There But for the Grace of God

by Shepherd23

Summary

Neal didn't return to the Enchanted Forest when Regina destroyed the Dark Curse. Instead, he crossed the town line with Emma and Henry. Eighteen months later, a familiar face shows up in NYC to bring them back to Storybrooke. When they return, things are not as they left them: new faces are showing up all over town, David and Belle are missing and no-one has any idea how they ended up back in the Land Without Magic. Alternate Season 3b
The Final Goodbye

Storybrooke, June 2012

With great reluctance, Emma pulled herself out of her parents’ embrace. There were tears on Mary Margaret’s face and she was sure David would cry too as soon as no-one but his wife would see, but there was somebody else she needed to say goodbye to.

In the distance, the great green clouds continued to rage as they devoured Storybrooke. She wasn’t sure how the magic worked but she did know that they didn’t have long before the curse reached them. The town itself was probably already gone. Neal stood a little way apart from everyone else with one arm around Belle’s shoulders. The poor woman still looked an absolute mess in spite of having pulled herself together in the time it had taken to get to the town line. Emma spared her a moment’s glance – she hadn’t liked Rumplestiltskin much, but she was still sorry Belle had to watch him die like she had and wished she had time to say so – before turning to Neal. He stepped away from his stepmother-of-sorts as Henry ran to Emma’s side.

It wasn’t until she actually looked at Neal that Emma realised she had no idea what to say. The seventeen-year-old part of her who’d first fallen in love with him wanted to hug him and never let go, while her more cynical twenty-eight-year-old self stayed back. Finally, she said, “Neal. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “You’ve got to get our boy the hell out of here.”

“And you have to go back there.”

Neal sniffled. “Yeah.”

Henry darted forwards to hug his dad and Neal pulled Emma into the group embrace. After a moment, one of them began to pull away – Emma wasn’t sure who – and now Neal was clearly crying. Not taking his eyes off Henry, he said, “Hey, this isn’t over. I’ll see both of you again.”

“You don’t have to,” Regina interrupted, appearing next to Henry.

Emma stared at her. “I’m sorry?”

Regina put one hand on Henry’s shoulder and addressed Neal. “You weren’t a part of the curse. You can leave with them.”

“He can?” Henry asked, looking between his adopted mother and his father.

Regina nodded. “If you wanted to.”

Neal glanced at Emma, uncertainty scrawled across his face. Henry grabbed his hand. “Please, Dad.”

“Would – would you want me to?”

That question wasn’t for Henry, Emma realised. Neal wanted to know how she felt about it. But it doesn’t matter how I feel, she thought. Henry needs his father.
She nodded. “Yeah. I would.”

Henry squealed and wrapped his arms around Neal’s midsection. Regina smiled sadly but let her son go. With their son otherwise occupied, she pulled Emma aside.

“There’s something that I haven’t told you.”

Emma sighed. “Now what?”

Regina turned the curse scroll over in her hands. “When the curse washes over us, it will send us all back. Nothing will be left behind, including your memories.”

Emma stared at her. Regina shrugged. “It’s just what the curse does. Storybrooke will no longer exist. It won’t ever have existed. So this last year will be gone from all of your memories. And we’ll just go back to being stories again.”

Emma turned to look at her son and his father, who were now saying goodbye to her parents. She wanted Henry to have his dad, she really did, but if the last year was erased from their memories then Neal would, to her, got back to nothing but the jerk who’d left her pregnant in jail. And he wouldn’t know his son.

“So, we won’t remember anything?” she asked. “What will happen to us?”

“I don’t know.”

“That doesn’t sound much like a happy ending.”

Regina chuckled. “No, it’s not. But I can give you one.”

“You can preserve our memories?”

She shook her head and Emma’s stomach fell. “No, but I can do what I did to everyone else in this town and give you new ones.”

“You cursed them and they were miserable.”

“They didn’t have to be.” Regina took hold of Emma’s hand. “My gift to you is good memories. I can make it so that the two of you never fell apart, you never gave Henry up, and you’ll have always been together.”

Heart in her throat, Emma barely managed to keep her voice level. “You would do that?”

Regina smiled. “When I stop Pan’s curse and you cross that town line, you’ll have the life you always wanted.”

“It won’t be real.”

“Your past won’t, no. But your future will.” Regina dropped Emma’s hand as Henry appeared at her side, Neal close behind. “You need to go. There’s not much time before the curse is on top of us.”

“Take good care of her, lad,” said Hook from behind Neal. He extended his good hand and shook Neal’s while Regina gave Henry one last hug. Emma looked past them to where her parents still
fought tears. She walked over to them and fell into David’s arms.

“I love you, Dad.”

David sobbed and squeezed her head before he let her go. She turned to her mother, who gave her a sad smile. “You have to go,” Mary Margaret whispered.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“I’m not.” Her mother wiped away the tears that were now falling freely from Emma’s eyes. “I’m so proud of you.” She kissed Emma on the forehead and then nudged her to where Neal and Regina waited with Henry.

“You ready, kid?”

“Yeah.” Henry climbed in the back of the yellow bug and waved to his family through the back window. Neal went to get in front of him but hesitated.

“You okay?” Emma asked.

“Yeah. Just one second.” He ran over to where Belle stood with Archie and swept her up in a big bear hug, murmuring something in her ear that made her laugh. Emma clambered into the driver’s seat, trying and failing not to cry. She felt Henry’s hand clasp her shoulder.

A moment later, Neal climbed into the passenger seat. “What did you say to Belle?” she asked.

“I told her to take care of herself,” he said as he clicked his seatbelt into place.

Emma reached for his hand. Neal started at the unexpected contact but then allowed her to slip her hand into his.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” she told him.

He just nodded and looked at Henry in the back. Emma turned as well to see Regina do something with the scroll and the green magic storm clouds fill the car windows. It would not be long now.

“Let’s go,” she said and started the ignition.

The yellow bug rolled across the town line and Emma watched through the rear-view mirror as the magic clouds (now purple) engulfed her parents, her son’s family and all the people she had come to call her friends. Then they and the town disappeared, and the Saviour remembered no more.

**Portland, OR, January 2001**

Emma leant against the factory wall and looked at the watch Neal had given her, now reading five minutes to nine. He wasn’t late, not yet, but she was antsy nonetheless. The butterflies in her stomach did nothing to help the nausea she had already felt and she regretted eating that convenience store pie earlier. First thing when they got to Tallahassee, she was finding a good sandwich shop.

To pass the time, she studied the watch. It was quartz with gold plating and a real leather band, and
probably worth enough to feed a small family for a month. No wonder Neal thought that they could get twenty thousand for the lot.

“Emma!”

She looked up to see Neal run from the shadows under the train station, looking panicked. The sports bag that held the watches was slung across his back. He grabbed her hand and, still running, pulled her out of the parking lot.

“Neal! What’s going on?”

“No time, come on!”

Still confused, Emma followed him through the maze of factories until they came to what looked like an abandoned warehouse. Neal made short work of the lock and motioned for her to follow him inside.

The windows had been boarded up but enough light crept through to see by. Neal shoved the watches behind a stack of wooden crates, then opened another door (to what may have been stationary storage from the old pencils scattered on the floor) and pulled her inside.

“Neal, what’s going on?” she asked again, this time in a whisper.

“Somebody tipped off the cops,” he explained.

“What?”

“Shh.”

Footsteps thundered past the warehouse walls; she didn’t know if they had come inside or not. Emma shoved a hand into her mouth and fought down the urge to vomit. Yes, the convenience store pie had been a terrible idea.

After an eternity during which she was sure her heart would run out of beats, the flashlight beams and the sound of footsteps disappeared. Neal slid to the floor, drawing her down with him. “I think they’ve gone, but we should stay put for a while.”

Emma could only nod. That was far too close.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he murmured, stroking her hair. She sniffled and turned her face into his chest. “It’ll be okay.”

**New York City, 21 January 2014**

“Daaaaaaad! Wake up!”

A ball of foam and pillowcase to the face was not what Neal had expected when he woke up that morning, nor was it pleasant. In fact, he’d been sound asleep and a little disappointed to find his wife’s warm presence missing when he started flailing for the source of his unprecedented morning wake-up. Raucous laughter filled the room and the pillow was raised, ready to hit him again.
“Oh, no you don’t!” he growled, tackling the twelve-year-old mischief maker. Henry squealed, so he started tickling.

“No fair, Dad!”

“Neither is hitting me with a pillow, buddy!” he retorted as Henry tried to wiggle out of his grasp. But despite being in the middle of a massive – and sudden – growth spurt, Henry was still much smaller than him which meant he was easily able to hang onto him until he felt Henry had suffered enough. Only then did he let the giggling boy go.

“Mom said to wake you up!” Henry said in what he obviously thought to be a valid defence.

“With a pillow? I don’t think so, mister!”

Henry then tried to look as innocent as possible, which was a lot harder now that he’d started to lose his baby fat. Neal ruffled his hair – he knew how much that annoyed him – and climbed out of bed.

“Daaaad! Cut it out!” Henry objected, flattening his hair. Neal shot him a grin.

“Nah.” He messed up his boy’s hair again before looking around for a shirt. Finding a semi-clean one at the foot of the bed, Neal shuffled out of his and Emma’s bedroom with Henry in tow, the smell of pancakes eliminating the last of his annoyance at having been woken up. Henry rushed ahead of him and was already seated at the table with a glass of orange juice by the time Neal made it into the kitchen, still blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” his wife teased when he wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her on the cheek.

“Morning. That smells delicious.”

“Thank you.” Emma slid a couple of not-quite-round-but-intact pancakes onto a plate. “Those are mine. I’m making a claim before you and the human vacuum cleaner over there can scoff them all down.”

“Hey, we leave you some!” Neal objected while licking the finger he’d dipped into the pancake mix. “Most of the time.”

Emma made a face at him, which he returned and they both laughed. He grabbed the larger plate of finished pancakes (leaving the ones Emma had claimed on the counter) and took it over to the table. Henry rolled his eyes at him, took several pancakes – leaving Neal with a grand total of two – and proceeded to cover them in butter. Neal grinned; he’d never admit it, but it was fun to embarrass his kid every once in a while.

If only Papa could see us now, he thought, but then shoved it away. No use thinking about what could have been, not when what he had made him perfectly happy.

Emma joined them at the table with her pre-selected breakfast just as Neal managed to steal part of a third pancake off his son – earning him a deadly look from Henry in the process – and there was a knock at the door.

“We expecting somebody?” Neal asked, pushing his chair back to answer it.
“Not that I know of,” said Emma.

Another knock – well, a pounding, really – shook the wall as Neal headed to the door and opened it.

Yep, this day was really not turning out the way he’d thought it would.

“Ah, Bae. Finally,” said Captain Killian Jones, a wide smile breaking out on the pirate’s face.

“Listen –”

Neal pushed the older man (who, despite somehow being in New York, was still outfitted in his leather vest and overcoat) into the hallway – this was definitely not a conversation he needed his son or his wife to overhear – and left the door slightly ajar in case he needed a quick getaway. “What the hell are you doing here? How the hell are you here?”

“Look, I need your help,” Killian said, holding up his hands (had he replaced his hook or was he just wearing a glove over it?). “Something’s happened, something terrible. Emma’s family is in trouble.”

“What?” Neal blanched. “How the hell do you know my wife’s name?”

“Wife?” Killian seemed genuinely shocked at that, though Neal couldn’t quite pin down the dozen or so emotions that crossed the pirate’s face in that second. “Obviously there have been some developments, I should have expected that, but if you’d just let me explain –”

“No. Get out.”

“Bae –”

“Don’t call me that,” Neal growled, trying to intimidate him into leaving. He didn’t have a clue as to how Killian Jones had tracked him down here, in the Land Without Magic, or how he knew Emma but he didn’t really care enough to find out. He just wanted him as far away from Emma and Henry as possible. “Get out. And stay away from us!”

He stepped back inside the apartment, shut the door in Killian’s face (making doubly sure to lock it) and spared one moment to compose himself before heading back to the table.

“Who was that?” asked Henry.

“Some random,” Neal said, reaching for the syrup so that he didn’t have to look at Emma. She may not have been as good a lie detector as she claimed to be, but she always knew when he wasn’t truthful. “Someone must’ve left the door open downstairs. Don’t worry about it.”

Henry was straight back to his pancakes – Neal noticed that a chunk out of one of his was missing, the little devil – but Emma watched him suspiciously. He shrugged and reached for the juice, which seemed to appease her for the time being, and tried not to think about Dark Ones and two-century-old pirates.
Where is Home?

Chapter Notes

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT IN THE TAGS, THERE WILL BE A MAJOR CHARACTER'S DEATH IN UPCOMING CHAPTERS. DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Enchanted Forest, June 2012

They were back.

A part of Snow still hadn’t comprehended that she was really back in the Enchanted Forest once again. She looked around at the familiar old pines, the ancient mountains that had encompassed every horizon she’d awoken to since she was a small child, felt the warmth of the sun on her face juxtaposed with the slight chill of the morning breeze blowing through the too-big nightdress she’d been wearing the day they were ripped from their homeland. The day her daughter was born.

Emma. Snow sniffled. She would never regret having the chance to know her daughter, brief though it had been, but she still felt cheated. She wanted more than just a few months. She wanted to know what had happened to Emma and Henry after they’d left Storybrooke with Neal. She wanted to know that they were happy.

Snow forced the feelings to the side for the time being and turned her attention to more important matters, such as the radiant prince and princess whose picnic they had inadvertently interrupted.

“How have things been since we left? The ogres?” she asked.

“It’s been a long fight,” said Aurora. “Philip and the army have been able to push most of them out of our kingdom, but we believe some legions to have persisted in the highlands.”

“Do you know if our kingdom is one of them?” asked David.

“I’m sorry, no.” Aurora grimaced. “After you and Emma returned to your world, Mulan and I travelled to the kingdom of Queen Titania. She’s an old family friend. She was able to recall the wraith that stole Philip’s soul and gave it back to us in exchange for help fighting the ogres on her border. Ever since then, we’ve been –” She paused, exchanging a knowing look with her husband. “Well, we’ve been rather busy.”

Snow nodded. “And congratulations.”

Aurora went bright red. “Is it that obvious?”

“You’re glowing.”

Somewhere behind them, a very grumpy Regina snorted. “Why is she pregnant and I’m the one
who’s sick?” Snow ignored her.

Philip grinned, his arm wrapped around his wife. “Well, we clearly have much to celebrate. You and your friends are welcome in our kingdom. If there’s anything you require, we are at your service.”

David stepped forward. Snow grimaced at the sight of blood on her husband’s undershirt and had to remind herself that the wound had healed nearly thirty years prior. “Thank you, but all we need is horses. And maybe a change of clothes,” he added, eying his wife’s attire. Snow hugged herself, feeling a little exposed. “We have our own kingdom to get back to. Our own castle.”

She nudged her husband. “David, our castle was destroyed in the curse. It’s nothing but ruins now.”

Philip pointed to Regina. “Her castle still stands. And from what our scouts report, the ogres have failed to penetrate the borders. They may not even be in the area at all.”

“Of course they haven’t,” Regina grumbled. “I protected it.”

“Well, technically the castle doesn’t belong to her,” said David. “It was Snow’s before she took it.”

Regina glared at him. “I married into it, thank you very much.”

“That you did,” Snow admitted. She turned to look her stepmother in the face. “And now we’re taking it back.”

“You wouldn’t –”

“And you’re coming with us.”

Regina scoffed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Everyone out there is scared and confused. They need hope.” Snow took Regina’s hands. “What better way to show them that than to return united?”

Regina still looked uncertain, so Snow added, “I know you don’t like it. But what better way to put the Evil Queen behind you than to come home with us?”

After a moment, Regina nodded. “Alright.”

Snow’s face broke into a broad smile. She might have had to say goodbye to her daughter for the second time, but as she held Regina’s hands and thought of the bright-eyed young woman who’d once saved her life, she thought that maybe something good could come out of their fractured family after all.

New York City, 21 January 2014

Emma was late. Very, very late. She had to stop herself from running up the stairs to the restaurant – maybe she should have worn flats after all – and self-consciously flattened the skirt of her dress as she walked the entry corridor.

“Hi, reservation for Cassidy?” she told the doorman. “Someone’s expecting me.”
“Yep, come on in,” he said. “Table thirty-nine, ma’am.”

“Thanks.”

He had picked a much more affluent place than usual, Emma thought. The last time they’d eaten at a restaurant with a name she couldn’t pronounce had been his thirtieth birthday nearly three years ago. That had been in Boston, before her work and a building fire had brought them to New York. Recently, between moving into a new apartment and putting their lives back together, they just hadn’t had the time to venture into New York’s various eateries. Regardless, the place definitely smelled good and she hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

Neal was scribbling something on a napkin when she got near the table. She took a moment to appreciate her husband from behind – he’d scrubbed up and actually combed his hair for once – then put a hand on his back to let him know she was there. He looked up from his drawing and she thought he was about to make a smart comment about her tardiness, but once he saw her only one word came out of his mouth. “Wow.”

Emma couldn’t help but giggle at the way his eyes had lit up, his face split in half and dozens of words fought to be said all at the same time, with the net result being that he resembled a gobsmacked goldfish in a suit. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No matter.” Neal stood and brushed a piece of hair away from her face so he could kiss her. Short and sweet, since they were in a public place after all. “Happy anniversary.”

“Ten years. Not bad for two people who met by stealing the same car.”

“Well, technically, I stole it first and then you stole it off me.”

She playfully stuck her tongue out at him just as a waiter brought over two bowls of soup and bread rolls, then had to try not to blush as Neal thanked him and pulled her chair out for her.

“Sorry, I got the munchies,” he explained. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“No at all, I’m starving.”

“Had a bad one?” he asked, tucking into a bread roll.

“No, just long. I haven’t eaten since this morning.”

“And Henry and I stole all the pancakes,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Mmm-hmmm.” She sipped her soup, which was a little too hot. “Did he end up staying at home or going over to Avery’s?”

“Stayed at home. He said he wants to see if he can beat level twenty-two before we get back. I asked Mrs Cuse to make sure he’s in bed by eleven.”

Neal’s phone, which was underneath the napkin he’d been scribbling on, rang. He checked the number. “Damn, it’s my boss. Give me a minute?”

“Sure.”
He smiled and ducked off to a quiet corner of the restaurant. Emma tried the soup again and reached for Neal’s drawing with her free hand. She’d always liked those, even though he never seemed to take up any artistic project fancier than doodles on scrap paper. Just a pass-time, she supposed, like Henry’s occasional pieces of short fiction. She’d actually had a collection of Neal’s throwaway drawings in Boston that she’d been trying to rebuild, along with everything else they’d lost in the fire. That had been a bad night. Even their wedding rings were replacements.

This drawing was a clock tower overlooking what seemed to be a township. It was sketchy and not terribly detailed, but still somehow looked familiar. Little ink people wandered along the street and the tower itself looked like something she’d seen in an architectural book once. Weird, but then she did have a picture of a pirate ship in a storm drawn on the back of a train schedule. Neal had a fascinating imagination sometimes.

Neal’s chair was then drawn back with a loud scrape that made Emma jump. Then she almost jumped out of her own seat when she saw that the person who’d taken Neal’s empty chair was not her husband, but an unshaven man dressed in a leather overcoat – an absurd article even by New York standards – a single glove and smelling strongly of liquor.

“Excuse me, I think you’ve got the wrong table.”

The man shook his head. “I definitely don’t, Swan. Just let me explain.”

Emma reached into her purse for her keys and glanced around for Neal, who was nowhere in sight. “You need to leave. Right now.”

“Swan, please. Just hear me out,” the man drawled in an accent she thought might have been vaguely Irish. “Your parents are in great danger, Emma.”

“What?” My parents? She flushed with anger. “Who the hell are you?”

“An old friend. I know you don’t remember me right now, but you will.” He fumbled about in his coat for something and produced a piece of paper. “Here’s an address. If you want to know who you really are, who your parents are, you need to go there.”

That was it. Emma brandished her keys. “Leave. Now.”

The man flinched but didn’t move. “You’ve been there before, a little over a year ago. You just don’t remember.”

“Alright, listen closely, buddy,” she threatened, lowering her voice. “I really don’t want to have to cause a scene, but I will if you don’t leave right this second.”

“Regina really did a number on you, didn’t she?” The man leant in closer and she gagged at the smell. “Alright, you don’t believe me? Try using your superpower.”

Emma stared at him. He smiled coyly, like a poker player who had outsmarted their opponent. “Yeah, I know about that. Use it. See if I’m lying. I know you, Swan. You think you’re happy, but I know you sense something’s off about those memories Regina gave you. Go to that address, and you’ll find proof. When you find it, I’ll be in Central Park by the entrance to the zoo. Your family needs your help.”
“Hey!”

The man winked at her before making a rapid exit just as Neal ran up to their table. Emma grabbed him by the elbow before he could run after the creep, who promptly disappeared amongst the confused patrons.

“You okay?” Neal asked.

“Yeah, just some drunk guy who wouldn’t take a hint. I’m okay.”

Neal stared at the spot where the man had disappeared. For some reason, Emma sensed that he was more shaken than she was. “Do you know him?”

He tensed, which told her more than she really wanted to know. “That’s the guy who showed up at our apartment this morning,” he said after a moment’s hesitation. But there was more to it, Emma knew without asking. He took his phone out of his pocket. “I’m gonna text Henry, remind him to make sure the door’s locked and not to answer unless it’s us or Mrs Cuse.”

“Do you want to go home?”

Neal looked at her, then back at the restaurant exit, as if he was contemplating it, but then he shook his head. “No. No, it’s our anniversary. I’m not letting some random drunk ruin that.”

It was then that they noticed some of the restaurant patrons had yet to return to their own meals and were still ogling them like a sideshow attraction. Neal waved them off and sat, wrinkling his nose at the smell. Emma did the same. The head waiter then came over to apologise for the disturbance, but she was only half listening because she realised that the man had left the piece of paper on the table. She picked it up, about to crumple it into a ball but somehow couldn’t make her fingers perform the necessary motions. So she tucked it between the folds of Neal’s napkin drawing, stuffed that in her purse and shoved the strange encounter out of her mind.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

Belle shivered in the chill evening breeze. Her prison shift was most certainly not designed for the outer elements, and she didn’t even have any shoes. She stood a little way away from the others as preparations were made for travel to Tower Castle, trying to hold herself together. She could really do with a cup of tea and a good book right now. And a warm fire and the creak of a spinning wheel …

“How are you holding up, sister?” said a gruff voice to her left.

Leroy (or was he Grumpy again?) held out his cloak and beanie for her. She sniffled. “Thanks, Leroy.”

He draped the cloak – a little small, but at least it was warm – around her shoulders and she pulled the beanie over her ears. “Come on, everyone’s getting ready. Maybe you can borrow some things from the princess, walking boots and the like. If we want to make Regina’s castle before sundown, we need to leave soon.”

“I’m not going to Regina’s castle.”
“You’re not?”

Belle shook her head. “No, I’m – I’m going home. To Rumple’s castle.”

Leroy opened his mouth to say something, but not before another voice interjected. “Belle?”

They both turned to see Prince Philip hurrying towards them, a wide grin on his face. Belle returned his smile and didn’t object as Philip clasped her hands in greeting. “I haven’t heard from you at all since you left Mulan and me in Liang Zhou. How are you? Did you find who you were looking for?”

She gave a half-hearted laugh. That adventure in the Eastern Kingdoms had been so long ago. “Sort of. It’s a rather long story, but I’m okay. You seem to have done well.”

“It’s slow work, but we’re getting there,” said Philip.

Belle then spotted the young woman standing a short way back from them, watching the exchange with her arms folded over her belly. “And I hear congratulations are in order.”

Philip glanced over his shoulder. “Oh, yes. Belle, I’d like you to meet somebody.” He gestured for the woman to join the conversation. “This is Aurora, my true love and now my wife. Aurora, this is the woman who helped Mulan save me from Maleficent’s curse.”

At that, Aurora’s discomfort lifted and she happily shook Belle’s hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you. Belle, is it?”

“Yes. Nice to meet you too. This is Leroy.”

“Your Highness.”

Both royals shook Leroy’s hand before Aurora turned back to Belle. “I suppose I’m somewhat in your debt, for helping to rescue Philip.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Belle shrugged. “I was just trying to help.”

Aurora smiled. “Well, I’m grateful to you nonetheless. Without you, we both may have been cursed for the rest of eternity. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Some warmer clothes would be good,” said Leroy before Belle could speak. “She’s freezing but she won’t admit it.”

“Leroy –”

“I can certainly manage that.” Aurora smiled and grasped Belle’s arm. “Come, let’s get you out of those cold clothes. It’s the least I can possibly do.”

How dare she! Regina snarled in frustration. She needed to get away from everybody else before she did something she wouldn’t regret. How dare she, the presumptuous little princess and her shepherd boy, just presume to order me about like a common servant! I am the Queen! She summoned a fireball to her hand, letting her anger and frustration and pain fuel the fire. It burned higher and
brighter, engulfed both of her arms nearly to the elbow, the tongues of flame licking the air like hungry dogs waiting for the feast …

A nearby bush rustled. Regina started and held the fireball, ready to throw it –

At a rabbit.

She sighed in exasperation and quenched the flames. The rabbit, a small brown and white creature of no particular significance, looked at her with big brown eyes that showed no fear whatsoever in spite of the great inferno it had been spared from moments ago. It wiggled its nose.

“What do you want?” she snapped.

The rabbit blinked but otherwise remained still. Annoyed, she stamped a foot. “Go on, away with you!”

The little creature straightened, swivelling its ears, and quickly vanished into the underbrush. Regina didn’t think that had been because of her, but she was happy to take what she could get.

“That’s right, you little rats!” she spat. “I may not be the Evil Queen anymore but I can still make mince pies out of the lot of you.” Then she realised what she was doing. “Now I’m talking to the vermin. I swear, if I start sweeping houses with a bow in my hair, I am going to murder someone.”

“Regina?” trilled the voice of her stepdaughter. “Who are you talking to?”

Can I not have a moment of peace?

“I needed some expert advice.” Regina turned to face her old adversary. “Something we’ve a shortage of around here.”

Snow gave her a funny look, the kind Regina remembered Henry wearing as a young boy whenever she did something and he struggled to understand. Oh, Henry –

“Right.” Snow muttered after a moment. “Aurora wants to know if you’d like to borrow anything for our journey – walking boots, or a cloak?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” Her magic kept her warm enough and protected her feet from blisters.

“Are you sure?”

She began to snap at her stepdaughter, then realised what Snow was actually asking. She’d been thinking about Henry and she’d let her mask slip. Even Snow wasn’t dense enough to miss that. “I will be.” Regina raised her chin. For his sake, I have to be

Now this feels right, thought David as he let his borrowed cloak billow in the wind and rested a hand on the pommel of his sword. Carrying a gun had served its purpose, but he’d prefer a sword to a pistol any day. The snowy stallion from Philip’s stables nickered and shook its mane as if in approval; David grinned and petted the horse’s ears in return. He was home.

He watched his wife – now much more appropriately dressed for travel in a white gown and mantle gifted from Aurora – move from person to person in the gathered crowd, ensuring everyone had
what they required for the trip. He smiled. How she had ever thought she’d make a terrible queen, he couldn’t fathom. Snow was a natural.

“Hey, Your Highness.”

David turned to see Grumpy trudging towards him, once again decked out like a dwarf miner in his leather boots, apron and hardy tunic. “Grumpy! You’re yourself again!”

The dwarf grunted. Some things never change. “Listen, according to Jiminy, there’s fifty more Storybrooke folk landed not two miles from here. They’re popping back all over the place!”

“That’s excellent!” David exclaimed. “At this rate, we’ll have the whole kingdom back in no time. Grumpy, you and the dwarves spread the word – all new arrivals make haste for Tower Castle.”

Grumpy grinned. “Consider it done.”

David gave his old friend an appreciative clap on the shoulder. As Grumpy left to carry his order to the rest of the dwarves, David turned back to his horse and spotted Hook over the stallion’s arched neck, standing next to a heavily-laden piebald mare. He strode over to the pirate.

“Awful lot of supplies you have there, Hook.”

Without turning around, Hook retorted, “Well, you know what they say about preparation and all that.”

David patted the mare’s nose. “There’s no need to overload your horse. Regina’s castle is less than a day’s walk from here. We’ll have everything we need once we arrive.”

“Aye, that’d be lovely. If I were going to the Queen’s castle.”

David frowned. “You’re not coming with us?”

“Well, you are a perceptive prince, aren’t you?”

He laid a hand against Hook’s saddlebags. “Where are you going?”

Hook finally faced him, his expression unreadable. “Look, mate, the Enchanted Forest is your home. Mine is the Jolly Roger.”

“You don’t even know if it’s –”

“Regina told me how this bloody thing worked. It returned all of our belongings to this land as well as us. So somewhere out there is my ship. All I have to do is find her.”

David sighed. “And here I thought you’d gone and changed.”

Hook’s face split into a crooked smile. “Look, I tried the hero thing. It didn’t take.”

“So that’s it then?” asked a female voice. David turned to see that Belle (was that Grumpy’s beanie she had on her head?) had joined them. “Emma’s gone and you’re just going back to being a pirate?”

“Back, my lady?” Hook scowled and mounted his horse. David winced as the mare grunted under
the weight. “I never stopped being a pirate.”

With that, he spurred his horse (to her credit, she bore her load and did what was asked of her) and the two of them galloped into the forest. David wasn’t sure he was sorry to see the back of the pirate, but before he could contemplate his thoughts on the matter Belle spoke up.

“Is it true what he said?” she asked. “About all of our belongings being brought back here?”

“You’d have to ask Regina about that. Is there something you’re looking for?”

Belle wrung her hands and nodded. “I’m going back to Rumple’s castle. It’s on the way.”

David sighed and rested a hand on her cold arm. “Belle, I know you’re hurting. But Rumplestiltskin is gone. We all saw it.”

“We saw him and Pan vanish in a burst of gold light.” Belle’s jaw visibly hardened. “I didn’t see his knife and I didn’t see a body. And even if he is dead, maybe there’s something at the Dark Castle that can bring him back.”

“Bring the Dark One back?” he asked incredulously. “Belle, do have any idea what you’re asking me to let you do?”

“He is not a monster,” she snapped and David recoiled from the force. “He sacrificed his life to save all of us. All of you.”

“I know,” he said quickly before Belle could chew him out further. “But there’s no knowing what the cost of bringing him back would be. You know as well as I do that there is always a price where magic is involved.”

She dropped her gaze to stare at the ground and David realised she didn’t want him to see her cry. He wondered if he had gone a step too far.

“Belle,” he said softly, sounding his next words in his head before saying them. “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’re going through. I am sorry Rumplestiltskin had to die the way he did and if I could go back and change it, I would. But what’s done is done, and maybe the best thing we can do for him is to let him be.”

Belle raised her head again, her blue eyes wet and downcast. “You mean what’s best for the kingdom. I’ve heard that before.”

“No, I mean what’s best for Rumplestiltskin.” He held her by the elbows and looked her square in the face. “He died a hero. Let him be remembered as one.”

High in the trees above the milling cream-coloured hairless beings, a monkey chittered and flexed its wings. Its mistress would like to know about this. Most certainly, yes.

New York City, 21 January 2014

Neal loved coming to Central Park – as much as he enjoyed the anonymity of living in the big city,
once in a while he’d think about his father or Hamelin and it made him long for the days when he could see the stars at night. Not that he would trade his life with Emma and Henry for anything in the worlds, but coming to the park meant that every once in a while he could lose himself in the smell of the dewy grass and fresh oaks, and just forget.

“You remember our first date?” Neal asked as he and Emma walked arm-in-arm along a lamp-lit footpath.

“Yeah,” said his wife, a big grin on her face. “I bought the coffee and you broke us into a swing carousel.”

A couple of other late-nighters passed them on the way to return to the bustle of the New York City nightlife. Neal glanced around to make sure they were gone and pulled his wife off the path into the sparse foliage. Emma started to say something; he shushed her and kept going, counting his footsteps to keep track of their location in lieu of much light. Fifty-three footfalls and quite a few leaves in his pants legs later, they arrived at their destination.

“Another carousel?” asked Emma.

Neal grinned, fished a pair of wires out of his pocket and got to work on the lock. “I know we’ve been good and law-abiding citizens – well, mostly – for a long time now but I found this place last week and couldn’t resist.”

“Now I understand why you didn’t want to bring Henry.”

The lock clicked open. Neal pushed the gate open – not the main gate, but a side entry – and they slipped inside. “He was otherwise engaged.”

“I don’t know, I think he would’ve liked the horses.” Emma discarded her shoes and climbed onto a galloping chestnut so that she was sitting side-saddle facing the central column. Neal mounted the black stallion next to it.

“You want grape or blackcurrant?” he asked, procuring two juice boxes from his pocket.

“Blackcurrant. You know, I’ve never ridden a horse before.”

“A real one or a carousel one?” She shrugged and Neal gawped. “Seriously? Not even at a theme park or something when you were a kid?”

She shook her head. “No. None of the foster homes I was in ever had the money for that sort of thing. At least none that they’d bother to spend on us.”

“Wow.”

“You didn’t have horses on the farm, did you?”

*Only when the Duke’s men came to visit*, Neal thought. “Nah, just the sheep. And they’re not too good for riding, though that never stopped me from trying.”

Emma laughed. “Is it anything like riding a bike?”

“Not really. The sheep can move by itself and that means sometimes it’ll run out from right
underneath you.” Neal illustrated his point with finger puppets. “Bikes also don’t bite or kick, at least none of the ones I’ve ever met.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“The rams were the worst.” Neal laughed as a memory he’d not recounted in over a century demanded his attention. “We had one that used to charge at my father every time he went to feed them, I think ’cause it used to make his previous owner drop the grain bucket. Smorgasbord. It never worked with Pop, though.”

“No?”

She sipped her juice, hazel eyes expectantly waiting for the next part of the story. He rarely talked this much about his past. Though to be fair, she’d never believe the full story even if he told her. Nonetheless, Neal’s mouth moved without him thinking. “No. Pop just stood perfectly still and waited until the ram got too close to stop, then shut the gate. Then he’d give him a stern word and whack with his walking stick, and the ram would wait patiently with the rest of them. Sheep are a lot smarter than people give them credit for. I think he knew that and it’s why he wasn’t ever mean to them, just strict when he had to be.” Neal sighed. “I guess my father was a bit better with sheep than he was with people.”

A few moments of silence – or at least as silent as it got in New York – passed until Emma said, in a small voice, “You’re not like him. You’re not gonna do to Henry what he did to you.”

“I know.” Over thirteen years down the track and Neal was still amazed at how she seemed to instinctively know what he wasn’t saying. Intellectually, he knew he’d never go down the road his father had – they weren’t in the Enchanted Forest, so no chance of somehow becoming the Dark One – but a part of him still wondered how much of the crazed imp had been the curse and how much had been Rumplestiltskin. It was that small part that kept mulling over the very few times he’d had to discipline Henry and worried that he’d taken it too far, that his boy would be left permanently traumatised.

That he’d leave, just like Baelfire had left.

*Why am I thinking about this so much?* Neal grimaced and inserted the straw into the juice box so he could have something to do with his hands. A blast from the past. *Damn you, Killian Jones.*

He stopped that train of thought. Thinking of the pirate raised more questions than Neal wanted to deal with at the moment, especially with Emma so beautiful in a sleeveless red dress (a woman would probably use a word like ‘cherry’, he thought) and long hair tumbling down her back and somehow having stuck with him for over a decade. “I just worry sometimes.”

“I know,” said his wife. “I do too.”

He grinned. “Well, I guess we’ve done alright so far.” He held up his juice box as if to make a toast. “Ten years. Here’s to many more.”

“I will drink to that.”
Next, Chapter Three - "The Things We Leave Behind", in which Regina gets attacked by a flying monkey, Henry realises that his parents are worried about something and Tower Castle is discovered to be not quite as vacant as they thought.
The Things We Leave Behind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New York City, 21 January 2014

“Henry?”

There was no response from her son so Emma unlocked the door. It opened fine – Henry hadn’t bolted it – but when she walked inside, there was no sign of him.

“Mrs Cuse said everything was quiet, no trouble at all,” Neal said, shutting the door of their neighbour’s apartment. “Just something about a cat sitting in one of her bowls that turned out to be a pumpkin.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Well, at least this time it wasn’t a chicken that had been left on the counter for an hour.”

He chuckled (softly because it was late and their downstairs neighbour would take any excuse to wake them up at some unholy hour of the morning to complain about noise) and looked around their apartment for something that wasn’t there. “Where’s the kid?”

“No idea. PlayStation’s off, the kitchen’s not on fire,” she observed. “And no noise from the bathroom. You know what, I think we might have caught the rare sight of a teenager in bed on time for a change.”

“No way!” Neal tiptoed across the floor to Henry’s room. The door was closed but not shut and he nudged it open to peek into the space beyond. “Yep, fast asleep with the X-Men credits rolling on his laptop.”

“Level twenty-two must’ve been harder than I thought.” Laughing, Emma dumped her purse on the table. Suddenly feeling adventurous, she intercepted her husband on his way into the kitchen and slipped her arms around his neck, planting on him a gentle kiss that made him tremble. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he murmured, sliding a hand into her hair and deepened the kiss. He pulled away after only a moment and Emma grumbled. “I’m gonna take a shower. See you in a bit?”

“Okay,” she said, playfully running his tie between her fingers. Neal snuck in another short kiss, then turned down the corridor in the direction of the bathroom.

As the sound of running water filled their home, Emma poked her head into their son’s room. Henry lay spread-eagled across his bed with headphones on, a half-empty glass of Pepsi on his nightstand and his laptop (still playing the end credits from an X-Men movie, she wasn’t sure which) open next to him on the duvet. She smiled. Too much like his old man, whose fingers she regularly had to pry away from a book after he’d fallen asleep reading.

Satisfied that at least he hadn’t been up until three in the morning playing video games again, Emma started in the direction of her and Neal’s room to change when she noticed that dumping her purse on the table had caused its contents to spill onto the floor.
“Damn,” she muttered, crouching down to clean up the mess. Neal’s clock tower drawing caught her eye, along with the piece of paper that had slipped out of it. For the first time, she looked at it properly.

#407, 89 Wooster Street, New York, NY, it read in surprisingly neat handwriting. An address, she realised.

“If you want to know who you really are, who your parents are, you need to go there,” the stranger in the restaurant had said.

Emma had long ago given up the search to find her parents, reasoning that it was no longer worth the disappointment of looking for these people who clearly didn’t want their daughter to find them. Not now that she had a family of her own. She wasn’t even sure if she wanted to find them anymore. What explanation could possibly make up for thirty years of nothingness?

She had Neal and Henry, and they were more than enough. So why was it so hard to throw away one scrap of paper?

It had to be a trick. Didn’t it?

She’d been down this road before, a trail of false hope intertwined with misleading information that eventually spat her out in yet another city of heartbreak. But then no-one had ever come to her with information before.

Wooster Street was only a few blocks across town, Emma thought. It would be easy enough to take a short detour on her way to do the grocery shopping tomorrow. And if it was another dead end, well, it wasn’t anything she hadn’t experienced before. Neal and Henry didn’t even need to know. She folded the paper and put it back in her purse along with everything else (except for the drawing, which she left on the table), then headed for her bedroom.

She thought better of it when she passed the bathroom, in which she could still hear water running and Neal humming to himself. She quietly opened that door instead; she needed the distraction, and it was a special night after all.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

Not even two days after leaving Neverland, certain that it would be a long time before she had to trek through another forest, Snow found herself trekking through another forest. David walked beside her, Philip’s chestnut pony between them and the majority of the Storybrooke refugees following behind. Grumpy and the dwarves walked at regular intervals along the trail, their horns at the ready if ogres descended on the group.

Snow thought it extremely fortunate that they had yet to come across any of the dreadful monsters since, despite Philip’s offer, they had only taken the bare minimum of supplies so as not to be slowed down. But they were making good headway, and if Snow’s estimate was correct then they were less than a few miles from Tower Castle.

“Regina’s castle lies at the foot of those mountains,” she told her husband.
“Snow? I think you mean our castle,” David reminded her.

She let out a long breath. “That’s going to take some getting used to.” Kicking aside a decaying tree branch, she continued, “I haven’t been there since just after my father’s death. And I’ve always dreamed of returning. I never imagined it would be with Regina by our side.”

“Your Highnesses!”

Snow turned in time to see Happy rushing towards them, a storm of dirt in his wake. Panting, the dwarf blurted out, “The Queen’s missing.”

David scowled. “You were saying?”

Sneaking past the incompetent midgets had been even easier than Regina had thought it would be. One quick confusion spell to make everybody nearby think that they weren’t seeing the Queen walk off alone into the forest and a few minutes later she was safely crouched in the thick underbrush, far away from anyone who could stop her from doing what she needed to do.

She visualised Pan’s smug face as she stabbed her dagger into the ground, imagined wrapping her fingers around his scrawny neck and squeezing the air out of the demon boy without whom she would not be back in the Enchanted Forest. Without whom she would not be back to listening to the Charmings’ holier-than-thou attitudes and every senseless fool who gobbled the law out of their whitewashed hands.

Without whom she would still have her son.

Regina redoubled her efforts. On the ground, the glowing red of her heart pulsated in the shadows, teasing her with every beat and the reminder of the crushing, sucking weight that was now gone from her chest.

“What are you doing?”

It took all of her self-control not to wring the woodland princess’ fair neck. Sighing, Regina tossed her heart into the hole. “So now you’re following me?”

“We were worried,” Snow chirped. “And it looks like we were right to be. What are you burying?”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

“Why does that make me think it does? Whose heart is that?”

Regina gripped the handle of her knife until her knuckles turned white. “Go away!”

“It’s yours, isn’t it?” Snow’s voice was much softer now. She paused, then added, “I know you miss Henry.”

Regina scowled. Leave it to Snow to get right to the heart of the matter without caring if she twisted the knife or not. “I am not having this conversation with you. Now go away!”

Her stepdaughter missed the hint and continued unabated, “This isn’t the answer and you know it. No matter how much pain you may feel, you can’t just bury it in the woods.”
“Watch me.” Regina scooped more dirt over the despicable organ.

“You won’t feel better. You won’t feel anything.”

She stood and snarled, “That’s the point! I cannot –” Her throat clamped shut and she forced herself to continue. “I can’t keep walking around knowing that I’ll never see Henry again, that he doesn’t even know who I am.”

At that, Snow’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean he doesn’t know who you are?”

Damn it all, she’d said too much. “It was the price of reversing the curse,” Regina admitted, feeling small under Snow’s green gaze. “Sending us back here, it erased Storybrooke as though it had never existed. Meaning that when Emma, Neal and Henry crossed the town line, their memories of Storybrooke were erased as well. I gave them new memories, good memories, to fill the gap but they don’t remember any of us.”

“Why would you do that?” Snow asked accusingly. “Why would you take their memories of us?”

“I just said I didn’t! It – it was just what the curse did. It was a price I couldn’t control.” Regina sniffled and took a moment to compose herself. “Do you understand now? My son has no idea who I am. I can’t live knowing that.”

Snow, apparently having grown some backbone during her time as weak-willed Mary Margaret, glared at her. “I just said goodbye to my daughter, Regina. For the second time in what, for me, has been less than a year. I know exactly what you’re going through. But you can’t just bury your problems in the woods and expect them to go away. You have to learn how to live with your pain, with that.” She poked Regina in the chest, in the spot where her heart used to beat. “Henry would have wanted you to carry on, don’t you think? He would’ve wanted you to find happiness. Like you gave him.”

“I can’t be happy without him.”

Snow gave her a stern look and bent down to reclaim Regina’s heart from the earth. “I believe you can. For him.” She held out the heart for Regina to take.

The organ continued to glow, mocking her with each beat of its crystallised muscle. Regina sighed. She saw no other way out of the situation (unless she killed Snow, but somehow murder no longer seemed appealing) so she took hold of the heart and shoved it back into her chest. The crushing weight returned with it, the sinking quicksand of hopelessness eating away at her insides and sucking away any reason or rational thought she may have had.

_I will find another way_, she vowed silently. _I want to be free of this pain._

She had no time to make another remark, as the next thing she heard was Snow screaming her name and pushing her to the ground.

**New York City, 22 January 2014**

“So, how was dinner last night? You guys got home pretty late.”
Neal looked up from reading the paper to Henry’s broad grin. He shared a guilty sideways glance with Emma before answering. “It was good. We went to that Italian place Sam’s parents recommended. Little expensive, but the food wasn’t bad.”

“That’s it?” Henry dropped his fork back to his eggs. “Man, anniversaries sound boring.”

“Well, lucky for you, you don’t have to worry about them anytime soon,” said Neal. In the kitchen, the oven clock dinged eight o’clock. “Whoops, better hurry up. You’ll be late for school.”

Henry nodded and quickly crammed the rest of his breakfast into his mouth. Neal folded up the paper and went to grab his coat.

“Where are you going?” Emma asked.

“I was gonna go with him.”

“Dad, I’m twelve,” his son mumbled around a mouthful of egg. “I can walk myself to school.”

“I know. Just felt like doing something different today.”

“Why?”

Neal tried to think of a way to explain the situation. “Well, the pirate who sold me out to the demonic guardian of Neverland when I was fifteen showed up at my home yesterday, somehow knows enough about my life here that he knows Emma’s name and managed to gate-crash our wedding anniversary. It’s put me a little on edge.”

Somehow he didn’t think that explanation would do the trick.

“Just do. Come on,” he said. Pecking a kiss on his wife’s cheek, he followed Henry down the stairs and onto the street. Neal had rather hoped the early-morning New York traffic would distract Henry enough that he wouldn’t have many questions. His hopes were dashed as the first words were out of his boy before the building door swung shut.

“Did you and Mom have a fight?”

“What? No, of course not,” said Neal. “What makes you think that?”

Henry shrugged. “You seemed pretty eager to get out of the apartment and Mom didn’t know you were going. You two tell each other everything.”

Neal flashed him what he hoped was a reassuring smile, placing an arm around Henry’s shoulders. “Well, we didn’t have a fight, I promise.” Quite the opposite, in fact.

“So what’s going on then?”

“Who said anything’s going on? Maybe I just wanted to take a walk with my favourite buddy.”

They joined a crowd milling at a ‘no-walking’ sign and Neal contemplated what to say. Henry was no lie detector, but he was as sharp as twelve-year-olds could be and saw through both of his parents like glass windows.

“Alright, maybe there’s something going on. Not between me and Mom, just concerning us,” Neal added hastily. “We don’t know anything for sure and I don’t want you to worry about it. I just want to be careful for a little while.”

“Has it got something to do with Mom’s job?” Henry asked.

“Hmm, you could say that.”

“But you can’t tell me.”

“No.”

They and the crowd moved as the sign switched to ‘walk’. Cars honked and people shouted from the windows of their vehicles things that Neal was happy to ignore. New York craziness was nothing compared to nearly two centuries in Neverland. Passing the university and Washington Square Park (they kept meaning to take a day trip out there, but had somehow just never found the time), Henry asked, “You’ll tell me if it gets serious, right?”

“Absolutely,” said Neal. At least that much he could promise.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

As undignified as she felt being shoved to the ground, Regina felt something almost akin to thankfulness towards Snow White when a rush of wind and sharp feathers blew over the pair of them, missing Regina by a hair.

“What was that?” Snow cried.

Regina scrambled to her feet. The creature was most definitely not an ogre – not that she had ever seen one for real, but she was reasonably certain that ogres did not fly – and had disappeared into the canopy, the reverberations of its wing beats shaking the trees and raining pine needles on top of them. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“It’s coming back!” Snow grabbed Regina’s arm and began to pull her into the foliage. “We need to find cover!”

Regina shook free of her stepdaughter’s grasp. “No. I do not run from monsters,” she said, summoning a fireball to her hands. “Monsters run from me.”

The creature caused more pine needles to drop as it made its return run. Regina launched the fireball, igniting the sun-dried roughage in a grand display that did nothing to deter their attacker. Vision obscured by smoke and falling flames, she did not see the clawed hand reach down and snatch at her arms until too late.

“Let her go!” shouted a male voice Regina didn’t recognise. The creature made some sort of hissing noise as she struggled in its grasp, its claws dug in and tore skin. Then it screeched in pain and let go.
She scrambled to her feet and ran to the bushes where her stepdaughter had fled, though she would edit out that little detail when she recalled the event later.

“Are you alright?” Snow asked. Regina turned her bleeding arms into her dress and nodded, entirely out of breath. Running was not her style, even over short distances.

Both women tensed when the bushes rustled, expecting the monster to have returned for a third attack. Instead, the leaves parted to reveal a hooded (but human) figure in a mottled green-and-brown cloak, a longbow held loosely in his right hand.

“Apologies, m’ladies,” said the figure, lowering the hood to reveal an unshaven blonde man. “We’ve been tracking that creature all morning. I would have shot it sooner if not for that rather fantastic fireworks display.”

“It’s Your Majesty.” Regina retorted, bristling at the use of the lowly term. The stranger leant against his bow. “And we had things in hand.”

“Of course, I’m sorry. I should’ve realised that when it began to carry you away,” said the man. His cocky smile shifted to concern. “You’re injured.”

“I’m fine.”

The stranger rolled his eyes. “A simple thank you would suffice.”

“Well, I’m grateful for the assistance,” Snow interrupted before Regina could snap back at him. She held out a hand. “I’m Snow White.”

“Robin of Locksley. It’s lovely to finally meet you,” said the man, smiling as he shook her hand. Three more cloaked and hooded figures – in less mismatching outfits than Robin’s but still tailored to the life of foresters – appeared at his side. “And these are a few of my Merry Men.”

The largest of the four men, a bearded man carrying a quarterstaff, glared at Regina. “If you’re really Snow White, then why are you with her?”

“Her?” Regina repeated incredulously. “Show some respect. Or at least some restraint at the buffet.”

Robin waved down the big man’s blustered response. “You’ll have to excuse Little John, but before you cursed this land we spent many a day on the run from your Black Knights. In fact, I imagine our Wanted posters may still be gracing some of the trees in your kingdom.”

“Well, I’m sure you deserved it,” Regina countered, wishing she could curse the smug smile off of Robin’s face.

Snow gave her an exasperated look. “What was that thing?”

“I have no idea,” said Robin, his gaze to the sky. “We tracked that thing from the castle at the foot of the mountains earlier today, but I’ve never encountered the likes of it before. It flies quickly and very powerful.” He looked at Regina. “You are rather lucky, you know.”

Regina ignored his last comment. “Did you say it came from Tower Castle?”

“Built at the height of a mountain, imposing black turrets shaped like needles?” Robin described for
them and Snow nodded. “That’s the one, yes.”

Under different circumstances, Regina would have arrested the outlaw for his description of her home. But she’d just been attacked by a flying monster that nobody could clearly identify, and it had come from the aforementioned palace. She exchanged worried looks with her stepdaughter.

“Is there something I should know?” Robin asked.

“No,” Regina snapped as Snow said, “Come on. We have to warn the others.”

By the time they’d reunited with the main group, Tower Castle loomed over them from its lofty position in the mountains. Snow spared a moment to have a proper look at her father’s second-favourite palace for the first time in too many years before running into David’s anxiously waiting arms.

“Snow? What happened? Why are you covered in dirt?” her husband fired off before she could get a word out. Snow just shook her head.

“I’ll explain later. Meanwhile, we’ve got more important news.”

“What the hell is this?”

Regina stormed past them, stopping at what looked like a line of burnt ground about two feet across that stretched as far as Snow could see. The older woman held up a hand as if to touch an invisible mirror and recoiled when something sparked her. “A protection spell,” she declared. “The entire castle is encircled by it.”

David moved in front of Snow. “What does that matter? You cast it, undo it.”

Regina rounded on him. “Don’t you think if I could, I’d be halfway home by now?”

“Someone else has taken over our castle,” Snow explained. “We were attacked in the forest by something, an animal of some sort with wings. Robin says they tracked it from here.”

“Robin?” David asked, looking confused.

“That would be me,” said the outlaw, stepping forward to introduce himself. “Robin of Locksley, at your service.”

“David,” said her husband, shaking the outlaw’s proffered hand. Snow made a mental note to remind him to use his proper title now that they were back in the Enchanted Forest. “Do you know who’s in there?”

“Haven’t a clue, I’m afraid.”

“Well, we’ll find out who’s eating our porridge soon enough,” said Regina. “Nobody sits in my chair. Nobody takes our castle.”

She turned back to face the protection spell, perhaps intending to attack it, but David stopped her before she could start. “Hey. Now’s not the time for that. We’ve got a lot of frightened people looking to us. Let’s get them to safety first.”
“They’ll be safe when whoever is in there is dead.”

Snow made a second mental note to work on Regina’s bullheadedness. “Rushing in there is a bad plan. You know that.”

“I can offer safe harbour in Sherwood Forest,” said Robin, the royals wheeling around to face him. “It’s not far. We can offer food, shelter and a thick canopy no creature will spy you under.”

“What about ogres?” Snow asked.

“Not a problem, the forest is too dense for them as well.”

“And weapons? Have you got any?”

Robin shrugged. “We’re outlaws. We’re lousy with them.”

“Fine, lead the way,” said Regina. “But we’re coming back. And whoever did this is going to suffer.”

Snow reached out to touch her stepmother’s arm. “Regina, it’s our home. We’ll make it safe again.”

And if she repeated it to herself often enough, Snow thought she might just start to believe her own words as well.

**New York City, 22 January 2014**

When Neal got back to the apartment, Emma was tidying up from breakfast. “Hey, I’m back.”

“Hey,” she returned whilst scrubbing the frying pan. “How’d it go?”

“No major catastrophes, just normal New York stuff.” He carried their plates, which had still been on the table, over to the sink and grabbed a sponge. “And no drunk randoms.”

Emma took the sponged plates to rinse and stack in the drying rack. “Henry asked what was going on?”

“What’d you expect?” he said, passing her a cleaned cup. “I told him we’d tell him if it gets serious, which right now it isn’t.”

“It isn’t?”

“Well, no. So far we’ve just had some rude interruptions, but no-one’s been hurt. The cops won’t be interested unless somebody does, anyway.”

“A sad comment on the state of policing,” she observed. “I still think we should be keeping an eye out.”

“Yeah, I agree. That’s why I walked him to school.” Neal rarely thought of himself as paranoid, but given what Jones had done in the past he wasn’t putting it past the pirate to outright kidnap a child.
“He’ll be fine there.”

