happened. I'd always assumed—a car accident or something."

"I did it to myself. I made my way home to find my son's birth had preceded me."

"Neal."

"Baelfire,' is what his mother named him. Word of my self-maiming had also preceded me; the village wanted nothing to do with me and my wife was ashamed. I couldn't make a decent living any more. Milah begged for us to move somewhere where no one would know my name, but I... I knew there was no such place. I'd been through that before, running away with my father; his reputation always caught up. Milah began drinking—she was pretty and flirtatious, and men bought her drinks, until one night a man came along that she wanted to buy drinks for. A swashbuckler in black leather, his fingers adorned with rings he'd stolen from men he'd killed. She ran away with him.

"This may sound odd, but after that, life was easier for Bae and me. A neighbor took an interest in us; she would babysit while I took my thread to market. Because of her, I was able to travel to nearby villages, and I got better prices for my work. We were still poor, but we got by, and we were at peace, until the war turned south and the Frontlands had to build a defense. The duke drafted all men who could hold a crossbow, and all childless women; when there were no adults left to draft, he lowered the age of conscription to fourteen. And then the time came that Bae was about to turn fourteen."

Trajan squirmed in his seat. Tomorrow was his sixteenth birthday; he couldn't begin to imagine marching into a wall of ogres.

"I had to save him. We tried to run away, but the soldiers stopped us. And then an old man came along, told me about a powerful wizard—a powerful, evil wizard called the Dark One. The Dark One had a secret: he could be made to do anything you wanted him to, if you possessed the magic dagger that had his name engraved into the blade. The old man told me where to find the dagger, and I stole it. I thought I would make the Dark One stop the war, or at least, stop the soldiers from taking Bae, but when I held the dagger and called for the Dark One to come, it was the old man that appeared, in his true form. Naïve fool that I was, I'd been easily duped. Zoso had been the
Dark One a long time and he was suffering under his slavery and the sickness of Dark magic. It had made a monster of him, but the tiny part of his soul that was still human went crazy with guilt and he saw death as the only way out, so he duped me and I realized I wasn't strong enough to control him; and then he taunted me, and in a rage I plunged the dagger into his chest and killed him. The Dark magic went out of him and into me, making me the Dark One. At first I was overjoyed: with magic, I could do incredible things. I stopped the war. I made a new house for Bae and me. I made food and clothes and books and toys, and I thought Bae would be happy, but he wasn't, because the magic consumed my soul, and I became cruel and dangerous. I hurt people, sometimes for no reason; Bae was afraid I would hurt him."

"But you didn't." Trajan didn't have to ask; he knew the strength of Rumple's love for his family.

"The Blue Fairy gave him a portal bean, with the intention that he would use it to take us both to a land without magic—here, where I could be free of the Darkness. At the last minute, I panicked, and I let go of his hand."

"And he came here alone."

"At age fourteen. A boy who'd never been as far as the next village over, uneducated, penniless, prey for con men, a target for bullies. I was immediately sorry. After that, all I wanted was to find a way to follow him. Hundreds of years went by while I studied and experimented to learn everything I could about magic so that I could use it to get to the place where Bae had gone. I learned that there was a curse that could take me here." He looked over at Regina.

"That's where I come in." She perched on the arm of the couch near her son. "I was the queen, but I was miserable. I never wanted to be queen; that was all my mother's idea. In fact, that's why I was born: so she could establish a royal line. Anything that would prevent that from happening, she put a quick end to, including killing the man I loved. When she did that, I wanted to hurt other people the way I was hurting. I started to learn magic, because I'd seen my mother use it to control people, and I thought if other people suffered, I would be happy. Rumplestiltskin taught me."

"So that she could cast the curse that would bring me to this land."

"To find Bae," Trajan said.

"I cast the curse and it created this town out of thin air," Regina said. "I took almost all of the people of Misthaven with me, to Storybrooke. The curse made everyone forget who they had been in Misthaven, but even worse than that, it took away love. Everyone felt lost and alone, even me. I learned, after a long time, that the satisfaction that comes from making other people miserable doesn't last long. What I needed, what we all needed, to fill the hole in our lives was love. Not magic. Friends and family, that's what everyone needs, even queens."

"And magic can't create love." Trajan recited the first lesson Merlin had taught his sorcerers' army. "Only a false impression of it. And magic can't create or restore life, only a false impression of it."

"The first and saddest mistake a new mage makes," Rumple said, "I found right off that Bae didn't want the toys and the clothes that magic made. He just wanted his dad, the way I was before, before the dark voice made me crazy and the magic made me sick."

"A wise lad," Archie contributed. "Magic may solve some problems, but it only creates new ones."

"It's time to talk about Zelena," Rumple urged Regina.

It was her turn to suck in a deep breath. "Yes. Well." She folded her hands in her lap and
concentrated on Trajan. "As you know, my mother's name was Cora. She had been born in poverty
and her father, a drunkard, kept them there; she had to work hard just to have enough to eat. She
hated being poor, but even more, she hated being made fun of."

"Bullied," Rumple supplied, and Trajan's eyes widened with understanding.

"People laughed at her because she was poor and dirty and her father was a drunk and her mother, a
prostitute who died of the pox. Cora observed that no one dared bully the royals, so she determined
that she'd achieve that status by hook or by crook. When she met Rumple, she thought she'd found
her hook."

"I taught her," Rumple said, "because a vision had shown me that someday, her daughter would
cast my curse."

"But something neither of us knew, until much later: before she married my father, my mother gave
birth out of wedlock, a girl—"


"Cora sent her away and never told anyone. Zelena grew up in Oz, raised by a childless couple."

Dread filled the boy's eyes. "Who is my father?"

"I'm sorry, Trajan, I don't know. Zelena never told me." Regina glanced at Rumple, who shook his
head.

"We can try to find out," Belle promised. "Perhaps Rumple's old books..."