Emma dropped the dishrag on the counter and faced him, hand on her hip. “You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not worried. Just mildly concerned.”

“No, you’re worrying,” she told him, voice stern. “Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“No.” He walked back to the table.

“Neal.” His wife sounded extremely concerned, and it made him want to tell her everything. She’d never believe it, the rational part of his brain reminded him.

“If something’s happened, I can help.”

“I know, but –” Neal stopped, a scrap of paper stuck underneath Emma’s purse (still on the table where she’d left it the night before) catching his eye. In spite of himself, he took it out and unfolded it, reading an address. “What’s this?”

He hadn’t been concerned before but the way his wife froze to the spot when he held up the paper troubled him very much. “Emma?”

“That’s, uh, that -” She sighed. “Please don’t freak out. But the guy who interrupted us last night gave me that.”

“He gave you this?” Neal confirmed. “Why’d you take it?”

“He said – he said I could find my parents there.”

_The one thing that could possibly get to her._ “He was drunk!”

“Not that drunk, now that I think of it,” she said with a grimace. “Look, I know it’s most likely nothing but it’s been bothering me all morning. I was gonna go check it out a bit later, just to have a look.”


“No?”

“You can’t. You shouldn’t.” He made a pained noise and ran his hands through his hair. “Something that doesn’t make me sound like a misogynistic jerk.”

“Good luck with that.”

She was pissed now. Neal took a deep breath. “It’s none of my business, but I really don’t think you should. It could be dangerous.”

Emma’s face creased into a mix of confusion and bewilderment. “Since when has that mattered? I’m the bail bondsperson, remember?”
“Yeah, I know but – I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“What the hell has gotten into you? What do you –” She frowned, putting the pieces together. “Wait, do you know him?”

“No,” he said quickly.

Emma swung the spatula in her hand at him like a sword, having not bought it at all. “Don’t lie to me, Neal. You know him, don’t you?”

He tried to back away, only to be met with a wall. Stuck between that and his angry wife, Neal knew his only way out was honesty. “Yeah. His name is Killian Jones.”

Thankfully, she lowered the spatula but the interrogation continued. In a less harsh tone now that she’d got the truth. “Who is he?”

“He’s –” Neal sighed. He couldn’t lie to her, she’d see straight through it. But the truth was just downright preposterous. Thinking quickly, he told her the bit she would comprehend. “He’s the guy my mom left us for.”

She looked confused but didn’t accuse him of lying. “No way is he old enough for that.”

“It’s the truth, I swear.”

He stepped away from the wall, hesitantly at first to see how she’d react and confidently when she didn’t make a move to hit him or call him a liar. Putting the island between them in case she wanted space, Neal tentatively reached out a hand. After a short while, she grasped it with hers.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. It’s just a part of my life I don’t like to think about.”

“That’s okay,” she said, giving a small smile. “I get it, I do.”

“Thanks.” He squeezed her hand, grateful when she did the same in response. “I don’t know what he’s doing in New York. I haven’t seen him in – well, a really long time. But whatever it is, it can’t be good. He’s not a good guy.”

Emma looked thoughtful. “Well, maybe we can find out,” she suggested, pointing to the address still in his other hand.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter Four - "A Hole in Reality", in which Regina conspires, Belle runs into two more old friends and Emma and Neal check out Hook’s note
New York City, 22 January 2014

Well, it certainly wasn’t much to look at.

Emma glared at the old red-stone building with butterflies in her twisted gut. It was in better shape than many of the places she and Neal had lived when Henry had been younger, and definitely cleaner than some of the foster homes she’d been in. A pot of wilted flowers (geraniums, maybe?) hung from a trellis above the door and the green paint around the entryway was faded and peeling. It looked like any other old apartment complex in New York, yet somehow it seemed familiar in a way that gave Emma chills and an ominous feeling, almost like somebody was about to die.

“Does this place look familiar to you?” Neal asked.

Emma turned to look at him and saw the same feeling of dread pushing on the bottom of her heart looking back at her. “Yeah, but I don’t know why.”

“Maybe this was a bad idea after all.”

She wanted to agree with him, wanted to march out of there and forget about this Killian Jones and whatever he might have done to Neal in the past. But she needed to know the truth.

“Well, we’re here anyway.” She opened the peeling green door. “Might as well check it out.”

Neal fidgeted but she heard him follow her into the foyer nonetheless. She looked over the call box and, finding 407, rang the buzzer.

“FedEx package for four-oh-seven,” she enunciated. There was no response.

“Maybe you should’ve said UPS,” Neal joked.

“Or nobody’s home.” Emma dug into her coat pocket for her lock picks.

“So you’re gonna break in?”

Silently praying none of the other tenants walked down the stairs, she began to play with the tumblers. “That’s the plan, Mr-Broke-into-a-carousel-for-our-anniversary.”

“That’s different, I wasn’t breaking into somebody’s home!”

The lock successfully picked, she straightened and wheeled around. “You don’t have to come up with me if you don’t want to.”

Neal threw her a quizzical look. “What makes you think I don’t want to?”

“Because you’ve recited the entire book of excuses since we decided to do this,” Emma barked.
“Look, I don’t know what happened between you two and I’m not gonna ask until you want me to. But if this guy’s as bad as you say he is, then I wanna know why he’s barging into our life.”

“Yeah, but –”

“And even if this does turn out to be just another false trail, I need to know,” she interrupted. “Okay? I just need to.”

She hadn’t intended to let that desperate thought through and almost kicked herself for it. Neal developed a sudden interest in the floor and neither of them spoke for several seconds. Finally, he nodded slowly. “Yeah, okay. I’m sorry.”

Emma pushed the gate open. “So, you coming or are you staying down here?”

“I’m coming,” he murmured. “Just need a minute.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a minute then.”

She squeezed his hand for reassurance and, grateful for the long coat that hid her shaking knees, began to climb the stairs.

Neal waited until his wife had disappeared from view, then took a deep breath and walked across the threshold, shutting the gate behind him in case any latent cowardly tendencies took hold. Of course she was still thinking about her parents, how stupid must he have been to miss that? She wasn’t like him in that regard, having spent thirty years trying to find her parents as opposed to two hundred running away from them. She’d never admit to it, but he knew she still held out hope.

“She has a destiny,” August’s words replayed in his head for the millionth time. “And you, this life? You’re going to keep her from it.”

He hadn’t believed August at the time – the guy screamed ‘liar’ from every pore – but now Neal wondered if he’d told the truth after all. Had it really been him that kept Emma from finding her parents all this time? He tried to recall what else August had said thirteen years ago. Something about magic and temptations, leaving Emma in the system, doing the right thing, Baelfire –

Neal stopped the pacing he hadn’t realised he’d started. That wasn’t right. He clearly remembered August rambling on about making the right choice, doing right by Emma and – and a piece of paper with his real name on it.

Where the hell did that come from? he thought, sitting down on the step and forcing himself to work through the events of that night. August had tackled him, told him who he was, claimed to be Emma’s guardian angel despite having abandoned her for seventeen years, told him to leave her and some story about a cursed town that she was supposed to save, or something.

Neal groaned as a headache split his temple. It wasn’t making any sense. August had known his real name but at the same time, he hadn’t. He must be remembering wrong, but for some reason both of those realities were doing war in his head. Then another half-buried thought popped to the surface.

My father, Neal remembered. He talked about my father. Crap, how did I forget that? Jumping to his feet, he raced up the stairs just in time to hear Emma call his name.
“Emma! Come –”

He crashed into a coffee table and sent a pile of paper flying in his blind run into the apartment. Iterating words not suited to young ears like his boy’s, he reached for his wife to drag her out of the building if that was what it took when he realised there were tears in her eyes. Then he saw what it was that had done it.

The dreamcatcher.

Their dreamcatcher, the one they’d taken from a motel room and hung on the rear-view mirror of the yellow bug, was in her hands. Neal gaped. That little memento of their Bonny and Clyde days had been destroyed, along with everything else they’d owned apart from their car and the clothes on their backs, in Boston. He was sure of it. I think.

“That – how did – that’s –”

“Not possible,” Emma finished for him.

Neal tried to go to her but pain shot through his leg when he tried. Bending down to rub his shin, he noticed a blood-stained rag lying on the couch. Obviously long-dried, but still disgusting.

“What the hell?” he said, lifting it up for closer inspection that revealed nothing interesting. She crinkled her nose.

“Lovely.”

Dropping the rag back into place for someone more qualified to inspect, Neal then noticed something even creepier. A bunch of unopened letters had been scattered onto the floor when he crashed into the table, all of them addressed to Neal Cassidy.

“This is bad,” he muttered.

“What is it?” Emma asked. He held up one of the letters. “You’re right, bad’s a good word for it. We should –”

A noise like a choking chicken forced its way out of her mouth. Neal first looked at her, then to the side table where her gaze had fixated on a camera. Tucking the dreamcatcher under one arm, she held the camera strap in both hands and a blank look on her face.

“Henry,” she murmured after a moment.

“Sorry?”

She turned the strap over so he could see it and all the pain vanished from his leg as he read Henry’s embroidered name. Or a Henry, he thought. It might not mean him, there are plenty of Henrys in the world.

There were no coincidences, he remembered his father telling him. For the first time in his unnaturally long life, Neal prayed that Rumplestiltskin had been wrong.

“We need to get out of here.”
“Yeah,” Emma agreed. “We do.”

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

“Hey,” Ruby’s soft voice called and Belle turned to see the red-cloaked werewolf fall into step at her side. “You okay?”

Much as she didn’t want to be frustrated at her friend, Belle couldn’t keep a sigh from leaving her lips. “Why does everybody keep asking me that? Of course I’m not.”

“No, I know you’re not,” said Ruby. “Just couldn’t think of anything else to say.”

Trailing along between two rather large gentlemen who paid her no mind and a wagon driven by a former Black Knight had been Belle’s attempt to escape the pitying stares and sideways glances that anyone who knew about her relationship with Rumple (which had been most of Storybrooke) kept throwing her way. Despite David’s earlier assurance that Rumple would be remembered as a hero, Belle knew that would never be true. Only she, the few people who knew her not to be a fool and the heroes who’d gone to Neverland – and they were objectionable in Belle’s opinion – had even acknowledged his sacrifice. To everyone else, it was good riddance and she was the delicate, foolish noblewoman who had been caught in the crossfire.

Her father was the worst of the lot.

Not wanting to think about that, Belle asked, “Where’s Granny?”

“Having an argument with one of the wagon drivers.” Ruby pointed back along the line. “Apparently ‘little old ladies’ are not supposed to be walking so much and he made a fuss trying to get her to ride in the wagon.”

Belle snickered. “I imagine that went down well.”

“If your grandmother threatening to disembowel one of your best friend’s chief grooms counts as well, then yes, that’s how it went.”

They both laughed and Belle felt a large weight lift from her chest. She fixed a crease that had formed in the mauve gown Aurora had given her and began to ask Ruby if she and Granny would open another eatery when another, smaller man joined the two giants in front of them.

“Oh, my goodness,” she murmured without thinking. “I know him.”

Ruby said something Belle didn’t catch as she increased her pace until she was just behind the three men and cleared her throat. “We’ve, uh, we’ve come a long way, haven’t we?”

“Belle!” Robin Hood exclaimed, throwing both arms around her in a hug that she happily returned.

“You two know each other?” asked Ruby.

Robin released her and they resumed their former pace. “From a long time ago, when she treated a poor thief with more grace than I deserved.”
“She does that a lot,” Ruby said, making Belle blush. “I’m Ruby. Or Red, as I’m known here.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Red. I’m Robin of Locksley.” He shook her hand, then stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Roland!”

Belle laughed again as a little boy darted between the legs of one of the giants and jumped into Robin’s arms. “Is this –?”

“My son,” Robin explained. “Roland, this is Belle and Ruby. Say hello.”

“Hi,” Roland squeaked with a dimpled grin, shyly burying his face behind his father’s when the two women replied in kind.

“I’d like you to meet the young woodsman who’d have never been born without you,” Robin said, giving Roland a gentle squeeze. “My apologies for lifting the wand again after you let me go, Belle, but without it Roland’s mother would have died.”

“It’s okay, I understand.” Belle pulled a face which made the boy giggle. “He’s a little darling.”

“A little cheek is what he is,” said Robin, tickling Roland into hysterics. “Aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

“Papa!” Roland squealed between laughing fits, kicking his legs in tandem. “Papa, down!”

Still laughing, Robin let him go and he scurried off to somewhere in front of the two giants, leaving the adults with broad smiles. Belle didn’t even care that her cheeks were beginning to hurt.

“I don’t mean to pry, but I don’t see his mother.”

Robin’s smile disappeared and Belle realised she’d said the wrong thing. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright, you didn’t know,” he assured her. “And it was quite some time ago, long before the curse trapped us in that infernal pause.”

“I can’t imagine the length of time has made the pain any easier.”

Robin gave her a sad smile. “I gather, from the look on your friend’s face, you’re speaking from recent experience?”

Belle felt Ruby put an arm around her shoulders. “Yeah. I am.”

Regina spied on the motley trio from her position next to Snow, in front of the giant Merry Men who had saved them from the creature’s attack. Apparently the outlaw was familiar with the bookworm; now wasn’t that interesting?

“So, what do you think of our new friend?” she asked nonchalantly. “Can we trust him? He is a thief.”

“Well, think of it from his perspective,” said her stepdaughter. “How do you think he looks at you?”

“Point taken.”
“He is kinda cute, hmm?” Snow teased.

Regina snapped her head around. “He smells like forest,” she objected.

“And I’m right here,” David chimed in, throwing his wife a look that Regina – if she’d been better versed in reading expressions – might have taken for amused jealousy. Snow reached across her pony’s width to take his hand. “Any ideas yet on how to storm the castle?”

“Possibly,” she told him, for once grateful for Charming’s direct approach to problems. “From what I can tell, the protection spell runs along the entire boundary. But there are tunnels beneath the castle grounds. They may also run beneath the spell.”

“So we could sneak an army inside.”

“No, an army would be detected.”

“Well, then how does that help us?” asked Snow.

“Because it can get me inside,” Regina explained. “If I can get inside, I can lower the shield. Then you can send in your army.”

David nodded, as if he liked the plan. Regina silently chuckled. She imagined the look on her younger self’s face if someone had told her that, in thirty years, she would be planning a castle invasion alongside Snow White and Prince Charming.

Then a jarring shriek, a horrific noise that made Regina feel as if someone had shoved a hairpin through her eardrums, pierced the forest.

“Incoming!” shouted one of the dwarves (the one who’d given his beanie to the bookworm). Regina covered her ears and looked to the sky to see another winged creature descending upon them. The dwarf barrel-rolled out of the way as the creature dived, rushing straight towards a little boy who had wandered ahead of the group. David drew his sword and Snow nocked an arrow, but Regina knew there was no time for that. Somebody behind her screamed as she ran forwards and pulled the child aside, shielding him with her own body. An arrow flew at the creature but missed, the monster soaring upwards and flipping to return for another dive.

“Not so fast,” Regina snarled. A fireball had failed her before, so she waved her hand and muttered a more discreet spell, one that had the monster falling out of the sky onto the ground at her feet as nothing more than a stuffed toy.

Grinning and satisfied with her work, she spun around to see that the boy had been claimed by the outlaw. No smirk or cocky grin graced Robin’s face, only a look of intense relief. The boy, for his part, held onto his father’s shirt with tiny hands but did not cry. Such a brave little man, she thought.

“Here,” she said, holding out the monkey for him to take. “Not so scary. Now you have a new toy.”

Hesitantly, he accepted the gift and in return gave a small, dimpled smile that warmed Regina’s heavy heart.

“Thank you,” said Robin, still holding his son close.

“What the hell was that thing?” Charming demanded. He and several others – Snow, the dwarf, the
werewolf, the bookworm and Robin’s part-giant friend – jogged up to them, forming a semi-circle. “Anybody get a good look at it?”

Snow slung her bow over one shoulder. “It looked like the same kind of monster that attacked us on our journey here.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it looked an awful lot like a monkey,” said the gruff dwarf.

Charming snorted. “A monkey with wings?”

“You, who’s slain dragons and fought alongside a werewolf, draw the line at a winged monkey?” Regina scoffed. “That’s exactly what it was.”

“I know I’m the werewolf,” said Red, “but isn’t that stretching it a little? I mean, I’ve never even heard of flying monkeys before.”

“I have,” said Belle, which Regina did not find surprising. “Just not from here. I’ve read about hundreds of lands with creatures similar to that, but I know of only one with winged monkeys. Oz.”

“As in the Wizard of?” asked Snow. “That’s a real place?”

“I’d listen to her,” interjected a new voice. An Asian woman Regina didn’t recognise and dressed in a man’s white tunic and breeches slipped into the group next to Robin. “She’s been right about these things before.”

“Mulan?” Snow and the bookworm exclaimed at the same time. The newcomer smiled.

“Belle. Snow. It’s good to see you both again.”

“Geez, sister, you just know everyone, don’t you?” the dwarf said to Belle.

Regina cleared her throat. “Sorry to interrupt the reunion, but the bookworm is right. Oz is quite real. And if our simian friend is any indication, I’d say we’ve just figured out who’s taken over our castle. The Wicked Witch.”

The dwarf grunted. “We talking east or west?”

“Does it matter?” asked Snow. “Neither one of those sounds good.”

“Well, one you drop a house on. The other you toss a bucket of water at.”

Ignoring the dwarf, Charming glowered at Regina. “So what exactly are we up against besides a broomstick and a pointy hat? What did you do to this Wicked Witch?”

Regina bristled. “This time, nothing. I’ve never even met her.”

Charming’s eyebrows receded into his hairline. “Really? This isn’t a personal vendetta? Shocking. Okay, Oz aside, we stick to the original plan. Arm up, then attack.”

The crowd nodded in understanding and dispersed, leaving Regina with just the Charmings. “That’s assuming you can get the shield down,” Charming said in a quieter tone once everyone was gone.
“You don’t need to worry about me.” Regina started forwards once again, only to be pulled back by Snow.

“I’m coming with you.”

Regina brushed her hand away. “No, this is a one-woman job.”

Her stepdaughter scoffed. “It’s the Wicked Witch. She has flying monkeys and who knows what else. You said it yourself, you’ve never met her before. You don’t know what you’re up against.”

“I don’t care if the Lollipop Guild is protecting her,” Regina snapped. “I can lower that shield on my own.”

Snow nodded and stepped back. “Then we’ll be waiting for you on the other side.”

“Good.” Regina turned and walked away from her stepdaughter, finally allowing herself to cry when nobody could see her face.

Henry had liked toy monkeys as a child too.

New York City, 22 January 2014

“So, what are we gonna do?”

Neal had been in the process of hanging their recovered dreamcatcher from a hook on their bedroom door when Emma had come in, her hair still wet from showering, and asked her the question neither of them had dared broach with Henry in earshot. Fortunately, the kid was busy battling warlords on the television and though Neal knew from experience that he would probably have to drag him away at one or two o’clock in the morning, it meant that he and Emma could talk in private.

“I don’t know,” said his wife, fishing a t-shirt off the closet shelf. “I mean, technically speaking we’ve got no proof of identity theft beyond a couple of letters that are nearly two years old and some missing belongings. That’s not exactly court case material.”

“Yeah, but why’s he got a camera with Henry’s name on it?” Neal asked.

Emma shrugged. “Maybe it’s a different Henry. We don’t know that it’s ours.”

Neal nodded. “Okay, how about this? You said he told you to meet him in Central Park, right?”

“By the zoo, yeah.”
“Yeah, so what if I go and talk to him tomorrow after dropping Henry off at school?”

“You go?” she said, confused.

“He’s expecting you, not me,” Neal explained. “And I know him, so maybe I can get something out of him that you can’t.”

“That’s exactly why I should go, because you know him. Who’s to say that it isn’t you he wants to turn up at the Park?”

“Emma, believe me when I say I’m not being macho about this,” he said. “It’s because I know him that I don’t want you, or Henry, anywhere near him.”

She frowned and in a small voice asked, “What did he do to you?”

Neal looked at the floor and rubbed his neck. “He – Look, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Looking up again, he added, “I promise I’m not keeping things from you because I don’t want to tell you. I do, really. But you wouldn’t believe me.”

She hadn’t bought it at all, he knew, but thankfully dropped the subject anyway. Pulling back the covers on her side of the bed, she said, “Okay. You go talk to him tomorrow. But I’m gonna be at the Park too, somewhere where he won’t see me, and I want you to promise that you’ll call me at the first sign of trouble.”

“I promise.” He leant over to kiss her goodnight, then turned off the lamp and climbed into bed. Tired out from a long, emotional day, Neal was asleep in a few minutes.

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His father, grey-haired and human, lay on the floor against the metal trellis of his apartment complex. He held a hand to his chest, bright red blood staining his fingers.

“Papa,” he breathed, uttering the word for the first time in two hundred years.

“Is this my son?” he asked, watching her face fall and familiar brown eyes widen in disbelief, turning to look at his mother.

“Yes,” she murmured, so quiet that he barely heard her.

His voice breaking, he croaked, “I didn’t think you would go back on our deal.”

“I just made the wrong choice,” said his father. He held out one shaking, weakened hand.

He turned away. “I’m still angry.”

But his father was also dying and he couldn’t bear the thought of saying goodbye. Not again. Not when there was a still a chance, however slim, that he really was a better man and they could make up for lost time. The hand bumped against his elbow and fourteen-year-old Bae grabbed hold, wheeling around in his chair to rest his head against his father’s. He couldn’t say goodbye. He just couldn’t.
“Emma!” he screamed over the roar of the portal, burning pain shooting through his chest and making it difficult to breathe. “You can’t hold both of us!”

“I’m not letting you go!”

“You have to! Henry needs you! He can’t lose both of us! Don’t make him grow up like we did!”

“Please don’t let go! I need you!” she choked. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Then his hand was wrenched from hers as the portal grabbed his feet, sucking him into a vortex of green, gold and chaos.

Neal woke, breathing heavily and drenched in sweat. In the dark, he looked over at the other side of the bed, where he could feel Emma using his arm as a pillow and hear her snoring ever so slightly. She was still there. Right where she’d fallen asleep. No light shone through the crack under the door and he couldn’t hear the sounds of the television in the living room, meaning Henry must have gone to bed on his own. Neal was still in his own home, he hadn’t fallen through a portal into another world. Well, not lately anyway.

He gently pulled his arm free and sat up, throwing the blankets off as he did so. Splitting pain, like someone had shoved a crowbar through his skull, wracked his head and he rubbed his temples in a vain effort to numb it.

“Neal?” Emma murmured, shifting the sheets around. “You okay?”

He sniffled. “Yeah, just had a bad dream.” He reached out for her and found her shoulder. The pain in his head had begun to diminish so he pulled his soaked shirt off and crawled back into bed. She wiggled closer, resting her warm cheek against his chest. Somehow being able to really feel her there helped him to shake off the dream.

With that thought, Neal shut his eyes and willed for sleep – preferably dreamless – to come back. As a result, he missed seeing the dreamcatcher begin to glow with a dim, golden light.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter Five - "Leap of Faith", in which Neal’s memory comes back, Emma is confused, Robin and Regina break into Tower Castle and run into a little more than just a green witch
Enchanted Forest, June 2012

Darkness had consumed the forest by the time Regina finally located the tunnel mouth in the woods south of Tower Castle. Though she welcomed her old friend gladly, her ankles and shins bore the bruises associated with several stumbles and she doubted her shoes would ever be wearable again, even with magic. At least Snow – or anybody else for that matter – hadn’t been around to see her trip over. More times than she really cared to admit.

Refocusing on the task at hand, she carefully undid the wards around the tunnel mouth and levitated the giant rock which guarded the entrance, depositing the monolith a short distance away. A flicker of light then caught her eye and she sighed in annoyance.

“No.”

“No what?” asked Robin Hood, confidently clearing the last few feet between them.

Regina folded her arms. “You’re not coming along.”

“I do believe I am.” He passed her to overlook the tunnel mouth. “I can help.”

“I didn’t ask for help.”

Turning to look at her with that fox-like smile of his, Robin planted his torch in the ground. “That doesn’t mean you won’t need it. I’ve seen many a hunter stalk its prey in these woods. That flying monkey back there wasn’t after my son,” he said bluntly. “It was coming after you. Roland just happened to be standing in the way.”

“Your point being?”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty,” he jested, carefully pronouncing the last two words, “that’s the second time you’ve been attacked. The Wicked Witch wants you dead.”

She scoffed and pointed to his bow. “And what, you think you can stop her from trying to hurt me?”

Robin shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. But I have to try. You see, despite the fact that neither of us much likes it, I owe you a debt.”

She threw him a puzzled look and he went on. “Even though that winged beast wasn’t after my son, it still could have hurt him. You saved him,” he explained, in a softer voice that didn’t make her want to choke the life out of him. “Therefore, I’m in your debt.”

She huffed in amusement. “Who knew a thief had honour?”

“Who knew the Evil Queen had a soft spot for children?” he countered.

Regina frowned. She’d known precious few people who had dared to speak back to her like that, and more than a few of them had ended up in the dungeons. Everyone in her kingdom had known that – she’d made sure of it – yet Robin faced her down with no fear whatsoever even after acknowledging a debt Regina was sure she never would have thought to call in, even in her worst
days as the Evil Queen. She thought maybe she was slipping, letting too many of her emotions show as Cora might have once said. Then she smiled to herself and thought that maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing.

A moment of silence passed in which Robin still stood there, patiently waiting for an answer. Regina glanced down the tunnel, then back at him. His company wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, she decided.

“Don’t get in my way;” she warned.

Robin bowed. “Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

New York City, 23 January 2014

Central Park was usually rather quiet after lunch hour, when the kids were all back in school and white-collar workers hurried back to their offices. Neal wasn’t sure whether to be grateful or not for the lack of witnesses. On one hand, he couldn’t guarantee that he wouldn’t punch the daylights out of Hook for coming near his family. On the other, he had no idea what the pirate captain was up to, if anything. He scolded himself for that thought. It was Hook; of course he was up to something.

The man in question was seated on a park bench exactly where he’d told Emma he would be, looking almost inconspicuous with his fake hand and drinking from a leather flask. Neal shoved his hands in his pockets, double-checked that his phone was readily accessible and walked up to his old captain.

Hook stood up quickly at his approach. “Bae? What are you doing here?”

“What the hell do you want?” Neal demanded.

“Do I want?” Hook looked disappointed. “It didn’t work, did it?”

“Did what work?” Neal shouted in frustration. “You know what, I don’t wanna know. What I wanna know is what the hell are you doing in New York. How long have you been here? Did you follow us from Boston – is that how you got our dreamcatcher? Why did you give my wife that address? And why in the hell have you got a camera with my son’s name on it?”

Hook recoiled, glancing left and right. “That’s a lot of questions, Bae. How about we go somewhere a bit more private and I’ll try to explain?”

“No, we’re doing this now or I’m calling the cops. I’m not a boy anymore, Killian.”

“Oh, I’m painfully aware of that,” Hook said, looking around. “Alright. I’m here because Emma’s parents are in trouble.”

“Emma’s parents?” Neal shook his head and pulled out his phone. “That’s it. You don’t wanna tell me the truth, that’s fine.”

“Bae!” Hook begged, grabbing Neal’s arm with his good hand. “Just listen, alright? I swear I’m not here to hurt either of you. Or your boy.”

Neal’s thumb hovered over Emma’s contact. He cursed inwardly at his damned curiosity and shoved his phone back into his jacket. “Okay. You got three minutes.”
Hook nodded in appreciation. “I know you don’t remember, but a year and a half ago Emma and Henry tracked you down to that address. That was your apartment. That camera – Henry must have left it there when you took my ship back to Storybrooke to save your father’s life.”

“My father?” Something tugged at the back of Neal’s memory, like a long-forgotten name on the tip of his tongue, and his headache from yesterday pierced his temple again. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“Nothing, as far as I know. He died in Storybrooke.”

Neal stared, unable to form a coherent thought. “What?”

Hook took a deep breath. “The two of you, Swan, myself and her parents journeyed to Neverland to rescue Henry from Pan. Upon our return, we found that Pan had come back with us and your father died to kill him and stop Pan from casting his own Dark Curse.”

“My father’s dead?” Neal murmured without thinking.

“I’m afraid so, yes.”

“I used the curse to find you, Bae, to tell you I made a mistake,” said a voice that sounded just like his father before the Dark One took him. Neal ran his hands through his hair. “No. No, you’re lying. How could Emma and Henry have ever been to Neverland? And Storybrooke? What kind of made-up name is that?”

“It’s the truth,” Hook assured him. “I know you don’t remember –”

“Remember? What, you’re saying that all of this happened and then someone took my memories? Do you have any idea what you sound like?”

Hook paused. “Like a madman, I’m sure. But, Bae, you have to believe me.”

Neal scoffed. “I’m out of here. And you stay away from us.”

“If you don’t believe me, then why did you come here?” Hook demanded.

“To make sure you weren’t trying to hurt my family. If you’re really not, like you say, then I’m done. I don’t want anything to do with this crap anymore.” Neal began to walk away when Hook shouted after him.

“Bae, Emma’s parents need her! She’s the only one who can save them! Storybrooke needs the Saviour!”

_The Saviour._ The drummer pounded harder against Neal’s skull. “What did you say?”

Behind him, Hook let out a long breath. “Storybrooke needs the Saviour.”

His headache reached critical levels as something fought for release inside Neal’s brain. He pinched his nose and asked, “Emma’s parents. Who are they?”

“Snow White and Prince Charming.”

“Snow White and Prince –”

“There is a curse and Emma is destined to break it,” August’s voice replayed. “She’s the Saviour, the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. She was sent through a magic wardrobe into this
land, seventeen years ago, so that she could return on her twenty-eighth birthday to defeat the Evil Queen for good.”

Neal grappled for the bench as his head spun, his false memories collapsing and real ones bubbling to the surface. The journey on the Jolly Roger. Fighting Cora and Regina in Storybrooke. Falling through a portal to the Enchanted Forest. Meeting Robin and Mulan. The flight to Neverland on the Shadow.

The pain in his head vanished only to be replaced by an ache in his chest as other memories demanded attention. Turning his back as August called the cops. Running to Canada with his heart in his throat. Eleven years of trying to forget.

Emma telling him she didn’t care that he’d been engaged to someone else. Him telling himself that he had moved on too. That he was only sticking around for Henry. Emma telling him she still loved him over the portal. Him knowing he’d never really let her go.

His father begging for forgiveness while dying in the back of the antique shop. Fearing Rumplestiltskin meant to kill Henry in Neverland. Forgiving him when he knew he’d been wrong all along. Belle’s radiant face watching them return to Storybrooke. Those few short hours where they were a real family.

The weight of a giant mallet crushing him as his father turned the Dark One’s knife on Pan. His father disappearing in a flash of white light.

“I’m sorry about your dad.”

“Bae?” Hook interrupted his influx of memories.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I think it worked,” Neal said, lifting his head from his hands.

“You remember?”

“Yeah. I do.”

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

“So, whereabouts are we headed?” Robin asked as they traversed the seemingly endless maze of tunnels. A floating orb conjured by the woman in front of him flooded the passageway with a dull white light, and Regina’s sheer figure stood out like a silhouette against the glow. She twisted to face him while still walking in front.

“There’s a fire in the courtyard that powers the spell,” she explained. “As long as it burns, the shield will stay up.”

“So all we have to do is put it out?”

“I simply have to put it out. You need to stay out of my way,” she snapped.

*Good Lord, why did I come down here?* Robin asked himself. He loathed tunnels, castles, enclosed spaces of any sort and now he was following the dreaded Evil Queen down a dark hole that could emerge inside a dragon’s hollow for all he knew. Maleficent’s fortress had been bad enough. He kicked himself for not taking Tuck’s advice and forgetting the whole sordid ordeal. The monk had probably been right in saying that Robin’s honour was going to get him killed one day.
“Just so I know, what is it exactly that we’re walking into here?” he asked.

“I have absolutely no idea.” She turned left at a fork; Robin thought he heard growls coming from the right-hand tunnel and hurried to keep up. “There’s still plenty of time to turn back.”

“Keen to be rid of me, are you?”

“I generally dislike thieves in my castle, yes.”

He slipped in front, forcing Regina to halt. “We aren’t all that bad, you know.”

“Not if you tell yourself that you steal from the rich to give to the poor,” she said with a scowl. “I’ve done bad things in my time, but at least I own it.”

“As do I,” Robin snapped. “I do hope you didn’t let me come along just to feed me to some monster you keep in these tunnels. Roland’s already lost his mother. Would you have him to lose his father as well?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head.” She pushed past him. “Anything that could have harmed you down here is long gone.”

“Really? Then what’s that I hear?”

He said it louder than he’d meant to, the noise echoing off the cave walls. Regina stopped again and when the crunch of her footfalls ceased, Robin realised that the sound he’d heard wasn’t a growl at all.

“Is that –”

“Music,” Regina finished for him. “This way. If you’re still coming, that is.”

He ignored her last comment and strained his ears for the steadily mounting crescendo, which sounded like organ notes. They covered the last stretch of tunnel almost at a jog – Regina stumbling slightly in her heels – and arrived at a spiralling staircase which emerged into a wine cellar. The music reverberated off the walls and Robin trembled, remembering his days as an altar boy in Locksley and attending choir practise with old Brother Anthony playing the deafening instrument.

“It’s been magically amplified,” Regina stated.

*Certainly explains a few things,* thought Robin, barely resisting the impulse to stick his fingers in his ears. “Do you know where it’s coming from?”

She shook her head. “No. But there’s a servant’s corridor not too far away which we can use to reach the second floor. That will give us a good view of the courtyard.”

Robin nodded. “Lead the way.”

The courtyard, viewed from an open hallway on the second floor, was ablaze with light and crackling with magic. Regina felt her temperature rise several degrees and the hair on her arms stand on end from the sensation. Whoever this Witch was, she had gone out of her way to put on an impressive display. Regina gritted her teeth; she would make the Witch pay, no matter what the Charmings said.

Although, even Regina had to admit that she might have bitten off more than she could chew when she saw the party in progress down below.
There were plenty of flying monkeys, of course; a dozen or so circling the green column of fire powering the protection spell, many more perched among stone gargoyles and one large specimen with a silky white band along its tail making an atrocious cacophony on the giant organ in the open chapel. Twirling along to the tune was a throng of silent dancers – strange, monstrous beings dressed in ridiculous, vividly coloured clothes. She stared at them, repelled yet unable to tear her eyes away.

No two of the creatures were alike but all danced with the same frenzied, unsmiling determination. Feathers, fur, spines, horns, scales, jerking limbs and clashing colours mixed and mingled before her eyes in a feverish nightmare. A giant-like being with a silver crest and three bulging eyes – one blue, one purple and one jet black – whirled on the wing of an overgrown stork bearing a man’s head. A bald, bearded woman circled a pencil-thin man whose pale face was framed by a stiff fringe of bright red poppy petals. And twenty other bizarre specimens, ranging from polymorphic man-animals to creatures from the depths of imagination crowded the dance floor.

Regina paused, wishing she had spent more time studying trace magic. To conjure and animate creatures of this complexity – for she knew they were apparitions from the taste of the spells holding them together – took an incredible amount of power she wasn’t sure Rumplestiltskin had been capable of.

“Looks like we missed a hell of a party,” said Robin. He extended an arm and pointed to the far side of the courtyard. She followed his gaze and her anger flared.

The Witch – encased in a gown Regina recognised as her own – sat at the edge of the dancing throng, her face masked by a ridiculous conical hat but her hands and neck coloured emerald green. A buffet spread across the long, mostly empty table at which she’d seated herself in the most important position. To her left sat two enormous, hulking figures easily ten feet tall and clothed head-to-toe in battle armour, their hog-like faces the stuff out of nightmares parents fed to their children when they would not behave. Regina had never seen a real ogre before and now she wished it had stayed that way.

“So, what’s the plan now?” asked the outlaw.

She scowled at him. “It hasn’t changed. We need to put the fire out.”

“On the contrary, it has changed,” Robin growled and Regina fought the urge to slap him. “Before, there weren’t two bloody great ogres taking up residence in your castle. Or this iridescent assembly.”

She snorted. “I wouldn’t worry about them. They’re illusions.”

He frowned. “And you know that how?”

“Well, all magic gives off particular traces depending on the spell used. The experienced practitioner can learn to identify them with great proficiency. And if you’d been paying attention, you would have seen the three-eyed giant walk straight through a pillar.”

She pivoted on her heel as Robin leant over the balcony to get a better look, laughing to herself. Before she’d gone too far, the outlaw called after her, “Where are you going?”

“My laboratory. I have a plan, but I need a few things.” She thought for a moment and, talking stock of the situation, added, “And you’re going to need more weapons.”

New York City, January 2014
Neal had no idea how long he’d been sitting on the park bench, sorting through memories, until Hook cleared his throat. “So, what do you remember?”

“Just about everything, I think. It feels weird, having two sets of memories in your head.”

“Aye, I can imagine.” Hook unstoppered his flask and offered it to Neal. He shook his head to refuse, so the pirate gave a small shrug and took a long drink as Neal’s pocket buzzed and he pulled out his phone.

‘Hey, what the hell’s going on?’ read Emma’s text.

“Emma,” he told a perplexed-looking Hook. “Oh, gods, what I am gonna tell her?”

“I take it the truth won’t work?” asked the pirate.

Neal put his phone away and subconsciously rubbed his left ring finger. “Killian, what did you – what did you plan to do to bring our memories back?”

For some reason that made the pirate look extremely uncomfortable. “I – I didn’t know your memories were gone until I arrived in New York. I had hoped seeing your old apartment would be enough to break the curse but obviously that didn’t work.”

“Obviously.” His phone vibrated again. Neal stared at the new message without reading it, thinking through all of the possibilities. “So, Storybrooke is back?”

“Aye. There was a second curse which brought everyone back to this land,” Hook explained.

“A second curse? How the hell did that happen?”

“Alas, I don’t know. The last I saw of Snow or the prince was over a year ago, when we parted ways en route to the Queen’s castle.”

“Then how’d you know to come and find us?”

Hook took another swig of rum before answering. “Well, as I was sailing the realms I received a note saying there was a new curse, and the only hope was to bring Swan back to Storybrooke.”

“Who sent it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Hook. “I’d assume Swan’s lovely parents from the bird which delivered the message to me.”

Neal’s phone buzzed for the third time. ‘Are you okay? Do you need me to call the cops?’ was the text message. He pressed the reply button.

‘No, but you’d better come over here. You need to hear this’ he typed quickly and sent before he could second-guess his decision.

“What are you going to tell her?” asked Hook.

“The truth,” said Neal. “I owe her that much.”

Emma re-read the text three times to make sure she’d got it right. From her position near the entrance to Central Park Zoo, she had a clear line of view to the bench where her husband sat, flanked by the man she still didn’t quite believe was really old enough to have come between Neal’s parents.
Neither had moved in several minutes and even though Neal had told her not to, she contemplated calling the cops anyway.

She bit her lip and steeled herself, hands in jacket pockets and wishing she’d brought a gun.

Neal was still on the bench as she walked towards them, head down and elbows braced against his thighs. Emma frowned at Jones when he offered her a wry smile. “Hey. What’s going on?” she asked, careful to keep Jones in her peripheral vision.

The two men shared a look Emma couldn’t decipher and that worried her. Neal’s eyes were red and bloodshot as well.

“Killian, do you mind giving us a minute?” he said. The other man hesitated, then gave a small nod and walked off, just far enough to give them some privacy. Emma wrinkled her nose – he’d been drinking again.

“What is going on?” she asked in a lowered voice.

Neal sighed and pulled her down to the bench. “You’d better sit.”

“Okay.”

He sniffled. “How – how do you feel about taking a trip to Maine?”

“Maine? What for?”

Glancing past her at where Jones leant against a tree, flask still in hand, Neal looked down at their entwined hands. “Killian’s – he’s not here to hurt us. He – he came to tell me that – that my father’s dead.”

“Oh, God,” Emma murmured. She knew Neal and his dad didn’t have the best relationship – as far as she knew, they hadn’t spoken since he was a teenager – but she hadn’t had to ask to know that a part of her husband still loved him. She let go of his hands and hugged him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sorta.”

“Is Maine where the funeral is?”

He stiffened and pulled out of her embrace. “What?”

“Is that why you want to go to Maine? For his funeral?”

The silence lasted a few too many seconds in Emma’s opinion and she started to worry again. Then Neal said, “Yeah, that, and there’s also another reason. See, uh, Killian’s come from a small town near that diner you took us to once, when you thought you found that lead on your parents. And he thinks he might know who they are. They’re still there.”

She stared, knowing full well that was the truth as Neal knew it but not comprehending a single word. Question after question raced through her mind, each more befuddling than the last. It couldn’t be possible that a random person from Neal’s past just happened to know her parents. “What – what?”

“He thinks –”

“I know, I heard you,” she snapped. “That’s not possible, Neal! It’s not possible. You – you’re believing this? I thought you told me you didn’t trust him?”
“This is different, Emma.” He slipped a hand around hers, squeezing gently. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course. But Neal, I don’t – I don’t –”

“Hey,” he murmured, touching her cheek. “This is not another dead end. It’s legit, I promise. I can’t tell you how I know that, but I do.”

Emma leant against the back of the bench as her insides tumbled and churned. Everything was upside down and back to front and she couldn’t make up her mind whether to run or curl up in a ball. The dull headache which had been bothering her since the day before started to throb between her eyes. “This doesn’t make any sense,” she whimpered.

“I know,” said Neal. “But it will. I promise.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

He hesitated. “I can’t right now. It’ll make a lot more sense when we get there. Can you trust me in the meantime?”

Take a leap of faith, she thought. It would be a first. “Okay. When do you wanna go?”

Enchanted Forest, June 2014

All of the flying monkeys were apparently preoccupied with the party still in progress, as Robin saw nothing of their silvery hides on his way to the castle’s armory. He stuck to the shadows, hood up and bow drawn. Experience had taught him that quiet castles were death traps and he had no intention of being caught off-guard again.

“Robin, run!” shouted William Locksley. The hangman slapped him across the face. “Go, boy!”

An arm as thick as an oak branch wrapped around Robin’s midriff. He tried to kick, or yell, or do anything except stare as Little John picked him up like a sack of potatoes and carted him out of the courtyard. Arrows streaked down from the buttresses, metal armour clanged around the bodies of the pursuing knights and people screamed from every direction, but Robin still somehow heard the distinctive snap of bone as the trapdoor collapsed beneath his father’s feet.

In the present, Robin gritted his teeth. He had a job to do.

He covered the length of the east wing at a silent jog, counting the archways until a narrow slit, no wider than the width of a slender willow, appeared in the wall next to the portrait of a snowy-haired king Robin didn’t recognise. Sandwiched between the shades of two giant pillars, the knot-hole was invisible to anyone who didn’t know to look for it. He squeezed through into a much wider corridor and spread his arms, taking several deep breaths before taking off again.

According to Regina, the armory’s main access was through the courtyard (currently blocked thanks to their green-skinned lodger) but knot-holes like this one threaded throughout the castle led there also, a failsafe in the event the castle was invaded.

Unable to see, Robin walked with his left hand glued to the cold stone. “Keep to the left,” she’d said.
“Go right and you’ll end up on the outer wall.”

After a while which may have been anything from seconds to a few years, he felt the wall give way as his corridor joined to another. He reached across the span for the continuing wall. “Take the first corridor on the left and follow it to a dead end. You’ll find a trapdoor with a ladder that descends into the armoury.”

Robin tripped over the ladder before he hit the dead end. Cursing profusely, he felt around for the latch of the trapdoor without realising he was on top of it, and landed in a dusty heap on the floor of the armoury.

“Our belongings should have been returned along with us when the curse was reversed, if they were taken in the first place. Take whatever you think you’ll need.”

“Now there’s something you should never tell a thief,” he murmured to the vacant room. Thin beams of pale green light from the courtyard shone through the tiny windows, reflecting off the shields, swords and halberds stacked in tidy rows against each wall. Robin selected a broadsword which felt too unbalanced in his hand, then a sabre which was heavier than he’d like but would do the job. He restocked his quiver, lowered the latch on the armoury door and climbed back into the knot-hole, hurrying to make sure he kept his rendezvous with Regina.

The queen was waiting, standing almost invisible against the stone. Some sort of glamour charm, thought Robin. He had to focus on her to get past the spell worming its way into his mind, trying to trick him into thinking her extravagant gown was an unusual pattern of the brickwork. She hadn’t yet noticed him and stared fixedly at the opposite wall, playing with a small object in her hands. She looked sad – Robin had certainly not expected that. He stepped out of the shadows and her expression evaporated, a little too forcefully replaced by one of steadfast resolve.

“Did you get what you needed?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Did you?”

He held up the sword. “I doubt I could take on the Agrabahn army, but I believe it should be sufficient for what we need.”

“Good. Take this as well.” She stepped extremely close, her forehead almost brushing against his as she pressed the object into his free hand.

It felt like wood, a carving of some sort, with a leather strap he guessed was meant to be worn around the neck. When he held it closer, Robin thought it looked like a dragon. “What’s this?”

“An amulet. Given to me by an old friend long ago,” she said. “Before I mastered teleportation, it would take me to her castle where she helped teach me … the finer aspects of being an evil queen.”

She closed his fingers around the amulet. “If you get into trouble you can’t get out of, use it. Just think of the place you want to go in this realm and it will take you there in a heartbeat.”

“Regina,” he said in a tone to match hers. “Maybe we should rethink this. Report back, return with a larger force. This Witch is clearly powerful, powerful enough to command those hordes and create that ghostly party.”

“I don’t care how powerful she is,” said Regina, her sharp edges returning. “I have to go through with this plan.”
She met him at eye-level, deep brown irises boring into his and her jaw set. Robin had seen the look of a hunter many times before, in the eyes of dire wolves and hunting dogs as they calculated their final lunge. Regina didn’t look like that. He could see that was what she intended, but beneath the mask of determination he saw a depth of sorrow he was all too familiar with.

“I doubt you would have gifted me with this if you thought we’d both make it out of here,” he said. He tried to give it back, only for her to clasp his hand against his chest.

“Don’t worry about me. You just make sure you can get back to your boy.”

With a soft smile he might have thought was compassion if the woman before him were anybody else in the world, she turned around and began to stride along the hallway, head held high.

“Regina!”

She was going to do this whether he helped or not, Robin realised when she turned back to him and the mask returned. Slipping the amulet around his neck, he said, “Good luck.”

Her mask dropped and that sad smile returned for a split second as Regina nodded in acknowledgement. Robin watched her go, trying to work out the enigma of a woman he’d inexplicably found himself partnered with on what was quite possibly the most dangerous job of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter Six - "Sparks Fly Upwards", in which Robin and Regina face down the Witch's army with mixed results and the Saviour returns to Storybrooke
Sparks Fly Upwards

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warning: graphic depictions of violence and bodily trauma

Enchanted Forest, June 2012

Robin had done many dumb things in his life, but a single-handed battle against more monkeys than he could count was at least brushing third place on the list. From his position on an elevated platform, he spotted the glimmering shadow that was the Queen taking up position on the far side of the courtyard.

This had better work, Regina.

The balustrade clattered as a pair of hairy, clawed hands wrapped around the iron rails. A silky black head appeared next, nose twitching excitedly, saliva dripping from its open maw and blood red eyes fixed on Robin. It screeched and pulled itself over the railing.

Oh well, thought Robin. Now is as good a time as any.

As it prepared to lunge, he sunk an arrow into the creature’s chest and it toppled from the balcony, its screeches raising the hair of every living being in the courtyard. Dozens of beady eyes turned to him, their owners shrieking to rival banshees. Robin ignored them, focusing instead on the black-clad figure in the courtyard below. Her expression unreadable, she stood like a judge at an execution eying the defendant as the order was given.

“Get him, my pretties.”

He let fly four arrows as the horde launched and three of them fell from the air. A snowy specimen dodged the fourth, its talons missing Robin by inches as he turned and ran down the hallway. The monkeys screeched and fought for space in their pursuit. He drew his sword and cut at the face of the closest one, the snowy, and continued to run along the narrow corridor.

Regina, you’d better move soon or this is going to be a very short battle.

New York City, 23 January 2014

“You didn’t tell her about Storybrooke.”

Neal forcefully opened the trunk of the old yellow bug. It was the first thing Killian had said since following them home from the park and it was a conversation he really didn’t want to have. “No.”

“So what do you plan to do when you get there? Tell whoever it is that cast this curse to run their magic the other way when Emma’s around?” Killian demanded.

“She wouldn’t have believed me;” said Neal, wheeling to face the pirate.
“She needs her memory. The Saviour can’t be the Saviour if she doesn’t know who she is.”

Neal shoved his hands into his pockets. “Alright, then, what’s your brilliant plan to get her memory back? Or Henry’s?”

Killian drummed his fingers against the car. “I don’t have one.”

“Right.” He hauled a heavy suitcase containing both his and Emma’s essential belongings – not much, but enough to last them a week or so – into the trunk. “I’m hoping my dad’s shop got brought back as well. There’s bound to be something in there that’ll get them back.”

“Hey, Dad!”

As Henry bounded up the sidewalk, backpack slung casually over his shoulder, Neal flashed a grin at his confused-looking son. “Hey, buddy.”

“What’s with the suitcase?” Henry asked, looking from him to Killian and back again. “You going somewhere?”

“Uh, yeah.” He glanced at Killian, then pulled Henry around the side of the car. “Listen, how’d you like to go on a trip?”

“You mean like a vacation?”

Neal shrugged. “I guess we could turn it into one.”

“Does Mom know?”

“Yeah, she’s just leaving the key with Mrs Cuse.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed. The curse of having an intelligent child, Neal thought. “Who’s the guy from Pirates of the Caribbean?”

“That’s Killian,” he explained. Fortunately, the pirate was captivated by the coin drop in a newspaper dispenser and paying them no heed. “He’s an old … friend of mine. He, uh, he came down from Maine a couple of days ago to let me know about something that’s happened. In my old hometown.”

“Your old hometown?” asked Henry. “I thought you were from Oregon.”

“No, that’s where I met your mom.” Neal checked to make sure Killian was occupied. “There’s, uh, a couple of things I need to help sort out at home. You mind taking a couple days off school to see where your old man’s from?”

“No school? A trip with you guys? Sold.”

“Good. Go pack a bag, we’re leaving in an hour.”

A short debate over seating arrangements was settled by Emma agreeing to sit in the back with Henry for the first half of the journey and swap over driving with Baelfire for the second half. Killian did his best to ignore the scathing sideways glances Emma threw him and the not-so-subtle way they both glossed over the idea of him being in the back with Henry without a second thought.

She was married, he reminded himself for the hundredth time. A century ago (or fifty years, maybe even only ten - or one), that detail would not have bothered him in the slightest. If a woman truly
wanted to leave her marriage behind, who was he to refuse her? Alright, so maybe he’d won them over with a little rum and fantastical tales of life on the high seas, but he’d never forcibly taken them away.

*If only it wasn’t Bae. If only she didn’t look so damned happy with him.*

It was easier to process now he knew for certain she’d forgotten him, Storybrooke, her parents, everything they’d gone through on Neverland. When she remembered – and he knew she would – she could make up her own mind.

Four hours later, Bae driving and him in the passenger seat, Killian stared out of the window and watched the foreign landscape go by. He asked questions to pass the time once Emma and Henry fell asleep, got thoroughly confused with Bae’s attempt to explain an ‘advertisement’ for something called a ‘movie’ and tried to forget the crushing disappointment that had lingered since his arrival on Bae and Emma’s doorstep.

*One hundred and one. She’s married.*

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

Robin’s shadowy frame disappeared into the hallway, flanked by the majority of the monkeys. The music stopped – the organist gone off to join the chase – and Regina counted three or four winged simians that remained. Easy enough to deal with by herself, she thought.

Sticking to the shadows, she crept under the archway where the ogre pair stood, now on their feet and brandishing weapons.

“What is the meaning of this?!” boomed a deep, gravelly voice. Regina cringed.

“A small altercation,” said someone with a lighter, feminine tone. The Witch. “Apparently we have trespassers in the castle. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll attend to this problem and be back shortly.”

The ogres grumbled and Regina stepped from her hiding place. “I beg your pardon.”

They turned, clubs raised above their heads. She blasted them backwards with a fire spell (the second most effective means of dealing with ogres) and they crashed into the central pedestal, knocked cold by an underlying sleeping spell. “But this is *my* castle, and you’re the trespassers.”

The ghostly party continued on, a giant gadfly walking straight through the ogres’ prone bodies. Neither the Witch nor the few remaining monkeys were anywhere to be seen. Regina guessed they must have joined the pursuit or thought that there were others hidden in the castle, and for a moment she considered going after them if only to provide Robin with magical support.

*He’s got Mal’s amulet,* she reminded herself. *Hopefully, he’ll be smart and use it before they get too close.*

She stepped over a sleeping ogre’s legs, dropping a handful of poppy dust across each one’s face for good measure – after all, things would go very poorly if they woke before Charming and Snow arrived – and stood atop the pedestal, facing the green fire. The Witch must have truly been overconfident; Regina was not the best at subtlety but she couldn’t taste even the thinnest strand of protective spells. All she had done was hijack Regina’s original spell. A single flick of the wrist and the column collapsed.
“It’s up to you now, Snow,” she murmured, drawing one of her hairpins loose. “My part is done.”

She sat on the ground on the opposite side of the pedestal to the ogres – thoroughly undignified, but she was past the point of caring – and thought of her boy, his big brown eyes and babyish face she had known and loved from the day he came into her life. Snow and the others could take care of the Witch. There were at least a dozen other powerful magicians in the realm, any one of them perfectly capable and willing to make a deal with royalty in exchange for comfortable lives. But Regina was just too tired of fighting.

“I’m sorry, Henry. Maybe one day you’ll remember me and come wake me up.” She sniffed and held the tip of the hairpin to her index finger. “But until then –”

“You weren’t even going to say hello first? That’s a little rude, don’t you think?”

She gently turned until she could see the Witch saunter through the throng, brushing aside the apparitions like fog. Then there was a rush of air and the hairpin in Regina’s hand disappeared, rematerializing in the Witch’s.

“Why the long face? Has life got you down?” Greenie trilled. “What does a witch have to do to get your attention?”

Regina stood, accidentally colliding with a dancing feather duster. The creature continued unperturbed but she felt as if her insides had turned to ice, her whole body frozen and immobile, white flashes blurred her vision and searing pain erupted in the back of her throat, then radiated down the length of her spine.

“Magnificent, aren’t they?” said the Witch as Regina felt her temperature begin to return to normal. “A bit of flair, some theatrics, always nice when you’re expecting company.”

It took a moment for Regina, still feeling the after-effects of her whole-body brain freeze, to register that comment. “This,” she said slowly with a wide gesture to the dance, “was for my benefit?”

“Consider it a demonstration. Be flattered, I don’t put on this much of a show for just anybody, you know.”

“What do you want, Greenie?”

The Witch raised her eyebrows in mock offence. “My, my, we are in a foul mood today, aren’t we? Allow me to introduce myself. You can call me Zelena.”

“I didn’t ask for your name,” Regina spat. Above them, a ball of snowy feathers torpedosed from the air and landed next to Zelena. The creature was completely white except for its face, which was stained red by blood from a deep slash between its eyes. “What did you do to Robin?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re actually sharing a bed with outlaws now,” said Zelena. The monkey chittered excitedly. “In any case, I did nothing to him. My minions will dispose of him soon enough. It was you I was waiting for.”

She glanced over to the still-sleeping ogres. “Of course, it was a little bothersome that you had to arrive during our negotiations but no matter. I can simply blame this all on you.”

“Unless I take you down.”

Zelena smiled, showing too-white teeth. “You still don’t get it, do you? You won’t, as you say, take me down.”
Regina had just enough time to get a defensive shield up before she under attack, half a dozen different spells combining to create a force stronger than all the arrows in her army combined. It didn’t taste like any magic she had encountered before – even Maleficent in dragon form had not had brute strength like this. It wasn’t human. It wasn’t dragon, either. *What the hell is she?*

Zelena eased the attack and Regina let fly the first eight curses she could think of, each one worse than the last. The Witch deflected them easily, flinging them back to her one at a time and Regina was forced to take a step back. She focused on Zelena’s sickening smile, using that rage to draw up every last ounce of power she had. She was losing ground too quickly.

Their magic met and mixed in mid-air, black and green, creating a waterfall of sparks and stray spells. Regina strained, trying to push her way through Zelena’s defences. Over the crackles and rumbles of uncontrolled power, she thought she heard the Witch *cackle* of all things and then the magic was gone. Regina toppled forwards onto the heated stone, the Witch’s black boots appearing next to her face.

“Such a disappointment. I expected so much more from the *Evil Queen*,” said Zelena.

Regina twisted her neck to look into her opponent’s cool blue eyes and realised too late that she’d been played.

“You’re just lucky I need you alive.”

Regina pushed herself off the ground to meet Zelena’s next attack midway. With such a short distance between them, the Witch’s magic came harder and stronger than before and Regina’s strength failed. She collapsed, her cheek scraping the stone. *I’m sorry, Henry*, she thought as unconsciousness claimed her.

**Somewhere in Maine, 23 January 2014**

The lights of the city were long gone and Emma determinedly fixed her gaze on the darkened road ahead of her. Killian was finally asleep, sparing her the awkward silences and slightly creepy stares she hadn’t quite puzzled out. Neal and Henry were asleep as well, leaving her with nothing but the air conditioning to keep her awake (she didn’t think the radio would be much more than static this far out).

She really didn’t know what to expect of this place. Killian claimed that her parents would be there and Neal seemed to believe him, a complete one-eighty from yesterday, which Emma still didn’t completely understand. Both of them weren’t telling her something and that was driving her insane. Neal had been honest about his father, though, and as infuriating as it was to know that her husband was keeping things from her, she at least wanted to wait until he’d had a chance to process that before she confronted him.

The woods continued to roll past. Emma rubbed her eyes. The coffee she’d bought in Boston during their swap-over was down to its final dregs. She’d lost track of how late it was. The dreamcatcher, hanging from the rear-view mirror, bumped against her head. She was not sleepy. *She was not sleepy.*

*A woman’s face. Black pixie cut, a little rounder in the face than her. Beautiful smile, natural and loving. Teary hazel eyes full of love and amazement.*
A taller man. Chiselled chin with a scar running the length of one side. Dirty blonde hair, blue eyes. Looking at her like no-one, not even Neal, ever had – like a reunion he’d been waiting on for years.

“You found us.”

Beep, beep.

Beep, beep!

Emma wrenched her eyes open just in time to see an oncoming pickup truck swerve into the opposite lane to dodge the bug, which had almost drifted off the road on the wrong side. She gripped the wheel firmly to steady the car, jerking everybody awake, and quickly swapped back into the correct lane once the truck was gone, its driver throwing her a well-deserved crude gesture as he passed. Throwing out every bit of thanks she had to the fact that it had been a straight stretch of road, she eased the car onto the bank and stopped, chucking the hazard lights on.

“Mom, are you okay?” asked Henry in a very high pitch. Frankly Emma felt like she could vomit and Killian didn’t appear to be much better, whiter than a milkshake and looking like one as well.

Still, once she’d slowed her breathing enough to form words, she said, “Yeah. Sorry. I nodded off for a second there.”

“I’ll take over for a bit then,” Neal offered.

“No, I’m okay, really.”

“It’s alright. I don’t think we’re that far away now.”

Emma took several deep breaths and reluctantly removed herself from the car. She then knelt on the grass, bile rising in her throat and her hands tingling with pins and needles. At least she didn’t throw up. She felt Neal drop down beside her and rub her back.

“I’m okay. I’m okay. Just need a second.”

“I’m still driving.”

She chuckled humourlessly. He offered her a wry smile and a hand to get up when she was ready (very careful to direct her to the back seat, mind you). Henry was still panicky and Emma kicked herself for not being more careful. She usually was but that time she’d been thoroughly ignoring it. She knew why. She just wasn’t quite ready to admit it.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2012**

Some amount of time passed; Regina wasn’t sure how much but when she came to, it was to the sound of a woman screaming, a man – or several men – shouting battle cries and monkeys screeching.

“You shot me! You fool!”

“Regina!” She felt someone fall next to her and violently shake her. “Regina!”

“Oh, son of a –” She groaned and tried to push herself up, then realised who she was talking to. “Snow? What are you doing here?”
“Robin brought us,” said her stepdaughter. “Do you think you can get up?”

“Yeah, just –”

“Watch out!”

The scarred white monkey lunged at them. Regina hurriedly conjured a weak shield. It shrieked as it fell back, snarling and spitting. An arrow then lodged in its side and it took off, howling in pain.

With Snow’s help, Regina got to her feet. Somehow Charming and at least three others had made their way into the castle and had drawn swords against Zelena’s monkey army. Apparently they had realised the apparitions were no threat, though she saw Charming freeze when he accidentally walked straight through one.

As for their creator, she had fallen back to the bottom of the pedestal, clutching her chest where another one of Robin’s arrows protruded and her face contorted in pain. The archer stood over her, preparing to fire. Zelena snarled and faced Regina.

“This isn’t over!”

“I would be disappointed if it was!” Regina shouted, trying to ignore how light-headed she felt.

Zelena easily deflected another arrow from Robin and conjured a broomstick in the hand not clasping her chest. The apparitions disappeared and the monkeys fighting Charming launched themselves into the air along with their mistress. Regina watched the flock vanish into the night with her jaw set. She would not be caught unawares again.

But for now she had other matters to attend to.

“I thought I told you to get out of here,” she snapped at Robin, who turned to give her a cold look.

“Yes, and that I did,” he said, drawing the amulet out from the fold of his shirt. “And then I brought back help.”

“I had things under control.”

“Well, your definition of control may include being beaten unconscious. Mine does not,” Robin calmly retorted.

“Regina,” said Snow.

She tried to return the fixed glare her stepdaughter threw her, only for her head to spin. The fight had left her far weaker than she’d ever care to admit and even she couldn’t ignore how close she’d come to defeat. Swallowing her pride with difficulty, she muttered, “Thank you.”

Robin gave her a soft smile. “You’re welcome. And this is yours.” He began to remove the amulet from around his neck. Regina held up a hand to stop him.

“You keep it,” she said. “It could be of use to you one day.”

At first she thought he would give it back anyway, but then he nodded gently and let it fall back into place. She felt herself begin to grin in spite of what had just happened and tried to think of the last time somebody (besides her son) had looked at her without so much as a flicker of judgement.

“So,” Snow interrupted, ruining the moment. “Who exactly was that? What was that?”
“I have absolutely no idea,” Regina admitted. “But she’s powerful. And worse, she’s been in negotiation with the ogres.”

“You mean those two?” asked Charming. “Do you know what she wanted?”

“Sadly, we didn’t get around to that part of the conversation. But I imagine she was brokering a treaty.”

The Merry Man who was actually a woman poked at one of the ogres, still snoring away, with her sword. “Fast asleep. We should get them out of here while they’re still so.”

“I can take them back to their border,” said Robin. “Assuming this will work on them, that is.”

Regina nodded. “It should.”

Charming grimaced. “I’m not sure how comfortable I am letting them go.”

“If we let them go, they can tell the rest of the clan,” Robin explained. “They’ll blame the Witch and jeopardise any treaty she might intend to make with them.”

Regina raised an eyebrow at that. For a woodsman, Robin had proved himself surprisingly crafty. She made a note to investigate the infamous outlaw further. After eating something and collapsing into bed, that was. She wasn’t sure how she’d fare in round two against the Witch but they had won the castle back with minimal injuries. And Regina had found herself a new enemy, one she certainly wasn’t going to entrust to some lesser magician.

Somewhere in the mountains, in an abandoned outpost where she knew she wouldn’t be disturbed, Zelena leant against the bedpost of a curtained four-poster bed and held a cloth to her wound. The arrow’s shaft had broken off in flight but the head remained wedged against her collarbone. Every indrawn breath made her want to scream, she could barely stand to move her arm and the cold steel burned like fire. If she’d been less than what she was, she imagined she would most likely be dead already. The iron was poison to her kind – she’d known that from childhood and still bore the burn marks from her father’s razors. But skin contact was one thing. An open wound was quite another and as much as she dreaded the effort, she knew she would have to pull it out sooner rather than later.

She pulled the cloth away – still bleeding with traces of black amongst the red – and sat on the bed, hooking her bad arm around the post for support. Her good arm she placed against her wound and thought, Pull! whilst her teeth cracked from the effort not to scream and every tissue in her body objected to the invasive object wiggling loose. It came out with a pop, searing her hand. Zelena quickly threw it away and replaced the cloth. It would heal, she knew, though not quickly and her magic would remain weakened until the last traces of poison had been filtered from her system. She burned to return to Tower Castle and finished what she’d started. She’d been so close. Damn the outlaw and his lucky shot.

Directly across from her temporarily-claimed bed, an open window gave her a perfect view of the castle in question. Parts of it that had remained dark for thirty years were now flooded with light as those who’d been taken from the land sought refuge between its walls. Zelena ground her teeth together.

“You celebrate your victory while you can, little sister. When I’m done, you’ll never have even been born.”
As the car rolled into the sleepy little town, Emma couldn’t help but feel a certain familiarity about the place. Neal seemed to know where he was going, which was fine by her except that he’d never once mentioned the place – apparently called Storybrooke, according to the sign they’d passed about a half hour ago – and she had definitely never been there before. On the road into town, they drove past an enormous clock tower bearing a banner for the opening of a public library, a wood shop that was still in operation despite the extremely late hour and a flower shop overgrown with ivy. When Neal stopped the car in front of a darkened B&B named “Granny’s”, Emma felt the distinct recollection of a warm cup of cocoa with cinnamon and whipped cream being served by a dark-haired but faceless woman. She was really starting to get weirded out now.

“We should be able to get a couple of rooms here,” said Neal. “The diner next door is run by the same lady. Don’t buy her lasagne, she charges through the nose.”

Is it possible that Neal’s right? That my parents really are here and it looks familiar because I have been here before, I just don’t remember?

Leaving Henry asleep in the locked car, Emma followed Neal up the stairs of the quaint little hostel, which she thought looked just like a cottage out of one of the fairy tales she’d used to read with Henry before he got too old for them. Walking inside only reinforced that thought.

A small fire crackled inside an old-style wood stove, flickering off the faded oak panelling on the walls. Green and red floral wallpaper decorated the spaces in between and lacy off-white curtains hung against the windows. To their right was a service desk, currently unmanned, and to their left was a small kitchenette or lounge area (Emma wasn’t quite sure) where two late-nighters conversed, oblivious to their customers.

“He’ll turn up, Snow,” said the woman facing away from them. “He always does.”

“I know, but it’s been four days and nothing,” said her companion, who was nursing a mug of hot chocolate. “I mean, if –”

Neal knocked on the wall and both women started, only then noticing their company. Emma’s eyes met those of the woman with the chocolate, and her jaw dropped.

It was the woman from her dream. Same short black hair, same hazel eyes, same cheekbones and same nose. She hadn’t been quite as chubby in the cheeks or had the enormous protuberance in her belly that had become noticeable when she stood up but it was her. And more than that, Emma knew her. She pinched her nose and swayed on the spot as something inside her head snapped and her vision exploded.

The look of unexplainable recognition on Mary Margaret’s face the first time they met in Henry’s school. Drinking hot cocoa with cinnamon. The strange sense of being drawn to the black-haired woman like she’d never felt with anyone else. Talking in the kitchen about Henry, and Regina, and the book, and David.

Seeing her parents together, really together, for the first time. The tears in their eyes as they hugged her. Laughing as Henry called David his grandfather. Not knowing what to feel - gratitude that she’d found her parents, or confusion over the weirdest possible way that it had happened, or anger at the fact. The fact that, coerced or not, they had still chosen to send her away. Chosen to let her
live twenty-eight years alone.

Confessing all of that to her mother in Neverland. That she still felt like an orphan, even all those months later. The surge of anger in the Echo Caves when her mother - her mother! - confessed that her daughter was not enough for her, that she wanted another go of it, with a child that would get everything she never had. Hating a baby that didn’t even exist yet. Keeping her mouth shut because she knew how stupid and irrational that feeling was, and her priority was to get to Henry.

Watching them cry, and crying with them, on the town line.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

“Emma? Emma?” Neal’s voice brought the memories to a halt. Her headache had vanished, replaced by a heart rate so fast it could have shortened her life by ten years. She continued to stare, tongue stuck in place along with the rest of her, not quite ready to believe even though she knew it was true. She was back in Storybrooke. Captain Hook had brought them home. And Snow White, her mother, stood before her looking as if she’d go into labour any moment. When had that happened?

“Emma?” Snow said softly.

“Mom?”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 7: “In Medias Res”, in which the state of the Enchanted Forest and the war with the ogres is explored, Robin and David share a drink, Belle gets extremely annoyed by her father and Neal gets a very stern telling-off.
“Prince David, I really must insist –” said the poor courier whose short legs meant he had to hurry to keep up with David’s longer strides. He felt bad for the smaller man, he really did, but he had far more important matters to deal with than the demands of some self-important noble. He waved hello to Captain Owen of the royal guard on the way past the barracks and headed for a quiet-looking passageway off the main corridor. He figured the least he could do for the man was to have the conversation in private.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness, but –”

“Look, I don’t wanna be rude,” David interrupted. “But I’ve got over four hundred refugees stuck in this castle because their homes are inside ogre territory. Plus half a dozen other kings and noblemen breathing down my neck about why I haven’t put together an army to fight the ogres. And I’ve got twenty riders scouting the kingdom for safe, arable farmland so we might have some chance of planting come winter. I don’t have the time or resources to be fighting Richard’s wars for him.”

“I understand that, Your Highness, but King Richard is requesting that you send assistance to the border as soon as humanly possible,” said the courier, snapping his reports together for emphasis. “The ogres have attacked several key towns and villages and if the rest of the realm doesn’t assist, His Majesty fears the capital will be overrun in a matter of weeks!”

“Weeks?” David asked. “Exactly how much ground has Richard lost?”

The courier flipped through his reports. “Uh, fifty-four miles, Your Highness.”

“Uh-huh. And how long has your army been fighting the ogres? Two months, three?”

“That would be accurate, yes.”

“Well, given how the capital is well over three hundred miles from the front I’d say we’ve got some time before the king’s favourite palace comes under attack,” David snapped. “Please tell Richard I appreciate the offer of a hundred pounds of copper ore, but we can’t eat copper. So if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to putting my own kingdom in order.”

He stormed off, leaving the courier to stammer and splutter in the passageway. David hadn’t meant to jump down the poor man’s throat – he was just the messenger, after all – but it had been one week since their return to the Enchanted Forest and he was already sick of it all.

The twelve royals and noblemen residing in Tower Castle were haranguing him for the lack of scouts’ reports, wanting to know whether their lands were safe to return to or not. David had lost count of the number of times he’d had to remind them that even horse scouts took time to complete their surveys. The fairies might have been able to speed things up but no-one had seen or heard from them since returning. King Midas had been the only other royal to send out scouts (his riders had come under attack near David and Snow’s southern border and wisely hadn’t ventured further) and the rest had decided that their hosts could take care of the matters themselves. They didn’t want to risk their own men if somebody else was willing to and it infuriated David to no end. They were cowards, the lot of them. Even Prince Ernest – the younger brother of King George, and Thomas’
father – was demanding action whilst refusing to do anything himself.

David wearily rubbed his eyes. He’d barely eaten or slept and had hardly seen his wife in days. Thanks to Philip and a recently renewed alliance with King Josef in the north, none of them were in danger of starving any time soon but they couldn’t live off charity forever. Their first priority had to be getting the kingdom self-sufficient but apparently only a few of them understood that. The rest were making demands of him that he just didn’t have answers for. He turned down a staircase in the direction of the stables. He needed a time-out.

All but four of the stalls were empty and their grooms nowhere to be seen. David reminded himself to have a quick word with the head groomsmen about his staff, but for the moment he was grateful for the solitude. The great white stallion still on loan from Philip nickered as he entered and he went up to pet the horse's nose. Philip hadn’t said as much on his last visit but David had a feeling the prince had no intention of asking for the gentle giant back. At least that was one man trying to help them, even if it was clear that King Hubert did not like it.

David fed the horse a sugar cube from the grooms' supply and then rummaged about in his tack until he found the leather flask he was looking for. He unstoppered it, took a long swig of the strong spirit and winced as the seasoned liquid singed his throat. He wasn’t entirely sure what it was – not beer; that was for certain - but it worked quickly and gave him something else to think about. He took another deep drink.

“I used to keep the bottle in my quiver.”

David sputtered and coughed, his eyes watering from the burning sensation in his windpipe. Robin winced sympathetically and thumped him on the back. Regina hadn’t been lying when she said the outlaw had soft feet, he thought.

Once he’d got his breath back, he asked, “What are you doing down here?”

Robin held up a rather large coin bag. “Payment. From your mother-in-law, for helping her to break into the castle.” He then knelt and dug out his bow and quiver from beneath a large pile of hay. “It’s old habits, you know, keeping weapons in various locations so you can get to at least one of them when you need it. Also makes for a good treasure drop, provided you can remember where you left the cache. I lost a perfectly good set of bronze chess pieces that way.”

David watched him drop his pay into the shallow hole he’d just dug, cover it over with his quiver and then bury them again in hay. “Regina must like you. I’ve never known her not to haggle over prices.”

Robin shrugged. “I think she just wants me out of here as soon as possible. Dislikes having thieves around the place, I think were her exact words.” He eyed the bottle in David’s hand. “If you don’t mind me saying, you look like a man who needs some sleep more than a drink.”

“I would if I could, believe me,” said David, taking a third swig. “Thirty years in another world, I think I forget what this was like.”

“I’m sorry, forgot about what?”

David stabbed a finger at the ceiling. “Them. Kings and princes and all the other nobles demanding I lead an imaginary grand army and free their lands of the ogres. Most of them answered to Snow and I before the curse but we got a delegation from King Richard this morning who’s demanding I provide him with reinforcements. In exchange for copper ore.”
“Copper, eh?” said Robin, shaking his head. “Richard was always a corker.”

“You know him?”

“I served under him during the war in Agrabah.” David offered him the flask and the outlaw took a sip. “Gah. Too much barley. And yes, Richard’s a right git when he needs to be. He probably thinks he’s been taking the brunt of this war while you lot have been away. Now you’re back, he’s done his fair share and it’s your turn to take over.”

David took back the flask. “I’m sensing some bad blood here.”

Again, Robin just shrugged. “I used to respect him. And he was a good man, once upon a time. Until the glory of war got to him and it became more important than maintaining his kingdom properly.”

“Wonderful. I needed another one of those.” David sighed and decided to change the topic. “So, are you sticking around for a while longer? I wouldn’t mind having a few extra hands on if we do end up having to fight.”

Robin grinned sadly. “I would love to, but I think I’ve overstayed my welcome. Although Mulan, I imagine, will probably want to stick around. She likes Snow and she seems a lot happier working on the right side of the law.”

“Oh, good.” David hardly knew the woman but his wife and daughter had spoken highly of the Eastern hero. If she was anything like her movie counterpart (which David didn’t count on, since the Land Without Magic cinema had got more than a few things wrong in those) then she was definitely somebody he wanted to keep around. “Still, I’m sorry you feel like you have to leave.”

“It’s not you,” said Robin. “The only thing my boy’s ever known is the woods and I don’t like castles much myself. Too many people. And if Richard shows up here – and trust me, he most likely will – he won’t want to see me.”


Robin laughed humourlessly. “Well, don’t offer him advice. I know from experience that’ll piss him off faster than almost anything else.”

David frowned. He almost asked what had happened between his neighbouring king and the outlaw who stood before him but thought better of it. What little he knew about Robin was that if it was a story he wanted to share, David would already know. So instead he offered his thanks and another swig from the bottle.

The mountainscape stretched for miles in every direction. Fog still consumed them despite the late summer, its cold grey tendrils snaking around the summits and rolling over the foothills. Belle watched the thick clouds from the highest point she had found in Tower Castle, a small circular room right below the lookout post on top of the keep. It had probably been a sentry’s quarters before she took up residence. She’d used some blankets and straw borrowed from the stables to make a makeshift mattress and a rather large collection of books – twenty-nine to be exact, all of which she had already finished – sat in a neat stack next to her bed. Some linens and sheets taken from the room she was supposed to be sleeping in had been modified to hang as curtains around the stone walls and kept out the sharpest draughts at night. Thankfully there was a tiny fireplace; a bit of kindling, some wood and a handful of stones later and she had herself quite a cosy little room. It wasn’t home, far from it, but it would do.
David's scouts had mapped the border of the ogres’ territory to less than a hundred miles from Tower Castle. The Dark Castle was on the other side of that line, deep within ogre-occupied lands. Belle desperately wanted to go but as homesick as she was, she knew it was downright suicidal to go wandering into the ogres’ territory alone. Nor did she want to talk someone else into joining her on said suicide mission, so she was stuck in Tower Castle for the foreseeable future.

She supposed that it could have been much worse. Ruby braved the long spiral stairs every evening to make sure she was eating properly and Snow had come up once or twice to see how she was, but otherwise she more or less had the top of the tower to herself. Belle knew it wasn’t healthy to isolate herself like that. She’d just had enough of the awkward silences and pitying stares. And people in general, really. Especially all the nauseatingly egotistical nobility also in residence at the castle. She did not envy Snow or David having to sort that lot out, not one bit.

The wind had begun to pick up again, so Belle shut the window and drew her makeshift curtains across the wall. She took a piece of straw from her mattress, pressed it to the heated coals until it caught fire and lit the oil lamp hanging from a peg next to the staircase. The light it gave off was dim but a small comfort in the darkness, especially when reading failed to chase away the nightmares. She lay on the straw mattress, tossed the thick wool blankets over her head and tried to sleep.

They lay tangled together in the master bed of the old pink manor, both thoroughly out of breath and fighting sleep just to stare into the other’s eyes. She ran a hand across his bare chest, for now avoiding the sides where she had recently been surprised and delighted to learn he was ticklish. His delicate fingers danced across her cheek, claiming a stray lock of her hair and twirling it while never once taking his eyes from hers. “I missed you.”

She giggled. “One hundred and thirty-one.”

He laughed and tucked the stray lock behind her ear. “I mean it. I love you. I never want to be away from you again. And I want the whole damn world to know it.”

She smiled. “That’s not a proposal.”

They both laughed and he shifted closer, rolling her back against the mattress so that he was above her, so close that she couldn’t tell where one of them ended and the other began. “Give me today,” he murmured, his eyes soft and pleading like a puppy’s. “I want to do it properly.”

“Oh, okay,” she said. She threaded her fingers through his hair, thick and feathery and so-ever-slightly greying, and rubbed the sensitive spot behind his ears. He shut his eyes and pressed his nose into hers. Too slow. She leant up to kiss him. She could wait one day. Especially one day like this.

And for the ninth time in a week, Belle woke up crying.

**Storybrooke, 23 January 2014**

Emma stood stock-still, frozen and staring at Snow, who stood up and exposed an extremely large, pregnant belly. Neal wasn’t sure which of them to run to since both looked like they could faint at any second. He glanced sideways at Ruby. She grimaced, apparently torn by the same decision.

Several seconds of silence passed. Then Emma made a noise like she was choking. “Mom?”

Neal gaped. “You remember?” he said at the same time Snow exclaimed, “Emma? Neal?”
“Yeah, I –” Emma began, then realised what he’d said. “Wait, what?”

*Oh, crap.* “Uh –”

“You – you remember? You knew?”

“Yeah, but –”

Fiery hazel eyes tore into him. If Neal hadn’t known better, he’d have thought she might light him on fire through the sheer strength of will. Then again, now that they were back in Storybrooke she could quite possibly manage that. “You knew! You’ve been awake! This whole time?!”

“No! Only from this afternoon,” he told her. “After I met Killian in the park.”

“Uh, guys?” Ruby interrupted. “It is kinda late and we’ve got a lot of people upstairs, if you wouldn’t mind keeping it down.”

“Sorry,” Neal and Emma said simultaneously. A knock and the opening of the door prevented any of them from continuing the conversation in a milder tone as a yawning Henry walked in.


Neal watched his son’s eyes glaze over Snow and Ruby like the two women weren’t there and then shared a look with Emma. Whatever it was that had returned her memory hadn’t brought back Henry’s.

“Yeah, we’re okay. Just had a bit of a shock,” said Emma. “Uh, Ruby, is there a room we could –?”

The innkeeper shook her head. “Sorry, we’re completely full. Had a lot of, uh, new faces in town.”

“You can come back to the loft,” Snow suggested.

Neal looked at Emma and she nodded. “Okay. Are you alright to be walking around?” she asked with an awkward gesture at Snow’s stomach.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow, Ruby.”

Outside, Henry was the first to speak. He held out a hand to Snow.

“I’m Henry. Nice to meet you.”

Snow quickly looked from Emma to Neal when neither of them said anything, she shook Henry’s hand. “Hello. I’m Snow- Mary Margaret.”

“How do you know my parents?”

“She’s, uh, an old friend,” Neal explained, throwing an apologetic look to Snow. It occurred to him then that the woman was technically his mother-in-law but he was far too tired to try and explain that to his son.

“Really? Where from?”

“Portland,” said Neal at the same time Emma said, “Here.”

“Well, Portland and then here,” Emma said quickly to cover their slip-up. “Shall we go? It’s cold out here.”
Belle was lying awake, re-reading one of the thin tomes in which she’d tried to lose herself for the past week and still not taking in a single word, when the patter of small feet climbing the stairs alerted her to a new arrival. Little Roland Hood poked his head around the wall and looked around the gloom until locating her beneath the stairs that led to the lookout.

“Hey, Roland,” she said, putting the book aside. “What are you doing up here?”

“Papa says bye to everyone,” said the four-year-old. “We leaving tonight, go back to Sherwood.”

“You’re going back to Sherwood Forest?”

Roland nodded. “Yep, Papa says he don’t wanna stay around the castle anymore ’cause King Richard don’t wanna see him.”

“I can understand that.” Belle’s duchy had been in King Richard’s lands and though she hadn’t known the king well, both her father and the old Lord Le Gume had been rather keen on him. That made her think she probably wouldn’t like him much either. “When are you going?”

“Now,” said Roland. “I ask Papa if I can say bye but he didna know where you are. I ask Miss Ruby and she told me where you are. Why you all alone up here?”

“Oh.” She wiped her eyes as she didn’t want to start crying again. “I just … I wanted to be alone for a little while, Roland. The castle’s quite crowded and I didn’t want to get in the way.”

“Are you sad? Papa says people get sad when they all alone.”

She smiled weakly. “Yeah. But I’m alright. Do you want me to walk you down the stairs? I think your papa might want to say bye too.”

“‘Kay.”

Then heavy footfalls, thunderclaps in comparison to Roland’s tiny mouse steps, announced another arrival, this time of her father. “Belle?” bellowed Maurice as he came into the room. “Oh, there you are.”

“Hello, Father,” Belle said coolly. She stood and held Roland’s hand – Maurice’s loud entrance combined with the low light had scared him and he’d ducked behind her skirts. “It’s alright, Roland. This is my father.”

Maurice glanced around, his eyes storming until he realised she’d been talking to a small boy. He spared Roland a forced smile before looking back at her. “Belle, what are you still doing up here?”

“I told you, I wanted to be alone for a while, Father.”

“But it’s not good, a young lady of your station hiding in a dark room for days on end,” he countered. “Come down. Queen Snow has a diplomatic party from the Southern Isles arriving shortly. You should get out, socialise a little.”

“Thank you, Father, but I’m perfectly happy where I am.”

“It’s not just that, Belle,” said Maurice. “You’re almost twenty-seven years old. You need to be thinking about your future instead of wasting your time with these ridiculous fantasies.”
She frowned. He couldn’t be saying what she thought he was. Not so soon after – no, even her father couldn’t be that dense. “What are you saying?”

Maurice stepped forward, reaching for her elbows. “I have some friends in King Christian’s court. His son, Prince Lukas, is among the diplomats who’ve come to make a trade agreement with Queen Snow.”

“Prince Lukas?” Belle said, astounded. “The same man who once tried to make his pet orang-utan into a general?”

“Miss Belle?” asked Roland, tugging on her skirt. “What’s an orang-utan?”

Maurice ignored the boy. “I believe that was his uncle. And while I’m not above saying that there’s certainly a streak of insanity in the family, they have good station in the realm. You can’t afford to wait around anymore.”

“You mean, you don’t think there’s anyone left in your circle of available suitors who’ll be interested in an old spinster, so you’re willing to marry me off to the first old dunderhead who makes you an offer?”

Maurice, to his credit, at least looked taken aback. “Belle, that’s not what I’m saying – what are you doing?”

She’d begun to assemble the meagre pile of belongings she’d accrued in the past week and shove them ungracefully into a leather satchel. While sorting through the books, she told him, “That is what you’re saying, Father. But you are right about one thing. I can’t stay up here forever.”

Leaving most of the books – boring old historical collections borrowed from Snow’s library, which was quite short on the adventures Belle preferred – she slung the satchel over her shoulder and then donned her cloak. Maurice glowered.

“So where will you go then?”

Belle stopped mid-stride and bit her lip. She hadn’t quite got that far. Then Roland slipped his small hand into hers and squeezed it, which gave her the best idea she’d had in a week. For the first time in a week, she grinned happily. “Sherwood Forest. I have some friends there. Who actually do care about my dreams, Papa.” She thought Maurice might have tried to block their exit but he remained still while she and Roland turned down the stairs. “You don’t get to choose how I live my life, Father. I do. And I’m going to live it the way I want to.”

Mid-way up another spire in Tower Castle, Regina carefully poured a drop of the blood she’d been able to retrieve from the floor of the courtyard into a vial of clear liquid. It still stayed stubbornly clear, useless, and she had to fight the urge to fling it across the room like she had the last three potions.

In the week that had passed since her fight with Zelena, she’d regained most of her strength. She was still sleeping a little longer than normal but she wasn’t feeling fatigued all the time anymore. So she’d more or less locked herself in her old laboratory, tearing through all the magic books Rumplestiltskin had made her read when he’d taught her magic. Most of them were useless, although Regina had found eight varieties of locator spells her old mentor seemed to have invented himself. There was nothing on Oz or the Wicked Witch, which she did think was odd – Rumplestiltskin had made it a point to be aware of all the powerful magicians in the realm, a point Regina had failed to follow up on (and was now in the process of rectifying).
She slammed yet another dusty old book onto the table, shaking the various beakers and crucibles littered across her workbench. For all of Rumple’s maddened old genius, he hadn’t left much behind to help her against an enemy even she couldn’t deny had beaten her to a pulp. She collapsed into a chair and held her head in her hands. She had gotten nowhere and it had been a week. Admittedly, Zelena seemed to have vanished after their last confrontation – secretly, Regina hoped she was still recovering from the arrow Robin had put through her – and hadn’t been seen in the kingdom since.

Not for the first time, Regina wished her old mentor was there. He would have known what to do about the Witch, how to find out who she was and what she wanted. Regina didn’t have a clue. She’d thought of asking the bookworm but Belle had become something of a recluse lately, keeping to herself in one of the top rooms of the keep and barely speaking to anyone. Mourning or overreacting, Regina wasn’t sure, but for now she felt like she owed the little brunette a bit of space. If she wouldn’t come down for Snow, Regina seriously doubted she’d come down for her.

Of course, that thought came before she happened to spy the bookworm descending the stairs at the front entrance, hand-in-hand with little Roland Hood, and greeting a happy-looking Robin with a hug.

Regina stood and moved to the window for a better look. Apart from a brief conversation in which she’d handed Robin a small bag of gold and another terse ‘thank you’, she hadn’t had a chance to speak to the outlaw since the day they’d won back the castle. She vaguely remembered David mentioning that he’d planned to leave shortly, but how shortly Regina hadn’t realised at all.

Of course he wouldn’t want to stay, said her logical side. He’s an outlaw!

She watched Belle give a hug to the rest of the Merry Men in turn while Robin scooped up his little boy and waved goodbye to someone outside of her view. A funny feeling crossed her chest, like her heart had clawed its way to the inside surface and was beating against her breastbone. Regina briefly contemplated teleporting down to the courtyard. In fact, she was halfway through the motions to do so before she stopped herself. They were well within their rights to go wherever they wished and it wasn’t her place to interfere.

She was not pining. She had work to do and a Witch to kill.

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

“Bartender!” the newcomer barked, slamming his mug – Aaron had lost count of what number the man was up to – onto the bar. “Bartender! Another!”

“Coming up,” said Aaron, setting down the mug he’d been cleaning and hurrying to pour the man another drink. He’d started out with the rum as had been requested, but now he was thinking that he’d be better off slipping the man watered-down beer. Whoever he was – a reasonably handsome chap with black hair, a long leather overcoat and only one glove – had begun to sway in his seat. Thankfully he was the only patron left – well, apart from Willie Winkie, who’d fallen asleep in a corner after his first shot at nine o’clock – or else Aaron would have seriously considered throwing him out of the pub. He set the new pint down and the stranger sculled half of it in a single mouthful. Aaron had to admire his accuracy; he didn’t spill a single drop.

On the other hand, he didn’t think he was going to get paid.

“Oi, mate,” he said, trying to keep his tone level so as not to incur a fight. “What’s your name?”
The stranger opened one bleary blue eye. “Who’s asking?”

“Aaron Tumble. I own the Duke’s Head pub.” Still cautious, he waved a hand in front of the stranger’s face and got no reaction. Completely out of it. “Who are you?”

The stranger shut his eyes and he started to tremble. Aaron thought he was having a fit until he saw the streaks falling across the man’s face. He was crying.

“You alright, mate?”

“She’s married,” the man whimpered. “Married. Can you believe that?”

A scorned lover, thought Aaron. He filled another pint, having seen a few too many of those in his day. “Nope, not at all.”

As it turned out, the next pint wasn’t necessary as the stranger slumped in his chair and began to snore. Aaron turned the dishrag over in his hands. It was going to be a long night.

Neal helped Snow made a pot of tea while Emma got Henry settled in the upstairs bedroom. He couldn’t help but notice the way her eyes lit up when she noticed the ring on his finger, but thankfully he was spared that discussion by Emma coming down the stairs.

“Okay, Henry’s watching a movie on his phone so we should be alright to talk,” Emma told them. Snow immediately went over to hug her daughter.

“It’s good to see you again.”

“You too,” said Emma. “So what happened? I mean, besides the obvious.”

Neal passed both of them a cup of tea. “I don’t know. Thank you,” said Snow, taking the cups and giving one to Emma. “The last thing I remember was watching the yellow bug roll across the town line. Everything went black, and then I woke up here like it was any other day in Storybrooke. Except, well, this had happened.” She held a protective hand over her stomach.

“You don’t remember anything?” asked Neal, chucking the used teabag in the bin. “Nothing at all from the last year and half?”

“No, nothing. Just the last four days.” Snow took a sip of tea. “Did you say it’s been a year and a half?”

“Yeah, definitely. That’s how long we’ve been in New York.”

Snow exhaled sharply. “Did we – did we even leave Storybrooke?”

He met Emma’s eyes and shrugged. Neither of them had any clue. “No idea,” she told her mother. “Killian might know. We could ask him. He came and got us in New York.” She pursed her lips and thought for a moment. “Um, I hate to go there, but is Regina here?”

Neal took the last empty chair as Snow nodded. “Yes, she’s in town.” Catching sight of her daughter’s expression, she added, “But she seems as clueless as the rest of us.”

“I’m just saying, new curse, no memories,” said Emma. “It fits her M.O.”

“I know, but trust me when I say I don’t think she was involved in this.”
Where is she?

The mayor’s house, I’d assume. It doesn’t look like the new curse changed anything about our Storybrooke personas. Except for this, and the fact that there’re a whole lot of new people in town. People who weren’t brought over with the first curse,” she explained when Neal offered her a puzzled look. “Several hundred of them. We think this time the whole realm, or at least most of it, was brought over instead of just select people. A few of the ones from the first curse are missing as well.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “Wait. Is – is David here?”

From the way Snow’s face fell, Neal thought Emma might as well have dropped a forty-tonne weight on top of her. “I’m not – I’m not sure. There’s been a lot of confusion in the past few days. Ruby and I have been trying to sort everything out, find out who’s here and who isn’t. But we haven’t seen or heard from him.”

Neal drained his tea and dropped the cup next to a heavy teacher’s textbook on the coffee table. “What about Belle? She could probably help us figure this out.”

Sadly, Snow shook her head. “No, we haven’t heard from her either. And we’ve checked. Your dad’s shop, the library. Nothing.”

“Damn,” he muttered. He rubbed his eyes. It had been such a long day. Emma looked the same when the white spots had cleared from his vision.

“Well, this mess isn’t going anywhere,” she said. “I’ll find Killian in the morning and see what he knows. We’re not gonna figure any of this out unless we can get your memories back.”

“Well, how did you get yours back?” Snow asked. “At Granny’s, you said you remembered? So how did you get your memories back?”

Emma glared at Neal for an explanation. “Uh, I’m not too sure,” he said meekly. “When I met Killian at the park, I just got this thumping headache. We talked for a while and then they just came back. I don’t even know why we forgot in the first place.”

“I do,” said Emma. “It was a side effect of Regina reversing the curse. It took away any memory we had of Storybrooke, so she replaced them with other memories rather than whatever the curse would have left in their place.”

Snow nodded and then grinned like a giddy schoolgirl. “And I suppose congratulations are in order?” When Emma looked confused, she pointed to the wedding ring on her own left hand. Neal tried to duck and avoid both of their gazes without drawing attention to the movement.

“Oh, yeah. That too.”

Snow stood and hugged her daughter again, completely missing the discomfort on Emma’s face. “It’s late, but promise you’ll tell me all about it in the morning?”

“Sure,” said Emma. She let her mother go to waddle off to the bathroom and Neal returned to staring at his shoes.

“Uh, if you want to take the couch, I’m happy to sleep on the floor,” he offered.

“That’s okay, the couch folds out.” She started to move the coffee table out of the way. Neal reached for her hand.
“Are you sure?”

Emma glanced over to the bathroom. The water was running now. “Look, can we – can we talk about it in the morning?” she asked. “Right now, I’m just – I just wanna get some sleep.”

He had to agree with her on that one. “Yeah, okay.”

Much later, after everyone had settled in for the night, Neal did have to push her gently onto her back and away from him after she’d rolled into his side. It was probably just a habit from New York, he figured, and if Snow’s casual mention of the marriage they thought had been real for the last year made her that uneasy, he didn’t think she wanted to wake up any closer to him than she had to.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 8: New Beginnings. In the Enchanted Forest, the war with the ogres progresses and Belle learns a thing or two about being an honourable outlaw. In Storybrooke, Little John is attacked, the Cassidy family has breakfast at Granny’s and Regina wakes up from a familiar nightmare.
“So, this is Elsinore Castle?” asked David. “It’s pretty.”

It might have been, several decades ago. The crumbling white stone walls were held in place by ivy and not much else. The remains of the castle grounds were overgrown with grass, daisies and waist-high shrubberies. Looters had cleaned the windows of glass and entire sections of the towers had collapsed, leaving behind gaping holes and piles of shapeless rock. David was no architect, but he was reasonably sure that castles were meant to have roofs.

The man astride the giant chestnut war horse on David’s right chuckled. “It was, once,” said King Josef of the Northern Kingdom. “Legend has it that one of the old kings was murdered by his brother who was, in turn, killed by the dead king’s son. Along with his entire family. My ancestors ruled from the north and left this place to the earth. According to local folklore, it’s haunted. I hope you don’t mind ghosts.”

“I don’t believe in them. But I thought you called us here because ogres were spotted in the area.”

Josef nodded. “Yes, this way.”

David signalled to his assembled troops to advance before spurring his horse to follow Josef. The older man was either Snow’s great-uncle by marriage or her cousin once removed; she had tried to explain it to him and, quite frankly, he hadn’t understood a word of it. Nonetheless, the man had an important relation to his wife otherwise they would have sent an embassy. And in spite of the fact that it took him away from her, David was happy to be out on the field again. In his opinion they were at their best when Snow handled the diplomatic relations and he tracked down the monsters that needed killing.

“My captain spotted them two days before yesterday,” said Josef as they directed their horses into the fallen stoneworks. The king dismounted next to a large piece of fresco and dropped his reins; David did the same. “He counted a total of half a dozen at the time but that was from a distance in low light. I am sorry to have brought you so far out – I’d have handled this myself but for how close it is to the border.”

“And a lot further north than we thought the ogres had reached,” David added. “Snow and I appreciate your concerns.”

“Ah, yes. How is my niece?”

Niece. So he is her uncle. David filed that away for future reference. “She’s well. The return to the kingdom wasn’t easy on any of us. Especially considering … well, it wasn’t exactly planned.”

“I see. And her stepmother?”

“Co-operating, for the time being. She’s trying to track down the Wicked Witch. Without much luck, unfortunately.”

“Neither did I.”

“Sir!”

The call came from the top of a daisy-laden hill, a young man with straw hair and an extended spyglass looking over the crest. David, Josef and the men following them kept their heads low as they ascended the hill, crawling the last few metres. “What have you got, Johannes?”

“Ogres, sir, dead ahead,” said the young man. He passed the spyglass to Josef, who cringed the moment he adjusted the focus.

David’s stomach sank to somewhere in the vicinity of his boots. “How many?”

“Four … five … thirty-six,” said Josef. “And big ones. They don’t look like they’re here for a picnic.”

David propped himself up on his elbows to look over the hill. His first thought was that ‘big ones’ was a bit of an understatement. His second thought was to wonder how to reword the phrase “tactical retreat” to the troops behind them.

Dozens of the massive creatures had taken up residence in what may have once been Elsinore’s great hall. A canopy – made of what looked suspiciously like dragonhide – had been suspended over the hole in the roof and three enormous fire pits dug out of the nearby ground. Two were in use. One held a cooking pot about the same size as David’s old pickup truck and minded by an ogre with tusks protruding from his upper jaw. The second was being used to roast an entire cow on a spit. Dozens of ogres, all clad in leather armour and wielding clubs, maces or crudely made broadswords easily longer than a grown man, ambled between the pits or into the hall. Some of them sharpened weapons or made repairs to armour. A few of the younger, less scarred ones held what looked like a wrestling match on an open patch of grass. The rest moved colossal, twenty-foot-high blocks of white stone on rolling logs across a well-trodden track that led up into the mountains. The stone was deposited two or three hundred yards from the castle ruins in an orderly, slightly curved, wall.

“They’re building a barricade,” said David.

Josef grunted in agreement. “A bunker, a place of operations from which to lay siege from the north. Incredible.”

David frowned at him, sure that he’d misheard.

“I mean in terms of the intelligence they’ve displayed here,” Josef continued. “I remember the last time we fought them, they barely made it out of the Alps. What I’d really like to know is how they got so far north without us even seeing them.”

David groaned. Damn it. “Regina says the Witch was negotiating with them when we took back Tower Castle. She must’ve made a portal, or teleported them somehow. That’s what the barricade is for.”

“You’re certain?”

“All of our defensive forces are concentrated in the south. Opening up a northern line, even just a small force, to attack us from behind … it would be devastating.”

Josef slowly nodded as David mulled over everything he’d just said. Regina had been right – whoever this Witch was, she was dangerous. So much for a warm welcome home.
“What’s your plan of action, sir?” said the young officer.

Josef drew back into a sitting position and faced the assembled troops. Fifty men, from both Josef’s army and David’s, all only lightly armed with crossbows and lightweight swords. The younger ones were pale and even a few of the hardened veterans were visibly sweating. David didn’t blame them.

“For now, nothing,” said Josef. “We’re not equipped to take on this many. But I believe Prince David is right. This is just the beginning of a larger assault. We’ll scout them out, set up a sentry in the woods to keep an eye on their activities.”

“What are we to do in the meantime, sir?” asked an even younger soldier, with peach fuzz on his cheeks.

Josef snapped the spyglass shut. “Pray.”

Snow had a long list of things she had expected when Regina had called her to her lab in the south wing, but her stepmother whooping had been nowhere on the list. She gently nudged the lab door open. “Regina?”

Her stepmother didn’t even bother to conceal the wide grin that split her face at the moment Snow walked in. She looked a mess, dark circles under her eyes, hair haphazardly tied back and she wore a pale blue gown Snow would swear was the same one she’d worn to breakfast two days earlier. Her bed had not been slept in and the wall bore the tell-tale signs of fireballs, potions and possibly a beaker or two having been thrown into it. Nonetheless, Regina looked ecstatic and the reason quickly became obvious: on the large map of the realm spread across half of her workbench, a spot the size of a Christmas beetle lit up with a ruby glow.

Snow gaped. “It worked!”

“Yes, finally,” said Regina, beckoning for her to come inside. Snow had to look at the map upside-down but it was large enough that she got the idea.

“So,” she said as she looked for the landmarks nearest the locator spell, “the Witch is somewhere in the north-west, near the border with the Northern Kingdoms?”

“It would appear so.” Regina pointed to the spot on the map. “If I recall correctly, that’s the town of Stargard. Small hamlet, or at least it was. I don’t know if there’s anyone there.”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s a place to start,” said Snow. “David just sent news from the north. It looks like the Witch has been transporting the ogres to Elsinore Castle, he thinks to try and attack us from behind while all of our defences are in the south.”

Regina frowned. “So she did make an alliance with them.”

“It would appear so. Regina, you’re not gonna go up there alone, are you?”

Her stepmother held up a hand. “No. Not after what happened last time.”

Snow sighed in relief. If nothing else, getting beaten to the ground had at least taught Regina some measure of caution. “What’s the plan?”

“Figure out a way to corner her, then see if there’s a way to disable or block her magic. Fairy dust would do it.”
“Like it did on you. Snow met Regina’s eyes hesitantly. “Yes. But nobody’s heard from Blue or the fairies since we got back to the kingdom.”

“Did you check the rose gardens?”

She laughed humourlessly. “Regina.”

“Fine, I’ll figure something else out.”

“After you eat something.”

“No, I –”

Snow grabbed her stepmother’s arm. “I’m not leaving if you don’t.”

Regina sighed. “Fine.”

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

Regina woke up screaming.

She sat up and clutched at her chest, coughing and choking on air. Bright golden flashes played across her vision, her hands and feet were numb and her room in the mayor’s house felt unusually warm, to the point of burning. She’d never been afraid of fire but that nightmare had been something different. Almost *real*.

Stuck in a dark room, with waterfalls of flame pouring from the walls, a mosaic of liquid gold beneath her feet and tongues of fire lashing out at her, following her, *targeting* her. Even awake she could feel the heat of the near-misses on her forearms and cheeks.

She threw off the sheets and wandered into the bathroom, where she splashed cold water on her face and arms. A glance at the mirror reflection of her clock told her that is was four thirty in the morning. She’d only managed to fall asleep at one o’clock.

For the third day in a row, Regina considered going back to bed and wound up in the kitchen boiling a kettle instead.

**Enchanted Forest, July 2012**

“You’ve been awfully quiet.”

Belle looked up from the book she’d been reading – a rather mediocre philosophy written by a Borderlands academic – to see Friar Tuck offer her a cup of tea. She took it and he took a seat next to her on the fallen log.

Two days after leaving Tower Castle, the Merry Men had set up camp in the south-west of Sherwood Forest. Small blinds dug out of the ground and roofed with knotted wood and woven leaves had turned out a lot warmer than she’d thought it would be. Alan, the jovial spirit of the group, had taught her to tie different types of knots – *most* of which were used for shelter construction, he assured her – and corrected a hundred errors in the way she held and used her knife. In fact, he’d given her an entirely new blade which was a touch lighter and longer than her old one.
Much had asked how she took her tea and Roland had stayed up past his bedtime, wanting to read with her. All in all, Belle felt welcome. Entirely out of place, but welcome.

It was better than the alternative, she told herself for the tenth time.

Friar Tuck waited patiently while she tested the tea. It wasn’t bad. “Sorry. Just been thinking. A lot.”

“About anything in particular?”

She grinned shyly. Somehow she didn’t think a monk would approve of her wholly unconventional relationship with the most powerful sorcerer in the realm. Nobody else had.

A few dozen yards away, at the bottom of the slope, Robin and Roland were playing a game of some sort. From what she could tell, Roland held an imaginary bow and tried to shoot his father, who ducked and weaved like a clumsy old grouse to make it a fair game. Every once in a while he would fall to the ground and play dead, much to Alan and John’s amusement.

She watched them play; to her right, she could see that Tuck wasn’t. When a short time had passed and she still hadn’t answered him, he said, “You know, you never did tell us why you left the castle.”

“Didn’t I?”

“No.”

She thought for a moment. “My father wanted me to get married. I told him I was going to live my life the way I chose. He didn’t take it well.”

“And you’re second-guessing that choice.”

It wasn’t a question, she knew. Still not looking at the monk, she said, “I don’t know. I’ve always dreamt of adventures, of seeing the world, being a hero. But – I don’t know if I made the right choice in leaving.”

“I see.” Tuck paused. “Would marriage have been such a terrible thing?”

Once, it would not. Once, Belle would have resigned herself to such a fate. It had been expected of her and if it helped her family or the duchy in any way, she would have done it in a heartbeat. But the circumstances had changed. “It – I – I couldn’t. I can’t even bear to think it, not – not so soon.”

“There was another?” She nodded. “What happened to him?”

“He – he died.”

Tuck said nothing. Belle put her book to one side as she felt her eyes begin to well up. An invisible hand reached into her chest and squeezed, tight but not constricting like it had on that terrible last day in Storybrooke. Did that mean she was getting used to it, she wondered.

“Would I be right in saying your father didn’t approve of the match?”

She huffed. “Not in the slightest.”

Tuck leaned back on the log, possibly to stretch his legs. “You know, I had a good parish in Hamelin. Nice place, people were simple, life was quiet. Then the old bishop retired and the new one … well, let’s just say he had some ideas about how the church was meant to run. Extremely traditionalist, he was. He didn’t think the laymen had any right to be serving in the church in any sort of formal manner, and all readings were supposed to be done in the tongue of the Old Empire. Never
mind that most folk in the town couldn’t read their own tongue to begin with.”

“What did you do?” she asked, feeling small.

“Well, the short answer is I left. My conscience wouldn’t let me carry on with my work in the way that Bishop Young wished it, so God led me elsewhere. At the time I wondered if I had made the right choice as well.”

At long last, Belle looked the old monk in the eyes. There was no distaste or belittlement in his eyes, only slight amusement as the elderly get when they watch their successors struggle with the same puzzles they themselves endured in their youth. “And — and did you?”

Tuck opened his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. “My ministry now is far less conventional and certainly looked down upon, but I also know that with the Merry Men I’ve – I’ve done things and I’ve helped people in ways I never would have been able to do if I’d stayed in Hamelin. That’s what I fall asleep to at night, and it’s what I wake up to in the mornings.”

“But do you think you made the right choice?”

He smiled, now openly amused. “I don’t know,” he admitted, “but I believe I’ll know one day. Robin and his lot – well, they’re unorthodox and they’re misfits. But one thing I do know is that misfits are the ones society shuns and history remembers.”

“You –” She swallow and thought of the best way to phrase her question. “You really believe that?”

“Belle,” said Tuck, “that’s something I’ve known since I was a boy.”

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

The next morning at Granny’s was weird. Emma couldn’t think of a better way to describe the mess of memories that ran through her head when she woke up, not in her bed in New York but on her forgotten mother’s sofa and the man she’d thought was her husband asleep face-down on the other side, having tried to sleep-pinch her pillow at some time during the night. She swirled her cocoa absent-mindedly while sorting through the facts.

She thought about Boston, living there with Neal and Henry while simultaneously knowing she’d been a lonely bail bondsperson. Even further back, to Tallahassee, she remembered Henry, no more than six months old, struggling to crawl as he hadn’t yet worked out the role his arms were supposed to play in the process. She remembered his room, the duckling mobile over his crib, the time he’d had a tantrum because the microwave ate his lunch. She remembered a tiny, secluded cove on Florida’s coastline where she’d said her vows, where Neal had said his. But she didn’t know the name of the minister who’d married them. She couldn’t think of the name of Henry’s first school. She couldn’t remember why they’d moved from Florida to Massachusetts, or which teams had played the time they’d gone to a ball game in Boston – even though she could distinctly remember having attended one.

“This is messed up,” she finally proclaimed, then buried her head in her arms, folded across the table.

“Two sets of memories in your head?” said Neal. She looked up to see that he’d come over with a cup of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs. “Yeah, I know.”