"I think I recall a history of Oz among the books in the shop," Rumple said. "What Cora didn't
know, though, when she sent Zelena away, was that Zelena was born with magic. With no one to
train her—and, in fact, growing up in a magic-hating town, she tried to suppress her powers, which,
as you know, will lead to confusion, depression, irrationality, and possibly, madness. The people
who raised her thought she was a freak; her crazy thoughts confirmed their conviction. They didn't
love her, and she had no friends because she didn't fit in. That made her lonely, and when she found
out that Cora had abandoned her, she became furious."

"She also found out that Cora had married a prince—my father—and they had me, and when I
grew up, I married a king and I learned magic, so she assumed I had a perfect life—the life that she
would have had, if Cora hadn't sent her away."

"Her anger and her jealousy made Zelena sick," Archie surmised. "And her magic made it possible
for her to hurt people. She wanted to hurt Regina."

"And she wanted someone to love her, so bad that she thought she was in love with Rumple," Belle
put in. "When she found out he didn't, she wanted to hurt him too. Her machinations caused Bae to
be sent to the Dark Vault, and then she took Rumple's dagger."

The blood drained from Trajan's face and, cursing under his breath, he leaned over to squeeze
Rumple's forearm. "I'm sorry, man."

Rumple mumbled to Archie, "I don't know if we should go any farther with this."

"He needs to know all of it," Archie answered. "He's a strong young man. Remember who raised
him." When Rumple's eyes drifted to Regina and Robin, Archie added, "Yeah, but you and Belle,
too. Let him see it and figure it out for himself."
Rumple's voice gained strength. "All right, Regina. Let's take him there."

Regina stood and smoothed down her skirt. "All right, everyone, I'm going to take us out to the farmhouse." Robin rose and took her hand, and with that signal, everyone else stood as well. A flash of light and the scent of burnt rotten eggs clogged his senses; Rumple coughed and waved his hand in front of his nose. His disposition darkened even further and he folded his arms across his chest as the family looked around at their surroundings: a barren cornfield behind them, an overgrown lawn before them, and to their left, a boarded-up farmhouse. Robin focused their attention on the wooden door that lay at their feet as he knelt and grasped the iron handle. With a yank he swung the door open. "We're going to need some light, Gina."

"Why?" Belle asked bitterly. "Rumple didn't have any."

Regina conjured a lantern to float overhead, and Robin led the way down the creaking wooden stairs. "Be careful," he warned. "Some of these steps are rotting."

"Mind the rats," Rumple cautioned. One by one, with Trajan bringing up the rear, the party made their way down the stairs, but when the teen looked back, he saw Rumple had turned his back on them.

"Aren't you coming, Rum?"

"Can't," he snapped.

"Should I stay with you?" Archie offered, but Rumple shook his head sharply, and Archie patted his shoulder before joining the party down the stairs.

Trajan was the last to go down. He found his parents standing in front of an open kennel, their mouths drawn in tight lines. Belle had wandered over to one of the walls, where various pieces of leather and metal equipment hung from pegs; she took the pieces down and hung them over her arm.

"Phew! Stinks in here," Trajan complained.

"Imagine spending a year in here," Robin grumbled.

"Isn't it healthier for dogs to be—" Trajan waved his hand toward the low ceiling—"up there, in the sunshine and fresh air?"


"While she was in Storybrooke, Zelena owned this property," Regina began slowly. "It's about ten or eleven miles northwest of town. She lived in the house you saw. Alone. She pretended to be a midwife, so that she could get close to Mary Margaret when she was pregnant with Neal."

"'Pretended to be'? What did she want with Mary Margaret?"

"Not Mary Margaret. It was Neal she wanted," Robin said. "A newborn soul. An ingredient for a curse that would transport people through time."

"Along with David's courage, Rumple's brain and my heart," Regina snorted.

"She. . . took. . . those things?" Trajan looked ill.

"There's much in Dark magic that I haven't shown you." Regina turned away from him, staring into
the cage. "Merlin and I agree, there will come a time for me to show you those things, so that you can fight them, but not yet."

"She forced Rumple to help her," Belle said. "Using his dagger, she forced him to help her kidnap the baby, right out of Mary Margaret's arms."

"And she forced him to threaten Roland's life so that he could take Regina's heart," Robin remembered.

Trajan glanced up the stairs, where he could see his mentor standing in the sun. "I don't—he never would hurt a kid. Dad, you've got to be mistaken."

"That's the power of the dagger, son," Regina said. "Zelena also used it to make him threaten to kill Belle."

"He fought the compulsion with everything in him," Belle explained. "He would have let it kill him, but I ran and Zelena let me go." One by one, she lifted the equipment draped over her arm. "Shock collar. Leash. Choke chain. Muzzle. Whip. She used these on him. Sometimes as punishment, sometimes just for her own amusement." She threw them into a corner.

Trajan cursed again, struggling to compare what they were telling him with what he knew to be true of his mentor.

"There's more," Archie prompted. "Trajan, this cage might have been intended for a dog, but it's where Rumplestiltskin lived for a year." He tugged at the broken padlock hanging from the iron bars, then drew the door back and stepped inside. Hopper had to bend to avoid brushing his head against the cage's ceiling. He laid his hand against a wheel attached to an upright bar. "This was Rumple's spinning wheel. He would sit here, on this tiny seat." Awkwardly he lowered himself; though he was a thin man, his butt barely fit on the narrow bench. "Hour after hour, spinning, to hang onto his sanity. Because not only did he have Zelena and the dagger breathing down his neck, and not only did he have his wife's welfare to worry about, but his son's as well." Archie pressed a hand to his chest. "Here. Locked inside. For a year, Rumple kept Baelfire's soul safe inside his own. His soul, his thoughts, his memories, his dreams, whatever makes up a life. Four voices were constantly hammering at Rumple during that year: his own, the Dark One's, Bae's, and through the dagger, Zelena's."