“It’s not just that,” she said, taking a rasher off his plate and realising too late what she’d done. She ate it anyway, not wanting to draw attention to her lapse into old habits. “I thought it would be like
waking up from a dream, but it’s not. It – it still feels real. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Neal thought for a moment, twirling his fork in the eggs. “Hey, look. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth when Killian woke me up. I just – I didn’t know how to get your memories back. Or any other way of getting to Storybrooke.”

“It’s okay, I’m not angry. At least, not about that.” He visibly relaxed. “It’s just a lot to take in.”

Neal smiled gratefully, and then Henry plopped into the seat next to him with a similarly loaded plate of breakfast. Emma felt heavy thinking of a similar scene, just in a New York City apartment with less birdsong and more angry drivers.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” her son asked around a mouth full of egg. He looked between her and Neal, waiting for an answer.

Inwardly, Emma cursed. What are we gonna tell him?

Thankfully, Neal spared her the trouble. “Well, I was gonna drop by the library. The, uh, the woman who runs it could probably help us.”

“With the thing Killian came to get you to help out with?”

“Yeah, that.”

“What is it that they needed you for, anyway?”

“Uh –”

The crash of a Styrofoam coffee cup exploding against floor tiles brought all activity, including Henry’s inquisitive mind, to a stop and turned the diner into a franchised vacuum. The dozen or so patrons turned to stare at the cause, whose face had drained of all colour when she saw the three of them. Or one in particular. Emma didn’t like to think of the scald Regina would have from the coffee she’d just dropped on her foot, but the former queen didn’t seem to have even noticed.

A moment passed, thicker than glue, and Regina regained her composure. “Oh. I’m – I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Henry gave a small shrug, apparently confused as to why she seemed to be talking only to him. “That’s – that’s okay.”

Emma rose quickly before Regina could run out the door, or do something else rash. She threw Neal a look and mouthed, “Keep him occupied.” Over at the counter, Granny clicked her tongue in annoyance. Emma pulled a statue-like Regina out of the way, the eyes of the elderly owner and the breakfasters boring holes into them as they ducked into the little hallway which connected the diner and the B&B.

Once they were out of the way, Emma noticed how exhausted Regina looked. The initial shock had worn off but she was still whiter than a ghost and with the dark circles under her eyes, she looked almost skeletal.

“He looked right through me,” she whimpered.

“Because he doesn’t remember you.”

Regina’s eyes widened further. “But you do? How?”
“Hook came and found us in New York,” Emma explained. “We’re not sure why we got our memories back, but we – Neal and I – did. For some reason Henry’s didn’t.”

She glanced around the wall to their booth. They were talking but Henry didn’t look confused or anxious, so whatever Neal had told him must have worked. So she turned back to Regina.

“How long – how long have we been gone? Did we even leave?”

Emma nodded. “You did. About a year and a half ago.”

“A year and a half?”

The people nearest to them looked up sharply. Emma tried to look apologetic and pulled Regina further into the corridor.

“Sorry. Look, I didn’t cast another curse, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I’ll admit the thought did cross my mind.”

“Well, I didn’t do this,” Regina growled. “I wouldn’t just erase eighteen months of my life.”

“Somebody did. And we need to figure out who.”

“And just how do you plan to do that?” Regina scoffed. “By walking around and using your superpower on everyone?”

“You got a better idea?”


She turned to cover her mistake. Neal had told her when he put their order in that Henry still didn’t remember, for reasons he didn’t know, so she needed to be careful. He called her back with a cheerful, “Hey!”

She pivoted again. Henry was smiling. “The cinnamon. How’d you know?”

Oh, damn. “Uh, lucky guess,” she said quickly. “You’ve got a – a cinnamon kind of face.”

He frowned. She flashed him a smile and hurried back to the counter. “A cinnamon kind of face?” she muttered on the way.

Snow and Archie sat at the counter, her old friend cleaving through a third helping of hash browns and Archie nursing a mug of black coffee. Both had been sneaking glances at Henry and Neal while Ruby served them. They’d been missed.

“He’s grown so much,” said Archie wistfully. “I don’t know if Pongo would even recognise him anymore.”

“I know,” said Snow. “That’s not all we missed – Emma and Neal got married.”

“What?” Ruby gasped, a little louder than she’d intended. She offered a hasty apology to those closest to them. “When?”

Snow shrugged. “I don’t know, I didn’t get to ask. All the things I’ve already missed in my daughter’s life, her wedding just had to be another one.”
“I’m sure she didn’t mean to leave you out,” said Archie. “We were in the Enchanted Forest, for good or so we thought. And you said Regina altered their memories so they didn’t remember us anyway.”

“I know. It’s just another thing I had to miss.”

“Order up!”

Ruby went to collect it. “Well, they’re back now. That’s the important part. If we could just – oh, rats. Sorry.”

Almost everything had remained consistent between the two curses. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the influx of new arrivals they might not have realised anything was different at all – Granny still ran the diner, Regina was still the mayor, Archie still a psychologist and Snow still a schoolteacher (albeit pregnant and with no memory of how she got that way). Except that with Emma gone and David still missing, there was no sheriff and the curse hadn’t seen fit to give the job to anyone else. So Ruby, out of necessity, had offered to oversee the station until someone better suited could take over. Exactly when that would be, she didn’t know and she had a sinking feeling that it had better be sooner rather than later. Especially with a call like the one she had to take just then, relayed from the station.

“Where are you?” she asked, waving aside the cook’s efforts to get her attention.

“Uh, somewhere near the woods,” said the voice on the other end, distinctly male and vaguely English. He was also loud, almost shouting down the line, which made Ruby think he was most likely a newcomer who wasn’t sure how to use a phone. “There’s a road, a large one. And an orange stripe painted across it.”

“You’re near the town line,” she told them. “Okay, I’ll find you. Just stay put and whatever you do, do not cross that line.”

“All right,” said the man.

Archie and Snow were waiting for her apprehensively as she hung up the phone. “What happened?” asked Snow.

“Someone’s been attacked out near the town line,” Ruby told them as she untied her apron. She looked around for Emma – she was still talking to Regina. “Not sure by what, just that it was big and it was flying. Archie, could you do me a huge favour and take those to table four?”

“No problem.”

“Do you need me to come?” asked Snow. She was halfway off her stool before Ruby stopped her.

“It’s alright, I’ll get Leroy.”

“Ruby –”

“No arguments. You need to stay off your feet.”

Snow glared, unimpressed. “I’m pregnant, not an invalid.”

“All the more reason,” she said, throwing on her coat. “It’ll be fine. Don’t make me lock you in the freezer.”
What?”

“Oh, right. You weren’t here for that.”

**Enchanted Forest, July 2012**

On the southern edge of Sherwood Forest, Belle and the Merry Men crouched on the downslope of a grassy hill, peering over the top with trepidation. Alan held a looking-glass to his eye and reported the details of the distant scene.

“There’s a dozen, maybe a couple more of them. Loads of caravans, too. Goats, cattle, weaponry. Looks like a fun party.”

Belle lay on her stomach next to a tense Friar Tuck. The giant, hulking forms of the distant ogres was all she could see but it was enough to send a shiver racing down her spine. The smell, the growls and grunts, the opaque pearly sheen of their eyes – even though she was a mile away, her throat burned with the acrid stench of oily, tarnished metal. “You don’t think they’re coming into the forest, do you?”

“No,” said Robin, who was on Tuck’s other side. “Sherwood’s too thick for them. We’ve seen them pass by a hundred times.”

“They’re going north,” Alan stated as-a-matter-of-factly.

The rest of them turned. “You’re sure?” asked Tuck.

Alan nodded. “Definitely. They’re not moving right now but there’s a definite trail, heading south. Wonder why they’re sitting still?”

“Ogres don’t move by daylight,” said Belle. “Small parties like this one camp out during the day and cover tens, even hundreds of miles during the night.”

Alan lowered the looking-glass to stare at her. “Whereabouts did you say you were from, again?”

“The Frontlands.”

His eyes widened with realisation, as did a few of the others’. “Bloody hell. You’ve seen some stuff, haven’t you?”

“What about security?” asked Robin. “Do they keep sentries, patrols, anything like that?”

She frowned. Robin shrugged and continued: “I was in Agrabah during the Ogres’ War. I don’t know that much about them.”

“Robin, if you’re suggesting we attack sixteen full-grown ogres I’m gonna make good on my threat to kill you,” said Alan, brandishing the looking-glass like a club.

Robin waved away that suggestion. “That’s not what I’m suggesting. See those caravans? That’s not a raiding party, that’s a supply line. The two ogres Regina took out in Tower Castle were holding a parley with the Wicked Witch. My guess is they’ve got a northern force we didn’t know about and these ones are going up to provide reinforcements.”

Alan didn’t look convinced. “We’d have noticed them.”
“Not if they travel in small groups by night, like Belle said. Or maybe the Witch teleported them north, I don’t know.”

“The Witch –”

“Is definitely working with them,” Belle interrupted. She could see where Robin was going with this and he was right; either King Richard didn’t know about these ogres or he couldn’t spare the troops to deal with them. Either way, she and the Merry Men were in a position to do something. The thought was exhilarating. “I’ve never seen ogres act this co-ordinated before. If they were on their own, they wouldn’t bother with a supply chain. They’d just raid the nearest villages.”

“Right,” Robin agreed. “We need to take out those caravans. I’m thinking a bit of dried wood, a small pound of explosives, a nice big bonfire to send a signal to anyone nearby.”

“I knew you were gonna say that,” Alan grumbled.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 9: Puzzle Pieces. In the Enchanted Forest, the Merry Men raid the ogres’ caravan line. In Storybrooke, Emma speaks to Killian, Neal and Henry visit the library and Ruby remembers everything she hated about being a deputy sheriff. Sorry that this is a touch late. I had to vote yesterday. Also, if you’re interested I drew a map to help with some of the locations/directions in the EF. Not sure how well you can see it, but you can find it at http://shepherdinthevalleyofdeath.tumblr.com
The cows stared blankly at Belle when she snuck into the corral. The poor things had been squashed inside a tiny open space between eight caravans and left to chew on whatever tough, scraggly plants they could find. Fat goats wandered between the uncomprehending cattle; a few young ones had climbed on top of the larger beasts, where they nestled in the cows’ thick fur. The nearest cow, a big black animal, nudged her with its nose.

“It’s alright,” Belle murmured, offering it her hand to smell. “I’m going to get you out of here”. Then she heard heavy footsteps and ducked underneath the caravan. Huge feet like oak trees thumped on the ground near where she had been only seconds before. Ogres were not quite blind like people believed but they did have astonishing smell and hearing. She could only hope that the stink produced by a herd of cattle would cover her smell. She hugged the caravan wheel and hugged her cloak tight.

“Stick to the shadows,” Alan had told her. “If they haven’t seen you, don’t move. Just stay as still as you can.”

So she did.

In the seconds – or possibly several minutes – that followed, the ogre’s feet pounded on dry grass and threatened to make her sneeze with all the dust it kicked up. At the same time, it was stone, the sound reverberating off tarnished suits of armour and ringing in her ears. Belle didn’t dare shut her eyes for fear of what she would see. She stared at the gap between the table legs – caravan wheels! – and waited for the ogre to pass by.

Then it was gone. A quick glance in the gaps of the other wheels showed no others close by, so Belle crawled out of her hiding spot. The cow mooed at her.

“Shh, shh. Okay? I’m going to get you out of here,” she murmured, glancing around nervously while she cut the ropes bridging the gap between two caravans. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

The rest of the cattle began to low in unison and stamp their feet. Further attempts to calm them failed. Belle could also hear shouts, either meaning Alan had started the first of the fires or the ogres had noticed the commotion in the corral. Either way, she was short on time.

“Oh, no.”

She cut through the last rope and let it fall to the ground. When she turned, the cows stared back at her.

“Come on!” She tugged on the collar of the black cow. “Move! You need to go!”

She tried something she’d seen farmers do in the marketplace and slapped the great beast on the hindquarters. That did nothing but then it caught the smell of not-trampled grass and lumbered through the open space. The rest moved slowly, then quicker. Belle clambered onto a caravan runner to keep from being trampled.
The shouts were louder now, more like roars, and smoke billowed over the tops of the caravans. Then something exploded, sending the cattle into a panic and rocking Belle’s caravan as the stampede started.

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

It looked like the sort of place that Hook would frequent, though Emma supposed the only real prerequisite would be that it sold alcohol. It was an English-style pub built from grey stone, with a heavy oak door and opaque glass windows. The second storey was made from white panels with black trim and large shutter windows, one of which held a small collection of clothes hung out to dry. A wrought iron sign hanging above the door informed her that the place was called the *Duke’s Head*, along with a crude depiction of the aforementioned, presumably decapitated, head. Emma grimaced and opened the door.

On the plus side, the interior was clean and hygienic, if poorly illuminated. Electric lamps made to look like gas burners spread dull, flickering light across long wooden tables and a well-worn stone floor. Behind the bar, a blonde guy in a dirty apron cleaned glass mugs in a tub of soapy water. She cleared her throat and he looked up.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Hi. Sorry to intrude,” she said. “My name’s Emma Swan. I’m looking for somebody who was seen in the area around one o’clock this morning. Killian Jones?”

The bartender shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t know him.”

“You sure? He’s about so high, black hair, got a hook for a hand?”

Recognition dawned on him. “Oh, so that’s the poor bastard’s name.”

Emma sighed in relief. “You’ve seen him?”

“A bit too much, actually,” the guy said, setting a cleaned glass on a drying rack. “He’s back here.”

He gestured for her to follow him into a back room which she guessed was a kitchen now also doing business as a laundry. It smelt like soap and had clothing, both unwashed and washed, stuffed into washing bags and stacked on the shelves between cleaned plates and cutting boards. “Pardon the mess,” said the bartender, shifting aside a basket of t-shirts.

“You’re full up on guests as well, are you?”

“Every inn and hostel around is at the mo’. Too many new folks poppin’ up all over the bloody place, I tell you. Your fella’s over there.”

“That’s a pile of dishrags.”

“No, behind that.”

Emma looked over the pile again. Sure enough, there was a lump behind it that moved up and down as it breathed. Thankfully it was still dressed.

“He wandered in here after his eleventh pint. Scared the dickens out of my wife when he switched his hand over with that hook,” said the bartender. “Then he curled up in the laundry and fell fast
asleep. It needs a clean anyway so I just left him there.”

Emma grimaced. “You didn’t think maybe to call the sheriff?”

“Nah, he wasn’t causing trouble. Just kept howling about some lass he lost to another man. Gotta say, I think she got the better part of the bargain.” He kicked Killian’s foot. “Nothing. Listen, do you mind getting him out of here? I want to close up.”

“Yes, no problem,” she said.

“And when he wakes up, tell him the tab owed is thirty-three bob.”

She paid the bill herself, which made him look extremely relieved. The bartender helped her haul Killian’s unconscious form out to the bug where they squashed him into the back seat. While stopped at a red light on the way to the loft, Emma spun her wedding ring around on her finger and thought about what he had said. Then the dreamcatcher bumped against her head. She had an idea.

As far as Neal could tell, the library was exactly how Belle had left it; a jumble of books on the check-out counter halfway through being sorted, an overloaded trolley marked ‘Shelving’ and a partially-finished children’s corner with the boxes out of order (unless Belle’s version of the alphabet actually did go ‘E-D-R-B’, which Neal doubted). A light layer of dust had settled and when Neal flipped the switches, the lights flickered before coming on. Snow had been right. Belle hadn’t been there. Henry looked uncertainly at the trolley.

“Dad, are you sure we should be in here?”

Neal headed over to the counter. “Yeah. The door wasn’t locked. Don’t worry, Belle’s really nice. So long as we don’t make a mess, she’ll be fine with it.”

*If she’s even here*, he thought.

Henry shrugged and plodded off to have a look through the shelves. Neal checked out the desk.

She had Post-It notes stuck all over the computer with things like “Shelves at back need fixing – call Marco” and “Get stamps for kids catalogues” written in elegant cursive handwriting. One stuck to the top of the monitor caught Neal’s eye; unlike the rest, it was in heavy block form and read “Dinner at Granny’s, six o’clock?” It was his father’s hand.

With everything else that had happened, Neal had barely thought about his father. It had occurred to him that some things of Rumplestiltskin’s would have been brought back by the curse – his shop was there, down the road from Snow’s loft – but until then Neal had not come face-to-face with any of it. He gently ran a finger over the lettering. He’d never realised that they wrote capital g’s the same way.

“Hey, Dad!”

Henry trotted over with an armful of books, his grin changing to a look of concern when Neal turned to him. “Everything okay?”

Neal hurriedly fixed his face into a small smile. “Yeah. Everything’s fine. What’d you find?”

“Some old fantasy stuff and a couple of graphic novels.” Henry held up an early issue of *Fables*. “I don’t know if I’ll have time to read them all before we go back, though.”

“Can’t hurt,” said Neal. “I don’t think she’s here right now but I can write her a note to let her know
you took them out.”

“Okay.”

Neal shifted a stack of books and rummaged through a box of stationary for a pen and the Post-Its. ‘Hey, Belle,’ he wrote. ‘Emma and I are back in Storybrooke. If you get this, can you come to the loft? We could really use your help figuring out what’s going on. Also, Henry borrowed a couple books. Hope that’s okay. Neal.’

He stuck the note to the keyboard and then noticed the large hardback that had been underneath the rest of the books he’d moved. *Once Upon a Time.* Henry’s storybook. Neal opened the cover. It was back, all of it.

His thoughts raced. The book had been what sparked Henry’s journey to find Emma the first time. If it had been brought back as well, then maybe it was the key to breaking the curse this time as well. He flipped to the end, which had been torn out the last time he’d read the book, paused over an image of a newborn Emma with her parents and then flicked through the rest of the pages. He didn’t read it all but a full-page portrait of a woman with green skin in a black dress told him everything he needed to know.

The missing year had not been completely forgotten.

“Dad?”

Grinning like an idiot, Neal shouted, “Yeah, I’m coming!” He scooped up the book.

*Enchanted Forest, July 2012*

The ogres flew into a panic the moment the stampede started. Cows were a lot smaller and far less scary than a fully-grown ogre, but three dozen of them galloping out of an enclosed space was an event Robin was happy to be well away from. Belle had done well.

He snuck around a large pile of lumber that was in the process of being loaded into one of the caravans. Some of it was still fresh, which meant it would take longer to burn but would make a lot of smoke. He took out a bag of powder and stuffed a handful between the bottom logs, then laid a line leading to the caravan where he dropped a larger amount of the explosive. The stuff had been bought in a deal with a weapons trader from the Northern Kingdom and was possibly among Alan’s most brilliant ideas (which was saying something; he’d had a few). Robin hated to waste it but when it came to ogres, he was not taking chances.

When he was a yard or so away from the caravan, he carefully retied the bag and got to work on the fire. It didn’t have to be particularly fancy, just enough to ignite the powder. As he worked, he repeatedly cast his gaze around for ogres until the kindling lit and rapidly spread to the fuse. Robin pocketed his flint and ran.

It took less than a minute for the charges to blow. The wood pile was thrown into the air, flaming logs landing in various locations all over the camp and lighting the dried grass. The caravan’s front wheels were demolished and fire licked and lapped at the forward half. Robin grinned as he ran from the carnage. It had not been the worst job in the world.

Or so he thought until he was the first one to make it to the rendezvous point when Belle and Alan should have easily beat him.
Storybrooke, 24 January 2014

Ruby pulled her car off to the side of the road where four men and a little boy stood, waiting for them. Leroy, grumpy as ever, got out of the car first.

“You the ones who called the sheriff’s station?”

Rather a dumb question, Ruby thought. Who else would be out in the middle of the forest?

One of them, a good-looking and unshaven blondish-guy in a dark jacket and green scarf, looked Leroy up and down. “Yes. And you’re the –”

“Hopefully temporary sheriff,” said Ruby, extending a hand and cutting across whatever Leroy had been about to say. “I’m Ruby.”

He shook her hand. “Robin. This is Friar Tuck, Much and Alan.”

“Hi. So what exactly happened?”

Robin raised his hands, looking unsure, and the rest of them shrugged, their faces blank. “Honestly, I’ve no idea. Little John – another of our number – chased a turkey across the road just there.” Ruby looked to where he pointed. “Then some manner of beast with wings grabbed him and flew away with him.”

The freckled man – Alan, she thought – had wandered onto the road. “I wouldn’t cross that line if I were you!” Ruby yelled. He started and stayed still.

“You think Little John was attacked because he attempted to cross that line?” asked Robin.

“Makes sense,” said Leroy. “Bashful and Dopey were checking out the town line a couple days ago. We haven’t heard from them since.”

“Have you got anything of his?” Ruby asked when Robin baulked.

“Yes, this is his scarf. The beast must have dropped it.” He held out a bundle of brown cloth for Ruby to take. She held it up to her nose and took a deep breath. Pine needles, creek water, cold earth and the distinct scent of a large grown man. “What are you doing?”

"Using the scent on the scarf to smell him out," she explained, tasting the air. There was a faint trail, probably weakened because it had gone through the air instead of overland, travelling north-east at an angle to the wind. “This way.”

“Were you a hunting dog back home or something?” asked the little man named Much. Ruby grinned, showing him her teeth. He was suitably frightened.

“It’s a wolf thing,” she said.

“Do you remember what happened after we left Storybrooke?” asked Snow.

Killian braced his elbow on her kitchen counter and let his head fall against it, cursing whatever malevolent being had thought the invention of the electric light had been a good idea. Those things were unbearably bright. “Aye, I do.”
When he braved opening his eyes again, both Emma and Snow stared at him expectantly. He avoided Emma’s gaze and shut his eyes again. It had been a long time since he’d drunk that much. Now he remembered why. “Regina’s spell took us all back to the Enchanted Forest. We spent a brief time with a prince and princess named Philip and Aurora. But I wasn’t feeling the community spirit, so I ventured off on my own. The last I saw of you lot, you were preparing to make your way to the Evil Queen’s castle.”

He rubbed the space between his eyes. “This is not looking good for Regina.” Emma’s voice. He groaned softly. He’d missed that so much.

“No, but that’s still over a year we’re missing,” said Snow. “It’s hardly enough to incriminate her. Anything could have happened.”

“Wait a second,” Emma said sharply. Killian looked up to see that she was looking at him accusingly. “If you left the Enchanted Forest before the curse, how did you know to find me and Neal and come to Storybrooke?”

_I didn’t realise what I’d find._ Killian cleared his throat. “As I was sailing the realm a bird landed on my ship’s wheel with a note instructing me to retrieve you and return here.”

“How sent it?” asked Snow.

Killian reached into his coat. “I assumed you did.” He found the note and showed it to her. “Looks like your sort of handwriting.”

Snow turned it over and studied the writing. “No, that’s not mine.”

Emma looked at it over her shoulder. “Is it David’s? Or Regina’s?”

“I mean no offence to Her Evil Majesty, but she doesn’t strike me as the sort to be writing like a monk,” said Killian. That earned him another glare.

Then Snow said, “No. And it’s not David’s either.”

“Speaking of whom, where is His Charmingness?”

He knew immediately that it was the wrong thing to say. Snow looked to be seconds from crying while Emma’s glared hardened. He grimaced. Well, he was playing host to the king of headaches and it was a simple mistake. “Sorry. I didn’t realise.”

“Right,” said Emma. “Okay, I’m gonna go talk to Regina again. She may not be the one behind this but we do need to get the town in order and she’s still the mayor. Neal and Henry should be back sometime soon. Hopefully, he found something.”

Killian grunted and let his head fall to rest again. “I suppose I should say congratulations. I’d almost forgot about that.”

Or he’d tried to anyway, with his hangover as the end result.

“That was – I didn’t – look, we didn’t actually get married, all right?”

He snapped his head up, which was a mistake. Lights flashed in his eyes and an invisible vice squeezed his brain so he couldn’t think. Thankfully Snow asked the question for him. “You didn’t?”

Emma looked flustered at how disappointed she sounded. “Well, no, not exactly. It was – it was part
of the false memory Regina gave us.”

There were other words said, possibly a plan made, but Killian heard none of it. They weren’t actually married, he thought. It was the best news he’d heard in over a year.

**Enchanted Forest, July 2012**

Robin paced the little clearing they’d arranged to meet up in, but there was no sign that Alan or Belle had been there and left. *Oh, Lord. Not again. Please not again.*

Somewhere nearby, a twig snapped. Too heavy to be a human. Robin drew his bow.

Then a brown-and-white cow trotted into the clearing with Belle on its back.

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Robin, letting out a long breath. “Are you okay?”

Belle slid from the cow’s back. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just had to catch a lift.” She patted the cow’s cheek. “Thank you.”

The cow grunted and lowered her head to sniff the grass. Apparently, it was good grass.

“Where’s Alan?”

“I don’t –”

A roar tore through the trees, shaking the earth. The cow bolted. Robin and Belle fell to the ground. When it had stopped, Robin scampered to the edge of the woods. The fire had ripped through the ogres’ camp and a great cloud of smoke engulfed the horizon. At the bottom, three large ogres had cornered a small freckled man, armed only with a short sword held with both hands.

“Alan.” Robin fumbled in his shirt for the dragon amulet Regina had given him. The redwood carving’s onyx eyes seemed to stare back at him, taunting him. Robin disliked the idea of using magic – it always came at a price, as a certain dark sorcerer had once told him – but this had been a gift, and a gift couldn’t possibly come at that steep a price. Could it?

The ogres roared again. Robin made up his mind. If saving Regina had worked, then saving Alan would. He focused on his friend and felt the same pull he had when he’d used it in Tower Castle, uprooted into a sucking void where breath was not possible and he felt as though he were being simultaneously exploded and compressed. Then he popped out on the ground next to Alan. He decided against waiting around and grabbed Alan in a bear hug, the amulet once again sweeping them away and dumping them in the forest where a confused-looking Belle waited.

“What – what just happened?” she asked.

Robin stuffed the dragon amulet back into his shirt. “Turns out Regina was right. It did come in handy.”

Alan collapsed in a heap. When he’d recovered, he threw Robin a murderous look. “Just for that, I won’t kill you today.”

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**
“The scent’s getting stronger,” Ruby told the group as she led them through the woods. The Merry Men and Leroy had spread out to cover more ground, each of them still in sight of each other. Ruby sniffed again and was hit with the bitter, metallic taste of blood. She gagged.

“You okay, sister?”

She coughed. “Yeah, just –” There was something red smeared on the ground in front of her. She bent down. Blood. “Oh, gods.”

A little ironically for a werewolf, Ruby hated the sight, smell and taste of blood. So she ran to the nearest tree and doubled over, only just managing not to vomit. Leroy appeared next to her, a solid hand on her back. She reached up to squeeze his shoulder in appreciation before turning back to the scene. Robin was already on the ground inspecting the spot.

“This is still fresh,” he observed. He then floated a hand over the scuff marks in the earth. “He was dragged. He’s there! John!”

Ruby and the others followed Robin at a run over the top of a fallen tree, where a bushy-bearded man lay bleeding from a wound that had taken a chunk out of his arm. He was badly scratched, with slashes across his face and torso that had actually torn through his clothes as well as his skin. Ruby could tell that he was breathing but his circulation was poor. He was in shock.

“John!” Robin shouted, shaking the man’s uninjured arm. “John! We’re here, mate! John! Wake up!”

“You ever seen a bite like that before?” Leroy asked in an undertone while pulling out his phone. Ruby shook her head.

“Come on, John,” said Robin as he wrapped John’s bleeding arm with his scarf. “We need to get him up, lads.”

“Leroy’s calling an ambulance right now,” Ruby told him. Behind her, the dwarf relayed the necessary information as best he could.

“An ambulance?” Robin looked at her as if she’d sprouted an extra arm.

“They’re like doctors in this big van,” she tried to explain without much luck. “Never mind. They can help him.”

Robin nodded, at least understanding that part. Then John began to seize, his arm flying out to strike Alan across the face and his legs digging into the dirt. Ruby pushed Robin aside as John screamed. His eyes rolled back, showing only the whites, and his jaw clenched together so tight that Ruby cringed at the sound of teeth cracking. Then she saw easily the weirdest thing she had ever seen.

“What’s happening?” shouted Much.

That was an excellent question, Ruby thought. John’s flailing arms had torn his jacket and shirt off but underneath that was silky grey fur where human skin should have been. His nose and jaw fused and elongated, becoming a hairy snout. His feet shrank and his fingers stretched into claws. Then he rolled onto his stomach and they watched as three lumps on his back grew exponentially into a pair of feathery wings and a tail. The winged monkey-that-was-John screeched, eying Robin with beady, blood-red eyes. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth and drool rolled off onto the ground.

“What’s happening?” shouted Much.

Robin nodded, at least understanding that part. Then John began to seize, his arm flying out to strike Alan across the face and his legs digging into the dirt. Ruby pushed Robin aside as John screamed. His eyes rolled back, showing only the whites, and his jaw clenched together so tight that Ruby cringed at the sound of teeth cracking. Then she saw easily the weirdest thing she had ever seen.

“John?” said Robin. Whatever he had thought that would achieve, Ruby didn’t know, because the creature lunged. She stepped in the way, punched it square in the face and kicked. Her foot met...
nothing as the monkey had taken off, using powerful claws to quickly scale a fifty-foot pine and launch itself into the air. Then it was gone.

“Okay,” said Leroy after a minute or so of stunned silence. “What the hell?”

Emma found Regina on the street outside the Town Hall, and not alone. A large crowd of people had gathered outside the main doors. Snow had told her that they’d set up an emergency centre in the hall for the newcomers to sleep, have their skill sets registered to help them find jobs and receive orientation on modern technology (especially plumbing and electricity). The dwarves had the shift for that morning to give Snow, Ruby and Archie a break. It did mean that the main entrance was in gridlock, so the office workers had to use the back entrance where a smaller group, a few of whom Emma recognised from the first curse, had gathered, blocking the way in.

“I really don’t know what you’re hoping to achieve here, but you are preventing the mayor of Storybrooke from entering her office,” Regina snapped. Emma thought it sounded forced. “Now stand aside.”

A short man with a thick, curly beard took a step forward. Emma distrusted him instantaneously. “The mayor of Storybrooke can enter her office when she begins to answer my questions.”

“As I’ve repeatedly told you, everybody is asking the same questions that you are. And when we get some answers, we will let you know.”

The short man folded his arms and stepped closer, invading Regina’s personal space. “That’s not good enough.”

“Hey!”

The dozen or so faces turned to Emma as she strode up to the scene. The short man looked her up and down, taking in what she was sure would have been an abomination in the Enchanted Forest. Like she cared. “Who the hell are you?” the short man barked.

Emma ignored him, instead addressing one of the people she knew. “What’s going on here, Mr Herman?”

“It’s Prince Ernest, actually,” said the man whose granddaughter’s freedom she had once made a deal for. He seemed to have forgotten that. “And this is a matter between royals, Miss Swan.”

“Really? Well, as the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming I think I qualify,” she told him. “Or do I need to call the station and have you arrested for accosting the mayor?”

Ernest huffed. “I didn’t vote for her.”

“That does not matter,” Regina snarled, not taking her eyes off the short man. “I am the mayor at the present time whether you like it or not, so stand aside.”

The short man looked to her and then Emma with narrowed eyes. "I'll speak to you later, then. Come, let's go."

The crowd dispersed. Before Emma could catch her, Regina had shoved the doors open with enough force to make them ricochet off the walls and stormed upstairs to her office. Emma followed. At least there were no fireballs yet.

Inside the office – which was exactly the same, from the bean plant growing in a hydroponic feeder
to the upscale, ugly black-and-white wallpaper – Regina set down the stack of papers she’d been carrying along with a coffee cup from Granny’s. Emma thought of the time she’d faced down the dragon beneath the library. All of a sudden going in for a second round didn’t seem so unappealing. “Uh, who the hell was that?”

Regina looked up from her desk quite jerkily, as if she hadn’t even heard Emma come into the room. That seemed to be the case. “That was King Richard. And some lesser royalty who are less than pleased to be back in Storybrooke.”

Emma thought she seemed just a touch too calm about the whole situation. “Has that happened before? The mob outside?”

Regina shrugged. Emma sighed. She’d hoped to have seen the last of the lynch mobs when she stopped Whale and his buddies after the first curse broke. “We’ll deal with it later, then. In the meantime, let’s talk about finding out who cast this curse.”

“I told you, it wasn’t me.”

“I’m not saying it was you. I’m saying we need to find out who did do it.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

The thought had struck Emma that morning when she went to find Killian. The dreamcatcher had been the thing to spark the return of her and Neal’s memories, so maybe they could use it to get everyone else’s back. But when she was done explaining it, Regina just shook her head.

“No, it won’t work,” she said. “However you got your memories back, that dreamcatcher isn’t what did it.”

“It’s when the headache started,” said Emma defensively, not quite ready to let go of her idea.

“Well, maybe seeing it was some sort of trigger that set off the rest of your memories,” Regina suggested. “I don’t know. If that’s what happened, it was because that is something special to you and Neal. It’s your talisman.”

Emma wasn’t about to ask what Regina meant by that but she did accept defeat. “Okay. Is there any other way to return cursed memories?”

Again, Regina just shook her head. “Apart from breaking the curse? Not that I know of.”

Emma thumped her fist on the desk. “Come on, there’s got to be something!”

“If there was, don’t you think I would have tried it?” Regina shouted, getting to her feet. Her desk chair rolled away and collided with the window from the effort. “You just saw for yourself what I’ve had to deal with the past couple days!”

Emma frowned. Regina’s hands were shaking. “How many coffees have you had today? Three, four?”

“What?”

“You look like you haven’t slept in a month,” she said. “Have you?”

Regina moved to cross her arms but then seemed to change her mind halfway through. “Not since we got back to Storybrooke. So, five days.” She gave Emma a glare like she was daring her to ask
more. Emma had wanted confirmation more than a fight, so she let the matter drop.

“Okay, uh – uh, you said there’s no way to return cursed memories except to break the curse. What about Henry?”

Regina shrugged. “What about him?”

“You’re the one who gave him those false memories. Can you undo it?”

“Well, not just by waving my hand and wishing them away, no,” she said. Then she brightened as a thought crossed her face. “But a memory potion would do it.”

“Great!”

“It will take a few days to brew, though. And I’ll also need a few of his hairs.” Emma started. Regina shrugged again. “Memory potions have to be made specific to the person they’re to be used on. Otherwise, they don’t work.”

Emma nodded and told her that she’d get them. If nothing else, at least the hope of Henry remembering had returned a familiar spark that had been missing when Emma confronted her that morning.

Leaving Regina to begin work (both on a potion and on actual mayoral duties), Emma went back to the loft. Killian was still there but Neal and Henry had come back. The former was in the kitchen, helping Snow cut up vegetables while Killian watched with vague interest, and the latter had claimed an armchair to read a book.

“Hey, you’re back,” said Neal as she walked through the door. “Did, uh, did you find anything?”

“Not really.” Emma looked to Henry. “Hey, kid. How was your day?”

Henry waited a moment before looking up from his book. At least he wasn’t playing video games. “Good. Storybrooke is a weird place. But cool. Did you know there’s a library beneath a clock tower?”

“I do. I’ve been there before.” And took the elevator down to an underground cavern where I fought a dragon. “Neal, can I talk to you for a second?”

Her husband-in-a-false-life set down the knife he’d been using to cut carrots and followed her to the door. Emma shut it behind them. “What’s up?”

She took a breath. “I talked to Regina. She thinks she might know a way to get Henry’s memories back but it’ll take a few days.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah, but we still don’t know who cast this curse. And I don’t even know where to start to look.”

Neal grinned. “Well, lucky for us, I do. I found Henry’s storybook in the library. I didn’t get to look all the way through it but there’s extra chapters at the back, I think about the missing year.”

Emma stared at him. He chuckled. “I’m not kidding.”

“I didn’t say you were!”
They both laughed. "Anyway, I was gonna show it to Henry. If we're gonna be chasing down whoever did this, it might be a good idea to warn him. Especially if he happens to see something. Regina throwing fireballs around the place comes to mind."

"That's a good idea," she said. "That could even bring his memory back on its own if he sees the book."

“Well, it can’t hurt.”

The door opened. Henry stood in the doorway, looking puzzled. “You guys okay?”

Emma and Neal looked at each other. “Yeah, why wouldn’t we be?” asked Neal.

“You know you’re not fooling me, right? There’s something you’re not telling me. All these old friends you’ve never mentioned and people whispering around us all the time. And you’ve been acting weird, too, like you can’t look me in the eye. What’s going on?”

Over their son’s head, Emma could see Snow and Hook looking guilty. Crap, what did they say?

Emma put a hand on Henry’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “You’re right. There’s something your dad and I need to tell you.”

Pushing past him into the loft, she sat cross-legged on the edge of the fold-out bed and gestured for Henry to join her. Ignoring the silent apology that Snow was trying to give, she thought about the best way to start. “Do you believe in magic?”

“You mean, like Santa Claus? I do know what your handwriting looks like, Mom.”

“No, I don’t mean Santa Claus. I mean real magic. Like wizards and witches and dragons. That kind of magic.”

Henry didn’t look amazed. If anything, he looked frightened. “Mom, what’s going on?”

“Hey, it’s okay,” she said, reaching around him for the storybook that Neal had just taken from his backpack. He then took one of the armchairs and Emma continued: “Do you remember your favourite movie from when you were little?”

He nodded. “Aladdin. Of course.”


Henry gaped and looked to Neal. His father just shrugged. Emma gave him a dirty look that meant, Thanks for the help.

“I’m not going crazy, Henry. You wanted to know what your dad and I weren’t telling you. This is it.” She opened the book to find the story she was most familiar with. “You see this picture? That’s Snow White and Prince Charming. They’re –” She paused and cast a glance into the kitchen. Her mother nodded encouragingly. “They’re my parents.”

Henry scoffed. “Yeah right, Mom. Pull the other one.” Nobody laughed. He looked from her to Neal, to Snow (who looked like she wanted to join in but didn’t know what to say) and to Killian and then to her again. “Wait, you’re – you’re serious? How – how –?”

Emma nodded slowly. Henry’s jaw dropped further, so she flipped through the pages until she got
near to the back, finding that the pages he’d torn out after bringing her to Storybrooke had been put back in. She showed him the picture. “That’s me right after I was born. My parents, they – they stuck me in a magic wardrobe that brought me to this world thirty years ago to escape a curse that brought them here, to Storybrooke. They were trapped. And time stood still –”

“Until you came back to break the curse.”

Emma stared. Had it actually worked?

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

Or not. She tried not to look disappointed; it had been a long shot. At least he didn’t think she’d gone crazy. “Yeah, kid. That’s why we’re here.”

Henry smiled and looked at Killian. “And you’re actually Captain Hook? For real?”

“Aye.”

“Awesome!”

“I think we need to re-evaluate your definition of awesome, buddy,” said Neal. “No offence, Killian.”

Henry, still looking as if his birthday, Christmas and Hallowe’en had all arrived on the same day, turned to his dad. "Did you know?"

“Oh, you could say that. I’m from over there too.”

“What?”

There was a knock at the door. Emma pushed the storybook into Henry’s hands. “Here. Why don’t you take this and get caught up? If you’re lucky, maybe your dad will tell you about the Ogre Wars.”

Neal vigorously shook his head. “Not before I go to bed. I don’t want the nightmares.”

Emma playfully shoved his shoulder just as the door opened and Ruby poked her head through. “Hi. Sorry to interrupt. We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 10: We Started the Fire. In Storybrooke, the royals continue to cause trouble, Snow meets Zelena while helping with the emergency shelter at the Town Hall and a prisoner breaks out of a certain farmhouse. In the Enchanted Forest, David scouts out the town of Stargard for Regina and Sherwood comes under attack.
We Started the Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Enchanted Forest, July 2012

David got a terrible chill, as if he’d had a bucket of ice water poured over his head while standing knee-deep in snow, as he brought his horse to a halt at the gates of Stargard. A simple farming town in the north of the Midlands, the entire place was a single, wide dirt road lined by two-storey houses, some of which looked like empty shops. A flock of geese ran out to meet him, Mulan and the two young soldiers they’d brought along. Apart from a couple of middle-aged mothers washing clothes in front of a silent pub, there was nobody there. No guard in the watchtower where they tied their horses, no town crier, no busy shopkeepers advertising their wares. Quite typical of a town that had been torn to pieces by the Dark Curse.

David sighed. They still had a lot of rebuilding to do.

“No, I do.” David turned to the men. “Boris, Dietrich, stay here and keep an eye out for anything unusual. You see anything out of the ordinary, sound your horn then ride back to camp as fast as you can. Don’t wait for us.”

Boris nodded. “Yes, sir.”

As they walked down the main road, the dirt clumped and rocky from a recent late rainfall, David tried to peek through the windows of each shop. Most were vacant, the doors and window fixings going to rot from a year without maintenance. Several had been broken into, probably by vagrants or the recent returns looking for food – David grimaced at the thought of a report from a town in the east where people had become sick from raiding the year-old pantries. It didn’t look as though that had happened in Stargard but he kept it in mind to refuse anyone’s offer of bread or cheese.

The few people who were there eyed them with a considerable degree of suspicion. He brushed it off as their reaction to Mulan’s presence (he doubted many Midlanders had seen an Eastern warrior before) until he realised that they were also staring at him.

One such busybody was an elderly man brushing muck off a donkey chewing on a cabbage. David walked over to him.

“No, I do.” he said, trailing off for the man to fill in his name.

“Friedrich Hoefler, sir.”

“Mister Hoefler, I’m Prince David.” He held out his hand to shake, only to receive a confused look. A month later and he was still getting used to being back. “Sorry for the intrusion. Could you tell us if you’ve seen anything, I don’t know, unusual in the area lately?”

Hoefler regarded with scrutiny as if he were a sample somebody had stuck under a microscope. He nudged the donkey. “What do you think?”

The donkey looked up from her feed, cabbage leaves spilling out the sides of her mouth. She chewed and gave David a similar look. “Looks all right to me,” she said around a mouthful of roughage.
David did a double-take. “She talks?”

“Most days she won’t shut up. Witches, you know.”

David turned to Mulan, who looked entirely unfazed. She shrugged. “If you think this is strange, remind me to introduce you to Mushu one day. Did you say ‘witch’?”

“I used to be;” said the donkey, returning to her cabbages. “This is what you get for crossing an inept wizard.”

David rubbed his forehead. “Right. Look, have you seen anybody unusual around here lately? Say, a woman in black with a pointy hat and green skin?”

“Nope,” said Hoefler. The witch-donkey kicked him. “Ow! Okay, there was somebody here matching that description about a week ago. But we’ve had enough trouble around here, so if you’re planning on bringing us more I don’t care who you are! I’m not having it!”

Mulan stepped forward, hand on her sword. David held her back. Civil insubordination was far down his list of concerns. “Is she still here?”

“If she is, I don’t want to know about it,” said Hoefler. “Last time I had anything to do with magic, I ended up stuck with this old crone.”

“Old crone?” the witch-donkey huffed. “Let’s see you pull your cart of cabbages to market, you wizened bunch-backed toad!”

“I could afford better help if you wouldn’t stuff them all down your crusty gullet!”

David turned to Mulan. “We should probably get out of here.”

“Agreed.”

The farmer and the witch-donkey continued to argue as they turned down the road. David kicked his boots into the ground, unable to shake the queasy feeling in his gut. The Witch had been there, he knew that much. He noticed that a few of the houses had tears in their roofs, misplaced tiles or scuffed thatch similar to the effects of a bird scrounging for nest material. A four-foot-tall bird with giant talons and fangs, that was. He couldn’t see any of the winged beasts. Perhaps the witch had taken residence somewhere and they had gone to roost for the day?

“We should speak to the washer-women, see what they know,” said Mulan.

“Good idea.”

Then a horn sounded three times. They ran back to the gates, where the soldiers still were – Boris halfway up the guard tower and Dietrich untying their horses.

“What’s going on?” David shouted.

Boris tossed down his spyglass and then pointed. “Ogres, sir, coming over the hill! They’re close!”

David didn’t need the spyglass to see the cloud of dust kicked up in the wake of the giant, lumbering creatures heading south, straight for the town. He swore under his breath. Their northern forces had yet to strike at Elsinore, waiting for the brutes to make the first move before they risked hundreds of lives. King Richard had insisted that was a mistake; David still didn’t think so but if the ogres were headed for Stargard, then they hadn’t taken the route he and Josef had expected and would miss the
army completely.

“Damn it. Alright. You three get going. We need to warn the army and try to head them off.”

“What about you?” Mulan demanded.

David hauled himself into the saddle of the white stallion. “There aren’t a lot of people in the area, but they still need to be warned. Go. I’ll catch up to you.”

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

“They’re being turned into flying monkeys?”

Ruby nodded solemnly. On the landing of the loft, Snow stood nearest the door with Emma and Neal against the railing, Ruby and Leroy balancing on the top step and Hook squashed into a corner. Snow rubbed her belly. “Do you think that’s what happened to the missing dwarves?”

“Smart money’s on yes,” said Leroy. Snow threw her old friend a scathing look that he returned. “It’d explain why nobody’s seen any trace of them.”

“And David?” She had to ask.

Ruby bit her lip. “Still no sign of him. So I guess it’s possible. He might have been taken in the first few days, before we got everything set up.”

“He’ll show up, Your Highness,” said Hook. “He always does.”

As much as Snow didn’t like the pirate, she had to believe him on that one. If she didn’t, she didn’t know what she’d do. Five days. It wasn’t like David to go so long without trying to contact her, or one of their friends who could contact her. The only explanation for why he hadn’t was that he couldn’t. She rubbed her belly again.

It’s all right, little one, she thought. We’ll find your daddy.

“I’ve asked Robin and his lot to patrol the woods in case anybody gets too close to the town line,” said Ruby.

“Good thinking,” said Emma. “We should get the dwarves to back them up when they’re done at the town hall.”

Ruby nodded and reached into her pocket. “Yeah. And I think I should give this back.” She held out the sheriff’s badge. Emma looked like she was about to object, so Ruby added, “We need a real sheriff, Emma.”

“You seem to be doing okay so far.”

“Yeah, but – look, can you just take the badge, please?”

Emma hesitantly took it, turned it over a few times and then clipped it to her belt. Ruby breathed a sigh of relief. “The rest of the gear’s still at the station.”

“Okay. I’ll pick it up later.”

Snow gave Ruby what she hoped was an encouraging smile. Ruby had been running herself ragged
with helping Granny at the diner, afternoon shifts at the town hall and trying to run a sheriff’s station on top of it all. She returned Snow’s smile then asked, “So, do we know anything more about who cursed us here?”

“I found Henry’s book at the library,” said Neal. “There’s an extra chapter at the back with a picture of a green-skinned woman on a broomstick. And now there’s flying monkeys in the town so I think I might know who our bad guy is.”

“The Wicked Witch of the West?” asked Emma with a hint of sarcasm.

Snow had never heard of Oz before the first Dark Curse and been surprised to hear Neal mention it when he and Henry got back from the library, but she couldn’t think of a better explanation. Her daughter looked from her to Neal and back again, as if waiting for somebody to shout ‘April Fool!’ Nobody did.

“Seriously? She’s real, too?”

“Says the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming,” Hook retorted.

Emma, dumbfounded, scratched her head. “I don’t get it. It’s not like we’re in Kansas. Why would the Wicked Witch of the West wanna come to Storybrooke?”

“When we catch her, that’ll be the second thing I ask her,” said Leroy. “Right after I throttle her for what she did to my brothers.”

“Look, there’s no need to go off the rails,” Snow interjected before things got violent. “Right now, we’ve got more concerns than just who cursed us. We’ve got a town half-full of people who know nothing about how this land works. Everybody’s scared and confused. What they need right now is reassurance, not a witch-hunt. Besides, we don’t even know who she is here.”

“Might I suggest we start by asking if anyone has seen a woman with green skin running around the place?” Hook posed. Snow couldn’t tell if he was being intentionally presumptuous or not.

“We’re cursed in Storybrooke,” said Ruby, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly. “She’ll look like anyone else here.”

Emma shifted forwards slightly to stand between the pirate and the werewolf, a small movement that was not missed by either party. “Neal, you said you think the missing year was recorded in the book?”

“Yeah, I’ll have a proper read of it when Henry’s done. Might give us some answers, maybe even who the Witch is.”

“Okay. In the meantime, we’ll have a look around the woods. The monkey would have had to have come from somewhere nearby, so it’s likely she’s not far from where you found – uh, what’s his name?”

“Little John.”

Emma gave a brief look of incredulity. “Of course.”

“We have to relieve the dwarves in about an hour,” said Ruby, checking her watch.

“I’ll stay here to keep an eye on Henry,” Neal added. “Probably best if he’s not wandering around town with a bunch of flying monkeys around.”
“Yeah, definitely,” Emma agreed. “Okay, I’ll come with you to the town hall to see if we can get any more hands on this.”


If Snow wasn’t much mistaken, Hook was focused on Emma and ignoring the suspicious look on Neal’s face. Apparently, a year back in the Enchanted Forest had done nothing to diminish the candle the pirate burned for her daughter. Snow wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She knew Emma was a grown woman capable of making her own choices – and didn’t need her mother’s input, as much as Snow didn’t like it – and she had told them, a little too sharply, that her marriage had been a part of the false life Regina gave to them. Whether that meant she and Neal definitely weren’t together or not, Snow didn’t know, but she could tell that Neal did not like the way Hook looked at Emma. And Snow had to admit, she much preferred her grandson’s biological father to the drunkard Emma had picked up off the floor of a pub that morning. Even so, it wasn’t her place to interfere – whatever happened, she just hoped the three of them could sort it out without making a mess.

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Two hours later, Snow sat at a rickety card table taking down notes about the person sitting opposite her. When she, Ruby and the others had realised how many new people they had in town, they’d sent the word around for everyone to come to the town hall until they could find houses and jobs for everyone. That did require them to make note of everyone’s previous occupations, experiences and family conditions since the second curse had seen fit to leave at least a few thousand people displaced and unemployed. Ruby had taken charge of making the town hall into a suitable shelter while Archie and Snow took care of the interview processes. On a good day, they had Whale there to give check-ups and vaccinations to the young children (something that had taken quite a bit of convincing). Snow’s fifth customer of the day was a raggedy, brown-haired man with crooked teeth, crooked eyes and a lot of dirt on his jacket.

“Mr Dogberry, what was your previous occupation?”

Dogberry gave a crooked smile. “I was chief of constabulary in Messina, my lady. Law infringement officer, I was.”

Snow frowned, wondering if she’d heard right. “Do you mean, ‘law enforcement officer’?”

“Aye, as I said.”

*I guess. Okay. Can you read and write?”*

“Have it been known, my lady, I make no boast of it as a well-favoured man is a gift of fortune but to read and write comes by nature which has allured me thus far.”

“I’m sorry?”

Dogberry shook his head. “I can culpably write and read opportunely, my lady.”

She made a note. Dogberry held up a paw-like hand as if to ask a question. “Might, if I be so bald, my lady, I’m given to underestimating that there is variety in the law infringement office of this town. May I proposition, mine being the pineapple of experience in traded thieves and vagroms, why, that I be accommodated for the job? I do not believe I can be represented to the sheriff as an object not altogether illegible.”
She looked up from filling in his forms. She had absolutely no idea what he had said and took a guess from the word ‘sheriff’. “Oh. Well, I can speak to her for you but, uh, she may not get back to you for a while. In the meantime, would you mind joining the group to see the gentleman in the white coat? He just needs to give you a medical check-up.”

Dogberry nodded and shook the hand she offered. “I will, my lady. Thank you erroneously.”

He left. Snow sighed. “Hey, Archie. Is it all right if I take a short break?”

“Yes, go ahead. I can handle things here.”

She headed inside to where sheets strung from fishing line and rope divided three-quarters of the hall into small sleeping areas. They had bought out the camping shop’s entire supply of camp beds and blow-up mattresses to keep people as comfortable as possible. The remaining quarter had been made into a soup kitchen; Ella and Jefferson were on the lunch shift, making sandwiches and teaching people to poke straws into juice boxes. Snow took a seat at the end of the serving table and Ella passed her a hot cocoa with cinnamon.

“Thanks, Ella.”

“Rough day?”

Snow shrugged. “No, I think I’ve just spent a bit too long on my feet. And uh, I haven’t felt the baby move in a while. I’m just a bit worried.”

“It doesn’t necessarily mean that anything’s wrong,” said a woman’s voice. Snow looked up to see a red-haired woman smiling at her. She was at the front of the line, holding a sandwich and a juice box and dressed in a long black skirt and a white blouse buttoned to the top. Snow put her cocoa down, curious.

“It doesn’t?”

The woman shook her head. “Babies are tougher than you think. If you don’t mind me asking, do you know when your due date is?”

She had been meaning to ask Whale for a check-up but had yet to get around to it. She couldn’t be far from delivery, though. “I’m not sure. Probably sometime soon.”

“It’s quite normal for the baby to be quieter in the week before delivery,” said the woman. “You’re Snow White, aren’t you?”

“I also go by Mary Margaret here,” she said, holding out her hand for the woman to shake. “This must be your first time in Storybrooke?”

The woman nodded. “I missed the first curse. So, everything here is still a bit … new.”

“You’ll get used to it after a while,” Snow assured her. “Who were you back in our land?”

“Oh, nobody you’d remember. Not everyone is as famous as you.”

“I don’t know about famous.”

The woman grinned broadly. “You were a princess. Some of us were just supporting players. I was a midwife.”

At that, Snow brightened. “Really?”
She nodded again. “My name is Zelena. I’ve seen plenty of new mothers. You’ll pick it up.”

“Well, maybe you could give me some advice?” Snow asked. “I have a book at home and I’ve turning the corner on every page on which I have a question and now I can’t close the book, there’s so many.”

Zelena beamed. “I – It would be an honour. May I?” she asked, extending a hand towards Snow’s protruding belly. She nodded and leaned back in her chair. Zelena let her hand hover for a moment. When she let it fall, the baby kicked.

“Ow!”

“Oh, sorry!” said Zelena. “I guess your little prince or princess wanted to say hello.”

“I guess so,” Snow agreed, rubbing her belly where the baby kicked again.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

“To another successful raid!” Alan declared, holding his cup high. The Merry Men – and woman – raised theirs to join in the toast over the fire. “By God’s grace, we’ll soon see the last of these ogres and we can get back to fighting the unjust law of King Richard the No-Heart!”