"Crazy," Trajan shook his head. "How did he not go crazy?"

"His psyche suffered," Archie agreed. "He's given me permission to share with you that he's been in therapy with me for quite some time now. It was love that enabled him to recover: love for Belle, Bae, Henry, Sam, you." Still bending, he vacated the cage with a shudder. "You're right; it stinks in here. And it's dark, and humid, and humiliating and lonely and frightening and maddening. This is awful, and I know it has to be awful for you to see it all, and hear how it was used. Worst of all, to hear that it was your mother who——"

"Not my mother," Trajan blurted. "Zelena. That's my mother." He pointed to Regina. "And that's my father." He pointed to Robin. "Doesn't matter who I was born to. She didn't want me, anyway. She pawned me off onto her minions. These are my parents." He grabbed Robin and Regina in a fierce bear hug.

"That's what matters," Archie agreed. "These people cared for you and loved you and always will. We'll talk later, when you're ready, about your feelings for Zelena. We needed to bring you here to see this so you'll have some context for what comes next." He motioned to the stairs. "Let's get out of here."
Once in the sunshine, the entire party breathed more freely. Rumple was waiting for them, leaning against the cattle tank in which he’d once almost drowned Hook. He stood as they approached and jerked when Robin let the cellar door drop shut. He kept his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Ready to go?"

"We're done here," Regina agreed, then with a wave of her hand sent them all back to the parlor in her mansion. She and Robin poured stiff drinks for everyone, although Trajan's was a club soda. They rested a bit in silence, until Belle suggested, "Well, I think someone ought to take a bulldozer to that place."

Robin chuckled around his whiskey. "My pleasure. First thing tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Rum, that she put you through all that shit," Trajan said. "I never knew."

"No, we didn't want you to. No one should have to hear such things about his parent. But Trajan," Rumple twisted in his seat to face the boy, "we told you for another purpose. So that you might have some understanding of why..." He sucked in a breath. "After these people," he nodded toward the Locksleys, "and the Charmings defeated Zelena, they suppressed her magic and put her in jail, and Belle gave me my dagger back. Were we free of her? I'm sure everyone else thought so. She would be kept in jail for the rest of her life, or until she reformed; that's what they planned. But I didn't believe that was possible. She would find a way out, I thought. Or that was one of the excuses I gave myself. And most importantly, she had caused my son to be sent to Hell, and nobody was going to make her pay for that. She had been allowed to do—" he waved a dismissive hand toward the west—"to do all that, and what was her punishment? To sit in a nine- by twelve-foot room to contemplate her wrongdoings and be fed a hot meal from Granny's three times a day. I couldn't let that stand. I'd promised Bae justice, and though I knew Belle would turn away from me for it, and the town would come after me, and Henry would hate me, I couldn't go back on my word. I'd broken one promise to him; I wouldn't break another. And so while everyone was busy celebrating their victory, I took my dagger to the jailhouse and I killed her."

Trajan sat frozen for a moment, as if waiting for someone to laugh and tell him it was all a joke or a misunderstanding. When no one said anything, and Rumple just stared at the floor, Trajan looked to his parents. Robin had lowered his head and was fiddling with a swizzle stick. Regina forced herself to look Trajan in the eye and nod slightly.

His fists clenching, Trajan stood, towering over his mentor. "Say it again."

"What?" Rumple echoed.

"Say it again. I want to make sure I heard you right."

"I killed her." Rumple repeated miserably.

Trajan's fist opened and sliced through the air to connect with Rumple's face. As the kid marched off, Rumple tumbled backwards and blood spurted all over the Ethan Allen couch. Belle and Archie came running to help, Archie inspecting the injury. "Your nose is broken." Robin brought over the ice bucket and a dishtowel, and together the men fashioned a compress.

"I'll get us to the hospital," Regina suggested, summoning her magic, then turned to her husband. "Stay with Trey."

Archie nodded. "He's going to need his papa right now. I'll get Rumple settled, and then I'll be right back." Then he whispered to his patient, "I want you to realize something, Rumple. The first time you told your story, it was because Zelena forced you to. This time, you told it willingly because
her son needed to hear it. You've grown, my friend, as a man.

At Trajan's request, the birthday party was canceled. Belle and Rumple drove home.

"When the time comes that you're ready to talk to me, I'll be waiting," Rumple wrote in a note he left with Robin. He didn't know what else to say.

"Their football team ended with a winning season," Regina reported over Skype. "He's happy about that. His grades took a dip and so did his appetite, but he's seeing Archie twice a week and that's helping."

"I'm sorry, Regina. Maybe I shouldn't have told him." Rumple ran his hands through his hair.

"He had to know. He'll be okay. Just give him time."

"Did you make a reservation at Granny's?" Rumple asked as he slid into the passenger seat of Belle's brand-new Kia Forte (paid for, she was proud to say, entirely from her own earnings as the Adult Services Librarian at Augusta Public). "Not that we need one; I'd wager of the eight rooms in that inn, six of them have never housed a guest."

"Comfy, darling?" Belle chirped a bit too brightly. "This car comes with individualized climate control settings, you know, so if you'd like the AC—"

"Beeeeelle. . ." He dragged her name out into multiple syllables. "You didn't make a reservation with Granny, did you?"

She started the ignition. "Just listen to that motor purr, like a tiger cub, waking from a nap—"

"You 'made reservations' for us at your father's, didn't you?"

"Rumple, you know how lonely he gets and how much our visits mean to him."

"He does understand we're here to work for Merlin, not cook for him and clean his house, doesn't he?"

"Oh sure." Belle backed out of the driveway, then headed for the farm road that would take them, eventually, into Storybrooke. "Though I may have agreed to a Yankee pot roast. . . ."

"Belle, you know how long a pot roast takes, and I haven't even begun to write out my lecture notes for this class."

"Then I'll be quiet and drive, and you can write on the way into town." She beamed at him. "This engine's so quiet you won't even know it's running. Now, darling, don't look so crabby. You know how much my dad loves your pot roast. And you know when we're not around how he eats. He needs a good meal now and then."

Rumple sighed and dug into Belle's tote bag for a notebook and pen, but instead of writing, he caught himself staring at the fall foliage beyond his window. Finally he dared to ask the question that had been preying on their minds ever since they'd agreed to return to teach this class for the fifth time: Trajan was now at the stage of his training where he'd be taking this particular class, in which Rumple and Belle discussed some of the advanced and sensitive books of magic, including The Chronicles of the Dark Ones. "What if he doesn't show up for the class?"

"He'll show up. He may not be the best student, Regina says, but he's determined to make a name for himself as a hero, so he works his butt off." She glanced at him. "He has his mother's reputation
to overcome; that's what he tells her."

"The sins of the father... I need to speak to him."

"I know. We'll catch him just as soon as we dismiss them for lunch."

But they didn't. Trajan made sure of it: he ran off with his buddies as soon as Belle called for a lunch break, and before Rumple could grab his cane and hobble over to Trajan's table, the kid was out the door. He stayed gone until the afternoon lecture had started; he gave a repeat performance of his escape act as soon as Rumple dismissed the class for the day. "Trajan, please stay behind—"

"Sorry, Ms. O'Neal. Football practice!" And he was gone.

Rumple glared at the broad receding back. "Football season's over."

"He called me 'Ms. O'Neal,'" Belle said glumly. "At least, he did ask questions during the lecture. That's a good sign."

"Signifies nothing," Rumple snapped. "Come on, we've got a pot roast to get on the stove."

"If you'd rather, we could just pick up something from Granny's." At her husband's sneer, she backpedaled. "Never mind." She packed up their books and followed him to the car. "He will come around, Rumple. Give him time."

At Christmas the O'Neals stayed in Portland, assisting Daniel with a zombie house, but mailed packages: a tripod for Henry, tickets to a Patriots game for Trajan and Roland. Thank-you emails came from Henry and Roland.

"When he's ready," Rumple mumbled.

Their lives were full, with classes and jobs and friends, passing-through-town visits from Storybrookers, regular monthly visits from Dove to discuss business, third and fourth and fifth honeymoons, a vacation in Florida, yet the O'Neals sensed a hole in their lives.

Rumple continued to send written and video messages to the three children who had had such a huge impact on his life, and from a distance he watched them grow into young men, successful in college, successful in careers: Henry went to work for Reuters in New York, Sam earned his DVM and went to work for the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, and Trajan, after studying with Jefferson, wandered the realms for several years, studying magic, until Balthazar retired and Merlin called Trajan back as his new apprentice. From time to time, Rumple saw his former charge at Mills-Locksley family celebrations, but to Rumple's invitation, "Whenever you're ready to talk to me, I'll be waiting," Trajan would simply nod politely and walk away.

At the party Belle threw to celebrate her husband's achievement of his nutritionist license, Henry, Emma and Bae, Robin and Regina, Daniel, Harry and Sue Ellen, and Sam and Jill were in attendance, but the face Rumple longed to see was missing. "You know, don't you, that Storybrooke is secretly proud of you?" Regina mused. "You're the first degreed scientist amongst us." Horrified, Rumple squeaked, "Well, don't say that in front of Whale!"

At Henry's wedding to Congresswoman Grace Hatter, Trajan greeted Belle with a kiss to the cheek and shook Rumple's hand, but sat at the family table, while the O'Neals sat with guests in the back of the reception hall with the Lucases and the Hoppers.

When Daniel died of a sudden heart attack, knowing what the good father had meant to the
O'Neals, friends filled the mailbox at the house on Curry Lane with sympathy cards, but there was no message from Trajan. Rumple retreated to his study for three days with a box of Kleenex and his holy books; Belle let him grieve in solitude, but she sent a plea to Trajan asking him to call or write. Still, no message came.
The Most Beautiful Sound I've Ever Heard

NOVEMBER 2032

Rumple woke up with a start, his pajama top drenched in sweat, although winter had already blanketed Augusta in a thin coat of snow. His abrupt movements woke Belle, who grumbled, until she heard his panting, then she sat up and stroked his back. "Honey? Are you ill?"

"No, just—bad dream." He slid out of bed and into his slippers. After a shower he thumped into the kitchen, where Belle had coffee and oatmeal waiting.

"Do you feel like going to work today?" She asked soothingly.

"I'm fine. Besides, I've got a big day today. Driving down to Lewiston for the ribbon cutting." He grinned around his coffee. "Gotta be there to support my trainees." He'd taught his methods to the cooks at the new Phoenix House.

"I'm proud of you, sweetheart. Do you want to talk about your dream?"

"It wasn't really a dream," he explained. "I don't know what to call it. More like the vision fragments I used to get, when I had the Sight. I saw a battle between sorcerers, dozens of them on an open field, and I saw Merlin there. But as hard as I searched, I couldn't find Trajan." He shrugged. "It can't be a vision, so—guess it's just my subconscious telling me it's time to check in with Trajan."

"I'm sure he's fine. I spoke to Emma last week and she said she'd seen him in the candy shop. He was buying Snow White Fudge."

"I'm sure he's fine too." Rumple spooned up his oatmeal. "Regina would let us know if there was a problem. Still, I'll send him an email. Maybe today will be the day he answers me."

"It's interesting you happened to call," Regina said. She brushed a stray strand of gray from her cheek. He admired her for that: she could have used magic, either her own or Clairol's, to return her hair to its youthful color, but she hadn't. She seemed to enjoy the status that came with age in Storybrooke.

Not that Rumple would have criticized her if she had dyed her hair. His own had gone full gun-barrel gray years ago.

"There was something upsetting that happened today," she continued. "Merlin received word from Misthaven that the Dark Vault has been opened. The body of a farmer was found nearby, the hand burned."