“Hear, hear!”

Robin tipped his cup back, downing half the drink in one gulp. It was actually just tea, a strong but delicious brew Much had learned to make in Agrabah, and a welcome warmth in a forest that was beginning to feel the winter winds. It had been a good day. The ogres had picked up the pace, actively confronting the army instead of lumbering around conquered territory as was normal for them. Unusual behaviour, since in the past the beasts had only ever attacked during abnormally cold winters that drove them out of the Alps, or after venturing too far out of the mountains and being attacked by a bone-headed knight. Richard, in all his majestic foolishness, was not adapting to the situation. Land was being lost and villages overrun, so the Merry Men had decided to do something. Using a couple of hand-drawn maps, Belle had shown them where the ogres’ likely strongholds were (former Ogres’ War forts and a castle or two) and what routes they would take to attack Richard’s armies in the south. Then they sent a message to Sir Houarn Pogamm, an old friend of John’s whom they considered reliable, that told him to attack the Glass Hill. Sneaking in to set fire to the fort had been easy enough; Robin was now realising how effective a small group of infiltrators could be against the ogres. Especially now that the traditional ‘point-and-charge’ strategy was losing them more and more ground by the day. They smoked the ogres into confusion and Pogamm’s army had successfully taken back fourteen miles of the north-western Frontlands. It had been a good day.

Roland nudged him in the leg. “Papa, can I have some more?” said his son, holding out his bowl.

“Please.”

“Please?”

He nodded and watched his boy toddle off to ask Much for a refill of soup. “Hey, Alan, how about a bit of night music?”

“Excellent idea!” said Alan, reaching into his cloak for his pipes. John frequently said Alan’s singing would chase away the ogres on its own; Robin admitted the man was no nightingale but he was hardly that terrible. Of course, he needed his pipes first and judging from the confused look on his
They weren’t in his cloak. “What the – ROBIN!”

He lunged. Robin caught him by the shoulders. “What? I’m innocent!”

Alan twisted and tackled him to the ground, tearing into his pockets while John and Much roared with laughter. Roland giggled, probably not sure what was happening. And maybe it was Robin’s imagination, or did Belle look a tad guilty?

“What’d you do with my pipes?”

Robin held his hands out in front of him. “I told you, I’m innocent!”

“I’ve heard that before!”

“This time, he is,” said Belle with a cheeky grin to rival Roland’s. She produced Alan’s pipes from inside her cloak.

Robin just shrugged as Alan beamed like a proud big brother. He got up, snatched the pipes from Belle and caught her in a friendly headlock. “Told you we’d make a thief out of you yet!”

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

Regina came down the stairs from her office, a stack of folders and papers in her arms and her eyelids threatening to close with each step. She wondered if she might ask Whale for something to knock her out for a night. Or borrow the dreamcatcher to test if it really would keep the nightmares away.

She’d just managed not to fall off the last step when Richard strutted straight up to her, his arms crossed and his beard pointing out like an upside-down party hat. A great military leader, but a clown of a king if there ever was one.

“Queen Regina,” he said in his most authoritative voice, which would have been intimidating if it hadn’t come out of the mouth of a man who was at least two inches shorter than her. She had only met Richard a few times in her pre-Evil Queen days but even then she’d thought he was overcompensating for something.

“King Richard. I would love to stay and chat, but I’ve rather important things to get to. So if you’ll excuse me,” she said, trying to walk past him.

“I’d like to get some answers, thank you very much,” Richard demanded as if she had said nothing at all. She tried to walk away but he grabbed her arm. “Primarily, I’d like to know when you people who claim to be in charge plan on getting us all back home.”

Regina wrenched her arm away. “Touch me again and I’ll turn you into something extremely unpleasant.”

Richard smiled evilly. “Oh, really? Go ahead. Prove to everyone you’re still the Evil Queen. Then they’ll realise that I’ve been right all along.”

There was no missing the threat. Regina dug her nails into her palms and fought to stay calm – the last thing any of them needed was a scene in the middle of the town. She thought about what she was heading home to do – to bring her son back – in order to quell the storm building inside her in that moment. The worst part about having all these newcomers in town was how many of them still
only knew her as the Evil Queen. Snow had stood up for her, which brought a few of them around (like the young prince and princess from the Borderlands), but a dunderhead like Richard hardly thought of a pregnant woman’s opinion as being worthwhile. And Regina was just too tired to deal with it.

“I should turn you into the little toad you are. But instead, I’m going to say this one last time,” she said in an equally low voice. “I did not cast the curse that brought us back here. We don’t know who did. And all we know at the moment is that going home may not be possible.”

“That is not good enough.”

“Well, then that’s what you’ll have to settle for because that’s all we have. Now, I’m sure there’s plenty of sherry at Judge Herman’s house to keep you occupied until we know more. Until then, stay away from this hall.”

She pushed past him, avoided the gazes of Snow and the former cricket on her way past the main doors and stormed along the footpath to her car, her fellow pedestrians giving her a wide berth. She’d been through her fair share of self-inflicted curses but this one had to be the worst of the lot.

Rumplestiltskin had warned her that going down a dark road would come at a price, hadn’t he? Well, she was well and truly paying it now.

The woods got intermittently colder as the sun began to slip behind the hills. Emma regretted not bringing a scarf, or a warmer jacket. Following Robin Hood of all people through a freezing forest had not been on her to-do list that day. Although she should probably have come to expect stranger things from a town full of fairy-tale characters.

She, Hook and two of the dwarves had joined the Merry Men out at the forest line four hours ago and split into two groups to run a search grid of the area where Little John had been attacked – the dwarves, Much and Alan headed south-east and herself, Hook and Robin headed north. Robin took the lead, which Emma was fine with. However, she had a sneaking suspicion that the crossbow he held was the same one in the stolen goods’ report she’d spotted on the sheriff’s desk when she’d gone to pick up the keys and handgun. She decided to ask him about it later, after the bow could potentially come in handy.

Robin then stopped next to a tree, running his hand along the white bark. Emma came to a stop next to him. “Claw marks?”

“Yes, huge claw marks,” said the (hopefully former) outlaw. “I think this means we’re on the right trail.”

Hook dropped to the ground next to them, having jumped from a fallen tree. “I don’t know about you, mate, but all I see is a whole load of trees.”

“You see a forest. I see the trees,” Robin muttered. “This way.”

Emma waited until Robin had got a short distance in front of them, and then turned to Hook. “I thought you said you could help. Help, then.”

“Swan, we’re chasing a wild goose here.” Hook leant in closer and whispered, “How does he expect to track a witch through these woods?”

“It helps to have good hearing!” Robin shouted from several yards away.
Emma suppressed a small giggle at seeing Hook do a double-take. When he recovered, she asked, “Why are you here, then?”

He shrugged and set off after Robin. “I’d have thought that was rather obvious, love.”

Inwardly, Emma groaned. She’d had enough and it was time to set the record straight. Grabbing his arm and forcefully pulling him back, she swung around to face him. “Look, just stop it, all right? I’ve had a long couple of days and I’m not in the mood to be hit on. This is not a contest.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. Now either help us or go back to town.”

She turned on her heel and prepared to storm off when Hook spoke again. “Just tell me one thing, Swan. Are you happy?”

“What?”

“But none of it actually happened!” said her pragmatic self.

“The last eighteen months did,” countered the voice of the little child. The one who had followed Neal to Storybrooke hoping to find her parents. The one who had given in to Henry when he’d asked her to stay, hoping to find home.

The two sides continued to argue. Emma felt as if something inside her was tearing in half. So she answered with gritted teeth, “I was. I was happy. Until you showed up and started poking holes in everything I thought was real.”

“But it wasn’t real,” said Hook.

She fixed him with the hardest stare she could manage. “It was to me.”

Enchanted Forest, November 2012

“Did anybody else hear that?” asked Much.

Belle wriggled out of Alan’s headlock as Robin got off the ground and they all (sans Roland) looked at Much. “Hear what?” asked Alan.

“That.”

Whatever it was, Belle couldn’t hear it. Just the whistle of the early winter winds, crickets chirping and deciduous leaves snapping off their branches. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Shh,” said Robin. “There’s something – over there!”
He pointed. Against the light of the full moon, Belle spotted the dark outlines of birds taking flight somewhere in the distance. Beneath them, the tops of the trees glowed orange.

“Is that a –”

“Forest fire,” confirmed Robin.

The birds cawed, cooed and squawked as they flew over the Merry Men’s heads. They were soon followed by rabbits, foxes, squirrels and something very large Belle hoped was just a bear crashing through the undergrowth. The orange glow doubled in size inside of a minute and the smell of smoke hit the camp.

“It’s coming straight for us,” said Robin, grabbing his son. “GET MOVING!”

The camp was soon a blaze of activity as the Merry Men grabbed whatever personal valuables couldn’t be replaced and ran into the darkened forest, away from the fire. Belle followed Alan as closely as she could. The smoke got thicker and thicker; after they had run several hundred yards, they were forced to stop as a blazing pile of tree crashed to the ground in front of them.


Belle held her cloak to her face to try and breathe around the smoke. The burning treetop had set fire to the surrounding undergrowth and was spreading fast. Other trees had collapsed as well, speeding up the spread. Through the crackle, she thought she heard Alan shout something and gesture wildly at his chest. Then somebody grabbed her arm and the world disappeared, becoming a mess of greens and blues where air didn’t exist and physical presence was a philosophical argument. Belle might have existed in the void; she might not have. She couldn’t really tell.

Then solid matter popped back into being as she landed with a thud on cold grass. She let herself lie still for a moment, worshipping the ability to breathe. In that moment, fresh air tasted better than an iced tea at Granny’s. The others were nearby. When she felt as if the smoke had been purged from her lungs, she lifted her head to see that they were all picking themselves up off the ground. Robin had brought them to somewhere not far from, but outside of, Sherwood Forest. Belle stood, brushed down her dress and joined the others in watching the fire quickly consume their home. She hadn’t lived there long, but as the fire continued to ravage the place she felt a pang of agony. It had been the first place she’d felt happy or wanted since Rumple’s death and now it was gone. She couldn’t begin to imagine how the others felt.

“Everyone still in one piece?” asked Robin.

“Yeah,” Alan grunted. “What was with the rough landing?”

“I never tried to teleport that many people before.” He picked up Roland, who was crying. Belle spied a flash of gloom pass over Robin’s face, possibly even a tear in his eye, as he cradled his son close. “Let’s go. Tower Castle should be just on the other side of the hill.”

**Storybrooke, 24 January 2014**

The light had turned on again. Something metallic clanged across the cement floor and the dog bowl again appeared at the bottom of the doorway. It was shoved through, spilling half of the water, by a foot in black high heels that disappeared a moment later. Then the light turned off and Belle was again left in darkness. She groped around for the bowl, gulped down the water and scooped rice into her mouth. If her governess could see her at that moment, she’d have had a heart attack.
Five days. Five days since Regina reversed the curse, five days she’d been trapped in a wooden prison. She would have thought the Queen would have at least given her the dignity of returning her to her tower cell. Actually, she would have thought Regina was long past wanting to keep her prisoner. Rumple was dead; what possible use could the woman – whom she’d thought had changed, but apparently not – have for her now?

Wherever she was, she wasn’t in the tower. She was in a small room with boarded walls, a cold cement floor and no windows. A small pile of straw had kept her from freezing the past few nights. She had no idea why it was so cold. There was a tiny gap between two boards of one wall, through which she could see open grass and trees when it wasn’t dark like it was at the moment. A few days ago it had been snowing, which was weird. Snow in June?

She finished her meal – meagre as it was – and went back to work. Five days ago, the gap in the boards had been just wide enough for her to squeeze a finger through if she struggled. So she’d torn and clawed at the gap. Now she could get most of her hand, scratched and bloodied as it was, through the hole. The board was coming loose at the bottom and if she could just make the hole big enough, she could get out of there. Regina had kept her prisoner for thirty years, and not another day if Belle had any say in it.

She worked through the night, trying to make as little noise as possible in case Regina had guards in the area – Belle hadn’t seen any, but if the Queen had taken her prisoner again who knew what else she might do? Sometime much later, when the faint light of dawn broke over the horizon and she’d had to tear a strip off the bottom of her shift to cover a gash in her palm, the nails locking the boards together popped open. Belle could have cried; she'd done it! She pushed at the loose board, which strained against her efforts with the strength of a warhorse (the prison had obviously been quite well made) until she could force her shoulder through, then her head. Then the rest of her. The board snapped shut on her foot and she had to shove her bloodied hand into her mouth to keep from screaming, but she was free.

She looked at her surroundings. Open grassland and a line of trees a few yards away. The wooden prison she had broken out of looked like a barn from the outside. Had Regina imprisoned her on a farm?

That was a question for another time, though. She got to her feet, bare against the cold, wet grass (thankfully no snow). The cold alleviated some of the pain in her sore foot and she felt like she could walk, so she did. The trees had to be her best chance. Just because she couldn’t see any guards didn’t mean they weren’t around.

She didn’t know how long she was walking, or in what direction. She just had to hope that she chanced upon a village sometime soon. The thin dress she’d been brought back in barely covered her knees and elbows. She was freezing.

After a while she found a creek. That had to be good, she thought. Creeks ended up in rivers, and rivers usually meant settlements. For a rare moment in her life, she looked to the sky and thanked whatever god had been watching over her. If she could find people before nightfall – and given how early it was, she reckoned she had a good chance – she might just live.

Then a shriek tore through the woods. Belle stiffened as a creature appeared in the trees above her, a creature she would have thought was a monkey if not for the feathery wings protruding from its back. It stared at her with deadly crimson eyes, the whites of its fangs visible even from a distance. A moment passed where they stared at each other. She couldn’t think, terror having frozen her before the cold managed it. Then the creature swooped and her legs answered commands long enough for her to dive out of the way, her head colliding with something hard and sharp when she hit the
ground. She rolled, felt something wet and ice-cold wash over her bare feet and the forest went black.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 11: Out of the Ashes; in the Enchanted Forest, Robin runs into Richard, Regina has a misunderstanding and Belle is stubborn. In Storybrooke, the search crew finds one missing person and Robin gets into serious trouble.

For those who are probably going to ask: Rumplestiltskin reappears next chapter.

Also, there’s been a little confusion so: this story ends Swanfire, Rumbelle and OutlawQueen. If I change my mind halfway through, feel free to (metaphorically) chew my ear off in the comments. Or just stop reading, whatever suits you. Thanks so much for sticking with me so far - this is the furthest I've ever got with a single writing project and hearing that people like it is just indescribable.
Out of the Ashes

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Enchanted Forest, November 2012

“It’s that bad?” asked Belle.

Snow nodded grimly. “It’s that bad.”

The morning after the fire in Sherwood Forest, Belle and Robin met with Snow, Jiminy and the two dwarves who weren’t fighting the ogres. A map of the realm covered the centre of the round table where they met, enchanted by Regina to show the progression of the battles in real time (an idea she’d picked up from GPS, apparently). Belle watched as the orange silhouette of the ogres’ territory in the south continued to advance along the Gaul-Midlands border. It now encompassed the entire length of the Alps, most of Hellas and a significant chunk of the northern Pridelands. Sherwood had been enveloped along with all the ground regained by Sir Pogamm in the past few days. Red dots showed the human armies and they were retreating. Quickly.

“Grumpy sent us a sparrow just yesterday,” said Sneezy, blowing his nose on Dopey’s handkerchief. “We’re completely cut off from the western armies.”


Snow nodded. Jiminy fluttered onto the map, landing just to the north of a green dot as he pulled out his loudspeaker. “This is where she is right now. We tracked her to Stargard a few months ago but she was gone by the time David got there. And then they got attacked by ogres.”

“That’s Avonlea,” said Belle, pointing at the map. Snow seemed confused. “It was my home. A long time ago.”

“Oh. Well, she’s been there for several weeks now,” Snow went on. “Regina thinks she’s gone to ground, deep inside the ogres’ territory so it’s harder for us to go after her. And we still don’t have a plan to trap her even if we did.”

“What about the fairies?”

Snow shook her head. “We’ve tried to contact them. Regina’s tried every method she can think of to summon Tink and Leroy even went up to Firefly Hill, hoping Astrid might meet him there. Nothing has worked.”

The ogre territory continued to expand north of Sherwood Forest. Belle had a terrible thought. “The fire wasn’t accidental. The Witch went after us deliberately.”

“You think?” asked Robin, who looked shocked.

“An accidental fire just at the start of winter, on a clear night, that burnt down an entire forest? She must have realised it was us running raids on the ogres’ supply lines, so she smoked us out of the forest.”

“Wait a second, it was you sending messages to the army about where to attack weak spots in the ogres’ lines?” Snow asked. “You could have let us know!”
Robin shrugged. “I can’t speak for Belle, but the rest of us aren’t well liked among the higher circles in Gaul. If Richard had known it had come from us, he would have tossed the letter away without a second thought.”

Then there was a knock at the door. Granny appeared in the gap, waved to Belle and Robin (she’d been on guard duty the night before and had met them on the way in) and said, “Sorry, Snow. Regina’s back.”

Snow practically bolted out of the door, leaving Belle and Robin with a slightly embarrassed werewolf, two confused dwarves and a huffy-looking cricket. They followed the young queen outside where the cause of her haste soon became apparent.

A group of two women and three men in battle gear had assembled in the courtyard with Regina at the centre. From the dazed and disorientated looks on the others’ faces, Belle guessed she must have brought them there by magic. Snow ran straight into David’s waiting arms, the two embracing like they hadn’t seen each other in months. Which they probably hadn’t, given the state of the war. Belle forced herself to look away from the happy couple and to the rest of the arrivals.

She almost hadn’t recognised Regina, given how different the dowager queen looked from her Evil Queen persona. Her hair was loose, clipped back by a couple of hairpins and she wore a crimson dress which was comparatively plain next to her old black ones. An attempt to change her outer appearance as part of her new start, Belle thought. It wasn’t altogether bad – she could almost separate Regina as she was from her memories of the Evil Queen. She really was trying.

Regina spotted them and Belle didn’t see a hint of distaste cross her eyes, just surprise at seeing her and Robin there. Or possibly even pleased to see them? “When did you two come back?”

“Last night,” Robin told her. Was it Belle’s imagination, or had he brightened as well? “Sherwood Forest was burnt to the ground. We were lucky to make it out alive. I suppose I now owe you one.” He drew the dragon amulet out of his shirt, then stiffened with his gaze fixed somewhere to Regina’s left. Belle followed it and grimaced. One of the new arrivals was a short man with a pointed beard and a temper to match. King Richard.

“What are they doing here?” Belle whispered to Regina.

Regina’s answer was interrupted by Richard. “What is the meaning of this?”

He had seen Robin. Both men stood stock still, a few feet apart as if a duel were about to take place, and a part had formed in the crowd so that nobody was stuck between them. Snow cleared her throat.

“Pardon me, King Richard. We have guests in the castle.”

“I see,” said Richard. He looked Robin up and down, then walked up to Belle and kissed her hand. “Lady Belle. Good to see you well.”

“Your Majesty,” she answered with a curtsey.

He then looked back to Robin, who did not meet Richard’s eyes. “Lord Locksley.”

“Your Majesty,” Robin said rigidly.

Richard turned on his heel and strutted away, leaving the other nobles to analyse Belle and Robin. They clearly didn’t know what to make of the encounter. Snow, thankfully, diffused the situation by asking the dwarves to show their guests to their quarters. When they were gone, Regina asked,
“Lord?”

Robin shrugged. “Technically.”

Belle knew enough from the Merry Men to know that Robin and Richard had a long animosity. Exactly what it was, they hadn’t told her and so she hadn’t asked, but now she thought there was more to it than just Robin’s reputation as an outlaw.

He didn’t offer more in the way of an explanation, so Snow said, “Um, okay. There’s going to be a meeting of the War Council this afternoon. I think it might be a good idea if you two were there. Considering your experiences with the ogres.”

“I’ll be there,” Belle told them, using the singular term deliberately. She wasn’t even sure if Robin had heard a word Snow said.

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2014**

They hadn’t found anything of interest the day before, so Emma arranged to meet the Merry Men at the place where Robin found the claw marks in the tree the next morning. This time, they all headed north instead of splitting up since the second group had found nothing of interest. Hook had tagged along again. Though he was being more helpful than the day before, he was also unusually surly and disagreeable, even by his standards. So when they spread out in a search grid, Emma made sure to stick him at one end and herself at the other. Whatever his problem was, she was not in the mood to put up with it.

Bitter winter winds cut through her jacket and an early-morning frost crackled under her boots. She pulled up Google Maps on her phone. It showed nothing but several miles of forest in the middle of nowhere, but at least she had a vague idea of where they were going.

“What’s that?” asked the tubby man with a barrel chest and heavy beard. Much, she remembered his name was.

“It’s called a GPS. Sort of like an electronic map,” she tried to explain. “It bounces off satellites to show your location and where you’re going.”

“What’s a satellite?”

“It’s a – you know what, I don’t know how to explain what a satellite is.”

Robin, a short way ahead of them and to the left, looked back over his shoulder. “Can you use it to find the Witch?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m just keeping track of where we are.”

“We’re ten and a half miles out of town, tracking west-northwest at a rate of one and three-quarter miles per hour,” he said. Emma stared at him and he broke into a wide grin. “You don’t get to be the Enchanted Forest’s most legendary outlaw without knowing a thing or two.”

“No, I guess not.” She put her phone away. This far out, it was only chewing through her data anyway.

“Just out of curiosity, what do we plan to do with this Witch once we find her?” asked Robin.
“We let Regina know where she is, see if she can take her down or lock her up, and then we get her to reverse whatever she did to this town. Or at least give your memories back.”

Much grunted. “You trust the Evil Queen to do that?”

“Of course.”

She must have been a little too sharp, as Much held up in hands in parley. “Forgive us, Emma. It’s just that where we come from, the queen has a rather, ah, shall we say, disagreeable reputation,” he said. “I’m surprised nobody’s run her up a gallows already.”

“You know the Evil Queen. I know Regina.” said Emma. “I wouldn’t call her my friend but I trust her enough to help. For the good of the town.” And Henry, she added mentally but didn’t try to explain her son’s family forest to Much and Robin just yet. There were a lot of things she needed to sort out first, starting with exactly where she and Neal stood. She’d meant to talk to him last night but had got back to the loft too late, after he’d fallen asleep on both of their pillows. Damn pillow thief, he was. Thirteen years had not changed that.

“You seem pretty convinced that she’s not the one who cursed us here,” said Robin.

“That’s because she didn’t. In order to cast the Dark Curse, you have to crush the heart of the thing you love most,” Emma told him as she slipped and slid on dry leafage. “I know for a fact that Regina hasn’t done that.”

She nearly bumped into Robin at the top of the incline. He’d stopped, standing straight and solid like a meerkat. A meerkat with a crossbow. She still had to ask where he’d got it from.

“What’s the matter?”

“Shh,” he said, holding up a hand. Emma quietened, filtering out the sounds of the others trekking through the woods, trees creaking in the wind and the sing-song trickle of a nearby creek for whatever had caught Robin’s interest. Finally, he said, “I thought I heard something.”

He half-ran, half-slid down the other side of the hill, Emma and Much tripping over their feet from trying to keep up. When he was several yards ahead, he shouted back, “Come quick! There’s somebody here!”

Emma broke into a run, clearing in three strides the rocks Robin had jumped over and landing on the bank. He was on the ground, next to a small woman lying face-down in the dirt with her bare feet in the water and dressed in a thin blue gown that was in no way suitable for the outdoor elements. He rolled her onto her side and out of the creek. Emma started. “Belle?”

“Oh, God,” Robin gasped. Belle’s forehead and neck were stained with blood from an open gash near her hairline. Elsewhere, she was deathly pale and Emma couldn’t tell if she was breathing. “She’s cold as ice.”

Emma took off her jacket and the woolly jumper underneath to wrap around Belle’s tiny frame. “Is that a bite?”

“No, she hit her head on those rocks,” said Robin. He pressed his fingers into Belle’s neck while Emma turned to see a stain on a jagged rock by her knees. “She’s got a heartbeat. It’s weak, but it’s there.”

“Alright. Let’s get her back to the bug. I’ll take her to the hospital.”
“As you can see, the ogres have overrun all of the ground we’ve been able to recover in the last four months. And then some,” David announced, waving a hand over the table-top map while his wife, her stepmother, Belle (with apologies from Robin) and the visiting military leaders looked on. “We believe our initial fears have been confirmed, that the ogres have formed an alliance with the Wicked Witch and she is using magic to expedite their armies’ advances.”

“I take it we’re no closer to capturing her then?” asked King Josef.

“Regrettably, no. Queen Regina’s enlisted the help of six sorcerers to help find a way to entrap her, so far without success.”

King Richard leant back in his chair, ignoring the distasteful look Queen Nala threw him. “Can we trust them? These sorcerers? I mean no offence to the fair lady, but an intelligent man would consider it foolishness to take the word of a woman who is still known in many parts as the Evil Queen.”

“I could easily have dropped you in the middle of a dragon’s den on the way here,” said Regina. “Don’t make me reconsider that decision.”

“All right, all right, let’s not be going at each other’s throats,” said David, holding up his hands to separate the two royals. “We’ve got other stray goats to catch. And the bottom line is, if we want to win this war we need all the help we can get. Right now, four of those sorcerers are up on the line trying to slow the ogres’ advance. Esmeralda saved the life of my highest general only a few days ago. I’m happy to vouch for them, and you can put my head on the chopping block if it goes south.”

Nala leant forward, tracing the lines of the ogres’ advances with a long brown finger. The fierce warrior queen of the Pridelands certainly lived up to her reputation, as David had discovered a few days earlier when she took down half a dozen ogres by herself. He was immensely grateful that while not on the battlefield, she was as mild-mannered as a kitten or he imagined both Regina and Richard would have been made into kibble a long time ago. “There was a sorcerer who assisted the last time we fought the ogres. I can’t remember his name for the life of me but I do remember that he successfully ended the war in a matter of hours.”

“Rumplestiltskin,” said Belle desolately. “His name was Rumplestiltskin.”

“Would he help us again?” asked Nala.

Heads shook all around the room. “Unfortunately, no,” said Regina. “Rumplestiltskin … has been dead for nearly six months.”

“And bloody good riddance. The Dark One was a menace,” said Richard, completely missing the way Belle had slipped into the shadows to hide her face. David felt torn between hugging her and punching Richard. Even though he’d said more or less the same thing himself on numerous occasions, Rumplestiltskin had saved a lot of lives in his final moments. David owed him that much, if only for the sake of the woman he’d loved. So he quickly changed the subject.

“Regardless, we’re here to talk about defending key locations in Gaul and the Midlands, which seems to be the ogres’ main focus of attack. Queen Nala, I understand Pride Rock is still holding steady?”

“For now,” she confirmed.
“And Elsinore Castle aside, they don’t seem to have much interest in the Northern Kingdoms,” Josef added.

They continued to talk strategy for another hour until David finally grew sick of Richard shutting down every suggestion he or Josef put forward and ignoring Nala entirely. He called for an adjournment before Regina and Nala could compete over who emaciated Gaul’s crown jewels first and fell against the table, letting out a sigh of relief when the allied royals left the room.

“Why do I get the feeling this summit is going to be a complete waste of time?” Regina growled.

He hated to admit it, but for once, he agreed with his stepmother-in-law. All the strategy in the world couldn’t beat two or three thousand fifteen-foot-tall solid bricks of muscle, allied with a witch that Regina was hesitant to confront face-to-face. He studied the map, watching the orange line that held steady at the border of Sherwood Forest, mere miles away from Tower Castle. Within a day, King Midas would likely be forced to pull his army back to the castle. A couple of days later and Mulan would have to bring the northern force down as well. With the seven enchanters, sorcerers and magicians they had on hand David reckoned that they could possibly withstand a siege for months, even a year or two. But the castle couldn’t house that many people for so long, and with the army out of the way none of the people in the east stood a chance. So soon after they’d been told it was safe for them to go home, as well.

“Because it is a complete waste of time,” he answered, letting his head fall against the table-top. “We’ve got nothing and we all know it. The Witch has given the ogres the kind of leadership needed to run us into the ground, and there’s not a damn thing any of us can do about it. I’m not even sure Rumplestiltskin could’ve helped us out of this one.”

Belle, now sitting in Josef’s vacated chair, tapped her fingers on the table. “I don’t think that’s true. Rumple knew more about ogres than anyone. He fought in the First Ogres’ War and it wasn’t an accident that he chose to live in the middle of their home territory.”

“Well, maybe so. But it doesn’t do us any good now.”

“Maybe it could,” she insisted. She sounded as if she was trying to keep a strong vein of hope out of her voice. David looked up; she was biting her lip and her blue eyes darted from side to side as she thought through an idea at a hundred miles per hour. “He had thousands of books in his library at the Dark Castle. I never got a quarter of the way through it, but some of them have got to have something on ogres. Or something in his collection that could help us.”

“The Dark Castle is fifty miles inside their territory,” said Snow. “We’re using up all of our magical resources just to hold them back now. How do you plan to get there?”

Belle explained, “I think the reason we – the Merry Men, that is – were having so much success against the ogres is because we were running raids with just two or three of us at a time. Get in, get out. And merchant caravans were able to pass through their territory unharmed all the time during the last war. I don’t think they care so much about smaller groups when there’s a bigger threat on the horizon. If I go alone, I can make it.”

David shook his head. “No. It’s too risky.”

“I’m not asking for your permission, David.” She stood up, staring him straight in the soul. How was it that such a small person could appear more imposing than a mountain while barely reaching his shoulder? “You said it yourself, we’re in trouble. If there’s anything there that could help us, I say it’s worth the risk. I’m going.” She paused to sniffle. “I’m going home.”
She left the room and the door clicked shut behind her.

“Well. Who knew the bookworm had teeth?” said Regina.

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2014**

Henry sat at one of the makeshift tables, chewing on a ham-and-cheese sandwich while he flicked through the pages of the book. His dad had brought him to the town hall to help out with all the people who’d been displaced by the curse while his mom went back out to the woods to look for … well, whatever it was that she was looking for. She’d come back to Mary Margaret’s so late and left so early in the morning that neither he nor his dad had had much of a chance to talk to her.

They probably thought he hadn’t noticed but his parents had been acting weird ever since they got to Storybrooke. Almost as if they didn’t know how to be around each other all of a sudden. Even when she’d been working some really tough cases in Boston, his mom had never skipped out before breakfast or didn’t call in the afternoons after school just to say hello. Now she and his dad skirted around each other, hardly making eye contact or even talking to each other. She’d been spending a lot of time around Captain Hook as well. Henry wondered if he should be worried.

In the meantime, he thumbed through the book for any information on the guy he might need to chase away from his mom. There was a lot in the book and Henry had yet to get all the way through it, but far enough to start identifying some people.

First was Mary Margaret, who was really Snow White and his *grandmother* of all people. The lady at the diner who’d served him cocoa was Little Red Riding Hood. There was an African-looking couple in one of the temporary shelters he thought might be King Simba and Queen Nala, only they were humans instead of lions. The guy fixing camp beds was Geppetto. His friend with the umbrella was Jiminy Cricket (also human) and the stern-looking nun overseeing the distribution of blankets was the Blue Fairy. There were a few Henry still hadn’t figured out, though. The black-haired woman trying not to look at him while she walked past was one of them.

“Uh, excuse me?” he said, standing up to get her attention. He held out his hand. “Hi. I’m Henry. We met at Granny’s diner the other day.”

She nodded and shook his hand. “Of course. I’m, um — oh. Hello, Neal.”

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2014**

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She nodded and shook his hand. “Of course. I’m, um, Regina Mills. I’m the mayor. How are you?”

“Pretty good. Settling in, and I’m slowly getting a handle on this fairy-tale thing.” She did a double-take, then saw the book and her eyes widened. “Oh, yeah, Mom and Dad told me about the curse and how everybody here’s from the Enchanted Forest. I’ve been catching up. Pretty cool stuff.”

“Oh. So, they told you who we all are, then?” she asked.

Henry shrugged. “Dad offered to help, but I’m having fun working it out on my own. The curse names make it harder but there’s usually little things to pick out. Like the Mad Hatter’s top hat, and the fact that Jiminy Cricket’s cursed name is Hopper.”

Regina smiled warmly. “You like puzzles, do you?”

“Yeah, I love them.” He paused to stick his hands in his pockets. “Some are a bit harder than others. Um, if you don’t mind me asking, who were you in the Enchanted Forest?”

He wasn’t sure but he thought she looked panicked. “I was, um — oh. Hello, Neal.”
“Hi, Regina,” said his dad, appearing behind Henry. “Hey, buddy. You still trying to work out who everybody is?”

“Yeah, it’s fun!”

Regina chuckled. “Well, I should probably get going.”

“Uh, actually, can I talk to you for a sec?” his dad asked. She nodded, so he turned to Henry.

“You’ll be all right here?”

Henry shrugged. “Yeah.” He sat down at the table and went back to the book as his dad and Regina disappeared around the side of the makeshift kitchen. He figured he could always ask her again later.

"He seems to be doing well. Happy,” Regina commented once they were out of sight. “What did you tell him?”

“The truth,” said Neal. “At least, as much as he’d understand at the moment.”

“He doesn’t – he doesn’t know who I am?”

Neal shook his head. “No. We haven’t really got around to telling him that part yet.” He didn’t want to try and explain the whole story, especially the part about why he’d been absent for the first ten years of Henry’s life while Henry still had his false memories. He knew he’d have to remember eventually, but it was a can of worms Neal didn’t want to touch until he had no other choice.

Regina nodded in understanding. “It’s probably better that way for now, anyway.”

“Hey, you know you’re welcome to come and see him anytime you want?” Neal told her. She sounded so heartbroken, worn out and more tired than he’d ever seen her. “I know if he had his memories, he’d want to see you. He’s your son too.”

“And what would we tell him, that I’m the Evil Queen who cursed his grandmother into an eternal sleep, and when that failed an entire kingdom into another world?”

“Well, not right away.”

She smiled, but it never reached her eyes. “I appreciate it, Neal, but knowing my son has no memory of me is painful enough. I couldn’t handle it.”

Neal tried to think of a good objection when his phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket and pressed accept. “Hey, Emma, what’s up?”

“Hey, Neal. Are you at the town hall right now?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I’m at the hospital and I think you’ll want to be here. We found Belle.”

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

Belle was sorting through her little pile of belongings, deciding on the minimum amount necessary so she wouldn’t be slowed down when the door to the Merry Men’s chamber was forcefully pushed open.
“What’s this I hear about you going off to the Dark Castle alone?” Robin demanded.

She cringed as he slammed the door shut but didn’t stop what she was doing. “David went to you to try and stop me, did he?”

“He was worried. You wanna give me a reason as to why he shouldn’t be?” He stepped up to her with his arms folded across his chest. “You volunteered for a suicide mission, Belle.”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “The ogres won’t care about one person when there’s an army for them to fight elsewhere.”

“The ogres might not care. That doesn’t mean the Witch won’t.”

“I’ll take my chances. Nobody else here knows the castle like I do. This needs to be done. I’m not just going to sit here and do nothing.”

She shoved past him. Before she could leave, he asked, “That’s not the reason you’re going, is it?”

With her hand resting on the door, she couldn’t think of anything to say. She also couldn’t seem to make the necessary motion to open the door. Robin sighed.

“Belle, was Rumplestiltskin …” He faltered. “Was he the one you lost? The one I asked you about on the Troll Road?”

Given how she and Robin had first met, naturally she hadn’t told him or any of the Merry Men the truth about her relationship with Rumple. There were lots of reasons why. She didn’t want them to think less of her for falling in love with the Dark One. She didn’t want them to think her fragile or foolish for it. And most of all, she didn’t want to justify how she felt to yet another person who hadn’t even known the man she loved.

On the Troll Road, her father had insisted that it had all been a spell and she would get over it soon enough. Ruby and Leroy, bless their souls, had tried to help her but it had got to the point where she just couldn’t take the pity, the attempts to be understanding, all the while people continued to insistently think of him as a monster. And she, the foolish maiden who hadn’t known what she’d got herself into. It was her heart. Why should she have to justify anything? She’d lost her True Love. There was no justice in that.

Her heart in her throat, she turned just slightly to look Robin in the eyes, steeling herself for whatever judgement lay there. Much to her surprise, there was none. No judgement, no pity, not even a hint of patronisation or the look that preceded the phrase, ‘You brought this on yourself’. Just understanding. Simple understanding. Then she remembered that he had lost his wife, the woman he’d faced down the Dark One to save. Of all the people in Tower Castle, Robin was likely the only one who really knew what she’d been through.

For a moment, the two of them stood there, letting the words remain unspoken though they both knew what the other was thinking. Robin was the one to break it, by bending down to lift his bag off the floor.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Robin, no!”

“There’s nothing I can say that’s going to stop you,” he stated flatly. Speaking from experience, she
thought. “And I’m not letting you do this by yourself. I’m coming. End of story.”

“And if this really is a bad idea?” she insisted. “You’ll run the risk that you might never come back?”

It wasn’t that she didn’t want his company – the Merry Men had become like the closest thing she’d had to family since Rumple died. She thought of Robin and Alan like the older brothers she’d never had. Tuck had even told them that he’d begun to feel like the elderly father of three rambunctious youngsters running roughshod in the forest, with Much as the tagalong cousin and John the cranky uncle with little to say. But that was exactly it – Robin had a family, a son, who needed him. Nobody could replace him if he died. Belle had no-one who needed her.

“I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you, and my being there might have prevented it,” he said after a long, pregnant pause. “I’ve – I’ve lost too many people I care about. I’m not doing it again.”

“Robin –”

“Belle, I’m coming. Who’s going to finish reading ‘The Snow Queen’ with Roland if you don’t come back? And with such animated storytelling?”

She laughed softly. She’d lost and she knew it. And as much as he knew there was no stopping her, she knew there was nothing she could do to stop him from following. Stubborn as mules, Tuck would have said. “All right. Let’s go.”

Regina wasn’t entirely sure what she was doing in the south wing. The Council meeting had resumed but she wasn’t really needed. She was pretty sure all of them found her presence off-putting (except for Nala, but then she hardly knew the Queen of the Pridelands) and it was good to get out of the stuffy War Room.

Her feet had carried her there of their own accord. It was what she told herself, anyway. Having arrived so late at night, the Merry Men were all crammed into one room with the intention of spreading them out later. They probably preferred it that way – she couldn’t imagine that they slept very far apart in the forest otherwise one of them could have been eaten and the others would never know. So finding their room was easy enough. She just hoped he would be alone. Thankfully the monk had few questions when she asked of Robin’s whereabouts, and the rest of them were busy tucking into lunch in the Great Hall. And Belle – well, Regina had to admit, she had no idea where Belle had gone.

Snow and David still had reservations, but Regina agreed with her that Rumple’s castle was likely their best bet for something to help them win the war. She would have offered to take Belle to the Dark Castle herself if she hadn’t been so sure it would be shot down. Not that she would’ve blamed her for doing so – one of these days, she was going to have to muster up the courage to give Rumple’s ex-maid a much-needed apology. Regina didn’t kid herself into thinking that she knew anything about the younger noblewoman, but she did know that the last thing Belle would want at that time was the company of someone who had wronged her so much. Five months of running around with outlaws had not erased the look on her face.

The same look Regina had seen every morning in the mirror after Daniel died.

She stopped outside the door to the outlaws’ room, breathing deeply to squash the butterflies in her stomach when she heard voices.

“I’m coming with you.”
“Robin, no!”

So Belle hadn’t left yet, Regina thought. David must have gone to Robin hoping he could get her to stay. Only he’d decided to leave with her instead. She knew she shouldn’t eavesdrop, but her feet remained stubbornly glued to the floor.

“There’s nothing I can say to stop you,” said Robin in almost a monotone. “And I’m not letting you do this alone. So I’m coming. End of story.”

“And if this really is a bad idea? You’ll run the risk that you might never come back?”

There was a pause and the sound of shuffling feet. Then Robin spoke again. “I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you, and my being there might have prevented it. I’ve – I’ve lost too many people I care about. I’m not doing it again.”

Regina wobbled and fell away from the door, having heard enough. She forced herself to turn away and walk, not run, along the corridor, taking the first corner that came along in case they happened to walk out and see her. Of course things must have developed between them in the past months. Belle was younger, and sweeter, and a far better person than Regina would ever be. Next to that, how could he have possibly ever thought of her? And how had she been so blind that she hadn’t seen that?

Because she’d had hope. Stupid, irrational hope that maybe Rumplestiltskin had actually been wrong for once in his wretched life. That maybe a villain could get a happy ending. She was not upset, she was – she was disappointed. In herself, for being foolish enough to hope that someone would ever see her as anything other than the Evil Queen.

She wouldn’t go back to being what she had been. No. Henry had not wanted that, and whether he remembered that promise or not Regina swore she would hold to it until her grave. But she would not make the mistake of thinking somebody might actually want her. That she would ever be happy again. Henry had been her happiness, and now they were both gone. It was just the price she had to pay.

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2012**

Neal ran past the reception desk without stopping to talk to the nurse, leaving it to Regina and Henry to explain what they were doing there, and rushed to the main ward. When he got there, Emma stood outside one of the rooms and Doctor Whale had just shut the door. The doc looked concerned, but not sorry, which Neal took as encouraging.

“How is she?” he asked as soon as he’d caught his breath.

“Well, she’s stable,” said Whale, looking at both him and Emma. “The bleeding’s stopped but she’s still hypothermic. There’s no knowing how long she was out there. It’s a good thing you found her when you did.”

“We need to know what she was doing out there,” said Emma. “How long before she wakes up?”

Whale shrugged. “I don’t know. Could be several hours, could be the rest of the day. She’s been out in the freezing cold for who knows how long and that head wound is pretty nasty.”

“Can I see her?” asked Neal. Whale looked like he was going to say no when Emma spoke up.
“Aside from her father, he’s probably the closest thing she’s got to family. That’s why I called him.”

Neal smiled and reached for her hand to squeeze a thank you. She did the same in return. Whale sighed.

“Not right now. We still need to run some tests and get her temperature back up to normal. I’ll tell the nurse to come and get you. In an hour or so.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

Emma’s disembodied voice sounded through the small metallic box that a man in a funny hat named Jefferson had taught Robin and the lads to use a few days prior when they’d wandered into town trying to work out where the blazes they were. Robin still didn’t understand it well – there were lots of little squares and circles that did things if you touched them, and numbers and symbols he didn’t recognise at all. Jefferson had told them to focus just on the green one with a white shape that Robin thought looked like a bent femur. Apparently, it was called a ‘phone’ and if you held it up to your ear, it could be used to talk to people across great distances. Exactly why a bent femur represented that, he had no idea, but there were a lot of things about this world he had yet to work out.

“Belle’s okay,” said Emma’s voice. “Doctor Whale reckons she’ll be out of it for several hours at least. I’m heading back out now, but I’d really appreciate it if you’d keep searching the woods, starting with where we found her.”

“You think she might have been attacked by the Witch?” Robin shouted into the phone.

“Robin, you don’t have to shout. I can hear you and so can everyone else here. And yeah, I think it might be possible.”

“All right, we’ll keep looking then,” he said in a normal tone of voice.

“Thanks. I’ll catch up to you in about an hour or so.”

Then there was a click and a number of beeps. ‘Call ended’, Robin read on the box. At least the written language was the same, which simplified matters somewhat for those who could read.

“So, what’s the story?” asked Alan.

Robin slipped the phone into his jacket pocket. He’d woken up with the thing on and couldn’t for the life of him figure out what it was made of – wool, cotton, flax or some strange material native to their new land, he couldn’t tell. Whatever it was, it warm and rather comfortable, so he wasn’t complaining. “The sheriff wants us to keep searching the area. She thinks Belle might’ve been attacked by the Witch, so it’s possible we aren’t too far from her stronghold.”

Alan shivered. “Feels weird, working with the law.”

“It’s not that bad. At least she isn’t Nottingham.”

They spread out again, ensuring that they had a clear line of sight with the people on either side of them. The three dwarves took one end of the line with the surly one-handed bloke and the Merry Men sans Friar Tuck (who was back at their campsite with Roland) took the other. While they walked, Alan chatted. “You know the woman we found in the creek, don’t you? How?”

“Do you remember when Marian got sick, and I broke into the Dark One’s castle looking for something to heal her when the fairies wouldn’t answer our call for help?”
“Yeah?”

“Belle was the servant girl who let me go. Saved my life, and Marian’s. And Roland’s. I owe her a debt I don’t think I can ever repay.”

Alan looked puzzled. “That little slip of a girl?”

“She’s tougher than she looks. She’d have to be to survive the Dark Castle.”

“Let’s just hope she survives this,” said Alan. “I didn’t like the look of that yellow beast the sheriff took her away in. How do we know it won’t eat her?”

“Did you see a mouth?”

“No, but it sure made a hell of a noise. Like a lion, or something. And they gotta eat something. We’re new here; how do we know they don’t eat people?”

“I’m sure they would have warned us if that were the case, and Emma didn’t seem that concerned.”

Alan shook his head, unconvincing. “I don’t know. She could’ve tamed it somehow. What if they didn’t tell us what they eat so as to make us easier prey? So we won’t run and hide when we see one coming, and then –” He made a noise like he was sucking up a whole bowlful of soup in one go. “No mess, no fuss. One satisfied carriage monster, four dead outlaws.”

Robin stopped, unslung the metallic crossbow Little John had ‘borrowed’ from a rich proprietor a couple of days ago and shoved it into Alan’s hands. “Here. You take this. You see one of them coming, you fire a couple of arrows into it. If that doesn’t stop it, start singing.”

“You’ll take any opportunity to make that joke, won’t you?”

Robin broke a low-hanging branch off a nearby tree. Whatever world they’d landed in, it was drastically short of swords and damned if he was going to take on the Wicked Witch bare-handed. “Just watch out for flying monkeys, will you?”

“There’s one behind you.”

“Alan –”

“NOT JOKING! DUCK!”

Alan lunged forwards and collided with him as feathered wings whooshed over them. Robin couldn’t see past the entanglement of his limbs and Alan’s but he heard a heavy body thump into the ground and the monkey shriek in disappointment. He shoved Alan off.

He’d thought the monkey John had turned into was big, but this one was at least twice the size. And a quiet flyer – he hadn’t even heard the bloody thing sneak up on them. Huge and snowy white, it had an ugly, jagged scar crossing its face from its right eyebrow to its left cheek and a chunk of its nose missing in the middle. It shrieked again, drool running down sharp fangs, and stared straight at Robin with something almost like recognition burning in the depths of its crimson eyes. With Robin’s luck, the monkey would have started out as somebody like Nottingham or Gisborne. Or worse, King Richard.

He held up his stick-sword, a twig compared to the monster in front of him, and Alan took aim. “Careful where you shoot!” Robin warned him. “These things used to be people!”
“I got it.” Alan fired.

He would have hit it in the hindquarters if the monkey had not jumped into the tree, making bark and dead leaves rain down on them while the arrow uselessly smashed into some nearby rocks. Robin held up a hand to shield himself from the falling litter and was about to shout at Alan for the bow back when the monkey dove, kicking Alan into the ground and pinning Robin to the tree trunk with its front limbs. He tried to hit it, only for it to rip the branch out of his hands, then grab his arms and lift him into the air.

“Robin!” he heard Alan shout, along with a few of the others who had run up to join the fight, but it was too late.

The monkey flew with him dangling just above the tree line so the leafless branches whipped at his legs. He twisted and pulled, but the monkey’s grip only tightened. Its claws tore his skin, then it let go and he fell through the air until landing in a pile of hay. He rolled down the side of the pile and finished his fall face-down on grassy earth, feeling as if he’d just been for a ride in a barrel being rolled down a steep hill. Everything hurt – his shoulders and back burned, his hands and wrists were bloody and his stomach roiled, threatening to vomit up the turkey that had been his breakfast that morning.

As much as he wanted to stay there and let the cool grass soothe his aching body, he knew he had to get up before the monkey came back for round two. But when he finally hauled himself to his knees, he realised he had bigger problems.

“Oh, oh, dearie, dearie, dear. The little birdie fell out of the sky. Dropped like a stone. Falling, falling, falling,” sang the thin figure standing a few feet away. He was a normal human colour here, had no scales and his eyes were green (though even as Robin watched, they changed to amber and then purple) but there was no mistaking him.

“The Dark One?”

Rumplestiltskin giggled.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 12: Though the Mountains Be Moved. In Storybrooke, Robin and Rumplestiltskin face off while Neal looks through the storybook for answers and Aurora can’t remember her son’s name. In the Enchanted Forest, the animosity between Richard and Robin is explained on the journey to the Dark Castle, where a person from Zelena’s past also looks for answers.
Though the Mountains Be Moved

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Storybrooke, 25 January 2014

Robin got to his feet. The sorcerer giggled again. His whole body shook and his eyes flashed from purple to blue.

“Pick it up,” he growled.

Robin looked down. A sword had materialised by his feet. The Dark One drew one of his own and trembled like a novice swordsman facing his first trials. Except novices never had such a deadly snarl like the one plastered on his human face.

“No use to try and run,” said the Dark One. “Run. Run. Can’t catch me!”

He burst into a fit of laughter. Robin didn’t get the joke but got the message. He lifted the sword. It was too heavy, too long and unbalanced in his hand. He couldn’t see this ending well for him.

The Dark One continued to laugh even as Robin stood at the ready for whatever was coming. Then it stopped as suddenly as it had started, and a pair of brown eyes looked at him in confusion.

“What’s happening?”

Robin had no idea. He and the Dark One stared at each other. Then the Dark One screamed, turned away and clutched at his head, all the while muttering nonsense.

“Tick tock, up the clock. Turn back the clock. Tick, tock, turn back the clock. Lion’s heart, dragon’s heart. Spin the wheel. Quiet the voices. Spin the wheel, quiets the voices …”

Robin inched closer with his free hand held out in front of him. “Are you … all right?” The Dark One continued to ramble, hunched over with both hands clasping his head. “Dark One? Rumplestiltskin!”

Like a clap of thunder, the Dark One rounded on him with the ferociousness of a rabid dog with solid black eyes. Robin hauled the too-heavy sword up, feeling his muscles scream in agony and joints twist painfully with the effort. He had a feeling this fight was not going to last long.

There was nothing to do but wait, so Regina offered to buy Henry an ice-cream at the café across from the hospital and Neal went to grab a cup of coffee. He knew he was overreacting, that the doc knew what he was doing, that the medical advances of this land meant Belle would be fine and yet he still couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something was wrong. He just needed to see her, to see for himself that she was alive.

A couple of hits on the side got the coffee machine working. He tried the coffee - watery and weak, but it would do - and walked back to the waiting room, where he ran straight into somebody.

“Oh, hell, I’m sorry,” he blustered, kneeling to help the woman pick up her things. “Aurora?”

“Neal?” said the young princess. She stood, brushed her hair out of her eyes and adjusted her grip on
the small boy perched on her hip. “You’re here? How are you?”

He handed her things back. “Yeah, pretty good. How about you?”

“Physically fine,” she said. The boy – her son? – babbled and pulled her hair. “Ow! I’m fine. A little confused. And acclimatising. This world is so – bizarre.”

“Huh. You’re telling me,” said Neal. “Who’s this little guy?”

“Pi!” the boy jabbered, still holding a fistful of Aurora’s hair.

“Um …” She trailed off, detangling her hair from the boy’s fingers. “I’m not too sure. Six days ago, Philip and I had a picnic at Lakeside Castle. I remember him arriving, then the next thing we know we’re standing in the middle of the street in these strange clothes and Philip is holding this one in his arms.”

“Pi!” the boy jabbered again.

“And he keeps making that noise. I don’t know why.”

Neal had a closer look at the boy. He was a chubby little thing, possibly a year old, with dark hair and greenish-blue eyes. “Any chance he might be your son?”

“It’s a possibility,” said Aurora in the way of a person who’d already come to a conclusion. “The dwarf doctor at the hall told me to come here to give him a check-up. I just wish I knew his name.”

“Pi!”

“Pi,” Neal repeated. The boy gave a wide baby smile, showing his two front teeth. “He seems to like that. How about we call him Pip for the time being?”

“Pi!”

“Pip,” said Aurora, as if trying out the sound in her own mouth. “That’ll do for now. Won’t it?”

Pip giggled happily. While Aurora tickled his belly, a nurse appeared in the waiting room and waved to Neal. “Mr Cassidy? Doctor Whale says you can see the patient now.”

“Great, thanks!” Neal quickly downed the rest of his coffee. “I’ll see you round, yeah?”

“Of course,” Aurora said while Pip continued to babble his newfound name.

Enchanted Forest, November 2012

They had decided to keep off the road into the mountains in case the Witch or her simian minions happened to be watching it. It meant that the journey would take a day or two longer than Belle would have liked but if they could get to and from the Dark Castle without being seen, then she was willing to do it. And as of day two, it was working – Robin’s one condition to making the trip was the promise to teleport them away the second there was any sign of trouble, but so far they had yet to see hide or hair of anything more threatening than the rabbit he’d shot for supper.

At the mouth of the temporary shelter they’d strung together from branches and late-autumn leaves laid with a thick wool blanket, Belle absent-mindedly chewed on a piece of willow bark while Robin strung what little they’d brought with them from a tree. “Thank you. For coming.”
“It’s no problem,” he said, brushing his hands off on his trousers.

“Still, I know you think this trip won’t produce anything useful. And you’re away from Roland, and the lads.”

He frowned. “First of all, I didn’t say this venture would be useless. If Rumplestiltskin had anything stashed away in his castle that can help us, then I agree with you – it’s worth the risk. And second, the unfortunate truth is that Tower Castle is probably the safest place for my boy right now. If they could burn Sherwood down …” He shook his head and finished the ties. “I just didn’t want you to walk off into their territory all by yourself. Risk-taking is one thing; recklessness is another.”

A flock of chattering sparrows passed over their heads across a twilight sky. It would be dark before long. They’d found some large rocks in a nearby creek to place at the bottom of the fire, to keep away the worst of the cold when the night did come. The breeze was light – otherwise, they’d have no fire at all – but enough to drive the pre-winter chill through Belle’s cloak.

“So, you think you might stay at the castle after we get back?” she asked. She hoped he might. As much as she would be forever grateful to the Merry Men for taking her in, she was still a noblewoman at heart. She needed the sounds of the city, the markets, animals and people. Until they’d got back to Tower Castle, she hadn’t realised how much she’d missed sleeping in an actual bed.

Robin used a stick to flip one of the rocks out of the ashes before answering. “Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t fancy the thought of running away from the war entirely. But where we could go besides the castle, to be involved but that’s also safe enough for us … I don’t know. On the other hand, Richard being around is going to make things difficult. He’s a git even to the people he likes. And I’m sure Queen Regina would be glad to see the back of me.”

He’d lifted a hand to touch the dragon amulet still strung around his neck. In five months, she hadn’t seen him take it off once. He didn’t like dabbling in magic unless he had to – had told her so several times – which made her wonder why he’d even kept the relic after Regina refused to take it back. Oh, it had been useful in saving Alan from the ogres, and the lot of them from the fire, but he’d had no way of knowing that from the start. Since the morning after the fire, however, Belle wondered if there’d been something she’d missed while mourning her own lost love.

“Maybe not as soon as you’d think,” she murmured.

He jerked his head up. “What’d you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” she said. He needed to work it out for himself. “So … about Richard. What exactly happened between you two?”

Silence – the woods’ version of it – struck as soon as the words left her mouth, and Robin’s confused face warped into a strange combination of blankness and anger. “It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got a long journey.”

He sighed. “What do you know about him?”

“My father likes him,” she said with a shrug. “Which makes me think I shouldn’t, if I believed in judging people I don’t know. I’ve only met him twice.”

“I’ve found that most of his subjects hardly know anything about him. A side effect of him spending a grand total of three years in his own kingdom for the sixteen he’s been king.”
“Three years?”

Robin nodded. “The rest of it, he’s either spent with his mother’s family in the Borderlands, or fighting in Agrabah. I used to believe the propaganda too – that if we didn’t stop the Sultan’s armies, the southern hordes would march north until they took everything we held dear. Of course, that would be to imply that the Agrabahn people have any interest at all in invading the rest of the realm, which they don’t. They were the ones fighting the invaders, not us.”

Belle hadn’t heard about that before. “Then why send an army there?”


“Is that why you went to Agrabah?”

“Hmm. I’m the second son, it was expected of me.” He looked sheepish. “Although, I suppose that was only part of it. I was young, and foolish, and fell for what turned out to be a deadly ideology.” He sighed. “I was wounded at the Battle of Damascus. Nothing serious, but I took a fever and had to return home. What was left of it, anyway. Prince John was taxing the kingdom so heavily that people could barely afford the dirt they were eating off. Much and I got into some trouble when we challenged one of his officials – suffice it to say that he returned home in a rather embarrassing condition – and we fled to the woods. We ran into Little John and Will Scarlett – you haven’t met him – pretending to be trolls to exert money off travellers. Then Alan a couple of months later when we got him off from a poaching charge in Rochdale. Then got his wife out of the village before they could arrest her too. Incidentally also how I met my wife. That’s a story for another time.”

He trailed off. Belle waited, watching the shadows fall across their little camp and sparks fly up from the fire.

“We didn’t have the manpower to face John directly,” he said slowly whilst staring into the fire. “So we stole instead. Robbed the tax caravans on the High Road, pickpocketed from the collectors as they went about town. I thought that when Richard returned, he’d deal with John. All we had to do was give the people hope until that time. So, in a way, I gained through banditry what I didn’t as a soldier. I was a hero. Or I thought I was.

“Four years later, Richard came back from Agrabah. I went to the capital, snuck in, and told him everything that John had been doing, from heavy taxes to public beatings to arresting nobles who dared to suggest that he was doing anything wrong. I told him about the little underground movement we’d inadvertantly formed – well, I say we. It was more my father and Marian’s father’s doing. Anyway, he arranged for myself, my father and Lord Knightsbridge to be at his return ceremony, to out John in front of the whole assembly.”

He went silent again. He’d braced his elbows against his knees and his fingers held the fire-tending stick so tight, his knuckles had gone white.

“When … we went into the assembly, Richard let us say our piece. Then he had the four of us arrested. Me, my father, Marian and her father. Thanks to my stupid confession, they didn’t even bother with a trial. Just locked us up, to be hung at dawn. Hung like common criminals. The lads worked out that something had gone wrong when we didn’t show up and they broke me out. But we couldn’t get to the others in time.”

The stick broke. The snap echoed around the valley and Belle jumped. Robin stared at the pieces and tossed them in the fire.

“The title Lord Locksley passed to me not long after that. My older brother had been ill with a
coughing sickness and died about six months after our father. In all honesty, it belongs to the caretaker Richard put in place – a fellow named Gisborne, he’s a distant cousin of mine – but I think he keeps it on me out of spite. As a reminder that while he might not be able to catch me, he can take what matters most from me.”

He leant back, so the shadows fell over his face. It was dark now, the only light coming from the fire and the few early stars twinkling in the heavens. Belle bit her lip.

“He murdered your wife and father.”

“Yep. And ran a formerly prosperous kingdom right into the ground with his foolish ventures of glory. And got who knows how many people killed in the process.”

“Why don’t you say anything?” she asked. “The most the nobility know, at least what I knew, is that you’re a dangerous criminal with a reward on your head worth more than the entire annual revenue of the Frontlands. If they knew the truth –”

“Then nothing,” Robin spat. “You said it yourself, your father likes him. A lot of his sort does. They look up that sort of man; men who use charisma and a showy display of might to trick others into thinking they’re God’s bloody gift to the kingdom. And the ones who did see right through the act … well, they were a minority to start with and he killed two of them. Now the rest won’t speak out for fear of the same thing happening to them.”

Somehow, Belle couldn’t think of an argument for that. They let the fire continue until it had burnt down to embers, then carefully dug the rocks out before burying it in earth. The rocks, heated by the fire, warmed their shelter enough that Robin fell asleep in a matter of minutes. Belle lay awake for some time, watching the half-moon’s glow illuminate the forest and finding that, despite how tired she’d been, sleep just didn’t want to come.

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2014**

There was a knock at the door. Snow waddled over and greeted the woman on the other side with a smile. “Zelena! Come in.”

“Thank you,” said Zelena. “Pardon me for being a bit tardy. I had to ask the lady at Granny’s Diner for directions to find your place. These phone things are rather funny contraptions, aren’t they?”

“Oh, believe me, I know,” said Snow, bolting the door behind her. Old habits died hard. “Please, take a seat. Would you like a tea or a coffee?”

“Oh, no, thank you.”

She pulled out a chair and gestured for Snow to sit down, smiling affectionately at Snow’s protruding belly. Snow chuckled as she manoeuvred into the chair and piled Henry’s school books on the opposite side of the table. “Sorry about the mess. My daughter’s staying with me, and her husband and son aren’t exactly the tidiest of people. Although, neither is Emma, really.”

“You have a grandson?” asked Zelena.

Snow nodded. “I do. It took a bit of getting used to, let me tell you.”

“I can imagine,” the other woman chuckled. “So. If you don’t mind me asking, will your husband be joining us?”
Snow started. “Um …”

Zelena looked taken aback. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Did I – did I say something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s just …” Snow trailed off, trying to think of what to say. “No, David won’t be joining us.”

Zelena nodded in understanding. “Is it – is it something you’d like to talk about?”

Snow rubbed her belly while she contemplated the thought. For days, she’d had a sinking feeling in her gut, and not just from the baby pushing her bladder into her spine. The more people tried to reassure her, the worse that feeling got. She liked to think of herself as optimistic but it was much harder to do that with hormones messing up her systems. And her usual methods of dealing with that sinking feeling were not working. “I don’t know. It’s just – it’s all been so confusing, the past few days. The new curse. The baby. And David – it’s not like him to go so long without trying to get a message to me. He knows Storybrooke, so it’s not like he could’ve gotten lost. I don’t even know if he was brought back with the new curse, or if he’s been turned into a flying monkey, or if he’s somewhere else in town and can’t get in touch for some reason. And there are a hundred and one things that need doing before I have the baby, and I’m not physically able to do any of them.”

At the end of her tirade, Zelena stretched out a hand and laid it on top of hers. She squeezed gently. “He’ll show up, Snow.”

Snow could only pray that it would be true.

The heavy weight of the sword threw Robin off-balance and he stumbled to one side, dodged the second blow and aimed a kick at the Dark One’s knees. He missed, the sorcerer spinning around too fast for him to hit. He parried another blow, stumbled, parried. God, his shoulder hurt. He had to hold the sword double-handed on a one-hand hilt and it bit into his hands. The Dark One moved slowly. He was playing, Robin realised.

Or maybe not. He’d begun to tremble, his free hand twitching and flicking of its own accord while his whole body seized. Pain flashed across his face.

“Too many voices,” he said, strained. “No room, no room!”

Then he lunged again. Robin dodged and ran in a circle, dropping the sword in the grass as he did so. He was better off without it.

The next time the Dark One struck, Robin pushed forward, catching the sorcerer in a rugby tackle. They fell to the ground. Robin wrenched the sword out of his hand and held the blade to the Dark One’s throat. The now-black-eyed sorcerer only laughed. It sounded like thunder rolling around inside Robin’s aching head.

YOU CAN’T KILL ME, said the Dark One. He hadn’t moved his lips, but sound like leaden doors in an underground cavern echoed in Robin’s ears and sent a sharp, painful tremor straight down his spine. YOU TRIED ONCE AND FAILED. YOU COULDN’T KILL THE MAN WHO MURDERED YOUR WIFE. WHO LEFT YOUR BOY WITHOUT A MOTHER.

“Get out of my head!”

The Dark One shoved Robin away so he landed with a thud on the solid ground. He lay there for a moment, taking inventory of the things that worked when he wanted them to, while the sorcerer got to his feet. He stood over Robin with his hands on his knees, like a vulture waiting for its prey to die,
his eyes the colour of liquid gold. When he spoke again, it was out loud and with a heavy accent.

“Dee boy is not safe ‘ere. ‘E can run, signor can run, but dey cannot ‘ide. Run, run, little boy, as fast as you can. Cannot catch me! The limbs, si, the limbs come off first. Make signor watch dee little boy die, slow, in pain, for la mamma ‘e screams. But she is not to be found because she died. You failed ‘er! You failed dem bot’!”

Robin roared and forced himself up, charging at the sorcerer. With the lighter sword, he struck with every move he’d ever been taught. Not one came close to landing. The sorcerer, once again black-eyed, laughed and pushed the blade away as if was nothing more significant than a fly fluttering about his ears.

YOU CANNOT PROTECT THEM, went the clang of wooden lids in a dank, dark cave never seen by the light of day. GIVE IN. IT’LL BE EASIER.

“No!” Robin shouted. He faked a swing at the Dark One’s head and switched direction to strike at his ribs. It connected; then a light flashed and the next thing Robin knew he was on the ground again, holding a sword shortened by two feet down to a stub. The Dark One tutted. There wasn’t even a scratch on him.

NO WONDER YOUR KING SENT YOU BACK FROM THE WAR. SUCH A DISAPPOINTMENT.

The air crackled. Robin felt his hair stand on end, and the acrid taste of tarnished metal hit the back of his throat. Magic. He cracked his eyes open to see the Dark One swirling his hands through the air, blackened sparks like ashes floating around long, thin fingers.

GOODNIGHT, OUTLAW. WHO KNOWS? YOUR FAMILY MIGHT JUST STAND A CHANCE WITHOUT YOU THERE TO MAKE A MESS AFTER ALL.

“You might be right about that,” Robin muttered. He let his eyes close, listening for the Dark One’s footfalls to know when the sorcerer was close enough, then thrust the broken sword up and into the Dark One’s torso.

The Dark One stumbled backwards, staring at the piece of metal now sticking out of his chest. More curious than hurt, Robin guessed, or confused. His eyes flickered to green, then orange, and finally landed on brown.

The brown eyes blinked once, then twice, looking from the sword hilt to Robin, still on the ground. Robin rolled over and laid face-down on the ground, his final dram of strength exhausted, and waited for the last blow to come.

It never did. The Dark One vanished in a cloud of red smoke, leaving Robin to give in to unconsciousness on the cold grass.

Some amount of time later, Robin heard his name being shouted in the fog of limbo and felt somebody drop down beside him. He was stiff all over and decided then and there that he wasn’t getting up. He didn’t open his eyes until the person rather forcefully shook his shoulders and he screamed.

“Oh, sorry,” said a voice he could now identify as Alan. “Robin, it’s Alan! Can you hear me? What hurts?”

Robin shouted again when Alan moved his hand from his shoulder to his back.
“Sorry, I’ll rephrase that. What doesn’t hurt?”

With a considerable amount of effort, Robin rolled onto his side. To answer the question, he pointed to his elbow. Alan kissed it.

“Hey! Sod off, you!”

Alan laughed. “Hallelujah, he’s alive!”

“What happened?” asked one of the dwarves.

Robin managed to sit up despite his back muscles swearing never to speak to him again. Much handed him a water canister; he forced himself to drink slowly. When he’d quenched some of the fire burning in his throat, he said, “Honestly? I haven’t the slightest idea.”

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Belle groaned and pulled her blanket over her head. She was perfectly comfortable where she was and had no intentions of getting up unless that perverted sheriff was coming after them again. “It’s not morning yet, John.”

*Boom. Boom.* “Seriously! John –”

The blanket was pulled back and a hand clamped over her mouth, silencing whatever she’d been about to say to the usual source of her unprecedented early-morning wake-ups. “Shush!” Robin whispered. He beckoned and crawled to the opening of their shelter.

Oh, right, she thought. They weren’t in Sherwood anymore.

She sidled up next to him, to a spot near the tree where they could look out without being seen from the outside. The source of the noise soon appeared in the form of pasty, wrinkled legs built like tree trunks stomping down the slope. She counted at least a half-dozen pairs, all of them longer than she was tall, accompanied by the stink of unwashed clothing. The ogres were only younglings, but she knew from personal experience that didn’t mean they couldn’t squash her and Robin without even knowing it.

The ogres thundered past the shelter, oblivious to the two humans in their presence. Belle and Robin waited in silence for them to disappear into the woods, then a few minutes more for good measure.

“You think they’re gone?” asked Robin.

Belle nodded.

They scrambled out of the hide and worked quickly. If there were more in the area, they had better move quickly. While folding up the blanket and demolishing the hide, Belle thought that it was rather odd the ogres were being so active during the day. She had no time to think about it further, as Robin was shouting and something heavy thumped on the ground behind her.

One of the youngling ogres had come back. Belle tried to run – practically screamed at her body to do so – but her feet stayed stubbornly stuck to the forest floor. The youngling stared back with his two good eyes – unusual for ogres – and she took in the baby tusks, little wisps of dark hair coming
out of his ears, and a long, white scar running down the side of his face …

“No! Don’t shoot!”

“What?!” Robin demanded as she stepped in front of his already drawn bow. Belle broke eye contact with the ogre to face him.

“It’s all right,” she said, her hands spread out in a peace gesture meant for the both of them. “I know this one.”

The ogre growled. Not dangerously like a lion as it tore into a meal; affectionately, like a cat greeting its owner after a long separation. Belle stretched out a hand. After sniffing it, the ogre gently butted his head against her knuckles.

Robin watched the entire exchange with a mixture of confusion and astonishment. He lowered his bow but kept the arrow nocked just in case. “I’m sorry, but what the hell is going on here? You’re friends with an ogre?”

“Not friends, exactly,” she said, studying the ogre. He’d grown several feet since the last time she’d seen him, as well as a pair of tusks, and made himself a new deerskin shirt that covered his upper arms. To cover the scars, perhaps? “He was taken prisoner by the knight who led Lord Le Gume’s army – Sir Gaston – and tortured for information. I let him go.”

“You let him go?”

“He was just a baby!” Belle shouted, rounding on him. “He fell in a hunting hole! That was hardly a declaration of war!”

“What’s he doing now?”

“I don’t know, he –” She stopped short, seeing what Robin spotted before she had. The ogre had cleared away a swath of dead leaves to draw in the dirt beneath. “‘Danger,’” Belle read. “‘Big chief afraid. Humans must leave.’ You want us to leave?”

The ogre nodded and pointed in the direction they’d come from.

“We can’t. We’re trying to get to the Dark Castle,” Belle told him. His ears flattened and he shook his whole body, gesturing wildly between them, himself and the ogres who had just gone by. “I’m sorry, but we can’t go. We need to get there.”

The ogre continued to refuse. Robin’s hand landed on her shoulder and pulled her around to whisper in her ear. “Do you think that’s wise? They’re working with the Witch, remember? Who’s to say she didn’t send him to make us turn back?”

“If the Witch knew we were here, we’d be dead already,” Belle countered. She was so close to home and she wasn’t turning back now. To the ogre, she asked, “Can you help us? We need to get to the Dark Castle as soon as possible.”

The ogre groaned and looked to Robin, gesturing to Belle. “As much as I want to get out of here, I don’t think she’s going to listen to me any more than you,” said Robin. Belle narrowed her eyes at him. He shrugged.

The ogre, for his part, sighed and his shoulders sagged. He pointed first at Belle, his finger like a branch jabbing into her belly, then at himself. She nodded and climbed up, using his outstretched hand for propulsion.
“What the hell are you doing?” asked Robin.

“What does it look like? I’m catching a lift.” There was just enough room for Belle to balance, a little uncomfortably, on the ogre’s broad shoulder if she held onto his ear. She hoped he wouldn’t mind. “What are you waiting for?”

“To see if this is all one mushroom-induced nightmare,” Robin muttered. Belle ignored the comment, as she had a feeling she wasn’t supposed to hear that. Still looking like he was following a crazy woman’s lead – which was probably true, she couldn’t think of too many in any world who’d just climb onto an ogre’s back for the fun of it – he pressed the toe of one boot into the ogre’s palm. When it wasn’t broken off, he copied Belle and climbed to the top of the other arm.

“I reserve the right to claim that you’re mental,” he said, taking up position. The ogre grunted, straightened himself and began to lope through the forest.

“Can ogres talk?” Robin asked while the ogre effortlessly covered miles of ground that would have taken them days on foot. He figured Belle would be the person to ask. Most Ogres’ War veterans he’d spoken to barely knew anything about the creatures beyond, ‘Sit in your foxhole and pray’.

“I think some of them can,” said Belle. She seemed captivated, watching the tops of the trees pass by at eye height. For an adventurer like her, he figured this must have been like a dream come true. “The really big ones, the ones who’ve been around for a while. Ogres age like trees, you know. They just keep growing and growing until either they get killed or they die from a lack of nourishment.”

“Wow. You know, I never asked – how do you know so much about them?”

“I started doing some research when the war began,” she explained. “My mother and I used to spend long evenings in the library at Kernosy Castle, reading all the old adventurers’ journals. It was a good excuse to get away from Gaston for a while.”

“He was around a lot, was he?”

“Unfortunately. We were engaged.”

Now that, Robin hadn’t been expecting. “The bloke who tortured baby ogres? You were engaged to him?”

Belle shrugged. “It was an arranged marriage.”

“I see. How’d you end up at the Dark Castle, then?”

She went silent, as she usually did when somebody brought up the Dark One. She’d tell him eventually; he just had to wait for her to sort out her feelings about the matter. When she did start speaking, it was so quiet that Robin had to listen closely over the sound of the ogre’s footfalls.

“My mother was killed in Avonlea during the war. A freak accident,” Belle began. “A troupe of ogres – younglings, not warriors – came into the town. I think they were just hungry and looking for food. The guards pushed us underneath a merchant’s stall so we’d be out of the way, but something heavy fell on it during the fight. My mother died instantly.”

“My God,” Robin whispered.

Belle continued: “The ogres shifted their focus from Kernosy Castle to Avonlea because of the
slaughter of their young. We were losing, people were dying. I found a mention of the Dark One amongst some old journals from the First Ogres’ War and figured out how to call for him. My father sent him a promise of gold in exchange for protecting the duchy, but he didn’t want gold. He wanted me.”

“As a servant or as …” Robin asked, almost afraid of the answer. Thankfully, Belle smiled.

“Just as a servant. I think it was a bit of a joke to him, watching a noblewoman be reduced to the role of a housemaid. But the funny thing was, we both sort of just forgot about it after a while. He let me get away with things no real servant ever would, like being late with supper because I got caught up reading in his library. I even burnt down the kitchen once, and all he did was say he’d handle the cooking from then on.” She gave a small laugh. “Everyone says he was a monster, the big, bad beast hiding in the Alps making deals for babies. I mean, a lot of it was his doing. I think he wanted people to be afraid of him so they’d leave him alone. But he was – he was lonely. And if I’m honest, I think that was the real reason he asked for me, even if he wouldn’t admit it. He just wanted somebody to talk to.”

“And then he fell in love with you.”

She laughed again. “You think I’m crazy.”

“Of course I think you’re crazy. That doesn’t mean I don’t believe you,” he said truthfully. “You’ve got that look in your eyes.”

“What one?”

“The one that you get when you’ve lost someone you love. Truly loved.” The one I saw every time I looked in the water after Marian died.

He might as well have said it out loud, really. The knowing look she gave him said she knew exactly what he’d thought.

“I don’t pretend to know anything about magic, but I do know that no enchantment can make somebody fall in love. Not the way you obviously did.”

“Does it ever get easier?” she asked, all of a sudden looking very small.

Robin decided not to bother lying. “Not really. Even if I didn’t have Roland, I think there’d still be a part of my heart that will always be Marian’s. Whether that’s a gift or curse … that’s for you to work out.”

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2014**

Neal had never before really appreciated how tiny Belle was. And now, buried in hot water bottles and warm blankets, she seemed smaller than ever. A bandage covered most of the left side of her face. Whale had explained that he’d stitched the wound and there were no fractures, thank gods, but as her circulation returned it was likely to begin bleeding again. She’d already lost a lot of blood, and she wasn’t a big person to begin with. Neal reached for her hand that didn’t have an IV line in it. She was warmer than she had been but still unhealthily cold.

It was a little strange even to him, how protective he felt. He’d known Lacey better than Belle – and disliked her about as much as he ever had anyone, except Pan or Hook on his really bad days – but as it had turned out, all it took was one meal with his father’s True Love and he’d come around on
the idea of her as a stepmom. Even if she was a couple of hundred years his junior.

He lingered on the doorstep of the pink house for a minute, maybe two, knocking on his head instead of the door. The fourteen-year-old inside of him insisted that he was making a mistake, that he should run back to Granny’s while he had the chance.

Belle was the one to answer the door. She beamed and hugged him, something Lacey had never done. The house smelled like pasta; between those two facts, he was somehow able to convince his feet to cross the threshold.

His father was in the kitchen, stirring a pot of something that smelled delicious. His stomach growled even though he’d eaten a bit at Granny’s. It had been a long time – over two hundred years, in fact – since he’d eaten his father’s cooking. One of the many things they’d lost when the Dark One entered their lives.

“It’ll be done in a minute or so. I’d let Belle take over, except that she’s better at burning kitchens than cooking in them,” his father had told him with a cheeky glance at the small woman taste-testing the sauce. She glowered back.

“That happened once, you silly man,” she said, playfully jabbing him in the ribs.

His father flinched, shouted ‘Hey!’ and they both laughed. He watched on, slightly embarrassed, remembering that Emma used to do the same thing to him. He wondered if Henry had also got his family’s ticklishness along with brown eyes and general sneakiness.

Somebody knocked on the door. Neal drew his hand away as Henry poked his head into the room. “Hey, Dad. All right to come in?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Neal had claimed the one chair in the room, so Henry leant against the bedpost. He had the storybook with him. Neal noticed that he’d put coloured Post-Its on some pages, and a few of the bookmarks had writing on them. He wondered how much homework, which was what his son had been supposed to be doing, he’d got done the night before.

“Is she gonna be okay?” Henry asked.

“Yeah. The doctor said she’ll be asleep at least until tonight, but after that she’ll be fine. How was the ice-cream place?”

Henry shrugged. “Not as good as Little Italy gelato. But Regina’s pretty nice, even though she’s a politician and all.”

“Yeah,” Neal said with a small laugh. “Is she still outside?”

“No. She said she had to get back to her office. They’re trying to sort out housing stuff for all the people in the hall.” Henry paused and scuffed his shoes on the floor. “Dad, who is she?”

“Belle? She’s – she’s a really long story.” Apparently that had been the wrong thing to say, as a wave of worry crashed over his son. “Oh, no, she’s not – she’s not an ex or anything. She’s …” But how to explain the truth, Neal had no idea. “She’s somebody who meant a lot to my dad.”

“You mean like a counsellor or something?”
“No, I mean like she was *his* girlfriend.”

Now Henry looked confused. “How can that be? She looks younger than Mom.”

Neal shrugged. He still had no idea how someone like Belle could have fallen for his father, and even less of one when he’d been the Dark One at the time. It was probably better to let her tell that story when she woke up. In the meantime, Neal figured he should try and find some answers. “Henry, can I borrow the book for a while? I just wanna look something up.”

“Sure. Can I go back to the loft?”

“Yeah, okay. Homework first, though, not video games. I’ll be checking with Mary Margaret later.”

“Yes, *Dad.*”

Neal quickly dropped a text to his mother-in-law to let her know Henry was on his way and thumbed through the book, starting with the page he’d seen earlier with the painting of the Witch and Regina duelling –

‘The Evil Queen said her goodbyes as she held the hairpin to her finger, ready to curse herself to endless sleep if it meant her pain would end. But before she could, the Wicked Witch appeared in the courtyard. She had been waiting for the Evil Queen for many years, and now she had her chance. The two enchantresses battled, in words and in power, until the Evil Queen appeared defeated …’

It was a shame that the book was written in the typical style of fairy-tale, with characters identified only by their monikers instead of their actual names. That would be too easy, Neal supposed. He flipped to the next story -

‘So to the sleepy town of Stargard rode Prince Charming and Hua Mulan, Hero of the East. As they went into town and spoke to the farmer and his donkey, they had no way of knowing that the Witch had long since moved on from the place, fleeing from the ogre hordes that continued to advance south …’

“That doesn’t sound good,” Neal murmured to himself.

‘“Don’t shoot!” shouted Beauty, bravely standing between the ogre and Robin Hood. The ogre looked back and in his mind, he remembered the kind voice and gentle hands that freed him from his imprisonment all those years ago …’

‘The Wicked Witch enchanted Beauty with kind words and false praises. Beauty was not fooled. She knew the Witch was twisting her words, using all the ills that existed between her and the Evil Queen so that she might trust the Witch instead. But she so desperately wished that her love be returned to her that she pretended to believe the Witch …’

“Belle. What did you do?” Neal flipped to the next page. A half-page illustration showed the Witch standing in a snowy clearing, a sandy-haired figure lying prone on the ground and a column of black liquid rising from the centre of a golden dais. He’d have needed a magnifying glass to be sure, but between the streams of black, he could see a thin, wavy line of silver with black writing on it. Rumplestiltskin.

‘As the life was sapped from the foolish and greedy merchant, the Dark One grew in strength. The essence of the darkness poured from the sorcerer in waves until a body formed, and a mind shortly after. The Witch claimed the Kris dagger, and from that point onwards, he was her slave.’

He re-read the page a dozen times to make sure he’d got it right. In the end, there was no mistaking
Enchanted Forest, November 2012

They emerged from the forest an hour later. Robin felt the mountain winds whip his cheeks the moment they left the trees behind. He pulled his hood up and focused on the landscape ahead.

The castle looked every bit as menacing as it had the first time he’d set eyes on the place, its high walls and towers casting shadows across the peaks already buried in snow. No flags flew from the keep, no insignia or coat-of-arms to tell travellers whose home it was. They simply weren’t necessary. The surrounding area was devoid of movement and Robin noticed how the snow had settled, undisturbed, for miles around. Even the wildlife avoided the Dark Castle.

Then the ogre stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Belle asked.

The ogre grunted and bowed down. Robin slipped from his shoulder, Belle doing the same on the other side, as he began to write in the snow. “‘Danger ahead. Magic not safe,’” Belle read. “‘Must turn back. Humans must turn back.’”

“I don’t think he wants to get any closer,” said Robin. “Belle, maybe we should go back. If he’s so frightened, then …” He hoped he didn’t have to say more.

She looked at him, then at the castle. “I’m not afraid. We’re so close,” she whispered.

Robin sighed. There was no talking her out of anything. “Yeah, all right. Thank you for the lift.”

The ogre whimpered. Clearly not the response he’d hoped for. He reached out for Belle, appealing to her one last time with wide eyes.

“Thank you. We’ll be okay from here,” she said, patting his thumb. The ogre nodded, stood up and shook the snow from his knees. Then he grunted something that sounded almost like, “Farewell”, if Robin wasn’t much mistaken, before he loped away and vanished between the trees.

Robin watched him leave, then turned to the trek ahead with butterflies roiling in his stomach. “Let’s get this over with.”

The Great Hall was colder than a witch’s elbow, as Robin’s granny might have said. And a bloody mess as well.

The table had been overturned and the chairs smashed to pieces, then thrown around the room. The windows were all broken, hanging like spider webs from their frames with shards of glass glittering on the sills, the floor, all over the place. The curtains had been torn and lay in piles. A white dove had made a nest among the shredded fabric, the only life for miles around. All of the pedestals had been knocked over, and the walls lined with deep gouges from something with very large, sharp claws.

“Well, I think we can safely say the Witch was here,” Robin commented. He ran a hand over one of the marks left on the walls, feeling the ragged edges and astonished at how deep the monkey’s talons
had dug into the stone. He'd never want to be on the receiving end of those claws. “I think you’re right, though. She doesn’t know we’re here or else we’d be a monkey’s breakfast by now. Where’s this library you were – Belle?”

She stood in the middle of the room, solid as the Lime Cliffs and clearly having not listened to a word he’d said. He watched her glide ghost-like to the end of the hall, where what had been a glass cabinet lay in shards on the marble floor. Broken pieces and some items were buried in the wreckage. He couldn’t see her face, but she was obviously on the verge of tears.

Robin mentally kicked himself. How would he have felt to see Locksley in this state? This wasn’t just general thievery and vandalism. It was brutality in its worst form.

Belle stepped over a fallen pedestal to kneel next to the wreck of a cabinet, brushing aside some of the glass to retrieve something. He followed her, careful not to make too much noise in case there was somebody home. She’d begun to cry as well.

What was strange was the thing that had set her off in the first place. It was a teacup, made from blue-and-white porcelain with a small chip in the rim, the sort of thing his grandmother might have used to serve tea at her knitting circle. But it was clearly much more than some tawdry family heirloom as far as Belle was concerned.

Robin shifted uneasily, not knowing if she’d welcome comfort from him. He considered himself a gentleman, but that didn’t mean crying women didn’t make him uncomfortable. So he joined her on the floor, but left some space between them so she wouldn’t feel crowded, and unstoppered a water canister for her.

When a few tense minutes passed, in which he was fairly sure she cried out every feeling she’d bottled up for the last five months – only a tenth of which Robin really knew about – and then sat on the floor for a little while longer, turning the cup over in her hands, paying particularly close attention to the chip in the rim.

“I’m sorry,” she finally spluttered. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Robin passed her the canister. She spilled half of it down her front, her hand shook that much, and then used the rest to scrub her reddened face. “You feel up to finding the library?”

She nodded as she carefully tucked the chipped cup into her bag, using a cloth she’d had wrapped around some vegetables (now eaten) to cradle it in. “Yeah. It’s up that way. Mind the sixth step – it bites.”

He let her lead the way as he highly doubted a biting step was all he’d have to avoid on the staircase. The library was in much the same state as the hall. Books were strewn everywhere, many of them nearby torn-out pages, the chandelier lay in pieces on the table and melted candle stubs poked out of pools of wax on the floor. There was less air flow in the room, so it stank of monkey and droppings, and the walls bore the same deep gouges in the stone. Belle had almost suffered a break-down in the hall; up here, she looked about ready to murder someone. It would certainly be a first, Robin thought. He figured they should make it quick.

“What are we looking for, exactly?”

“Anything that has to do with ogres, or the Wicked Witch,” said Belle, picking up a few of the books from the floor. “Rumple knew or mentored almost every magic-user in the realm. He must have known something that could help us defeat her.”
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“Right. I’ll take that end.”

He skirted around the broken chandelier to the far wall, where a bookshelf had been pushed off-
balance and was now at an angle to the floor, held up by the shelf opposite it. It was as good a place
to start as any, he supposed.

At least until the crossbow bolt thudded into the wood an inch away from his left ear.

**Storybrooke, 25 January 2014**

“You should never have brought me back.”

He’d been saying much the same thing for the last five days. After her interview with Snow – or did
she actually want people to call her Mary Margaret? – and meeting the woman’s rather chatty
grandson, Zelena returned to the farmhouse. She watched the shell of her old mentor tremble and
twitch while he sat cross-legged on a bale of hay inside the barn. Five days in this strange town -
called Storybrooke of all things, how sickening - and she was no closer to figuring out what was
wrong with him. And she was running out of time to do it. If her estimate was correct, the snow
princess was due to give birth within a matter of days. The less time she was required to play nanny
– and pretend to care about the missing prince – was all well and good, but the baby was useless
without everything else in place as well. So she ignored her pet repeating his nonsense and drollery,
and held out her hand. “Did you get what I wanted?”


“Oh, for God’s sake.” She called the broken sword to her gloved hand, turning the talisman over to
admire the gold filigree laid into the handle. Her arm twinged painfully as she did so. It had been
doing that for a while. It didn’t matter right then, though. She chuckled to herself. One down, three to
go.

“What do you say, dearie? Shall we return you to your cage?” she asked, sliding the dagger out of
her handbag. Rumplestiltskin cringed. “Good boy.”

There was a shriek and a flutter of feathers. Zelena looked up. The white monkey formerly known as
the Great Royal Marshmallow perched in the rafters, screeching for all that his scarred head could
manage.

“What is it, my pretty?”

The monkey shrieked and leapt to the floor, where it pounded against the wall of the storeroom in
which she’d kept the blue-eyed woman. Zelena still didn’t speak much of the monkeys’ tongue, but
in between the shrieks and wails, she got the message. Hoping against hope that she had translated
wrong, she threw open the storeroom door.

The woman was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 13: The Stakes Laid Down. In the Enchanted Forest, Robin and Belle
come across a vital piece of information that could help them defeat the Witch. In
Storybrooke, Ruby meets Mulan, Belle regains consciousness and the first casualty of war is struck down (forewarning: minor character death).
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Warning/Spoiler: minor character death ahead]

Storybrooke, 25 January 2014

“So what the hell happened?”

Robin grimaced as the dwarf doctor continued to clean the cuts on his back. The monkey’s talons had torn through his jacket and undershirt to leave decent-sized gashes in the skin. According to Doc, they were superficial but he would need several stitches at least. Emma, standing by the door of the ward, waited expectantly for him to answer the question. Robin began his story.

“After you called, we were ambushed. One lone beast, a white brute with a scar across his face. He shoved Alan aside and then went for me.”

Emma frowned. “You’re saying it targeted you on purpose?”

“I think so, yes.”

“O-kay,” she said, moving to sit in the ward’s empty armchair. “Then what?”

“Papa!”

A little ball of brown hair and orange coat barrelled into the room. Roland collided with Robin, wrapped skinny arms around his neck and hugged him tight. Robin held his son, feeling his heart wrench when he realised Roland had been crying.

Much appeared in the door, red-faced and out of breath. “Sorry. He wouldn’t stop until we let him come and see you.”

Offering Emma a quick glance meant as an apology, Robin then nodded at Much and held Roland tighter. “That’s all right. You okay, Roland?”

“Uncle Much says you got hurt, Papa,” his son murmured against his bare shoulder.

“Hey, I’m okay. I just had a little disagreement with a monkey,” Robin explained. Then to Doc, he asked, “Is he all right to stay here?”

Doc grunted. “I don’t have a crowbar to get rid of him.”

Robin chuckled. “Sorry, Emma. What was the question?”

“What happened after you got attacked by the monkey?”

“Oh, right.” He glanced down at his boy, still clinging to him like a baby. The most confusing thing about waking up in Storybrooke had been wondering why his son had shot up at least half a foot in the course of a few days. Robin hadn’t needed much convincing about the missing year as a result – Roland had simply grown too much for it to not be true. “Well, he picked me up and flew with me for some distance. Then he dumped me in a field. And … the Dark One was there.”
Emma stiffened. “By the Dark One … do you mean Rumplestiltskin? You’re sure?”

“The one and same. He looks different – human – here, but it was definitely him. Why?”

“Because –” Emma shook her head. She looked completely confused, like a fawn who couldn’t figure out what its legs were supposed to do. “Because Rumplestiltskin’s dead. He died over a year ago.”

“Huh. Well, either I swallowed a mushroom sometime earlier or he’s not as dead as you think.”

Even as the words left his mouth, the door left shut by Much’s departure was shoved open with enough force to shake the windows and make everyone jump. A dishevelled young man entered the room, familiar brown eyes taking in the door still shaking on its hinges. “Whoops. Sorry,” said Baelfire, grasping the door to steady it. “Robin?”

“Good to see you, Baelfire.”

Robin rubbed Roland’s back then glanced behind him, where Doc held a (fortunately sheathed) needle and thread. Baelfire grimaced and turned red as a cedar. He looked a right mess with his hair stuck up in every direction and a heavy book clutched protectively to his chest. “Sorry, Doc.”

“Hmm.”

“Neal, what’s going on?” asked Emma, getting to her feet. Baelfire looked from her to Robin, then at the hardback in his hands and appeared to remember what he’d come in for.

“I think my father’s alive.”

Emma stared, frozen somewhere between shock and horror. She turned to Robin.

“Told you,” he said, moving Roland so that Doc could get at his wounds.

Later in the evening, Neal sat in a booth at Granny’s nursing his third beer while opposite him, Regina flipped through the pages of the book. She paused occasionally on the pages Henry had bookmarked and scowled even more than usual while reading the chapters of the last year. Having two sets of memories in his head was confusing enough; Neal couldn’t even imagine how weird it must be to read about a year no-one could remember. Eventually, she fell onto the page with the picture of Rumplestiltskin and the Witch. “How in the hell - ?”

“That’s what I said,” Neal commented.

The door to the diner opened, and in walked Leroy and Archie. They dragged a couple of chairs to the booth to create some extra space. “Heard you got something on the missing year,” Leroy grunted, sitting backwards on his chair.

Ruby joined them, carrying a plate of nachos and a coffee she passed to Regina. Neal frowned. That was her second since they’d sat down. He quickly forgot about it as Emma took the empty seat on his left, a whiff of her hair hitting him like a hurricane. Hook’s disgruntled face appeared behind the stray strands, blue eyes staring straight at Neal.

It’s not my fault if she’d rather sit with me, Neal thought, throwing the pirate a territorial look.

They’d agreed to peace once before but if he wanted a fight, Neal was happy to give him one when they didn’t have other priorities. Such as how in the hell his father was alive, and apparently in thrall to the Witch.
Robin had, as tactfully as he could, explained the details of his encounter with Rumplestiltskin, including how he’d been swapping accents and characteristics between violent seizures. Just the description had given Neal chills. He’d never known the curse could do that. *Papa ...*

Regina, meanwhile, proceeded with the purpose of their meeting. “Henry’s storybook from the first curse. New chapters have been added, chronicling the events of the last year.”

“Anything that could help us?” asked Archie.

“Unfortunately, not much,” said Regina, flipping a page. “It doesn’t give her name or much else that could help identify her.”

“Looks as if she’s got red hair,” Leroy observed.

“So does Aurora, and a lot of other people,” said Ruby. She squinted at a page. “Is that Belle?”

Regina nodded. “Yes. It says here she was working with the Witch on a way to resurrect Rumplestiltskin. But when the time came, she refused to do it. I would guess that she’s been held prisoner ever since.”

“Again,” Leroy grunted. He ignored the look Regina threw him. “Is she awake yet?”

Neal shook his head. “No. She was still asleep when Whale kicked us out. He thinks she’ll be out of it by tomorrow, though.”

“That’d be good,” said Emma. “If she was being held by the Witch, we need to know everything she can tell us. What about who cast the curse?”

Regina flipped to another page, then over again until she arrived at a blank page. “That can’t be right.”

“What is it?”

“The book, it just ends,” said Regina, tearing through the dozen or so blank pages in the back of the book. “This part is about us returning to Tower Castle after it was overrun by the ogres. Then a bit about something happening in … Knightsbridge, I think. And then nothing.”

“Maybe that’s when the curse was cast, and it just wasn’t recorded in the book?” Archie suggested. Regina shook her head.

“No, it says this was in the middle of last summer. That would mean at least six months are missing.” She flipped back a few pages. “There are also blank paragraphs in the last couple of pages.”

“What does that mean?” asked Ruby.

“It means whoever cast this curse obviously knew about the book and was trying to keep vital information out of it.” Regina slammed the book shut. “So much for that.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Archie. “The Witch wasn’t brought over with the first curse. How could she have known about the book?”

“She had Rumplestiltskin and his maid with her. Between them, it’s entirely possible that she could have recreated the curse and altered it to her own desires.”

Neal frowned, having had a thought. “But why would she keep everything else the same? You’re still the mayor, and there was no sheriff before Emma and I came back. If she could change things
like the book, why wouldn’t she make herself the power in the town? What the hell does she even want in Storybrooke?”

Regina drummed her fingers on the book, and then a light bulb flashed in her eyes. “The Saviour.”

Neal felt less stupid when everyone else looked as confused as he did. Regina scowled and reached across the table, clicking her fingers at Emma. “Give me the note.” Emma gave it to her without comment and she held it up for everyone to see. “This isn’t my handwriting, or Snow’s or David’s. Does anyone here recognise it?”

The others shook their heads. Neal had another thought and took the note from her. The Post-Its in the library had been similar, but when he looked closely it was obvious they weren’t the same. Belle’s hand was not nearly as loopy as the script written on the parchment. “No. It’s not my dad’s or Belle’s either.”

“The Witch,” said Regina with finality. “She must have sent the note to Captain Guyliner over there so he would bring Emma back to Storybrooke.”

“For what?” asked Emma.

Unfortunately, Regina could only shrug.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

A hooded figure, holding the offending crossbow, appeared in the shadows of the fallen bookcase, another bolt drawn and ready to fire. Robin froze in place, the bolt quivering next to his head where it had lodged in the bookcase. When the shock had passed, he felt a sting in his ear and realised it must have clipped him. Either the mystery person was a very good shot, or a very terrible one. Robin did not care to find out which.

“Uh, hello –” he said rather stupidly. The person raised their bow. “Uh, look, I don’t mean to intrude –”

“Disarm,” said the person.

“I’m sorry?”

“*Disarm,*” they repeated. They sounded female, but muffled by the hood so he wasn’t sure. “Put your weapons on the floor. And your friend.”

Belle took a step back from where she’d tried to get behind the woman, her knife halfway out of the sheath. *Damn it,* Robin thought. What was wrong with his ears lately that he wasn’t hearing things until they were right on top of him? First the ogre child, now this woman.

The bow had not moved, so he undid his quiver belt and placed it on the floor with his knives. Belle did the same with hers. The bow remained still, pointed at Robin’s head.

“Good. Now, where’s the Witch?” the hooded woman asked.

“The Wicked Witch?” asked Belle. The woman moved so the bow was pointed at her instead. “I – I don’t know! She’s not here!”

“Obviously. So where is she?”
“I told you, we don’t know!” Belle shouted. “We’re the ones fighting the Witch!”

“Then what are you doing in the Dark One’s castle?”

“We’re –”

“Wait a second,” Robin interrupted. He didn’t think it wise to be spilling everything to this person and tried to wordlessly communicate the thought to Belle. “What are you doing in the Dark One’s castle?”

“Uh-uh. I asked first.”

“We’re looking for information on the Wicked Witch of Oz,” he said. That seemed harmless enough and unlikely to come back to bite them. “Now what are you doing here?”

The hooded woman paused, and lowered her bow enough that there was no immediate threat to either Robin or Belle, but still able to fire a shot within a thought if needed. “You don’t work for the Witch?”

“No,” Robin and Belle said simultaneously.

The woman nodded. “All right, who are you, then?”

Belle took a step forward, her palms outstretched. “I’m Belle of Avonlea. This is Robin of Locksley, or Robin Hood as he’s known to some.”

“You’re Mishavenians?”

Robin looked at Belle, but she didn’t seem to know what that meant either.

“Never mind,” said the woman. She stepped out of the shadows and removed her hood, revealing dark plaited hair and a sharp, youthful face weathered by the sun. With her simple blue dress and dark cloak, she might have been a farmer, or a shepherdess, or a labourer of some sort, but the sparkling silver slippers on her feet suggested otherwise. “I’m Dorothy Gale.”

Belle held out an eager hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

After a cordial pause, Dorothy shook it. Robin guessed their assurance of non-complicity with the Witch was not enough to put her at ease. “I suppose, if you truly are against Zelena, then that would make us allies.”

“It would,” said Robin. “In that case, can I ask what it is you’re looking for in the Dark Castle?”

Dorothy looked him up and down, biting her lip with uncertainty on her face. Clearly their assurance that they weren’t allied with the Witch had not put her at ease. Robin had the distinct feeling of being put through a strainer. “The Witch came to Misthaven some months ago, searching for ingredients to a spell. One that she’s been working on since our first meeting when I was a little girl. A spell to travel backwards in time.”

“A time travel spell?” Belle asked. “What for?”

Dorothy shrugged. “I’ve no idea. But one of the principal ingredients is apparently something that she could only get from the Dark One himself.”

“But Rumple –” Belle coughed, Robin suspected to cover up the sob in danger of escaping her throat. “The Dark One is dead,” she finished sadly.
“I know. The Witch believes she may have found the key to bringing him back.”

“She what?” Belle gasped.

“Bring the Dark One back?” Robin asked. “Is that even possible?”

“Zelena seems to think so.”

Robin shook his head. He didn’t pretend to be an expert on magic, but he knew very well that there was a price to be paid – and the cost of bringing the darkest of sorcerers back to life had to be the highest of all. “Do you know of anything that could stop her?”

“I might,” said Dorothy. “Though, forgive me for being blunt, but I don’t trust you enough that I’d just tell you.”

“That’s fair enough. Would you consider coming with us to Tower Castle, then? Perhaps our War Council can convince you that we’re no allies of the Wicked Witch.”

Belle looked up, her head having fallen into her cupped hands upon mention of her dead lover. “Robin –”

“Regina and the others need to know about this, Belle, as soon as possible,” Robin told her. She looked back, her eyes wet and nose reddened from tears. She was heartbroken and homesick, he knew, and felt every pang of the same grief burning in her eyes in his own soul, but this was too important. If he had to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off the mountain, then he’d do it.

Of course, that implied that their reason for leaving in the first place intended to co-operate.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” said Dorothy. “We just met. How do I know you won’t lead me into some Winkie-infested dungeon, or worse?”

“First of all, I’ve no idea what a Winkie is and I don’t think I want to know,” Robin said quickly, trying to both comfort his friend and keep their best hope from running away at the same time. “And secondly, we’ve been at war with the Witch for months. She’s allied herself with the ogres who live in these lands.”

“She’s working with ogres?” Dorothy asked incredulously.

He nodded. “Yes. And we’re losing. Badly. If you know anything, anything at all, then please, I’m begging you to help us.”

Silence filled the library, unbroken even by the whistle of the wind or the chirp of an insect so the sound of dust settling on the books was like a giant stomping on a stone floor. The Dark Castle really was lifeless without its master and mistress-in-all-but-name. Robin shoved away the feeling of uneasiness he already felt, doubled by the unholy stillness of the place, and focused instead on Dorothy. She remained as a statue, and Robin thought he’d failed to convince her. Until she removed the bolt from her bow and nodded.

“All right. Describe this … Tower Castle to me.”

“Why?” Robin asked. Dorothy pointed to her shoes as a way of explanation.

“If we’re going, we’re going my way.”
They’d talked more at Granny’s, gone through the book again and come to the irrefutable conclusion that they still had no idea what was going on. So Emma and Neal went back to the loft, where they realised just how late it was by the fact that Snow and Henry were fast asleep. Her mother had collapsed with her copy of “The American Baby and Child Care” still open between her fingers, propped up by her belly. Emma spared a moment to smile, then moved the book to the nightstand and threw the bed covers over Snow.

Neal, meanwhile, had taken over the kitchen counter for the supposedly simple task of spreading butter on a bagel. Why he needed a potato masher for that, Emma had no idea. He’d been off all afternoon, and every time the storybook fell into his possession he invariably ended up flipping to an early chapter of the book which showed a young boy of maybe Henry’s age next to a crippled man. Him and his father, before everything had gone wrong. Emma dropped the book on the counter and pulled out a stool. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I guess,” he said, not looking up from his buttering job. “I mean, it’s not every day you find out your father’s come back from the dead.”

Emma chuckled. “Yeah, I guess not.”

“It’s just –” Neal started, running a hand through his already-messy hair. He really needed a haircut, Emma thought. But that didn’t matter just then. “I don’t really know how I feel about it.”

“Are you worried he might try to kill Henry again?”

“What? No!”

She reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Sorry. I just needed to know.”

Neal sighed. “Look, Pop and I – oh, I don’t know. I guess we cleared up a lot of things after we got back from Neverland, but there’s – there’s just –” He took a bite of the bagel, chewing slowly while he organised the million or so thoughts leaking out of his brain. “I don’t – I mean, I haven’t really –”

“You haven’t really forgiven him yet.” He shut his eyes. With a small glance to make sure her mother was still asleep, Emma told him in a whisper, “Hey. Believe me, I get it.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re probably the one person who does.”

She waited for him to say more, but when it didn’t come she moved off the stool and around the counter to instinctively wrap her arms around him. If he was surprised by the contact, he didn’t say anything. As confused as she was about everything, it felt … right. Normal, though it was the closest they’d been since arriving in Storybrooke. Since she was seventeen, if she was really honest and didn’t count the last year and a half. He moved so that he could rest his chin on her head, and she shut her eyes. Standing there like that, Emma would have given almost anything to erase it all again, to go back to New York with her husband and son, an orphan forever and none the wiser as to how screwed up her life really was.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option – or at least one that she and Neal both seemed to have unconsciously ruled out. So she let her head fall against his shoulder, holding him tighter when she felt him swallow his need to cry with a sharp breath, and shoved aside the part of her that wanted to run – which was easier than she’d have thought it would be – to allow herself one small indulgence in the life they should have had.
Henry had given up waiting for his parents to come back from whatever it was they were doing – which they obviously hadn’t wanted him to see, or else Mary Margaret would not have been left on babysitting duty – and fallen asleep around midnight, only to be woken by the sound of people moving around the loft. His dad’s voice wafted up from the floor below. Henry pushed the blanket off, intending to say hello even if they wouldn’t tell him what they’d been doing until so late at night, but stopped dead when he heard his mom speak.

“Are you worried he might try to kill Henry again?”

The words echoed in his brain, muting whatever rebuttal his dad had, as Henry first wondered if he’d misheard, then panicked because he definitely hadn’t. *Somebody wants to kill me?*

On one hand, he could have gone down there and asked what they meant. If somebody – and his parents clearly knew who – was trying to kill him, then he had a right to know! Didn’t he?

On the other, he’d noticed that his parents had become frustratingly cagey since arriving in this funny little town. Between lying to him about why they’d left New York, leaving out the small detail of everyone in Storybrooke (including his parents!) being a *fairy tale* character and then the appearance of his dad’s dead father’s girlfriend (which still didn’t make sense), Henry was acutely aware that they were keeping things from him. Things like why Regina kept looking at him like she knew him, then turning away when she realised he’d seen it, or changed important conversations halfway through and kept dodging his questions.

He’d been willing to wait when it was just the book, and the curse. Now he needed to know. So he stayed still and listened as hard as he could.

“You haven’t really forgiven him yet,” said his mom. *WHO, Mom? Who hasn’t Dad forgiven yet?*

One of them murmured something, too quietly for Henry to make out so far away. Then silence for a few minutes until his dad spoke again.

“Hey, did you get the hairs for the potion?”

*potion? What potion?*

“Yeah, I got them this morning while he was in the shower. Regina thinks it’ll be ready in three or four days. I don’t think she’ll want to wait that long, though.”

Henry’s heart raced. *What? Does she mean me?*

“The sooner, the better. He’s not safe out in the town, not after what happened to Robin.”

*What happened to who? Who’s Robin?*

“I know. Snow’s already said she’ll keep an eye on him. And I’ll bet you anything Regina doesn’t stay away for long.”

A spring creaked as somebody sat on the fold-out couch and the main light was switched off, plunging the loft into darkness. Henry thought he could hear his parents talk for a while longer, then silence. He remained frozen in his bed until somebody starting snoring softly – probably his mom, though she’d insist that it was his dad – and then threw the blanket off.

The loft floor didn’t creak too badly if Henry stuck to the beams. On tiptoe, he made it to the stairs using the little light provided by the microwave to guide him. He worried for a moment that he might make more noise by searching, but found what he wanted almost immediately after reaching the
His parents had left the storybook on the kitchen counter next to a potato masher. He scooped it up, paused to make sure they were still asleep, then tiptoed back up the stairs and into bed, where he grabbed his phone off the nightstand before pulling the blanket over his head like a tent. He turned the flashlight on and opened the book.

Sleep could wait. He had a lot of work to do.

The clock had struck two o’clock in the morning before Maurice realised how late it was. He wasn’t normally the late-night type but his shop assistant from the first curse had not shown up for work in five days, leaving Maurice to do all of the chores left behind in his absence. He was less annoyed about it now that it was common knowledge in Storybrooke that they’d been cursed a second time – by who, nobody seemed to know, although anybody with any brains should have thrown the mayor in jail the first chance they got – and he didn’t know if Simon had been brought back to Storybrooke or not. He had a potential replacement coming in the morning, sent by the waitress and the psychiatrist attempting to settle the newcomers, which would be good. He might actually be able to take a day off.

He yawned and placed a pot of rosebay rhododendrons on his front counter. Time to go home, he thought.

He took his time in locking the till and the back room and switching off the lights. He was halfway to the door, rummaging in his pockets for the front-door keys, when he noticed an unusually dark shadow near the orchid display. A pale hand reached out to touch one of the budding plants and Maurice looked to the front door. He hadn’t heard it open. “Hello?”

The figure moved. Definitely a woman, though her face remained in shadow. “Hello. You are Maurice, Duke of the Frontlands?”

Maurice felt the hairs on his neck stand on end. She sounded polite, but there was something sinister in her voice, like a spell muddling his tired thoughts and compelling him to co-operate. He blinked several times to clear it. “Yes.”