"The Dark One's been released," Rumple surmised. "Has it been seen anywhere?"

"Not yet, but the Duke of Shapleigh has vanished. The duchess reports that he and his squire went out hunting two days ago. The duke's horse returned to the stables yesterday, riderless. The squire is missing as well."

"Could be a coincidence, but it needs checking out. Where's Merlin now?"

"He's rounding up his 'white army' and preparing to take them to Misthaven to investigate."
Rumple swallowed hard. "Trajan."

Regina shook her head. "He's not going. Merlin said that only the pure-hearted could win this fight. Anyone else would be vulnerable to the Darkness."

"That's so, but—Trajan—" Rumple sputtered.

"Merlin ordered him to stay behind. He's shattered, of course, but what else can he do? He's going to guard the portal here, just in case Merlin's army fails."

"They won't."

Regina sighed. "Rumple, Emma and I are going with Merlin."

"Oh."

"He asked us. He said he needs all the help he can get."

"Work as a team and you'll kick Dark ass."

She chuckled. "Thanks for that vote of confidence. As you can imagine, Trajan is bitter and a bit embarrassed. Would you talk to him? Try to help him cheer up?"

"If he'll take my call. I'll try tomorrow night. Good luck, Regina. Keep your head and you'll do fine."

"Thanks, Rumple."

"One more piece of advice: find the duke and you'll find the Dark One."

-----------------------------------------------------------------

A scowling face swam into view. At least Trajan was answering his call; that had to be a good sign—unless Trajan thought Rumple might have some news from the Dark side. "Yeah?" But the young man didn't sound angry, just anxious.

"Hello, Trajan. Will you talk to me?"

"What for? Are you calling to rub it in?" His defensiveness reminded Rumple of the hurt little boy who'd once confronted him with "What do you know? Who the hell are you?"

"You may wish the world to see you as a hard case, but Master Trajan, I know what's underneath, because I have put up that same front," Rumple said.

Trajan's face softened as he remembered the first time his mentor had made that same statement. He glanced away, rubbing his eyes, then glanced back again. "Do you know the history of the name 'Trajan'?"

"No."

"It was the name of a great Roman emperor, considered one of the greatest military leaders in history." Trajan snorted. "Some namesake I am. Merlin threw me out."

"That's not what I heard. He left you behind to guard Storybrooke."

"That's not what it was," Trajan denied. "He left me behind because I wasn't 'pure' enough. Because my mother was—who she was."
"Is that what Merlin said?" When the young man didn't answer, Rumple pressed, "Is that what Merlin said? Because I doubt it. He knew when he started training you who your mother was, and yet he prepared you for his army, made you his apprentice."

"What else could it mean?" the boy spat. "'Pure-hearted'—he said all his soldiers need to be 'pure-hearted' so the darkness couldn't consume them. He's taking my mother and Emma Swan! Mom's almost fifty!"

"There's no degradation of power in older sorcerers. If there were, Merlin would've retired long ago. Regina and Emma will be fine," Rumple shook his head in thought. "The combination of their powers blended together—I doubt if even Merlin could beat it. But as for Merlin's remark. Did he explain what he meant by 'pure-hearted'?"

"No. He never explains. He just expects us to figure out his riddles."

"Long ago, Trajan, I promised to always tell you the truth, and you promised me the same. Do you remember?"

"Yeah. Life was simpler then."

"Tell me the truth now, and I promise I'll be equally honest. In what way are you not 'pure-hearted'? Have you dabbled in Dark magic?"

"No!" Trajan slapped his hand against his keyboard, causing his image in Rumple's monitor to shake. "Never! After all I learned about Mom and Zelena and you, I wasn't about to mess with Dark magic. It never was worth the price for any of you. I guess you know I did a lot of traveling, after I graduated high school, and I studied different forms of magic in different realms, but Dark magic never tempted me."

"Good." Rumple leaned back in his seat with a relieved sigh. "Very good. If there was only one thing I taught you that you retained, I'd hoped it would be that."

"Oh, I remember everything you taught me," Trajan said bitterly. "From the value of birdhouses to the uselessness of revenge. But that doesn't mean I'm not still angry as hell for what you took from me."

"I understand. I won't ask for your forgiveness; I understand you can't give it. All I can do is say I'm sorry, and I've spent every day of my life since then wishing I hadn't walked into that jail. My best hope is that you never, ever have to experience the shame and regret that comes from acting out in rage."

"Well, looks like I'll never get that chance, huh?" Trajan threw up his hands, which glowed faintly with unspent power. "Since all I'm good for is babysitting portals!"

"That's not true. I've seen film from some of your training sessions. You have a wide range of skills, wider than Regina's, and as much raw power as Zelena had. Ability is not the issue, is it? Be honest with me, Trajan."

"No, I suppose it isn't."

"Then what do you think Merlin meant?"

The young man ran his hands through his short-cropped hair. He wore a beard now, longer than his father's, as long as Balthazar's; Regina had mentioned he'd started growing it when he'd accepted the position as Apprentice, as a tribute to his predecessor. Trajan's beard was tinged with
red, a mark of his lineage. "He meant I'm still mad as hell!"

Rumple nodded. "As you know from Regina, anger leaves a path for Darkness to follow. That's why Merlin thought you would be vulnerable. It's me, isn't it? Your anger is against me."

Trajan leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. He lived alone—had moved out right after graduation, refusing any financial aid from his folks. He rented a one-bedroom duplex a couple of blocks from Marine Garage, where he earned his keep installing batteries and doing tune-ups. What he'd never found out, in all those years, was that when he'd moved in, Mr. Dove made an adjustment to the rent on that duplex. In return for their silence, the couple in other side of the duplex had enjoyed a fifty percent reduction in rent. Dove had made the adjustment without consulting Mr. O'Neal; after all those years in service, Dove just knew it was something Mr. O'Neal would want done.

"After my sixteenth birthday," Trajan reflected, "Archie had me write two memory journals. You know what those are? I guess they're a favorite therapy of his." At Rumple's nod, he continued, "One of them was for everything I could remember about Zelena. I worked on that damn thing for two weeks. Spent most of the time just staring at a blank page. I ended up with a page and a half. Made me realize that just because she gave birth to me didn't make her my mother. The other journal I got done in three days. It was thirty-three pages long, and it was about you."

"I mattered to you."

"Yeah. That didn't make me stop hating you." Trajan thought for a bit. "It wasn't because you killed Zelena that I hate you. It was because of what you did to me."

"What did I do?"

"You came into my life when I was needy and vulnerable. First you acted like a teacher, but then, more like an uncle... or a father. I had fantasies for a while that you'd adopt me, you and Belle, and make it real. You gave me hope, and you did that all the while knowing who I was and what you'd tell me someday. Zelena was dead, but you got one more act of revenge in, didn't you? A son for a son, me for Baelfire."

Rumple blanched. "Is that what you think? That I was using you to get back at her?"

"What else?" Trajan snapped. "You knew who I was, even before you met me!"

"You're dead wrong! I refused—when Archie asked me to teach you, I refused, because I knew who you were. He was asking me to help the child of the woman who tried to kill my son, the woman who kept me locked in a dog cage!"

"I know; I saw it," Trajan reminded him.

"I refused, but Archie told me how you were being bullied, how the Martels thought you were delusional because you remembered Oz, and I was the only one on this side of the barrier who could tell you the truth. And still I refused, because how could I help her, after all she'd done to me? But I... I was like you; the only person in this world who knew the truth about magic. And I knew what it was to be bullied, and what you would grow up to be, if someone didn't help you. Me. You'd grow up to be me. So I—gave in. I thought I owed it to Bae. I never intended to use you or betray you. I just wanted to make sure there would be one less bully in the world."

"Fine story," Trajan snapped. "Now that I've had my bedtime story, Uncle Rum, I'm going to bed."

The connection terminated, Rumple stared into a blank screen.
NOVEMBER 2032

"Is there anything you can do, Rumple?" Robin's voice was shaking.

"I'm afraid not. This is a magic fight, and I have nothing to bring. Nor do you and David and Bae. You have to remember that; all your arrows and swords are nothing more than mosquitoes to the Dark One. The people with the best chance of winning that war are already in Misthaven. The rest of us would only endanger them, because believe me, the Dark One will come after their loved ones just to throw Emma and Regina off-balance." Rumple was almost as anxious as his caller was, but he had to be realistic.

"There must be something in your shop, in your books—"

Rumple shook his head. "This is a fight between good and evil, simply that. Merlin will win. We must be patient and hopeful."

"Never thought I'd say this, but I wish to hell you were the Dark One still."

DECEMBER 2032

"Papa! We've had a message from Merlin," Neal had phoned when Rumple was taking too long to answer his Skype call.

"Sorry, Neal, it's me," Belle said into the phone. "Rumple's in the shower. Here, I'm going into the bathroom. . . ." Neal could hear a door squeak, then water running, then a curtain rattling and the water cutting off. In another moment, Rumple was barking into the phone, "What's the message, Bae?"

Neal ignored his father's slip of the tongue; years ago, he'd accepted that to one person in the world, he would always be Baelfire. "Merlin sent word to Balthazar through the crimson crown. Emma's okay but three of Merlin's army are dead and Regina's been wounded. They need help. It's bad, Papa."

"What can I do? Without magic, I'm useless to them." And yet, as Rumple exchanged a worried glance with Belle, they both knew that they would be driving to Storybrooke tonight. She handed Rumple a towel and ran into the bedroom to dig into his dresser for some warm clothes.

"Not you; it's Trajan they want. You have to help him once more, Papa."

"But he's vulnerable—"

"Not if you can drive the anger from his heart. That's what Merlin said." Neal licked his lips nervously. "Please, Papa. For Emma."

An annoyed voice shouted through the door, "If you got car trouble, leave the keys on the counter at the garage. I'll get to it in the morning." But Rumple kept pounding, and at last the door jerked open and a barefooted, bare-chested young man filled the doorway. "Leroy, if that's you begging to borrow money again, I swear—" The porch light flickered on and Trajan gaped at his visitors. "What the f—what are you doing here?" He looked around at the empty street, then tossed his head toward the apartment. "Come in."

His place was a mess, strewn with dirty dishes, half-filled coffee cups, piles of clothes on the couch and the kitchen table. Regina would have raised holy hell—probably had, before she went off to
war. Rumple wondered if this was Trajan's acting out his anger at being left behind or if it was a simple act of new-adult rebellion. Trajan didn't bother to clear away sitting space; clearly, he didn't expect them to stay long. He flipped on the kitchen light and stood with folded arms. "Well?"

"They need you. In Misthaven. They need you," Belle said.

He snorted. "Yeah. David and Neal were here tonight. Before them, Dad. So you drove all this way to tell me what I already know? Thought you two were supposed to be the smart ones."

"Don't be rude to my wife, Master Trajan." Rumple went toe-to-toe with the kid and folded his arms too. "I thought I taught you better; I know Regina and Robin did."

Trajan blinked. "So what'd you come for?"

"To ask the impossible of you." Rumple lowered his arms. "I'm asking you to forgive me."

"What?" Trajan blinked again, then his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why?"

"I won't argue whether I'm guilty of using you, as you think I am. I came to realize it doesn't matter what I intended when I became your mentor; what matters is how you feel. I'm asking you to put those feelings to the side for a moment and try to remember how you felt then, that first session we had together. Can you remember?"

His mouth twitched as if a smile might form. "I was a little snot and you gave me what-for."

"Yes, I said I wouldn't tolerate rudeness and I walked away. But I also said that if you listened to what I had to say, you'd learn a great deal about yourself. Please, listen now. A lot of people are depending upon this."