“Excellent,” she said, stepping out from the shadows. She must have been new in town as Maurice didn’t recognise her at all. “I was wondering if you could help me with something.”

At this time of night? “I’d love to, miss, but I’m afraid the shop’s closed. If you would come back in the morning –”

She held up a hand. “This won’t take long.”

Maurice swallowed sharply. He had his keys, and he supposed a trellis would make a good enough spear in a hurry, but he had no weapon he was truly comfortable with. And he had the distinct feeling that the woman was no human. “Listen, I – I’ve not much money here, and no magic. I’m no threat to you.”

“I need you to tell me where your daughter is.”

He started. “My daughter?”

The last time he’d seen Belle had been in Granny’s, nine days earlier (not counting the missing time), eating fries with the grumpy dwarf. They’d exchanged pleasantries but had no real conversation. Just as it had been between them since he found her after the breaking of the first curse. Stubbornly
refusing to leave the depraved enchanter he’d stupidly made a deal with. It had become clear that the
man cared for his daughter in his own twisted way, whatever way that may have been, so he’d
decided to let her have her space, to let her do as she wished and make her own way in life, and
come back when she was ready to see him again. His little girl was a grown woman, as much as it
pained him to admit it, and so headstrong that he’d finally realised there was no reasoning with her.
Now he thought that may have been a mistake.

The woman nodded, twirling a piece of straw between her fingers. It might have been fatigue, or a
trick of the light, but Maurice could have sworn it glinted as she turned it over. “Yes, your daughter.
Belle. About so high, brown hair, quite the … enchanting young lady.”

“I don’t know,” he said. She scowled, firing daggers with her eyes. “I – I don’t know! I haven’t seen
her in days.”

“You’re telling me that she wouldn’t come to you first? She would go elsewhere?”

“What? She’s – is she in danger?”

The woman flicked the straw aside. “In a way. Now tell me. Where is she?”

She was uncomfortably close now, suddenly having invaded Maurice’s personal space without the
tiniest of sounds. As if she had glided across the floor instead of walked.

“I don’t know,” Maurice repeated. The woman stroked his face; he flinched, but found himself
unable to move for unknown reasons.

“You really don’t, do you?” she said, at last removing her hand. “Hmm. Well, that is unfortunate for
us both. Show yourself, dearie.”

She spun away from him. Maurice released a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. The
shadows near the orchid display began to move again, this time to reveal a face Maurice was all too
familiar with.

“The Dark One?”

The woman turned her back and ignored him. “Kill him.”

Maurice tensed, screaming internally at his feet to move, to run, to do anything except remain glued
to the floor. Rumplestiltskin took one step, then another, then stopped halfway through a third step,
his face contorting in pain and so red, he may have combusted right then and there. The clock
continued to click even as the darkest of sorcerers shuddered as if to shake himself apart.

The woman had no patience for it. “What are you waiting for? Kill him.”

“No,” groaned the sorcerer through clenched teeth. He began to rock, back and forth, his hand
coming up to tear at his filthy dress shirt. The woman huffed.

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes.”

And plunged her hand into Maurice’s chest.

Enchanted Forest, November 2012
Seeing Robin and Belle suddenly appear on the side of the mountain had been surprising, to say the least, and their companion even more so. A brief chat with Snow had convinced this Dorothy Gale of what Robin and Belle had told her, though Ruby had the distinct feeling that the woman still didn’t trust any of them. Nonetheless, she willingly entered the castle and an emergency War Council meeting was called for all members and visiting nobility – Richard, thankfully, had seen Robin in the group and refused to join them. The rest took whatever seats were available, and had a lovely surprise when a fluffy salt-and-pepper terrier popped out of Dorothy’s bag, scurried across the table and licked Ruby across the face.

“Just a wolf thing,” she said, scratching his ears. Seeing the dog – whose name was apparently Toto – so at ease made Dorothy visibly relax, and so she began to tell her tale.

“When I was a little girl, Toto and I were carried to Oz in a cyclone. We crash-landed on top of the Wicked Witch of the East, and she was killed. Glinda’s sister in the north came to my rescue when Zelena tried to kill me.”

“As retribution for killing her sister?” asked Snow.

Dorothy shook her head. “They aren’t sisters. I later learned that what Zelena wanted were these –” She pointed to her shoes “– which were stolen from her by the Witch of the East. They give the wearer the ability to travel anywhere one wishes. Even across realms.”

David cleared his throat. “Well, she’s here now. So what does she want?”

“She’s looking for the ingredients to a spell that would allow her to travel back in time.” Dorothy fished around in her bag and retrieved a piece of paper that she handed to Regina, standing on her left. “I took this from her fortress in Oz and then followed her here.”

Regina turned the paper over in her hand. “Did a child write this?”

“No, that’s her handwriting,” said Dorothy. Regina scoffed.

“Must have learned from her monkeys. So she needs … a talisman of true … courage. That’s courage. The cleverest of minds. A resistant – no, that’s … resilient heart. And an innocent soul. How maddeningly unhelpful.”

“But would that work?” Josef asked, aiming the question at Regina. “Can somebody truly travel back in time?”

Everyone, including Dorothy, then turned to the former Evil Queen. “I don’t know,” Regina admitted. “It’s been studied, philosophised, for centuries but every attempt I know of ended with cataclysmic results. Now the subject is almost … taboo. Even Rumplestiltskin never considered it.”

“All right, so we’ve got a green-skinned maniac running around trying to erase history,” said Grumpy. “How do we kill her? Throw a bucket of water on her?”

Dorothy smiled shyly. “I’m afraid I’ve already tried that. It doesn’t seem to have stuck.”

Toto whined. He snuggled into Ruby’s hands, much to Dorothy’s amusement. “Sorry,” she said when Ruby gave her a puzzled look. “It wasn’t an entirely pleasant experience for him.”

“What about why the Witch wants to go back in time?” asked David, getting back on topic. “Do you know?”

“No. I’m afraid not.”
“What about why she’s working with the ogres?”

“Uh,” said Dorothy, looking uncertain. “I’m honestly surprised to hear that she is.”

Somewhere in the back of the room, Robin cleared his throat. “And the Dark One …” he said, trailing off as if expecting Dorothy to continue his statement. Regina looked from him to Dorothy.

“What about the Dark One?”

“Zelena came to the Enchanted Forest looking for him,” Dorothy explained. “I believe one, or maybe even all, of the ingredients are something that she could only get from him. And she believes that there might be a way to bring him back from the dead in order to get them.”

Grumpy snorted. “First time travel, now resurrection. Did anyone ever tell this Witch the meaning of the word ‘impossible’?”

Snow ignored him. Addressing Dorothy, she asked, “Do you know how?”

Again, Dorothy shook her head. “No. I was looking for information in the Dark Castle when I ran into your friends here, but it’s been cleaned out. There was nothing left of any relevance.”

“Regina, you’ve got spell books from Rumplestiltskin,” said Snow. “Do you think there might be anything in them?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Right,” David declared. He got to his feet. “It’s not much, but it’s a start. Belle, you knew Rumplestiltskin best. Do you think you could have a look through Regina’s books for anything that could be of importance?”

Belle didn’t answer, as she was staring into the centre of the table as if she expected it to burst into flame. Grumpy nudged her with his elbow, and she started. “Sorry. What was that?”

“Could you look through Regina’s spellbooks in case there’s anything in there on how this Witch might bring the Dark One back?”

“Sure. I can do that.”

Ruby knew David could be somewhat dense at times, but she could have slapped him for missing the brief flash of emotion on Belle’s face. Her friend had become better at hiding it, but she could tell Belle still mourned. Ruby made a note to drop in on her as much as possible in case she hid away again. On the table, Toto grumbled, the vibration in his stomach tickling her wrists, and she smiled. Maybe she’d ask Dorothy if she could borrow the old dog for an afternoon. Dogs could cheer anybody up.

**Storybrooke, 26 January 2014**

Neal wanted to murder whoever had invented cell phone ringtones. Particularly when the damned things went off not two feet away from his ear, interrupting a perfectly pleasant dream. He’d been riding a sheep through a daisy meadow, with a blurry figure laughing happily somewhere nearby. Blissfully serene, but that was all he could remember thanks to the rude awakening of some senseless piece of machinery. He complained out loud when Emma pulled away from him to answer it and the cold morning chill bit his toes. He rolled onto his stomach, chasing warmth and the scent left behind
Then the racket finally stopped. “Hello?” said Emma. She sounded as groggy as Neal felt. “Yes, this is the sheriff … Wait, wait. Slow down. Just tell me what happened … uh huh … uh huh … Wait, who? … Okay … Okay … Yeah, I’m on my way.”

The bedsprings pinged as she left the bed. Neal turned his head sideways and cracked open one eye. It was still dark. “What’s going on?” he croaked.

“I’m not sure yet,” said the blonde blur. Somewhere in the depths of his still-asleep consciousness, a little voice commented on how unnatural it was for a person to look so damned beautiful straight out of bed and through blurry vision to boot. “I gotta go. Go back to sleep.”

He didn’t need much more convincing.

Emma picked up a cup of much-needed coffee on the way to Market Street. A south-eastern breeze had picked up from the Atlantic and she had to turn her hood up if she wanted to keep her ears. She found the place, a white building overgrown with plants she couldn’t even begin to identify, shortly after the sun finally broke over the two- and three-storey roofs. Ultimately she didn’t need the address – she knew which shop it was by the presence of the young boy, maybe seventeen years old, dressed in hand-me-down clothes spruced up to look less run down than they were. He knelt by the fence, looking as if he had recently forfeited good terms with his stomach, and a greying man squatting next to him with a protective arm around the boy’s shoulders. The older man got to his feet as she approached.

“Benjamin Spratt?” she asked.

“That’s my son here,” said the man. “I’m Jack.”

She shook his proffered hand. “Hi. Sheriff Swan. What happened?”

Jack grimaced. “You’d better see for yourself.”

He pushed open the door of the shop – he had gloves on, so Emma didn’t object – and stood by the threshold but didn’t enter. Emma grimaced at the view. It was not what any reasonable person wanted to see at six thirty in the morning. Or at any other time of day.

“Ben came here this morning for a job interview,” Jack explained. “He wanted to make a good impression, so he came as early as he could. The door wasn’t locked. Then he found the body.”

Emma had only met Moe French on one occasion, when he’d come to the sheriff’s station asking for her help. She’d thought he meant help containing the embarrassing behaviour of his daughter – the result of a curse, which Emma could do nothing about – but that hadn’t been it. He’d wanted to know if she could keep Mr Gold away from his daughter. Also something she could do nothing about, as Belle – well, Lacey – was a grown, consenting adult capable of making her own decisions. Even if her taste in men was somewhat questionable. Since then, she had seen little of the man. Now, judging from the awkward angle of his limbs and the lack of movement in his chest, she guessed she would be seeing even less of him.

“How long ago was that?”

“Twenty minutes, maybe half an hour,” said Jack. “Ben called me, and I told him to call you.”

Emma gingerly stepped over the threshold, looking left and right. Her gut told her there was nothing
there, so she shuffled across the floor and squatted next to Moe’s prone body. A feel of his neck confirmed her suspicions.

“What do you reckon? Strangled?”

She jerked around to where Jack stood, his hands in his pockets and not looking half as put off as he should have been standing next to a dead body. He seemed to catch her confusion. “I was an officer in Rochedale. I’ve seen a few too many of these, unfortunately.”

“A police officer?”

“Well, the Enchanted Forest equivalent.”

Emma cast her gaze around the room. Everything was in order, nothing out of place, which told her nothing except that there hadn’t been a fight. As for Moe himself, his keys were in his hand and his eyes were shut. Emma was no forensic analyst, but she could tell enough to guess that it had been quick and mostly painless. At least he’d had that. “He must have been closing up when it happened,” she said, pointing to his keys.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” said a voice. Emma turned to see Ben on the threshold, reddened eyes determinedly staring anywhere except the body. She nodded. Poor kid, she thought.

“What’s that?” asked Jack.

He pointed to a patch of floor a few feet from the body. Emma frowned. It was a pile of dust.

“Crap.”

“What?”

She stood, fishing her phone out of her pocket. “I think I know what happened. Listen, can you two come by the sheriff’s station this afternoon? I just need to get a statement from you and your son. In the meantime, don’t tell anyone else. The last thing we need is to cause a panic.”

“Just my wife. She’ll want to know, but she’ll keep it to herself.”

“Yeah, fine.”

He nodded, and confirmed a time to drop by the station before leaving the scene with Ben. Emma scrolled through her contacts until she found Regina’s number. It was answered on the second ring.

“Hello?” said Regina. She didn’t sound as if she’d just woken up. Emma wondered if she’d gone to sleep at all. Making a mental note to confront her about it later, again, she filled her in on what little she knew about the death of Moe French. Emma could make an educated guess, but still thought it was better to consult an expert before jumping to conclusions.

“A pile of dust?” asked Regina, her voice crackling over the line. “How big is it?”

“Not much, maybe a handful or two at most.”

“Does it look silvery, or like it has glitter in it?”

“Yep.”

“Crap.”

“So I’m right?”
“Afraid so. His heart was crushed. I’m on my way.”

The town hall was packed, as was usual these days, and Ruby was running ragged trying to do a million things at once. If she’d had one wish at that moment, it would be for eight extra arms.

Hook, for once, hadn’t shown up looking like he’d swallowed a sour grape and Ruby guessed he was probably asleep under a bar counter somewhere. No great loss, really. Ella finally arrived half an hour late for her shift with Alexandra in tow (the baby, now nearly a two-year-old, had been restless for several nights and her mother didn’t want to leave her with a sitter) and took over the laundry so Tink could go home and rest. Leroy turned up a short time later to take over processing duty. He insisted that Ruby take a break, which resulted in Archie inviting her to lunch (his lunch, her breakfast) and refusing to let her leave until she’d all but inhaled a bowl of cereal.

At least things were slowly beginning to taper off, as families were reconnected and a whole bunch of people had been employed to build houses on the north side of town. Loggers were pretty easy to come by, and most of the Enchanted Forest’s working-class were at least familiar with building processes, so with a few decent architects to oversee the project (Geppetto had volunteered, along with the former King Midas) they were hoping to have all the workers rehomed within a few months. At the moment, Ruby’s main problem was the old nobility. Snub-nosed royals who took one look at their employment options and threw the papers back in her face. If they even entertained the notion of getting a job in the first place. Ruby hoped Regina would give them a stern talking-to sooner or later; they had a lot to learn about how things worked in this land.

When Archie was satisfied, she went back to ensuring people had clean blankets. Carrying a couple dozen of them along the walkway, she tripped over a wayward box and almost lost the load, if not for somebody with a strong grip catching her on the way down.

“Whoa! Are you all right?”

Ruby rebalanced herself. “Yeah, fine. Thank you.”

“Here, I’ll take a few of those,” said the woman who’d saved her from a terrible embarrassment. She lifted half the blankets and Ruby’s arms ceased screaming in protest. “I’m Mulan.”

“Ruby,” she said. “Thanks for the help.”

“No problem. You look like you’ve got a lot on your plate.”

“Ha! Tell me about it. You try housing and employing a couple of thousand people in the middle of winter.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Mulan asked.

Ruby examined her new friend. She smelled like poppies. “Depends. How much do you like doing menial tasks designed to swallow your pride and crush your soul and that nobody’s ever gonna appreciate?”

“The more people you have, the quicker it gets done,” said Mulan with a smile. Ruby smiled back. That would certainly be good, and she wanted to drop by the hospital to see Belle.

“All right, if you’re really up for some torture, do you mind taking those over to that side of the hall? And if the Weasel-town guy gives you any trouble –”

“Drop him in a scorpion pit?”
Ruby laughed. “Sure. Why not?” She didn’t like the idea of pawning the job off to somebody else but Mulan, in her jeans and biker’s jacket, looked like she could handle herself. Or at least give Weaselton and his cronies some food for thought.

She left Mulan to it, and was about to knock on the curtains of her next stop when an agitated-looking Emma all but ran to her, closely followed by Regina and with Archie, Snow, Leroy and Neal not far behind. “Have you got a second?” Emma asked. “We need to talk.”

“Okay.”

“Not here. Mayor’s office.”

The seven of them filed into Regina’s office, all but the mayor and Emma looking thoroughly confused. Ruby shivered at the smell of distress wafting off Emma and Regina. It was not good news. Archie pulled out a seat for Snow and the rest of them opted to stand while waiting for somebody to speak. Emma eventually did, and it was even worse than Ruby had thought.

“Moe French is dead.”

“Belle’s father?” Ruby gasped.

Emma nodded. “He was found this morning by someone who was going for a job interview. His heart was crushed sometime last night.”

“By the Witch?” asked Archie.

“Fair bet.” Emma pulled a sealed evidence bag from her jacket. Inside, a thin strand of something yellow glittered. “I found this in his shop.”

Neal reached for the bag. “Is that –?”

“Gold’s,” Emma confirmed. “Unless we know somebody else who can spin straw into gold. This means we’ve got a problem. Belle’s in even more trouble than we thought.”

“What do you mean?” asked Snow.

“She turns up half-dead in the woods and then her father is murdered less than twenty-four hours later?” Regina shook her head. “The Witch is looking for her.”

“Hello?” said a tinny voice somewhere in the room. “It’s your phone in your pocket! I’m on my break! He-he-he!”

Emma turned to Neal with an amused look, and he flushed bright red. In spite of herself, Ruby giggled. “Henry’s idea of a joke,” he said weakly, turning away to answer it. “Hello? … uh huh … okay, thanks.” He hung up. “Belle’s awake.”

After some heated arguments, it was agreed that only Emma, Neal and Regina went to the hospital. The rest of them were needed in the hall. A nurse met them outside the ward and stubbornly refused to let all three of them in, so Regina stood by the door while Emma and Neal followed the nurse.

“She’s been in and out of it all morning, so don’t be surprised if she falls asleep again,” said the nurse, whose nametag read ‘Anita’. “Call the doctor if there’s a problem.”

“Thanks,” said Neal. He went in. Emma stood back to let him through, followed and stood by the
wall to give them some space.

Belle looked about the same as she had the day before – pale, clammy, a bandage around her head and monitors beeping on the wall behind her – the differences being that her IV line was clear in colour and she no longer had a mountain of hot water bottles piled around her. Neal pulled out the seat next to the bed and squeezed her hand. Her eyes flicked open. “Bae?” she murmured.

“Hey.”

“Ow,” she groaned, her free hand coming up to touch the bandage around her head. “What – what –?”


She rocked her head, then went still. Back to sleep, Emma guessed. She tapped Neal on the shoulder. “I’ll be outside, okay?”

“Okay.”

In the hall, Emma found Regina speaking with Whale. “Hi, Doc.”

“Sheriff. How’s our patient?” he joked with a wry smile.

“She’s nodded off again. Can you give her something to keep her awake for longer than a few seconds at a time?”

Whale frowned. “I can give her a stimulant, but I’m a little worried about how it’ll affect her recovery.”

“It won’t hurt her, right? So do it,” Emma told him. “We need to know anything she can tell us, as soon as possible.”

“And the part about …” Regina trailed off, glancing sideways at Whale. So far, nobody else knew about Moe’s death. Emma wanted to keep it under wraps in case it caused a panic.

“We’ll tell her when she’s in a better condition to hear it,” said Emma. Sadly, it looked like Belle was going to have to take more than a few punches before the day was out.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

There were far fewer books in Tower Castle and not a single one of them had what Belle was looking for. Even the ones she’d taken from Rumplestiltskin’s library were scant at best, and contained no mention of how one might resurrect a Dark One. She slammed Regina’s umpteenth spell book shut in frustration. “Useless.”

Maybe some tea would help clear her head. She walked to the door and rested her forehead against it. She had not failed him. She had not.

Then something that felt like a hand grabbed her arm from behind. Belle had hardly enough time to even register that much before being sucked into a swirling green void.
Next, Chapter 14: Bring Me Home to Thee, My Love. In Storybrooke, the heroes consider the next steps in light of Maurice’s murder, Regina’s involvement is brought into question and Snow tries to figure out what happened to David. In the Enchanted Forest, Belle makes a crucial decision over the Dark One’s Vault.
Return Thee Home to Me, My Love

**Storybrooke, 26 January 2014**

Her head hurt. That was the first thing Belle became aware of. She tried to open her eyes. That was a bad idea. The world was, for some reason, filled with a blinding white light that sent daggers through her skull and made her head pound like a drunken drummer.

With her eyes still shut, she tried to move. Her body felt like wood, stiff and aching, and something heavy laid across her placed a leaden weight on her already protesting muscles. Pins and needles wracked her toes and sent arrows of pain up her legs when she tried to stretch.

“Belle? Can you hear me?”

* A man’s voice, she registered. She should know them … they were important … something about … bay … Bae … Baelfire!

“Bae?” she croaked. She immediately regretted it.

A warm hand enveloped hers and she tried to focus on the feel of Bae’s fingers, rough and calloused, so unlike his father’s, weathered from working the wheel but so, so gentle …

_Wait a second, where am I?_ Belle thought. Bae couldn’t be in the Enchanted Forest – she had watched with her own eyes as he crossed the town line with Emma and Henry, off to live out their happy ending, with the promise that he would take care of himself just as she had promised that she would take care of herself …

_Well, I’m doing a fantastic job of that, aren’t I?_

She cracked one eye open. The light was still there. She dragged her free hand up to shade her eyes – _what is that on my head?_ Coarse, woven fabric of some sort brushed against her knuckles. _Is that what’s making my head hurt?_

“What’s that?” she asked, trying to point to the thing.

“It’s just a bandage. You bumped your head.”

“What?” She forced her eyes open and blinked until she could bear the light. Bae looked at her with eager brown eyes, a hopeful smile lining his face. Belle would have frowned if not for the pain in her head. “Where – where are we?”

“You’re in Storybrooke,” Bae said. He nodded at someone on Belle’s other side, where she couldn’t see. “Thanks, Doc.”

“Call me if there are any issues,” said somebody who sounded like Doctor Whale.

Belle blinked again. “We’re in Storybrooke? How – how did we get back?”

“Dunno yet. How’re you feeling?”

“Oh, peachy.”

Bae laughed softly. “What about your memory? Can you remember anything?”
“Um,” she said, shutting her eyes to concentrate. “We were out at the town line. Watched you go with Emma and Henry. Then … there was some sort of cloud. And then … I was in a dark room somewhere. I … I think I tried to break out … then I … then I don’t know what happened.”

“Emma found you in the woods yesterday,” said Bae. “You must’ve slipped and hit your head. When they found you, you’d fallen in a stream and frozen half to death.”

“Oh. That explains the headache.”

“Belle, did you see anybody where you were?” asked a new voice. Belle started and jerked her head around to see Regina standing at the foot of her bed. Though her heart started pounding in her chest, Bae didn’t look at all concerned that she was there. Was Regina waiting for Bae to leave so she could lock Belle up again, or was she waiting to see if her cover had been blown?

“Uh –”

“Look, we’re sorry to put this on you so fast,” Bae said, gently squeezing her arm while throwing Regina a look. “It’s just that we’re in a bit of a pickle and we were hoping you might know something.”

“What?”

“We think that the Wicked Witch of the West cursed everyone back to Storybrooke,” he explained. “And … we think she might’ve been the one keeping you locked up.”

“The Wicked Witch of the West?” Belle repeated, feeling dumb. “How do you know that?”

“It’s in the storybook.”

“So … not Regina then.

“Did you see anybody there?” Regina asked again. Now that Belle looked at her properly, she noticed the dark circles under her eyes, the hurried job she’d done with her hair and the wrinkled shirt she’d thrown over her back. The signs were subtle enough that a casual observer would not think anything of them, but Belle knew Regina better. Well, enough to know that she would iron her shirt.

So she answered honestly. “No. Just a pair of feet in high heels. Black ones.”

Regina scowled. “Damn it.”

Belle watched her closely. Regina was not that good of an actor, so maybe she had been wrong after all.

Then Regina began to wave her hands, a motion Belle had seen Rumple perform a hundred times. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Putting a protection spell around the ward,” Regina explained without breaking focus. “Just in a temporary measure in case the Witch decides to come after you.”

“What?”

“Why do I feel like I’m only getting half of this story? Why would the Witch want to come after me?”

“It’s just a precaution,” Bae said. Belle frowned. He had the same shifty look in his eyes that Rumple got when he wouldn’t tell her the whole story. And his hands, normally as animated as his father’s,
were still.

“Bae, what’s going on?”

“Belle, really, it’s just in case.”

She shook her head. “No, there’s something you’re not telling me. What’s going on?”

Bae rocked in the armchair with his mouth hanging open, words stuck in his throat. He looked to Regina, but the mayor only shrugged.

“She’ll have to find out sooner or later.”

“Find out what?”

She had to keep herself from yelling, infuriated as she was that something unspoken had passed between Bae and Regina that she was not privy to. Then Bae took her hand again, and moved from the armchair to her bed, unable to meet her eyes, and Belle wondered if she wanted to know after all.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

The swirling green vortex disappeared and Belle’s head spun. Or maybe her whole body did. Then she remembered what had happened, so she wheeled on her toes and came face-to-face with a green-skinned woman.

“My apologies for that,” said her assailant, holding her palms outward in a peace gesture. “If I’d stayed too long, the Queen would have sensed me. I didn’t want a fight.”

“I’m sorry, but what?” Belle asked.

“I need your help.”

Belle scoffed. “My help? You kidnap me without a word and now you expect me to help you? Who are you?”

The woman lowered her hands. “Forgive me, I should have started with that. My name is Zelena. You might know me as the Witch of the West.”

“The Wicked Witch of the West, actually.”

“Well, that’s a matter of how you look at it,” Zelena said with a small grin, showing too-white teeth. “I can’t help what sobriquets people choose to give me.”

“Sobriquets are usually given for good reason,” Belle retorted.

Zelena grinned wider. “Believe what you will, Belle – do you mind if I call you Belle? – But I mean you no harm. I brought you here because, as I said, I need your help.”

Belle stood as straight as she could and looked into the witch’s cold blue eyes. “Why, in a million lifetimes for all the reason on Earth, would I help you?”

“Because I can bring your lover back to life.”

Belle stopped functioning. She must have looked a right idiot, but at that moment she couldn’t care
Zelena waved her hand around the room. “Do you know where you are?”

In the low levels of light, Belle inspected her surroundings. They were in a hall. Dark golden beige walls with large white stone squares in unusual places surrounded them and faded red banners hung against the pillars, blowing against a light draught. Something silver glinted in the middle, and as her eyes adjusted she could make out the outline of a rampant gryphon. Her family crest.

“Kernosy Castle,” she whispered. Oh, God. She hadn’t seen her childhood home in nearly five years. “Why did you bring me here?”

“This isn’t the first time a Dark One has died and vanished from the Earth,” said Zelena. “The darkness of legend disappeared from history until two hundred and fifty years ago, when your ancestor, the one who fought the First Ogres’ War, found a way to bring it back to the realm. I’m hoping that between the two of us, we can find a way to recreate whatever it was that he did.”

“And you need me because it was my ancestor?” asked Belle.

“Partially,” said Zelena. “I’m also given to understanding that you have a particular gift for books and research. And, if I may be so bold, word has it that you and the last Dark One were somewhat … attached?”

Belle forced herself to remain unreactive, but Zelena must have sensed something anyway because the witch smiled.

“I’m not judging. It appears that your family has a long, sordid history with more than one Dark One. All I want is your help.”

“Why? What do you want from Rumplestiltskin?”

“I have my reasons,” Zelena said with a small shrug.

“Like a spell to travel through time?”

Zelena laughed unconvincingly. “What makes you think that?”

“I met an old friend of yours in the Dark Castle. Dorothy Gale?” She made no response, so Belle continued: “She told us that you’re looking for the ingredients to a spell that would allow you to travel back in time. To what? Conquer the realm? Aren’t the ogres getting the job done quickly enough for you?”

Then Zelena frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You are using the ogres to take over the Enchanted Forest! And killed hundreds of people in the process! WHY WOULD I HELP YOU TO DO THAT ALL OVER AGAIN?”

“Work with the ogres?” Zelena repeated, brushing off Belle’s outburst seemingly without a thought. “Why would I do a thing like that?”

“Oh, so your meeting with them in Tower Castle was just a friendly chat, was it?”

“I was asking them to leave the castle alone!” Zelena countered. “I had work to do – I didn’t need a horde of great, smelly monstrosities knocking on my front door!”

Belle placed her hands on her hips. “Regina says there’s an unknown magical force driving them –”
“And she’s pointing fingers at me?” Zelena finished. Then she rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Belle, consider the source! Think about it – what have I done that is making you take the word of a woman who kept you prisoner for thirty years over mine?"

Belle opened her mouth to shout again, then realised she had nothing to say. What had Zelena done exactly? Sherwood Forest – but there was only fire, no magic or flying monkeys, said her subconscious. The ogres – but there’s no proof, not if Zelena is telling the truth about her meeting in Tower Castle. Dorothy – but how well do you really know her?

She let her hand fall to her side and said, “You’re … telling the truth?”

“I swear on my mother’s grave that I’ve no association with the ogre hordes, and I mean you – and your friends – no harm,” Zelena said immediately. She stepped forward, holding out a hand. “So will you help me?”

**Storybrooke, 26 January 2014**

“Wow, you got here fast,” said Snow, stepping out of the doorway so Zelena could enter.

“Well, I thought I could hear a little panic in your voice over the phone,” said Zelena. “So I brought along an old midwives’ remedy.”

She set a bag of groceries on the kitchen counter and waved to Henry, who had claimed the table again for study. Snow wondered what the last year had done to his attitude about homework – the last time she had seen him so engrossed in a project had been Operation Cobra. He waved back and returned to work. Zelena just smiled.

“My mother used to do this for women who were in their last week or so of pregnancy,” she explained, then pulled a bottle out of the groceries.

“Orange juice?” Snow laughed.

“Works every time, I promise. Like I said, it’s perfectly normal for the baby to move less the closer you get to delivery.” She poured out two glasses. “Here.”

Snow accepted hers with a small smile. “Maybe. Or maybe I’m just anxious because of everything that’s been going on. With getting ready for the baby, I mean,” she added hurriedly.

“And the Wicked Witch,” Zelena added. With a small shrug, she explained, “News gets around fast in this town.”

“Oh,” Snow wondered where from, as she knew Emma wanted to keep things quiet for as long as possible in case people panicked. Although it didn’t matter much if the word had already got around.

“Do you know if the sheriff has any leads?”

“No, not yet,” Snow told her, tracing the rim of her glass with a finger. “She’s waiting for Belle to get better. Hopefully, she’ll know something then.”

Zelena frowned. “I’m sorry, Belle?”

“Oh, she’s the town librarian. She, um, she had a little accident day before yesterday. Fell in a stream.” It was close enough to the truth; for once, Snow agreed with Regina that it was probably
better if fewer people knew Belle might have been kidnapped by the Witch.

“Is she all right?”

“As far as I know,” she said. Seeing as how I’m being cooped up in here all the time now that Archie won’t let me help out. “My daughter and her husband went to see her this morning with Regina.”

Zelena nodded. She took a sip of orange juice, prompted Snow to do the same, and then set her glass down with a thoughtful look. “Just out of curiosity – because, just so you know, everyone in town is talking about it – but why isn’t Regina at the top of the list of suspects? I mean, if anybody was going to cast this curse, I would’ve thought the Evil Queen would be first in line.”

“You don’t know Regina like I do,” Snow defended, taking a second gulp of juice. “She’s changed since being here. I have to believe for the better. Whoa - ow!”

Snow remembered that Emma had liked to sit on her bladder when she’d first been pregnant. Her little brother or sister seemed to prefer playing with her kidneys. After two days of stillness, the first kick was followed by a second, then a third.

Zelena grinned. “Told you. Works every time.”

“You’re amazing!”

Snow laughed while Zelena blushed and reach out to touch her belly. The baby kicked again. Snow felt warm inside – partially a touch of indigestion, and partially knowing for sure she had made the right choice for her child.

The moment Mary Margaret and the lady with the funny taste in hats began to discuss baby stuff, Henry had fished his earphones out of his bag. He’d already had to endure a morning and an evening of his grandmother reading that book with the cradle cap and diaper rash and everything else a twelve-year-old had no interest in. And he had work to do.

He had started with a compilation of all the villains in the storybook – if somebody was trying to kill him, then it made sense to start with the people who had a history of murdering others – and come across a few more than he’d expected. Some were standard villains from the Disney movies – the blind witch with the candy house, the dragon-witch who had a pet unicorn (Isn’t he supposed to be a raven? Henry wondered) and the sorcerer who had a weird thing for snakes and genies. Only one had really stuck out to him. The guy popped up in almost every single story – first to cut off Hook’s hand, then to trade King Midas a magical gauntlet, as Cinderella’s fairy godmother, as the beast in the castle who fell for his castle’s caretaker (Wait - is the Beauty the same Belle who’s in the hospital right now? As in, my grandpa's girlfriend?). So far the book only referred to him as the Dark One, though Henry still held out hope of coming across a name or something that would help him guess a name.

The second song – something cheesy from his dad’s collection – began to play and Henry was about to press the fast-forward button when Zelena mentioned Regina’s name, then the phrase ‘Evil Queen’.

As in, Snow White’s Evil Queen? he wondered. But that couldn’t be right – Regina and Snow seemed to get along okay, and his parents seemed to like her.

Unless there was something else going on?
Henry chewed on the end of his pencil, thinking hurriedly. Then he flicked through the book until he found the painting of Snow White and Prince Charming’s wedding, and the Evil Queen marching through her castle on the next page.

“Aagh! Bloody hell!”

“Well, if you’d sit still …” Friar Tuck mumbled. Robin winced and gritted his teeth as the old monk worked a poultice into his wounds. He tried to offer Roland a reassuring smile. His boy shook his head, unconvincing.

Emma officially called off the search after the last attack and the Merry Men had relocated from the woods to the docks, setting up camp in what looked like an abandoned shipyard. They were more exposed to the townsfolk there and the wind blowing off the ocean water made the nights like sleeping in an ice cave, but at least they were under shelter. And more importantly, a long way from the Witch’s monkeys. Robin didn’t fancy facing a third attack, not with his boy so close to the line of fire. And if he had been targeted on purpose as Emma seemed to think … well, he didn’t like to think what that might mean for Roland.

His son, fortunately, had other things on his mind. “Papa, can Uncle Alan and me get ice-cream? Please?”

They had come across the sweet on one of their first ventures into town and Roland had barely talked about anything else since. Robin didn’t really understand the attraction, but then he’d never had much of a sweet tooth. That had been Marian.

“Really? It’s freezing cold.”

“Please?”

Robin pretended to think about it, letting Roland squirm for a good minute or two before he nodded. “All right. But you don’t let Uncle Alan out of your sight, okay?”

“Okay!”

They would be all right in town, Robin told himself as his boy trotted off with Alan in tow. The attacks had all been in the woods, and there would be plenty of people around if anything did happen.

He winced again as Tuck began work on his other shoulder. “James,” he began hesitantly, for once using the monk’s first name. “May I ask you something?”

“Just so long as it doesn’t have to do with monkeys. I’ve had enough of them to last me ‘til Judgement Day.”

“It doesn’t,” said Robin. “It’s, um …”

“Um?” Tuck repeated. “I don’t know how to help with ‘um’.”

Robin resisted rolling his eyes even though Tuck wouldn’t see. “What – what do you think about this Wicked Witch problem?”

“I think Sheriff Swan is a very capable woman who can handle it well enough,” Tuck said.

“You don’t think that maybe we – maybe we should …?”
“Should we lend a hand?” Tuck finished for him. “Are you second-guessing the decision to leave the woods?”

“Maybe a little,” Robin admitted, feeling small.

“Not like you to run away from a fight,” Tuck mused.

“I’m not running!”

“I didn’t say that you were. Hold still for a second.”

Paper crinkled next to Robin’s ear as the monk unwrapped the dressings given to them by the doctor. There had been other instructions, but Robin really hadn’t been listening. In retrospect, that may have been a bad idea.

When he was done, Tuck walked around to the front. Robin reached for his shirt and jacket - and the peculiar wood ornament that had been around his neck since arriving in Storybrooke, the origins of which he had yet to determine – and dodged the monk’s knowing gaze. “What brought this on?” Tuck asked.

“Nothing,” Robin answered automatically. It convinced Tuck no more than it had Roland. He remained silent, thinking over what he might say while hoping that Tuck might let the subject drop. “I, uh – well, see the thing is, I – the, uh, ..”

“What did the Dark One say to you?”

“In between trying to chop my head off?” Robin tried to joke. Tuck didn’t laugh. “He – he talked about my father. And … about Marian.”

“Oh. You mean the, uh …”

“Yeah, that.”

“I see.”

Robin let out a long breath, then began to talk at speed. If he stopped, he didn’t think he would be able to start again. “Do you – do you ever wonder how things might have gone if we hadn’t been there? If we’d just left the kingdom, like Marian wanted to do after Roland was born?”

Tuck crossed his arms. “Are you saying you think that it’s your fault they died?”

“My big mouth is the reason Richard arrested any of us in the first place.”

“Well, that may be true. But you didn’t tie the noose. Richard did.”

Robin grunted. “Do you blame him? Strictly speaking, he did exactly what was expected of him. And say what you like about … taxes or whatever. At the end of the day … we were traitors to the crown.”

“That doesn’t make it your fault.”

“No, but … oh, Lord.” He ran his hands through his hair and spoke his next words to his boots. “Do you ever think things might have turned out better if we hadn’t fought in the first place?”

Tuck remained silent for a second. “I can’t answer that, Robin. No-one can. But as for the current situation …” He trailed off, and shrugged when Robin looked up. “I don’t think we can stay out of
Regina pulled the last of the magical threads together, enclosing the hospital room in an incandescent red bubble. There was a snap as her core powers separated from the protection spell, then her ears popped and her fingers twitches. She rubbed her jaw. For some reason, these types of spells always felt like emerging from a pond.

Across the room, Neal had his arms wrapped around a still-crying Belle. Regina remained by the wall and slipped her hands into her pockets, unsure of what to do with herself.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Belle repeated between sobs. The bandages on her hand left scratches when she tried to wipe her eyes, so Regina found a handkerchief in her purse and passed it to Neal to give to Belle. “Thank you.”

“It’s okay,” Neal murmured.

“No, no, it’s not,” Belle sniffled. “What – what are we doing about the Witch?”

“Hey, hey. Don’t you worry about that right now. Emma’s got things in hand,” said Neal, rubbing her back. “You need to get better. Ruby’s offered to let you stay with her and Granny when you get out of here.”

Belle pointed to the door Regina had just enchanted. “Then why the –”

“That’s only temporary. In case the Witch comes before Whale lets you out of here,” Regina explained. “I’ll put a blood ward around the bed and breakfast later.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

*It’s the least I can do,* Regina thought. What with everything that had happened between them, and she hadn’t missed the earlier fright on Belle’s face. *She must’ve thought it was me holding her prisoner. Again.*

Not that Regina blamed her, really.

“Belle, are you sure there wasn’t anything, any clues to where you were?” she asked.

“No, I don’t –” Belle sniffled again, then paused with the handkerchief over her nose. “There was a rooster.”

“A rooster?”

“Yeah, or some sort of bird making noise in the mornings,” she said, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “And … maybe some pigs? Something that smelt awful.”

Neal frowned. “A farm?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Regina leant against the door. If Belle was right, then maybe she could follow the trail back to the Witch. “Well, it’s a place to start.”

Belle blew her nose with a force to shake the hospital. “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“That’s not your fault,” Regina said immediately and without thinking, to the visible confusion of
en everyone in the room.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

Belle put down her fortieth dusty journal, throwing up a cloud of fine powder from the bench top. Though the library had been repaired since the ogres tore a hole in the wall, most of the books had not been reshelved, instead piled on or under the tables. A heavy layer of dust had formed and cobwebs hung from every corner. Given the relatively clean state of the rest of the castle, Belle guessed that the library had not seen visitors since she left with Rumple. She and her parents had been the most regular visitants, and now that she thought of it, she had not seen her father enter the place after her mother’s death. He must have closed it off completely after Belle’s departure.

The grand old oak doors opened and Zelena appeared amidst the clouds. In between coughing fits, she asked, “How are things going?”

Belle hesitated to answer, still not entirely sure how she felt about the green-skinned woman standing on the other side of the desk. Apart from the rather rude kidnapping, Zelena had been nothing but nice and seemed genuine in her pleas for Belle’s assistance. It made her feel unusually warm, that sense of being needed. On the other hand, her gut had been unsettled since deciding to comb through Kernosy Castle’s old archives for records of the First Ogres’ War. Belle didn’t think that had much to do with the peculiar selection of fruits that a silver-furred monkey dropped in front of her a few hours ago.

Still, if it meant she could see Rumple again …

“Well, actually, I did find something rather interesting. Just one moment.” She pushed aside the few books remaining on the desk and drew Zelena’s attention to a slender moleskin journal that she had discovered in a box in a cupboard, buried beneath a pile of maps, letters and out-dated Holy Books.

“What’s that?” the Witch asked.

“It’s my great-great-grandfather’s diary,” Belle explained. “The first Duke of the Frontlands, decorated by King Charles the third during the First Ogres’ War.”

“The one who brought the Dark One back,” said Zelena.

“That’s him. You might want to read this.”

She handed the journal over and watched Zelena’s eyes dart across the pages. “Where did you find this?”

“In a box buried beneath a collection of old letters. And what I think might have been a rat’s nest.”

“Remarkable that the Dark One never claimed a book such as this,” Zelena commented. “He discovered a vault a few miles from Glass Hill?”

Belle nodded. “The Vault of the Dark One. This was in the cabinet too.”

She held up the object that had led to her discovery of the journal in the first place, an ugly moulding of pig iron that had fallen on her foot when she opened the old cupboard. One might charitably describe it as a key; it had three jagged teeth sticking out of one end at ninety-degree angles, and the other end flattened into roughly the shape of a human palm. Belle had accidentally cut her hand on the raised triangular shape protruding from the flat end. It was truly a vile piece of metal.
“There’s a drawing on the next page,” she said, holding out the key for Zelena to compare. “He says that the key will unlock the Vault and allow the Dark One out.”

“What exactly is the Vault?” Zelena asked.

“I don’t know. He doesn’t say much else about it.”

“Do you know where to find it?”

“I think so.”

“Excellent,” said Zelena, snapping the journal shut and holding out a hand. Belle eyed it warily and bit her lip. “What’s wrong?”

“Doesn’t this seem … I don’t know, a bit too simple to you?” she asked. “He doesn’t chronicle what happened after bringing the Dark One back – or he might have, the pages are missing – but that has to come with a steep price. We’re talking about the darkest magic possible.”

“You consider bringing a man back from the dead to be dark magic?” asked Zelena with her hand still outstretched.

“Look, I don’t pretend to be an expert. All I know is what Rumple taught me, and that’s all magic comes at a price. All magic. Is there truly harm in wanting to be sure that there’s no other way?”

Zelena lowered her hand and held the journal in front of her. “Belle, we may have here a way to bring the love of your life back to you. Not to mention, a way to turn the tide of your friends’ war with the ogres. It seems to me that any price for those things would be worth paying.”

“Until the day comes that we have to pay it.”

Zelena scowled. “Well, I’m willing to risk it,” she declared, extending her hand again. “Are you?”

For Rumple? Belle asked herself. As much as she tried to tell herself otherwise, the same answer kept forcing its way into her conscience. Anything.

So she ignored the way her gut screamed and rolled, and she clasped Zelena’s cold green hand.

**Storybrooke, 26 January 2014**

Archie picked Snow up from the loft that afternoon, as Emma had called a town meeting outside the hall. Over the phone, her daughter explained that she’d finished her preliminary investigation into Moe French’s death, filed as an open murder case for the time being, and now that word was getting around about the Wicked Witch (if Zelena’s comments were anything to go by), they needed to let the townspeople know what they may be up against. Henry had asked to stay behind, so Snow joined Leroy (equipped with collapsible chairs from his boat) while Archie made a quick call to Ruby.

“Well, Belle’s settled in at the Lucas’,” Archie told them when he was done with the call. He placed a gentle hand on Snow’s shoulder, not-so-subtly pushing her to the empty chair. Snow felt fine to stand but sat anyway to avoid an argument, giving Pongo a scratch behind the ears. “Regina’s just finishing up with her part of the job, then she’ll be right over.”

“How is she?” Snow asked, having heard only a little about Belle’s welfare when Neal dropped by
“She’s holding up, apparently,” said Archie. “Ruby’s not coming. She wants to stay with her, and I’ll pop around to help with the funeral plans tomorrow morning.”

“I wish I could help,” said Snow.

“Everything that needs to be done is being done, sister,” Leroy countered. “You’re not gonna do any of us any favours by overtaxing yourself.”

“I’m not overtaxing myself. I’m sitting at home, twiddling my thumbs.”

Wisely, neither man made a response, instead starting another conversation about how Leroy’s renovations were going. Snow listened in with half an ear, pondering the consequences of punching one of them whilst in her condition, and then spotted somebody else she had been meaning to talk to mingling with the crowd outside the hall. With a promise to be back in a minute, Snow hurried after Blue and caught her near the doors.

“Blue!” she called to get the senior fairy’s attention. “Can I have a moment?”

“Of course, my child,” Blue said, walking with her to the side where they could have some privacy. “How are things?”

Snow hugged her belly. “About as well as could be expected. Um, I wanted to ask if you could help me with something.”

“Of course. What is the problem?”

“Well,” Snow started, looking down at her feet (or where they would be if her stomach wasn’t in the way). “I was wondering if you could help me find David.”

Something flashed in Blue’s eyes, but it was gone in an instant and Snow wondered if she’d imagined it. The senior fairy bit her lip. “How long has he been missing?”

“A week now. Since we woke up in Storybrooke.”

“And you don’t believe that he has attempted to contact you and you’ve simply missed it –”

“No!” Snow barked, a little sharper than she had intended. She tried to look apologetic and Blue held up an understanding hand. “He hasn’t been to the loft, or the station, or to Regina’s house or office, and I can’t think where else he would go if he couldn’t get in touch with me.”

Blue nodded. “I see. And you would like me to …?”

“Is there any way to use magic to find him? I know Rumplestiltskin could use locator spells the last time we were in Storybrooke. Could we make another?”

“A locator spell will only work if David is in Storybrooke. We don’t know that he was brought over with the curse,” Blue said with a gesture at the crowd. “Not everyone was brought over. That would amount to several million people at the least.”

“Well, why wouldn’t David be here? He was part of the first curse.”

“Who knows how the Dark One’s curse selects its victims? Why King Midas and not, say, the Emperor of the East? Or the king of the Roselands?” Blue mused. She laid a hand on Snow’s crossed arms. “There is no reason to assume the worst, my child.”
Snow jerked away from the senior fairy. She hadn’t even considered that possibility, but now that Blue mentioned it –

*No!* she yelled at herself. *He is not dead! He can’t be.*

She would know. Wouldn’t she?

“I – I haven’t considered that,” she said after a moment. “Can – can we try anyway?”

Blue patted her arm. “I cannot be sure of a locator spell’s effectiveness while the Dark Curse is still active. Perhaps it would be better to focus our efforts on breaking it?”

“Perhaps,” Snow agreed.

There were a lot more people than Emma had bargained for, and they were all looking to her for answers. Some had claimed the available chairs, most remained standing, and all of them were a mix of confusion, panic and anticipation. She wrung her hands while trying to work up the courage to address the crowd, spun her ring around her finger and tried to think of exactly what to say.

She looked behind her to where Neal leant against a pillar, nodding supportively. Damn him for appearing so calm, she thought as she stepped onto the crate they were using as a temporary podium.

“Everyone!” she called as loudly as she could over the chatter below. “Everyone! Look, I know you’re all frightened and confused but I need you to listen –”

“Is it true?” asked Sean Herman, standing up straight with his arm around his wife. “Is there some kind of monster keeping us from leaving the town?”

“Yes,” Emma answered. She scanned the crowd, finding her mom and Archie near the back but no sign of Robin or the Merry Men. They must not have got the word. “We believe that people are being abducted as they approach the town line. But so far there have been no attacks in town –”

“So we’re trapped here? *Again*?” said Mrs Ginger, whose cat Emma had rescued from numerous trees during the first curse.

“From what we know, this situation is similar to last time –”

“Last time we lost our memories!” shouted Sidney Glass. “This time we’re getting dragged into the woods!”

The murmurs picked up again, so Emma spoke quickly. “The attacks are only happening when people stray too close to the town line. So long as people avoid that area, there is no danger as of yet.”

“What about who cursed us here?” said a vaguely African-American man that Emma didn’t recognise. “And why they wanted to bring us to Storybrooke?”

“So far, all I can say is that we’re working on it.”

“Why? Shouldn’t it be obvious?” said the bearded man who had been causing trouble at the hall a few days earlier. King Richard, if Emma remembered correctly. “There’s only one person who has ever done something like this. And for some reason, the so-called sheriff of this town is letting her walk around free!”

“There’s no need to cast aspersions –”
“I didn’t ask you, Josef!” Richard barked.

“I’ve spoken to Regina personally,” Emma interrupted before the two men could begin a verbal – or worse, physical – fight. “Several times, and I can vouch for her when she says that she did not cast this curse.”

“Then who did?” said several people.

“I have a shortlist of suspects. In the interests of my investigation, it would be better for me not to reveal their names at this time.” Or the fact that my shortlist is actually only one person, she added for her ears only.

“What about the murder that took place on Market Street last night?” said a slick-looking man Emma only knew by sight from around the Rabbit Hole. And from the look of him, that was as close as she wanted to get. “Is that connected to the new curse?”

Emma hesitated and scanned the crowd again. She spotted Jack and Ben Spratt on the far left, Jack with a small boy on his shoulders and mouthing the words, Wasn’t me, to her. She believed him (he was a police officer, after all) but let out a small groan anyway. She hadn’t wanted to publicise Moe’s murder just yet, but despite her best efforts it had still got out.

“That is being investigated at the present time,” she answered.

“And where was the Evil Queen when this murder took place?” asked Richard.

“She was at her home, asleep in bed.” Well, probably not asleep but I know she was at home.

“And where’s the proof of that?”

Emma gritted her teeth. “Sir, can I ask what it is that you really want to say?”

“I want to know why Queen Regina isn’t currently locked in a jail cell,” Richard demanded. “I want to know why she’s allowed to walk around this town like she owns the place. In fact, I would like to know where the hell she is right now.”

There were murmurs of agreement. Emma groaned again.

“Regina wasn’t able to attend this meeting due to a prior commitment that I know all about,” she tried to answer with reassurance. It fell flat on more than one pair of ears. “And as I said, I’ve spoken with her and I can say with confidence that she is not the guilty party in this instance.”

Richard opened his mouth to say more. Emma quickly cut him off.

“Look, as soon as we’ve caught the person who did do this, I will be more than happy to answer your questions about this investigation. In the meantime, I just want to ask that everyone stays calm and carries on as normally as possible. For safety’s sake, I would advise that nobody travels anywhere alone after dark and make sure that you know how to call the sheriff’s station in case of an emergency. Happy and Jefferson are still offering lessons on how to use a cell phone for those of you who aren’t familiar with the technology. Thank you.”

She stepped down from the podium before anyone else could accuse her or Regina of anything more, and then pushed through the crowd to grab hold of the Sidney. He followed her to the side of the hall without trouble. “It’s good to see you again, Emma.”

“Yeah, likewise,” she said. Not entirely true, but she didn’t feel like having a discussion about the
last time they’d worked together. At least now Regina’s and her interests were aligned, so Sidney’s should be too. “Listen, can you do me a favour? I need to you run this notice in the paper.”

She handed him the note she had prepared earlier and waited as he read it. “You want anyone from Oz or who knows the Wicked Witch of the West to call you? I don’t understand –”

“She’s a suspect in the investigation. Actually, the only suspect right now,” Emma told him. “Do you know anything about her?”

Sidney shook his head. “No.”

Emma let out a breath of relief as her gut assured her it was the truth. “Great. Can you run that notice, and keep what I just told you to yourself? I don’t need her finding out that I’m on to her.”

“You’ll understand if I’m not so quick to dismiss Regina as a suspect as you are,” Sidney said, pocketing the note. “You do know she threw me in that asylum of hers?”

“It’ll be dealt with, I promise,” Emma told him, trying to change the subject. “Can you please just run that notice?”

“Yeah, all right. I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

At least he offered her a friendly smile as he left, leaving Emma to contemplate going to Granny’s for a hot cocoa and then collapsing into bed. There was a reason she had never taken up public speaking.

Neal appeared by her side, still looking like an adorable goofball. Emma almost wanted to hit him, or kiss him, or whatever would make that crooked grin disappear. “You did great,” he said. “Though you gotta admit, this is not looking good for Regina.”

“Oh, great, you too?” Emma rounded on him. “She didn’t do this!”

“Hey, I’m with you,” said Neal, holding up both hands in surrender. “I’m just saying, if we can’t convince the rest of the town, and soon, we’re gonna have an uprising on our hands.”

Emma sighed. “Yeah. I know.”

Enchanted Forest, November 2012

For the second time that day, Belle stepped out of a green vortex feeling as though her stomach was about to fall out. She let go of Zelena’s hand and braced her elbows against her legs, waiting for the feeling to pass. Now she understood why Rumple had preferred to travel by foot when she was with him.

“We’re here,” Zelena announced.

From what Belle could see, ‘here’ was a freezing cold mountainside covered in a foot-deep layer of early snow. Tall evergreens grew around them, leaving twenty feet of open space with Belle and Zelena in the middle. No sunlight fell onto the slope, blocked by sheer towers of frozen rock, and the clearing was silent; no birdsong pierced the trees, no chatter of squirrels, no howling winds. No footprints or animal tracks disturbed the perfect, pearly sheen of frost on top of the snow. If hell was
the burning fire of a thousand doomed souls, then this place was the polar opposite. Millions of frosty spears pierced her body, wracking her with unnatural chills. Belle gagged as the taste of tarnished metal filled her mouth. If she squinted, she could almost see the thin strands of power swirling in the cold air like icicles. Raw evil, raging and vicious … and if she concentrated, something soft, and sweet, and kind …

“Rumple,” she murmured.

Zelena cleared her throat. “So, where exactly is the Vault supposed to be?”

“Well, we’re in the right place,” Belle observed. “Wait a moment.”