Trajan's arms dropped to his side. "Are you... going to guarantee me answers?"

"Not this time." Rumple turned and cleared off space on the couch, then helped Belle out of her coat and urged her to be seated.

Duly embarrassed, Trajan tossed away a stack of Sports Illustrateds to free up the rest of the couch. "Please, have a seat. You want some coffee?"

Rumple slipped off his coat and Trajan hung the two coats up on a coatrack behind the front door. "No, but thank you for offering," Belle said.

"None for me either, thanks," Rumple said.

Trajan sat down in his Laz-y Boy. His knees on his elbows, he invited, "I apologize for my earlier rudeness, Belle."

Belle smiled. "I accept your apology, Trajan, and I'm sorry we woke you. This is a rather urgent matter."

Trajan motioned to Rumple. "You were saying?"

Rumple relaxed against the sagging couch. "I'm asking you to remember our first project."


"It took us weeks to build. During that time, I came to care about you, and as a result, I agonized over what to tell you about your past, and how, and when. I knew the time would come that I
would have to tell you I killed Zelena; I feared that the longer I waited, the harder it would be for you to forgive me. But I also knew you needed me, at least until it was possible for Regina to come into your life. And by that time—by the time I could've let you go, I couldn't. I needed you too. I waited to tell you until I thought you were old enough to understand the whole story. Maybe I shouldn't have waited, or maybe I shouldn't have told you at all, but I'd promised you, in the beginning, I would be honest with you, though there would answers I couldn't give you at the moment you asked for them because I thought you weren't ready yet." He drew in a deep breath and released it. "You have a right to your feelings, but to hang onto anger, especially when there's nothing I can do to repair the damage I've done, it will accomplish nothing. So I'm asking you to let go of your anger and forgive me."

Trajan stared at him in pain. "I don't know how."

Rumple dug into his jeans pocket. "I think I can help. Give me your hand."

Perplexed, Trajan frowned but did as bade; Rumple pressed his own hand against the young man's, and when he moved his hand away, five shiny pennies remained in Trajan's open palm.

The boy's mouth fell open as he poked at the pennies and remembered. "The weight of a chickadee."

Rumple smiled. "The weight of a chickadee. That's what your anger is worth. No more." He pushed Trajan's palm closed, then pulled it open again and the pennies were gone. "Let it go with the pennies."

"I can't—"

"You can, if you'll remember."

At a nod from Rumple, Belle reached into the tote bag at her feet and drew out a manila envelope. "Make a lap, Trajan," she urged. When he pushed his knees together, she dumped the envelope's contents into his lap. "I took these from the walls of our house. Every room of our house." He could believe it: the pile kept growing as she shook the envelope. "Years of memories. They're on loan to you for as long as you need them, but we would like them back eventually. They're important to us."

Falling out randomly, the flimsy sheets bore no order as he sifted through them, identifying them: "My graduation picture. My grades from third grade. My diagram of the birdhouse. Ticket stub from an amusement park you took me to. Essay you made me write about the importance of birds. Ticket from the car show." He looked from Belle to Rumple. "You kept all this?"

"Because it was important to us," Belle said.

"Because we love you," Rumple finished. "Go through these mementoes, Trajan, and remember how it was between us, and if you hold onto the memories, you can let go of the anger."

Belle stood and held out her hand to her husband. "We should go now, give him time to think."

Rumple accepted her hand. "We're staying at the inn for the next couple of days." He retrieved their coats and helped Belle into hers. "When you're ready to talk, I'll be waiting."

"I couldn't pry him out of his chair," Belle sighed in answer to Neal's unspoken query. Belle and Rumple had been invited to dinner at Dave's Fish and Chips, but only Belle had slid into the booth across from her stepson. "He just sits by the window overlooking town square, pretending to read,
but he's actually watching the street."

"For Trajan," Neal surmised.

"Yeah." Belle tried to smile as the waitress brought over menus and took drink orders, but as soon as the waitress moved away, so did the smile. "We'll leave tomorrow. It'll do him some good to get back to work."

"What a waste," Bae growled, tapping his fork against the edge of the table. "What a frigging waste. That's something I had to learn the hard way. You can go through life blaming your family for how screwed up you are, or you can get on with living. Learn to see them for what they are: good people who sometimes make mistakes, sometimes terrible ones. Forgive them and accept the love they want to give you, which is, by the way, pretty damn good."

Bae seemed to suddenly make a decision, for he stood up and grabbed his jacket. "When she comes back," he urged, meaning the waitress, "order me the First Mates Platter. I've got an errand to run. I'll be back as quick as I can."

"Where?" Belle wondered.

He smiled that lopsided grin of his. "Got to have a chat with a boy about grudges and wasted time. Which I know a bit about. Two hundred years of wasted time."

On their third day, Rumple sat at the window looking out over the town square and refused Belle's suggestion that he join her at the diner for breakfast. He held a translation of the Guru Granth Sahib in his lap, but he wasn't reading. She closed the door to their rented room behind her and started down the stairs.

A moment later, she was galloping back up, doing her best to keep up with the long-legged man carrying the manila envelope. "No, you're not interrupting. He's just admiring the view," was all she said, but she grinned from ear to ear. "Come on in." She swung the door open. "Rumple, we have a guest."

Book in hand, Rumple stood. Before he could collect his thoughts and welcome the guest, the envelope was being presented to him. "I thought I'd keep your mementos a little longer, mail 'em back to you, if that's okay. But as a sort of collateral, here are mine."

Rumple spread them out on the bed. "A note I wrote you, congratulating you on your grades. Photo of the three of us at the car show. Birthday cards. Christmas cards." He puzzled over a mustard-stained wrapper until Trajan explained, "From the hot dog you bought me at the Moose versus Seawolves game."

"You're forgiving me?"

Trajan nodded. "Neal came by the garage yesterday; he kinda grabbed me by the shirt and shook me, metaphorically. He said I can keep on smoldering from the inside, making myself miserable, blowing up at the world, or I could man up. And he showed me pictures of Emma and Henry and the Charmings and you and Belle, and he said that if he hadn't decided to man up, he wouldn't have all these people in his life now. And he reminded me that when you started mentoring me, you knew who I was, but you didn't let that stop you from loving me. So I got to thinking about—well, this." He indicated the envelope. "All the stuff you did for me, even though I was Zelena's kid, and I figured if you could do that, then I could change too. So, yeah, I'm forgiving you."

Rumple didn't wait for an invitation: he hugged his mentee.
Granny set the morning's issue of the Mirror down, along with two cups of tea, on the table.
"Newspaper's on the house. Your pancakes will be up in a few. Them I'm still charging for." The O'Neals could barely hear her over the chatter in the over-crowded diner. "Got to make a living." She winked at Belle before she moved on to the next table.

"Hmph," Rumple opened the newspaper. "Glass should get Henry back here. The quality of proofreading at the Mirror's really gone downhill." He turned the newspaper around so Belle could see the headline.

"Still, nice photo of Merlin's army. Trajan looks nice in the uniform," Belle pointed out. "The article says they're expected back tomorrow, after Queen Iona knights them. Think we can stay in town one more day?"

"Don't you have a budget meeting tomorrow?"

"Yes, but Sarah can fill in for me. She owes me a favor. Don't you have a new trainee you're starting tomorrow?" Belle had recently been promoted to Assistant Director of the Augusta Library.

"Yes, but Martin can give him the orientation. I think I can squeeze one more day of leave out of Ms. Hotchkiss."

"Then we can stay. Be there with the rest of town when the heroes return." Belle skimmed over the article as Rumple sipped his tea and drummed his fingers, eagerly awaiting the pancakes. "Hey, just wondering something: did you ever meet the Duke of Shapleigh?"

"Nope."

"How'd you know, then? You told Regina, 'Find the Duke and you'll find the Dark One.'"

Rumple shrugged. "It usually goes that way. Ten of the last seventeen Dark Ones were noblemen before they got hold of the dagger. Then they find that controlling the Dark One isn't as easy as it seems, and they panic and take the power for themselves. The Dark One encourages that terror; possessing a nobleman is more fun than inhabiting a peasant."

"You were one of the seven non-noblemen."

"Yeah, just a working-class slob." He picked up Belle's hand and kissed her palm. "But I'm a king now."

An impromptu parade featuring the high school band, a fleet of Model T's from the Klassic Kar Kollectors Klub, and a three-man clown car from the brand-new Storybrooke Clown College celebrated the return of Merlin's warriors. The great sorcerer himself vanished as soon as Mayor Mills-Locksley's welcome home speech and the ensuing photo op had concluded, but the rest of the town, along with two out-of-towners, stuck around for the traditional lasagne party at Granny's. "You done good raisin' him," Leroy congratulated Robin; the former bandit raised a mug in Rumple and Belle's direction. "We didn't do it alone."

Trajan himself, after receiving all the hugs, kisses and back-slaps due him, kissed his mom and bear-hugged his dad, but then strolled over to Rumple. "Buy you a beer, Rum?"

"Sure." The two men perched on stools and rested elbows on the counter as they waited for Ashley
to pour the ale. Belle, with a pat to Trajan's back, wandered away to give them a modicum of privacy; they had something they needed to say to each other, she understood, even if most of what they said was unspoken.

"So, I guess it went well," Rumple started.

"Yeah. Touch and go at first, but we turned it round." And Trajan went on to describe the battles between the Duke's forces and Merlin's. After they'd fallen silent and sat guaffing their beers and munching peanuts, Trajan got to the point. "Rum, I just wanted to say, I'm sorry I was such a jerk. You know?"

"I know." Rumple grinned wryly. "I know all about being a jerk. Believe me."

"So... Guess I missed a few soccer matches while I was gone. How's the Revolution doing?"

When Belle checked in on them an hour later, they were arguing. At first she was alarmed, until she heard her husband declare, "Nah, Perez is all flash and no substance. Now Santiago, there's a footie player." She chuckled then.

"How they gettin' along?" Robin whispered to her.

"The tide's turned," she replied. "Rumple's more at ease than he's been in ages."

"So is Trey." Suddenly the two soccer fans got up, guzzled the last of their beers, pulled on their coats and headed for the exit. Belle and Robin exchanged a puzzled look until Trajan called across the diner, "Hey, Dad, I'm going to show Rum the ultralight I'm building. See ya later, okay?"

"Yeah," Belle mused. "The tide's turned."

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MAY 2036

Humming along to the Beatles track he had playing on their stereo, Belle leaned over her husband's shoulder to squint at the dark photo on his computer screen. "What is that?"

Rumple grinned. "A photo from Trey and Jennifer."

"It's, ah, awfully hazy..." She twisted her head to the side to examine it.

"That's because it's a sonogram."

"A sono-?! They're pregnant?" Belle whooped.

"My darling, you're looking at the very first photograph of Robert Robin Mills-Locksley." Rumple's smug grin softened as, in the background, Paul McCartney looked into the future and sang what he saw: "There will be an answer/Let it be."

Belle reached over his shoulder to clasp his hand, and as she did, her attention fell upon the ever-present stack of books he kept on his desk. She recognized the volume lying open on top; she knew how it had come into his possession, and why, and who had given it, and she had reason every day to thank the giver, as well as the many others who'd given Rumple a home when he needed one. A yellow sticky note marked a verse, and as she read it, in her imagination-memory she could see Daniel at his kitchen table, plastering that Post-It to the page and smiling, well pleased because the verse said exactly what Rumple needed to hear. As much as she missed Daniel, she realized Rumple must miss him so much more, but every now and then, the priest would pop up in messages like this one: "Until seventy times seven."
"Forgiveness," she said aloud, touching the Post-It. "The true power."

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