She knelt in the snow, scooping away handfuls until she hit a cold, hard surface that did not feel like frozen earth.

“It’s down here.”

Zelena leant over. “Move aside.”

Belle quickly stepped to the side as the Witch waved her hand over the snow, causing it to melt away in a torrent of slush. It cleared to reveal a circle of bronze with raised markings, engravings of battle scenes and magic symbols, and a shimmering centre of the darkest black Belle could possibly imagine. She drew the key out of her cloak; the teeth matched the grooves in the centre of the Vault.

“I think this goes in there,” she said, taking a step forward.

Whatever Zelena said next was drowned out by the sound of Belle’s heart hammering against her ribs and blood whooshing through her ears. She could really do this. She could really bring him back …

She knelt on the Vault’s hard surface, tracing the lines in its heart with a shaking finger. All she had to do was push the key into place.

A slight wind picked up off the mountain, blowing snowflakes into Belle’s face. The magic threads had stilled, as if watching her, waiting for her. All but one, one that screamed and railed against every fibre of her being with a voice that haunted her dreams …

“No.”

Behind her, she felt Zelena tense. “Excuse me?”

Belle turned the key around in her hands, letting the sting of its ugly creation burn her skin. The raised triangular design was now stained with her blood, the mark having cut into her palm as she held the key with an iron grip over the lock. Black liquid dripped from the wound like poison, as if her body was trying to expel the touch of the dark metal.

“I won’t do it,” she whimpered.

*Don’t appear weak,* said a small voice somewhere in the clearing. *Stand up, girl!*

She did just that, spinning around to face Zelena. “You want the dagger, don’t you?”

It had not been a question, not really, and the way Zelena became livid told Belle everything she needed to know.

“I won’t do it,” she told the Witch, dropping the key into her dress pocket. “I won’t bring him back
just to be a slave to you.”

“You don’t want your love back?” Zelena asked, this time not even bothering to keep the growl out of her voice. Belle wiped her face, feeling tears bud in her eyes despite her efforts to fight them back.

“I do,” she admitted. The Witch stepped closer, invading Belle’s space, but she refused to back away again. “I do want him back. More than anything. But – but not to be a slave to you.”

The winds of evil began to spin again as the Witch leant down, her face inches away from Belle’s and her eyes burning with rage. The façade had vanished and Belle was left wondering how she had ever seen something pleasant in this pot of bubbling wickedness.

“You do know that I can always force you,” the Witch snarled. In spite of herself, Belle laughed.

“But that won’t work, will it? It has to be done willingly, or else you would not have wasted all this time sweet-talking me into doing it. You tore the pages out of the book, didn’t you?”

The Witch’s eyes darkened and she turned a shade of olive green. In other circumstances, Belle would have shut up and run. But she had no weapon, no books and hundreds of miles of snowy forest she had no hope of traversing alone. So she continued to talk.

“Let me guess,” she said, taking a step away from the Witch. “I put the key into the Vault, and it takes my life in exchange for Rumple’s? Is that what you were trying to keep from me by taking those pages?”

No reaction.

“That’s why you didn’t just do it yourself, isn’t it?” Belle asked the irate green wall. “What did you do? Plant the book for me to find, make me think that this was all my idea, and hope that I’d just be too stupid or – or – or too desperate to realise it was all a trap?”

Then the wind whipped past her as green fingers wrapped around her throat and she was thrown through the air, coming to a stop when her back collided with the rough bark of a pine tree. Belle found herself unable to move. Zelena was so close that her icy eyes were like dinner plates in Belle’s vision.

“Don’t think that you’re getting out of this so easily,” she spat, plunging her free hand into Belle’s pocket to claim the key back. Then she released her hold and the world was sucked out from beneath Belle’s feet. She landed with a thud face-down on a cold stone floor, a few loose strands of straw poking her cheeks. A small amount of light trickled through a barred window and the wooden door slammed shut, the locking lever falling into place with a heavy clunk.

Her small prison seemed vaguely familiar, but at that moment Belle couldn’t care less where the Witch had chosen to deposit her. All she wanted to do – and all that she did – was bring her knees up to her chest and cried herself to sleep.
Storybrooke, 27 January 2014

The next day, Neal sat at Granny’s counter drawing syrup faces on his pancakes. They just didn’t smell as good as Emma’s, with their mildly imperfect roundness, uniform shade of beige and lack of burnt bits on the edges. He spun one around on his plate, contemplating the extent of his hunger, when Granny cleared her throat and gave him a fiery look until he picked up his fork.

With a satisfied grin, she passed a large paper bag to a couple waiting for their breakfasts. They didn’t seem in a haste to be anywhere, accepting their food with a ‘thanks’ while staring fixedly at the booths, so she waved them along with an egg beater clasped in one hand.

“That girl’s got enough to deal with,” Granny growled, handing the beater back to the cook.

Neal cast a look over his shoulder at Belle sitting alone in a booth, her hands around a cup of tea and an undisturbed plate of scrambled eggs on the table. Either her tea was doing something very interesting, or she hadn’t noticed the food. He wondered if she even realised she was at the diner.

Yeah, he silently agreed. And I haven’t even told her about Pop yet.

The diner door jingled and Henry walked. He took the seat next to Neal’s.

“Hey, buddy. What’s going on?”

“Okay,” Henry said. He spotted Belle. “Is she okay to be out of hospital?”

Neal nodded, even though he knew Whale would have said no. Belle still had a concussion, so the doctor had only agreed to release her on the condition that she wasn’t left alone and went to the hospital after lunch for a check-up. If only they could be sure the Witch wasn’t going to attack her, or worse …

“Dad, can I ask you something?” Henry asked, interrupting Neal’s train of thought. His son awkwardly pulled the storybook out of his backpack and flipped through the pages, landing on a picture Neal recognised from Cinderella’s story. “Is this your dad?”

Nodding took more willpower than Neal would admit when faced with the Dark One’s scaly skin and golden eyes. “How’d you figure that?”

“You said Belle was his girlfriend,” Henry explained. “And she’s the Beauty from Beauty and the Beast, so …”

“Right. Of course.”

“Dad, is someone trying to kill me?”

Neal jerked his head up at the whisper to meet his son’s brown eyes, wide with worry and looking to him for answers. He quickly took stock of his surroundings and, seeing no eavesdroppers, asked, “What? What makes you think that?”

“I heard you and Mom talking the other night,” Henry admitted with a guilty look. “She said
something about you guys being worried that someone was going to try and kill me again.”

“Buddy …”

“What were you talking about, Dad?”

Regina cannot get this memory potion done fast enough, Neal thought while fiddling with his collar. “Buddy, no-one’s trying to kill you,” he said, going for reassurance straight off the bat. It was the bit that would make the most sense, at least. “What your mom meant … it – it happened when you were younger. An accident. You wouldn’t remember.”

Well, it was true from a certain point of view.

Henry grimaced, maybe somewhat convinced and somewhat not. “Okay. But what about everything else that’s been going on? And you’re both keeping something from me, I know it.”

“Your mom’s just trying to figure out who cursed the town, Henry. It’s dirty business, you know.”

“Yeah, but ever since we got here, it’s like it’s been one thing after another.”

“Henry –”

“I want to go home.”

Neal stared at the counter top, unable to believe what had just come out of Henry’s mouth. Storybrooke was his home, one that Henry had fought for over and over again, by bringing Emma to the town, trying to destroy magic when he thought it was a threat to his family and helping to stop Pan’s curse.

But he doesn’t remember any of it, Neal reminded himself. To this Henry, home was the big city. It was their little apartment with its faulty oven timer, invading pigeons and cranky neighbours. The three of them going to Yankees games and trying to pretend they hadn’t come from Boston. Waking up to his wife’s hair tickling his nose or to Henry jumping on their bed …

Gods, now Neal was making himself homesick.

“Yeah. I know,” he said after a moment. “But … do you think you can stick it out another couple of days? It’ll all make sense soon, I promise.”

Just as soon as Regina gets this damn potion done.


“Yeah,” Neal said wistfully, failing to push aside thoughts of baseball and carousels and afternoon walks in the park. “Me too, buddy.”

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Amongst the bustle of the hospital, Zelena stepped around an orderly with a bucket and walked to what looked like a reception area. She put on her best smile. “Excuse me?”

The nurse, ‘Anita’ according to her name tag, looked up from the funny metal box called a ‘computer’. “Hi. Can I help you?”

Oh, good. I’m at the right place, Zelena thought. “I’m looking for a patient here. Her name is Belle French?”
At least she was hoping the daughter had the same name as her father. If not … well, that was what the memory potion in her purse was for.

“Oh, sure. I just need to check the record,” said Anita. “Are you family?”

“No, just a friend.”

She nodded and tapped on the board with the alphabet and other symbols written all over it. Zelena tried not to fidget, pretending to be interested in the framed picture of the woman and a white spotted dog (what sorcery had produced a painting so realistic?) as she waited for her to do whatever she was doing.

After a while, the nurse stopped and said, “I’m sorry. It looks like she was discharged last night.”

“Oh. Um, I don’t suppose you know where I could find her?”

“Sorry, no. You could try the emergency shelter. Doctor Hopper is helping to reconnect family and friends. He might know.”

Zelena tried not to let the frustration show on her face. “I will. Thank you.”

She had thought it would be relatively easy to track down a person in such a small town. But having nothing of the woman’s, she was forced to use ordinary human methods and that did not seem to be working. The longer it took, the greater chance that she would be discovered. She was so close and could not risk somebody finding out what she was up to.

She asked Anita for a way to contact this ‘Doctor Hopper’ and left the hospital, whereupon she felt a tug at the back of her mind.

Somebody had tripped the wards on her house.

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Even though Bae and Ruby had done their best to fill her in the day before, Belle still had trouble comprehending it all. A year and a half that no-one could remember, a second Dark Curse cast by an as-yet-unidentified Wicked Witch and, at the last count, nearly four thousand new people in town.

She could see from the window of the diner quite a number of them gathered around doing ordinary things like eating, or reading, or watching cars drive past and wondering whether they should be scared or not. Belle spared herself a small laugh, remembering how overwhelming her first few days loose in Storybrooke had been. Or even before that when she’d been frightened in turn by the radio, the microwave, the computer. Even little things like the softness of her clothes or water coming out of the taps. She remembered how amused Rumple had been the day he tried to explain the shower system to her …

“Oh, Rumple.”

She tried not to cry as Bae dropped into the other side of the booth. He and Ruby had been so wonderful; she had no idea what she had done to deserve them, that somehow she could bring herself out from feeling so lost because of them. She offered Bae a smile, the best she could manage, and he gave her one in return.

“Hey. How’d you sleep?”

“Okay. My head still hurts, though,” she said, spinning the straw in her iced tea. Liquids were about all she could manage and though she knew Granny would berate her later for not eating, she just couldn’t make food seem appealing.
“How do you feel?”

She sighed. “Bae, I’m all right.”

“Yeah, of course,” he said, leaning back on the chair. “I know that, I’m just –”

“I know.”

He took a deep breath. “Listen, there’s something we haven’t actually told you. We would’ve, except yesterday you were a bit, well, yeah and I figured I should before you find out from someone else –”

“Bae.”

“Right.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a sealed plastic bag with something glittery in it. “Emma found this in your dad’s shop yesterday.”

Belle grabbed the bag. “Is this one of Rumple’s?”

“Yeah. See, we found the storybook and it looks like the Witch found a way to bring him back. Now she’s got the dagger and if he did kill your dad, he wouldn’t have done it willingly –”

Belle heard exactly three words from Bae’s ramble and she couldn’t believe them. He might as well have told her that he’d seen a dancing unicorn on Main Street. “Rumple’s alive?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

She gaped. “How is that even possible?”

“I was kinda hoping you might know,” Bae admitted, his eyes downcast. “As far as the magic stuff goes, you knew him better than I did.”

“Yeah, but coming back from the dead ...” she said, turning the golden straw over for a better look. “I have no idea. I didn’t even think it was possible.”

And if it weren’t for the dull ache on the left side of her head, she would have thought it was a dream.

Then she had a thought. “There could be something in the shop which might help us.”

Bae bit his lip. “You sure you’re up to that?”

Rather than answer him, Belle pushed her tea to one side, slid out of the booth and grabbed her coat. She didn’t, in all honesty, and still didn’t quite believe him, but doing something – anything – had to be better than sitting in the diner trying to ignore everyone’s poorly hidden pity stares. Bae followed close behind without comment, telling Granny and Henry that they would be back soon, and if she opened the door a little hard – much to the annoyance of the bell on the door – well, she really didn’t care. Not right then, anyway.

Rumple was alive.

Enchanted Forest, November 2012

People stepped aside as Mulan hurried through the camp, determinedly ignoring the distant screams
and the glowing orange horizon that had nothing to do with the sunset. She shoved aside the tent curtain and stepped into the dark, stuffy interior.

“You’re late,” said Philip.

“My apologies.”

As her eyes adjusted to the dark, Mulan took stock of the others in the room – Philip stood with Frederick, the Hellenic knight, and a young Pridelands warrior named Vitani. The crooked Farmer Weathersky had claimed the only available chair, fiddling with a contraption of some sort, and the hulking Iron John stood behind him. Philip cleared his throat.

“All right, let’s get started. Frederick reports that we’ve got ogres advancing on the southern front. We have two battalions standing ready on Elms’ Ridge. Mulan, what’s the word in the north?”

“We’ve lost Breton,” Mulan reported to the groans of everyone in the room. “King Josef’s forces have barricaded Cliffside Castle but -”

“It’s never going to be enough,” Frederick grumbled.

“What’s the word from Queen Regina?” Vitani asked, aiming the question at John and Wizard Bing. Neither seemed overly enthusiastic.

“So far, very little,” said John. “She’s still working on a way to catch the Witch. As for whether she’ll have a viable trap in time -”

There was a loud crash, a scream and a blast of yellow sand blew through the tent flap. A dark-haired man with dirt and blood coating one side of his face stumbled through the door, clutching an arm bent at an awkward angle.

“Quincy!” Philip exclaimed.

“Ogres, sir,” the captain reported, gratefully accepting the water flask that John passed to him. “Less than five miles away. The battalion’s gone. I’m sorry, sir –”

“Never mind that now,” Philip stopped him. “Weathersky, see to him. The rest of you, with me!”

Mulan burst through the curtain ahead of the others, her sword in hand in time to bat aside a flying pine tree. They were lobbing missiles ahead of them, she realised. While Philip and Frederick began to shout orders at the men, Mulan pushed through the soldiers and made her way to the front of the camp, taking a crossbow from the quartermaster as she did. They had a number of watchtowers circling the camp; Mulan scaled one and set her sights on the horizon.

They were on their way, all right. Even as Mulan watched, a swath of trees vanished and reappeared inside the camp. Many of their men were lucky to miss them; others were not so fortunate.

She blot out their screams. Heartless, but it was what had to be done.

The remains of Captain Quincy’s battalion staggered and limped into the camp; those still able took up arms again after handing off the bleeding and injured to Weathersky and his team of healers.

Mulan shut her eyes, focusing on the coldness of steel beneath her fingers, the smell of the grass, the sound of blood coursing through her ears.

The ogres continued to stomp closer. It would never be enough.
Storybrooke, 27 January 2014

Well, it was a farmhouse all right.

A flock of chickens ran out to meet Regina as she strode up to the only building within walking distance of where Emma said they’d found the bookworm. It was isolated, which Regina thought was promising. If she had a nefarious plan in the works, she would want some privacy as well. Though she would have picked a place that smelt less like pigs.

As she walked, she sent out feelers looking for trace magic. The Witch wasn’t home – Regina doubted she would have been able to get so close otherwise – but that didn’t mean she hadn’t left a trap or two in place. Regina found a ward on the front door, easily dismantled with a flick of her wrist, and the presence of warm-blooded life forms – those chickens, some pigs in the back yard, and something human-sized lurking in the bushes below the front porch …

“Show yourself, you winged freak!”

Her hand moved of its own accord to catch the arrow before it hit her in the chest and she summoned a fireball to the other, ready to loose at the bushes. The archer stood up, crossbow dropping to his side as he did.

“Apologies, m’lady,” he called, holding up his free hand in peace. “I thought you were the Wicked Witch.”

Regina quenched the fireball. “And I thought you were a flying monkey.”

The archer offered her a wry smile as he showed himself fully, a scruffy-looking man with stitched-up holes in his jacket. “I do hope my mistake hasn’t cost me my head, Your Majesty.”

“So you know who I am?” Regina observed, lifting her chin.

“Your reputation in the Enchanted Forest precedes you.”

“Hmm. I didn’t catch your name.”

He held out a hand. “Robin of Locksley. At your service.”

Rather than shake it, Regina dropped the arrow into his hand. “The thief.”

Robin grinned and, while reloading the arrow into his bow, said, “Well, since we’re tossing labels around, aren’t you technically known as the Evil Queen?”

_Only to scoundrels and insensate nobility who keep reminding me, _she thought with a scowl. “I prefer Regina.”

“My apologies,” he said with a small bow. “Regina.”

It gave her an odd feeling, the way he said her name. She couldn’t quite pin down what it was, so she brushed it aside for later and asked, “How did you find this place?”

“Much the same as you, I imagine,” he said. “I followed Belle’s trail from the creek.”

“And you think you can bring her down with sticks?” she said, nodding to the crossbow.
He shrugged. “Well, it can’t hurt to try. However, our mutual friend doesn’t appear to be home at the moment.”

“That doesn’t mean there isn’t some clue to her identity here.” She pushed past him and kept walking along the drive.

He followed her. “My thoughts exactly. I guess you’ve got yourself a partner.”

“I don’t remember asking for one.”

“You didn’t.”

Regina stopped, turning her head over her shoulder to look at him. She was used to people running away from her, not offering to help her.

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. She couldn’t imagine him leaving unless she magicked him away, and for some reason that just didn’t seem appealing. Not to mention that she didn’t need another reason for the townspeople to hate her. “Just don’t get in my way.”

He nodded. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

She frowned, feeling the oddest sense of déjà vu. “Have … have we met before?”

“I doubt I’d ever forget meeting you,” he said coyly, and she couldn’t quite work out whether it was meant as flattery. She started to respond, but he walked off towards the farmhouse, talking as he went. “Unless, of course, it was during that pesky year that no-one can recall. All the more reason to find this witch! Perhaps she can offer some insight into our lost memories.”

When Emma was finally able to get out of the station after checking the report of an elderly couple who had claimed to see unusual lights out of their window late at night (actually just a couple of kids who’d discovered the magic of glow sticks), she went straight to the diner. Neal had asked if she wanted to have lunch around one o’clock if she was free, but he wasn’t there. He must have given up on her since it was now half past two. She tried not to be disappointed and instead dropped into the seat next to Henry. She was happy to see that he had his maths homework out. On the counter next to him was a napkin covered in black ink, and when Emma looked at it properly she recognised it as the same flower she had tattooed on her wrist, repeated over and over to the edge of the small square. Sometimes she had to wonder if Neal was even aware of what he was drawing. She pocketed it before prodding their son to get his attention.

“Hey, kid. How’s it going?”

“Okay,” he said around the end of a pencil. “Mrs Dutton e-mailed me the work for this week.”

“Oh, good.”

“How’s the case going?” he asked, looking up from his papers.

“It’d be going better if we actually had some idea what we’re dealing with.”

“Do you know how much longer it’ll take?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, kid. I have no idea. You getting homesick?”

“A bit,” he said.
Ruby then appeared at the counter, a grin on her face despite the fact that she was working back-to-back shifts at the diner and at the town hall. “Hi, Emma. Grilled cheese and a long black?”

“To go, please. Actually – sorry, Henry – I need to talk to you for a second.”

“Sure,” she said, handing the order to the cook. “What’s up?”

“Could you drop by the flower shop sometime this afternoon?” Emma asked. Despite Sidney’s note in the paper (and she had made sure to check), no-one come forward with anything helpful. Admittedly, it had only been a day and a lot of people still didn’t know how to use a cell phone, but there had been one murder and Emma was not prepared to chance another. “Have a sniff around, find a scent trail, that sort of thing?”

Ruby huffed indignantly. “I’m a werewolf, not a bloodhound.”

“I know. And I’m sorry to ask, but I’m getting desperate here.”

Then Ruby grinned in amusement and Emma realised she was only having her on. The long days must have been getting to her. Emma rubbed her eyes; as soon as this was over, she was going to get a deputy. Or two.

“Of course I will.”

“I can lend a hand if you like,” said somebody behind Emma. Hook appeared, the wave of rum stench hitting her like Chicago fog. She wrinkled her nose, which he either didn’t notice or ignored, and offered what was probably supposed to be a charming smile. “That was a good speech last night. Very inspiring.”

“Thanks?”

“Wait a second,” Ruby interrupted. “You want to help in what way, exactly?”

Hook shrugged. “I’ve tracked down my fair share of scoundrels and vagrants.”

“Magical ones?”

“It only took a couple of centuries.”

Emma held up a hand to stop them both before an argument broke out. “All right. Hook, if you really wanna help, go along, whatever, I don’t really care. Just don’t be – you know, you. We need this curse broken and the witch behind bars.”

Hook held up his good hand. “Pirate’s honour.”

“And Ruby, just so you know, I wouldn’t ever believe that you knocked him unconscious with a flower pot because you decided he was being too much trouble.”

“What if I just punched him?”

“I still know nothing.”

At least Hook had the good sense to only sneer instead of making an uncouth remark. It might have had something to do with the egg beater sitting within arm’s reach on the kitchen window.

The pawnshop was exactly as it had been before Pan’s curse. From the stack of books on the counter
next to the old inkwell to the silver tea set to the collection of paintings leaning against the wall, Belle was haunted by memories of the man she loved. God, she missed him. Even if it had only been seven days as far as she remembered.

There was the shawl he’d given her, the fleece she was sure had been one of his, the carved wooden box in which he’d kept a secret stash of sweets (no need to let the town know that the great and terrible Dark One had a weakness for sugar).

She pushed aside the curtain blocking the entrance to the back room, surrounded by old antiques and knickknacks long forgotten by their previous owners, and thought of the last time she and Rumple had stood there, considering seriously for the first time their future, their hopes and dreams. She remembered seeing that beautiful rocking horse and the conversation that followed cut short by an extremely distracting kiss …

Belle stopped before the memory went any further. She was sure Bae had no desire to know about things like that.

Speaking of whom …

“Hey, my cutlass!” he exclaimed, drawing the blade out from a collection and giving it an experimental swing. Seemingly satisfied with it, he gave her a smile and asked, “So, where do you wanna start?”

“Well, I know there are a collection of books on magic in that cabinet,” she told him, pointing. “It’s as good a place as any.”

“Okay.”

Bae put his cutlass down and went to pull the books off their shelves. Belle joined him after a moment, and quickly buried herself in the pages.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

After the War Council meeting, Robin took Roland down to the stables, having nothing better to do with his time. He had no mind for research, no desire to see Richard at all and Roland had been bugging him to see the ponies for days. So they said hello to the nice young groom and asked if they could borrow the shaggy bay mare at the far end of the stables. Half an apple and an armful of hay later, and Roland stood proudly on top of a feed bucket brushing dirt out of the mare’s thick coat.

“Can we keep him, Papa?”

Robin grinned – Roland insisted that the mare was a boy horse – and thought it was good to see his son’s smile back. Roland had been understandably upset that Sherwood Forest had been burned down, perhaps more so than anyone else, and Robin was happy to indulge his five-year-old until things returned to some semblance of normality.

“I don’t know. She belongs to Prince David, remember?”

“But he likes me!”

The stable doors creaked opened as Robin tried to suppress a giggle. He could see the two of them spending quite a lot of time in the stables for the foreseeable future.
“Hi, Miss Ruby!” Roland squeaked.

“Hey, Roland.” One of these days Robin was going to have to ask why Ruby wore that red cloak so religiously. “Have you seen Belle?”

“I think she’s in the library,” Robin told her.

“I checked. She wasn’t there.”

“Odd.” He’d thought somebody would have to drag Belle out of her hideaway before she faded away into the pages of her beloved books. “Roland, you stay here and I’ll be right back. Not too many apples, okay?”

“Okay, Papa!”

As he and Ruby walked up the stairs to the courtyard, Robin listed off all the places he thought Belle might have gone. The dining hall, her quarters or the War Room seemed the most likely candidates until he remembered that she had gone to borrow some books from Regina.

“She might’ve gone to Regina’s workroom,” he told Ruby, who agreed. “Where is that?”

Ruby pointed him in the direction, then went to see if Belle might have gone back to the War Room. Robin hurried up to the third-floor corridor, where a heavy oaken door – the only one on the level – was open, and a young honeysuckle plant dropping down from the wall inside. Robin knocked on it before popping his head through. “Belle, are you – oh, sorry,” he said quickly as Regina appeared from behind the door. “Uh, I was looking for Belle. Has she been by here?”

“No,” said Regina. “Her things are here, but she was gone when I arrived.”

“Right. Sorry to bother you, then.”

“Is there a problem?” Regina asked, setting an elaborate ivory inkwell down on her desk.

Robin shook his head. “No, Ruby was just looking for her. If you do see her, could you let her know?”

Something flashed in Regina’s eyes, though it was gone before Robin could register it. The impenetrable mask of a sorceress hidden in her mountain fortress. She seemed to put it up a lot when he was around – or maybe she did it to everyone and Robin just hadn’t noticed. Whatever the reason, he was sure it wasn’t personal.

“Sure,” she said after a moment. Robin thought of bowing, then stopped himself and tried to disguise the movement by turning his back. “Wait.”

He turned back and Regina sighed. “Come in. I’ll save you the trouble of looking.”

“I’m sorry?”

She took a potion from her collection, then fetched Belle’s bag from beneath the windowsill and took out the thin tome titled ‘Her Handsome Hero’, Belle’s favourite book. “It’s a locator spell,” Regina explained, pouring the liquid contents over the cover. “It’ll save you having to run around the castle all day.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

The book began to shudder, though Robin wasn’t really paying attention. One thing he had
definitely noticed since Regina stopped dressing like the Evil Queen was how long her hair was, spilling down her back like a wave of night sky and her neck –

“What the hell?” Regina declared, interrupting Robin’s thoughts before they could become entirely inappropriate. He tore his eyes away from her to the book, which was shaking as though to tear itself to pieces. Then it leapt off the desk, did a cartwheel and shook itself beneath the desk.

“Why is it doing that?”

“Something’s blocking the locator spell.” She sounded as if she had just told him that his horse died.

“What does that mean?” Robin asked, almost dreading the answer.

“Nothing good,” she said. Now Robin was really worried.

**Storybrooke, 27 January 2014**

Regina rattled through the Witch’s sparse pantry, finding jars of dill, pickles and something crusty that might have been mayonnaise. There was a basket of apples – green ones – on the table and a cooling pot of rice in the kitchen, faded olive paint peeling from the walls and a pot of yarrow on the windowsill. Unremarkably ordinary. She was disappointed. She had been expecting much better from somebody who went by the title “The Wicked Witch”.

“Nothing much here, unfortunately,” she commented, running a finger through the dust that had accumulated on the table top. Robin leant against the chair, looking just a little too at ease.

“So, not one of these contain magical properties?” he asked, waving a hand at the Witch’s collection of herbs and spices. Regina shook her head.

“Not alone, no. And they can all be used in cooking as well.”

“What about magical essence? Can’t sorcerers use that to trace each other somehow?”

Regina turned to look at him. He shrugged.

“I’ve had to deal with a wizard or two in my line of work.”

“Then you should know that a good witch covers her tracks,” she said whilst inspecting the basket of apples. “But a better one can uncover them.”

Even if she didn’t really feel like the superior witch right at that moment. She rubbed her eyes, feeling grit under her fingers as she did. The previous night had been somewhat better, and she’d actually got a few hours of decent sleep before the nightmare woke her. She had wanted to brush it off, chalk it up to a sudden recurrence of her childhood night terrors, but after seven nights in a row she was starting to wonder if it was something else. The fire room sounded a lot like the one Henry had visited after waking from the sleeping curse, almost exactly down to the glowing marble floors and the burns on her fingertips after waking that she still wasn’t sure if she’d hallucinated or not … but that couldn’t be right. Regina was awake, and she knew for a fact that a sleeping curse could only be broken by True Love’s kiss. And the only True Love in her life currently had no idea who she really was.

Robin then interrupted her thoughts. “You know, I’ve heard many stories about the great and terrible Evil Queen. But from this angle, the ‘evil’ moniker seems somewhat of an overstatement.” Regina
turned around again, not missing the flash of his eyes darting up from a less than gentlemanly interest. “Bold and audacious, perhaps. But not evil.”

“The name served me well. Fear is … quite an effective tool.”

She watched him contemplate that comment with a blank look, waiting for the accusations to come. Instead, he stepped closer, leaning in almost close enough to touch her face, and she was hit by the not-altogether-unpleasant scent of pines and fresh water. She would have wondered what the hell he was doing but somehow it was not disagreeable, in fact it was rather nice …

“What about this?” he asked, interrupting her thoughts for the second time in as many minutes. “Is this magical?”

She looked down to see that he had taken a bottle of Jack Daniels off the shelf. She tapped a finger against the stopper.

“Not exactly,” she murmured. There was no need to talk louder, and the huskiness in her voice had nothing to do with the intimate proximity at which they stood. “But it is a liquid that can conjure courage, give strength to the drinker or even act as a love potion of sorts.”

He raised his eyebrows and she laughed.

“It’s called ‘whiskey’. And no, it’s not magical. Especially not the next day.”

“Ah.” He reached up and there was a clink of glasses.

“You want to have a drink? Now?”

He shrugged. “Well, in the last week we’ve survived a curse,” he said, pouring a glass for both of them, “woken up in an entirely new realm, and forgot a year of our lives! I’d say we’ve earned it. Wouldn’t you?”

Regina accepted the proffered glass with a smile. “I might. What would you – where did you get that?”

She stabbed a finger at his chest, where a wood carving on a string had popped loose from his shirt. Specifically, a dragon carving with an onyx centre, a memento of a friend now long dead, that Regina would have known anywhere in any realm.

“What, this?” Robin held the pendant in his palm. “I had it with me when we awoke in this realm. Why –”

“It’s mine!”

To his credit, he looked as confused as she felt. “Oh. Well, I suppose I should give it back, then,” he said. As he reached around to the back of his neck to take it off, his sleeve was pulled down, revealing a black shape on his wrist –

Regina rocked back, hearing Tink’s voice echo in the depths of her memory. “You need love!”

“Is something wrong?” Robin asked, frozen in place with the pendant’s cord pulled up to his ears.

Wrong. Or right. Something. Regina didn’t know what to think. With the image of the lion tattoo forever burned into her mind, she was suddenly incapable of processing thoughts, so she put the glass down and strode briskly to the door, ignoring Robin’s calls for her to wait, or to come back, or
whatever. Outside, the cold air stung her exposed skin and she somehow refrained from running all the way home –

The last part happened in part because as soon as she set foot on the gravel driveway, she was thrown back by a blast of magic and landed in an undignified heap against the wall.

“Hey!” she heard Robin shout. Then the twang of a crossbow, and a grunt as Rumplestiltskin – for there was no mistaking the weathered man who looked like an imp even without the scales – caught the arrow a fraction of a second before it hit his chest. Regina forced herself to her feet, calling up every defensive spell she could think of while Rumple – why were his eyes completely black? – tossed the arrow aside and wiggled his fingers, sending a second blast that she was able to deflect into a nearby tree. *Sorry, chickens,* she thought as the frightened birds burst out of the foliage.

She prepared an offensive, feeling the addictive rush of magic at her fingertips, but pulled back from the attack when she noticed that Rumple was shaking from head to toe. Then he screamed, cradling his head in both hands.

“Rumple?”

“No! No!” he shrieked. Like he was fighting some great force, he sluggishly turned on his heel and began to run. Regina reached for her phone, spared Robin a sideways glance, then ran after her old mentor whilst cursing her choice of heels.

“Watch the cover on that one.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Neal assured her as he took the books from her. Belle had climbed up the stepladder to get some old tomes from the top shelf even though he probably could have reached if he stood on his toes. Part of him wanted to remind her that she was still recovering and that she was meant to take it easy. The other part reminded him that Belle had never been the type to sit still when there were things to be done. That was one thing she and his father had in common. “What language is this?”

“I think it’s similar to Etruscan.”

Neal nodded, handing her the books back as she came down from the ladder. Then his phone rang – reset from Henry’s earlier shenanigans – and Regina’s name flashed up on the screen. “Hey. What’s going on?”

“We found your father,” said Regina. It might have been an effect of the phone, but she sounded horribly short of breath.

“What? Where?” Neal said, louder than he’d intended and it caught Belle’s attention.

“Out in the woods,” she relayed quickly. “He’s running and Emma isn’t answering her phone. Can you get out here?”

He glanced at Belle, who wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that she was listening to the conversation. “Yeah. Where are you?”

“About ten miles out of town. Near the old toll bridge.”

“Okay. I’m on my way.” Neal hung up. “You heard it, didn’t you?”

Belle nodded. “Where are they?”
Neal quickly contemplated his options – on one hand, he could drag Belle back to the diner and tell Granny to keep her there. But that would be a waste of precious time and she certainly wouldn’t go quietly. “Out in the woods near the toll bridge.”

She was halfway to the door before he’d even finished speaking. Neal grabbed his cutlass and followed her, hoping to hell that he’d made the right choice.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 16: When the Sky Falls Down. In the Enchanted Forest, Zelena gets help investigating Rumple’s affliction and a drastic decision is made. In Storybrooke, the chase continues through the woods, Belle and Rumple are reunited and Emma discovers the Witch’s real name (forewarning: angst. You have been warned).
Storybrooke, 27 January 2014

Rumple had done many things to test her, once upon a time. He had made a bridge collapse beneath her, bit by bit, until she commanded it to hold together. He had made her put her hand into an asp’s nest to retrieve its egg, soothing the deadly serpent to sleep the entire time. He had even instructed her to rip out and crush the heart of a rare, beautiful black unicorn.

Just then, none of it seemed to compare to the latest task her old mentor had set; chase him ten miles into a freezing forest, in heels, while he zigzagged around trees, skidded down slopes and cleared felled logs in a bound.

And without his bad leg, the bastard was fast.

Regina had given up trying to outrun him two or three miles back. She was simply not a runner and that sucking feeling one got when one’s body was suddenly deprived of oxygen, like a deflated balloon, reminded her of why all too well (this was why she’d had carriages!). Instead, she jumped ahead a few yards at a time to try and corner him. The first time, he’d practically run her down. The second, he turned her spell back on her, causing all of her air – what little she had left – to be knocked out. The third, he had caught on to her tricks and changed direction before she reappeared.

On her fourth try, Rumple had disappeared. She scanned the pine trees, looking for movement, and took a step, not noticing the burnt line in the earth under her foot –

“Watch out!”

Robin pulled her back as a shimmering green waterfall appeared in the air before them, the magic shocking Regina’s shoe off. She wouldn’t notice that fact until much later, as she got distracted by the sudden need to right herself upon realising just how close Robin was.

“Are you all right?” he asked as if speaking to a recently rescued damsel in distress. Well, it was partially true, but this damsel could take care of herself!

“Fine,” Regina replied, brushing herself off. In a slightly softer tone, she added, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She certainly didn’t intend to.

“This is rather peculiar, isn’t it?” Robin observed after a moment.

Regina thought he meant that impromptu embrace they had just agreed not to mention. “What is?”

But thankfully he didn’t mean that. “We’re at the town line,” he explained. “And –”

“No flying monkeys,” Regina finished for him. She looked skywards, to where the Witch’s barricade had returned to its normal translucency one might have mistaken for vapour trails or too much to drink the night before, and indeed, there wasn’t a single winged simian in sight. “What the hell does that mean?”
“You’re the enchantress; you tell me.” Then chitters in a nearby tree caused them to jump out of their skins. “Drat. Spoke too soon.”

The monkeys descended.

“Please tell me you found something.”

Ruby shook her head, and Emma groaned. Fantastic. “Sorry, Emma,” she said. “With all the plants in there, it’s hard to pick anything up.”

“It seems this Witch cleans up after herself,” added Hook, stepping over the police barrier in front of Game of Thorns and shaking ivy leaves aside with his hook.

“You couldn’t find anything?” Emma meant it more for Ruby than Hook. At least he wasn’t hitting on her right then.

Ruby exhaled and said, “Well, there’s a faint scent of holly berry. Moe doesn’t have any holly plants so it might have been on the Witch’s shoes or her clothes. But that’s not going to help me trace her if she didn’t leave a trail.”

“Which she didn’t?”

“No. She must’ve teleported.”

Emma growled. She needed to kick something, right now, so she did, and upset a ceramic flowerpot. Now a shattered ceramic flowerpot with pieces bouncing off the sidewalk. “Well, I’m out of ideas!”

“We could try the woods again –” Ruby started.

“No. Robin was lucky to get out of there alive. I’m not taking the chance that someone else will get hurt.”

“Someone else is going to get hurt if we don’t find –”

“Excuse me?” a fourth voice interrupted. Emma turned to see a brown-haired woman with the kind of tan you got from working long hours in the sun. She had mud staining her jeans around the knee area, well-worn practical boots and was holding up a copy of the Mirror. “Are you the people looking for information on the Wicked Witch?”

Emma blinked. Had they finally caught a break? She looked to Ruby, then back to the woman. “Yes! Please, any information you can give us would be highly appreciated –”

“Her name is Zelena,” said the mystery woman.

There was nothing but the sound of pigeons in the rafters and a far-off car horn as Emma processed that information. “I’m sorry, but who are you?”

“Dorothy Gale.”

“Dorothy – ?” Emma baulked. “As in The Wizard of Oz?!”

Dorothy looked confused. “Uh, no. That was a guy Oscar Diggs. I’m from Kansas.”

“That’s not what I – oh, never mind.”
Ruby interrupted. “I’m sorry, but did you say the Witch’s name is Zelena? About so tall, red hair, voice like a breathless squirrel?”

Dorothy nodded. “And green skin.”

“Oh, no.”

Ruby dropped the contents of her purse in her hurry to look for something, which turned out to be her phone. Emma chased a runaway nail clipper and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“That’s the woman Snow was talking to the other day,” Ruby explained. “The midwife.”

“Oh, crap.”

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

The book continued to shake around like a headless worm, going in one direction and then pulled in another, and back again. It rammed into the table legs, the wall, the pot with the honeysuckle plant. After a minute, Regina quelled the magic. It was painful just to watch.

“What does that mean?” Robin asked.

“Nothing good.”

If the locator spell wasn’t working, then that meant something was blocking it – even if the only thing left was a headstone, then the spell would find it for you. If Belle had any magic of her own, then Regina might have thought she had run off on her own and used a spell to keep anyone from following her. It was what Regina herself would do, after all. But the bookworm had no magic, as Regina was well aware, which meant that something – or rather someone – was blocking it for her.

And she had a sinking feeling that she knew exactly who that was.

“The Witch must have got to her.”

Robin went silent for a minute. Then he asked, “How? You have wards around the castle, don’t you? Wouldn’t you have noticed?”

“Wards don’t discriminate between people. I had to leave them open for our allies to be able to come and go,” Regina explained. “If she came in for a split second – plenty of time to grab someone and teleport away – then, no, the wards would not have picked it up.”

*Or they did, and you ignored it,* that annoying voice in the back of her head added. *A little nibble that you dismissed as just another rat –*

*Shut up!*

“But why would the Witch want Belle?”

Regina inwardly groaned as the answer came to her. “Dorothy told us that the Witch is looking for a way to resurrect Rumplestiltskin. If anyone could do that, Belle could. She knew him better than almost anyone else.”

*At least in a better light than anyone else.*
“But to bring someone back from the dead has to be the darkest magic of all, is it not?” said Robin. “Belle would never do that.”

“She is a woman who has had her heart broken,” said Regina, thinking across the decades to another young noblewoman whose True Love was taken from her. “That can make someone do … unspeakable things.”

Robin’s eyes narrowed. “Speaking from … personal experience?”

Regina froze. She instinctually looked away from him, those eyes that seemed to know more than they were entitled to, and wondered why she had even offered to help him in the first place. “Nothing you would understand.”

Too late, she realised that it might have been the wrong thing to say.

“Then you clearly know nothing about me,” Robin snapped.

He had turned on his heels to leave when an alarm went off, a high-pitched wail that sent shivers through anybody in the castle unfortunate enough to have their ears open at that particular moment.

I need to fix that, Regina thought, with her fingers shoved down to her eardrums to block a poor choice made in her worst Evil Queen days.

“What the hell is that?” shouted Robin.

“An alarm!” What the hell did he think it was? “Means there’s an army encroaching on the grounds!”

Robin shook his head. “What?”

“I said – oh, never mind.” She grabbed his hand and teleported both of them to the road, where a large throng of people had gathered. Regina quelled the defensive spells – and the alarm – when she recognised Iron John and Terrence the Bridgekeeper in their midst.

“What happened?” she shouted to nobody in particular as she and Robin tried not to trip down the hill. She could guess; everyone she could see was supporting, leading or carrying someone else with bits hanging off them or missing. In between the drying stains, Regina saw so many pale faces that she thought a vampire would have a hard time sourcing a quick snack among this lot. The worst of the injured were on the ground, healers frantically running from one to another. John, whose skin glinted where it wasn’t covered in hair, had in his arms a raggedy figure cradled like a baby, straw-like strands of white hair sticking out from under its hat.

“Weathersky,” Regina murmured.

John nodded. “He burned himself out buying time to escape.”

She hadn’t known the older sorcerer well – they had been rather happy to avoid each other for many decades – except that he once lost the ownership of a magical kite to Rumplestiltskin in a bet. But magicians were few and far between, and not many made lasting friendships in their lifetimes, so a sort of unspoken kinship developed between them, even as they competed with, fought with and on occasion attempted to kill each other as Regina had done with Rumplestiltskin. It was just what sorcerers did; the general population was hardly a challenge, so they fought amongst themselves. They understood that the battles were never personal, except for when they were, and the loss of one was a blow that any of them had to at least respect.

John was now visibly in tears, and Regina remembered that the old man had been his mentor. She
gently lowered Weathersky’s hat over his eyes.

“Uh,” she started, never sure of what to say in these situations. It was much more Snow’s thing than hers. “John, why don’t you take him up to the courtyard? We can – we can send him off up there.”

“Yeah,” the big man sniffled. “All right.”

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Robin watched the proceedings with uncertainty, feeling as though he should jump in and also feeling as if he should run for the hills at the same time. Why did magicians have to be so bloody confusing?

He would have been lying if he said Regina’s earlier words hadn’t stung, but seeing her fidgeting so when speaking with the shaggy giant made Robin realise that maybe she wasn’t as good with people as he’d first thought. That made a lot of sense; he couldn’t imagine that the Evil Queen made too many friends.

He turned away to help out with the injured and give them some privacy, when he spotted a wrinkled old face he’d never had the pleasure of seeing.

“Terry?”

The old bridgekeeper turned around and smiled broadly – or what passed for a smile when Terry’s eyes had fixed in a permanent squint. “Robin!” he exclaimed, thumping Robin on the back. “What – is the capital – of Assyria?”

“Good to see you too. And I still have no idea.”

“All right, all right, enough lollygagging!” shouted a bloodied King Midas, whose coffers Robin had always been happy to leave alone since a good chunk of it ended up feeding war widows and orphans anyway. “Everyone who can be moved, get them up to the castle! Regina, where are Snow and David?”

“They’re up there. They’re probably already on their way.”

“All right, folks, let’s move!”

Robin cast his eyes around at the injured. It was Acre all over again. There was a man barely ambulatory with a bandage around his arm, a young woman half-carrying a man who looked like he might be her brother, and a bloodied body lying prone on the ground. He knew instinctively there was no point, so he settled on an older man, probably brought out of retirement, moaning on the ground where somebody had left him with a tourniquet around his leg. “Give me a hand with him?” he asked Terry.

“What – is the average speed – of a barn swallow – in flight?”

“I’ll take that as a yes?”

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**Storybrooke, 27 January 2014**

The door opened forcefully, smashing into the wall hard enough to send splinters flying. Emma ignored it, scanning the room over the barrel of her gun. A startled Snow overturned her chair as she instinctively grabbed the nearest weapon, a heavy textbook.
“Emma! What’s going on?”

“Where’s Zelena?”

Snow frowned. “She’s not here. She took today off.”

Emma lowered her gun, but kept it handy nonetheless. “Do you know where?”

The other three filed into the room; Ruby sniffed the air, Dorothy looked confused, and Hook tried to appear useful. “Holly berry,” Ruby confirmed with a deep breath over the kitchen counter. “I knew I’d smelled it somewhere before.”

“Guys, what’s going on?” Snow asked, now evidently alarmed.

“Good to see you’re safe, m’lady,” said Hook.

“Oh, I’m so safe! Why wouldn’t I be safe?!”

“It’s Zelena,” Emma told her. “She’s the Wicked Witch. Ruby tried to call you, but we got no answer.”

“What? How do you know?”

Emma glanced over at Dorothy. “Made a new friend. This is Dorothy Gale.”

“Hi,” Dorothy offered meekly.

“She knows Zelena from Oz,” Emma continued. She had a thought and pulled her phone from her jacket. “I’ll call Regina. We need to get a protection spell around the loft.”

Regina answered after five rings. Emma almost instantly jerked the phone away from her ear as the mayor roared, “ABOUT TIME YOU PICKED UP YOUR PHONE!”

“I will!” Regina continued. She sounded like she was running. “LISTEN TO ME! GET OUT TO THE WOODS, NOW! WE’RE AT THE TOWN LINE PAST THE OLD TOLL BRIDGE!”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The imp’s gone crazy, is what’s going on! And he’s making a run for it!”

They had made it to the Toll Bridge unencumbered but found no-one there. Neal was about to grab Belle and drag her back to town when they heard shouts from somewhere in the woods. Belle was off before he could do anything except run after her.

And try not to trip over her heels when she kicked them off.

Breathing the cold air made Neal feel as if he had icicles growing in his chest, jagged crystals that tore into his lungs every time he tried to suck in air. How Belle kept that pace, and barefoot, he would never know. He wondered if she knew.
True Love really was the strongest magic of all.

Then more shouting, the *twang* of a bow, shrieks that sent a shiver through his bones, something that sounded awfully like a fireball exploding –

Neal had just enough time to pull Belle to the ground as something dark with feathers soared over them, missing Neal by a hair’s breadth. They scrambled to their feet, looking out for another attack, but the monsters seemed to be targeting the two people barely visible through a shimmering cloud of black, grey and dirty white monkeys.

Monkeys with wings. Even having seen the pictures in the book, Neal could hardly believe his eyes.

One black monkey fell out of the shrieking storm of feathers, an arrow embedded in its hindquarters. Through the gap left behind, Robin pointed and shouted, “HE WENT THAT WAY!”

Belle ran. Neal hesitated, torn between his father and the attack. His mind made itself up after Robin shot another monkey, and Regina downed two at once with an exploding fireball. It occurred to him as he ran that they were on the town line, the black border markings not even a yard away from his feet. His father must have tried to leave town, Neal concluded.

Up ahead of him, Belle cried out as she tumbled over a log buried in the leaf litter and landed heavily on her elbows. Neal skidded to stop in time.

“Are you all right?” he asked, bending down to help.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” she said.

Then there was a scream, a very familiar scream from somewhere close by. Neal pulled Belle to her feet and rounded a giant tree. There was a ditch, and a skinny figure huddled on the rocks, holding his head in his hands and rocking back and forth.

“Papa.”

Rumplestiltskin looked worse than Neal had ever seen him; worse even than when they had been mere shepherds and wool spinners. His tailored jacket – the same one he had died in, Neal realised – had patches of muck down the front and rips in the seams. Dirt and leaves stuck to his pants, and he had scratches all over his hands.

*Gods,* Neal thought. What had the Witch done to him?

Tentatively, like approaching a wounded dog, Belle hobbled forwards. “Rumple?”

“No!” he screamed. “No – no – no room! No room!”

“Papa!” Neal called to him. It got his father’s attention, and he raised his head. Neal shouted in shock; his father’s eyes, normally the same colour brown as the ones Neal saw in the mirror each day, were bright blue.

“Please help me!” his father begged in a Canadian accent, tearing at his matted hair. “They’re after me! They’re after me! I can’t quiet the voices!”

Neal stayed on the ridge while she knelt next to his father. The eyes that weren’t Rumplestiltskin’s turned to her.

“Rumple?” she asked again, reaching for him. He watched her hand as if expecting it to bite him.
“It’s me, Rumple. It’s Belle. Can you hear me?”

While staring at her hand, which was now on his thigh, Rumple began to shake. Still frozen on the ridge, Neal watched him spit something unintelligible and try to pull away but couldn’t, as Belle had grabbed his hands with one of hers, and his face with the other, and kissed him.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2012**

It had been a week. At least Belle thought it had been a week. All she had to go by was the transition from sun to moonlight through the barred window. Everything was upside down; she either couldn’t sleep or feared she had slept too long. Sleep was the only thing she could do aside from pace her tiny grey cell. Or make faces out of straw so that she could talk to someone. A bowl of unappealing food sometimes appeared, varying between night and day. She had figured out to eat it as soon as possible after it came or it too would be taken from her.

The hunger pains were almost welcome, though. At least they were something concrete she could focus on.

A couple of times she had tried to pull herself up to the window. What little she could see of the landscape was snow. Snow, snow and more snow. No grass, no plants, no animals. Just snow. Nothing to tell her where she was, or give her hope of a coming rescue. Not even birdsong to listen to.

She scratched a tally onto the wall to try and keep track of the days, though she had long since lost track of time. Seven faint scratches, the best she could manage with her nails alone, beneath a face she had dubbed Mr Cross. He didn’t like to talk much.

Sleeping was a much better pastime. In sleep, she could dream. Dream of a woman with blue eyes like hers forever tinkering with gears and cogs or reading to her in a modest library. Dream of a pink (salmon!) mansion with the kettle boiling on the stove, dream of a warm, sunlight voice luring her awake.

But invariably it would turn cold, frozen like mountain ice, and the voice would become a cackle, the woman’s smile gone, the gentle breeze through the windows a harsh gale through which her love would scream desperately for her to stop. And she would wake up, and sleep would cease to be her refuge.

After seven days (or however long it had been), Belle was curled up on her little pile of straw, inhaling its earthy scent, when something incredible happened.

The door opened.

In walked the Witch, dressed in a shiny black dress that swished when she moved and a hat with huge, garish feathers circling the crown. The smell of wet monkey wafted in through the open door and Belle sat bolt upright, her senses blown into overdrive after so many days of deprivation.

“Come with me,” the Witch demanded. Belle didn’t even care what she wanted – it was heaven just to hear another voice. She scrambled off the floor and followed the Witch into the hallway beyond, revelling in the sight and sound of something that wasn’t her prison.

On the fourth step going upstairs, she realised why the place had seemed familiar upon her arrival. Lurking in the shadows was the same suit of armour with a missing boot that had been near the dungeons in Rumple’s castle. And the stairs had the same dark stain on the sixth step where she had
dropped a load of laundry, the blemish the remains of a thick black liquid that smelt like fish.

She was back in the Dark Castle. She was home.

The Witch marched along the corridor, Belle taking two paces for each of hers, and waved open the doors of the Great Hall without breaking stride. Then she glared at Belle with one finger outstretched to point at something inside the hall and barked, “Explain this!”

Belle somehow managed not to cower from the barely controlled rage simmering inside the Witch, and obediently followed the line of the Witch’s finger to –

“Rumple!”

She must have run to him, because she landed on her knees, cold metal bars striking her face – only then did she notice the cage surrounding him – and she reached out, fingers stretched to breaking point, for him. But he was too far away, and the damn cage was in the way!

“Rumple,” she repeated in a whisper, hardly able to believe her eyes. Had she finally lost her mind and brought her dreams to life in an attempt to cope? Or was he really there, the dark and scaly imp once more, sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor and drawing circles in the air? “Rumple?”

He giggled. “No. Rumple-bumple isn’t here.” He turned his head and stared at her, his eyes the colour of the twilight sky. “Rumple-bumple gone, my dear.”

Even as she watched, his eyes flickered and swirled, changing from violet to crimson. She tried again to reach him but he pulled away, huddling into the corner of his cage like a wounded dog fleeing from a whip. She gasped; it was him, and he had no idea who she was.

A monster born of pent-up rage reared its head inside of her, and Belle rounded on the Witch. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!” she screamed, her hands balled into fists and rising to strike the Witch’s sickeningly malicious face –

Magic blasted her away before she made contact. When her vision cleared and her ears stopped ringing, she pushed herself into a reclined position. The Witch stood above her, hands on hips and less amused than Belle had ever imagined possible for a person.

Nearby, Rumple giggled. “You should have run away, signorina. Saresti dovuta scappare. Run, run away!”

“Do you know the meaning of this?” the Witch asked.

“It sounds like Calabrian,” Belle told her. “I don’t speak it but there’s bound to be a reference book –”

“I don’t care what he’s saying!” the Witch thundered. “Why is he like this?”

“Why would I know?” Belle retorted, infuriation mixing with her thousand other emotions from seeing Rumple alive and threatening to swallow her from the inside. “In case you forgot, I’ve been in a dungeon for a week!”

Cold blue fire blazed in the Witch’s eyes as she leant over, close enough that Belle could imagine being burnt by the flames. She prepared herself to be flung back into the dungeon, or some other horrid fate the Witch had in store for her, almost praying that she would just kill her and have it done with –
“Well, you’ve a library full of books and a castle built from magic,” the Witch sneered with barely controlled fury. “Figure – it – out.”

And then, with a poof of green smoke, she was gone. Belle, still comprehending exactly what had happened, forced her shaking arms to work and crawled to Rumple’s cage, where he had resumed his task of drawing circles. She gripped the bars with both hands and willed, prayed, screamed to whatever god would listen that he might turn around.

“Rumple. What has she done to you?”

**Storybrooke, 27 January 2014**

It had been instinctive, an impulse, something that anyone else in the world would probably call stupidity. Belle didn’t care. She had looked into those blue depths, so pained and distressed and wrong and just acted. At her touch, he’d calmed until the storm inside him returned with thunder, pulled him away and it had been all she could do not to scream.

No! I am not losing you again!

So she’d kissed him.

It was a kiss reminiscent of the first ever, a kiss of hope and longing that maybe Regina had told the truth, that she really could free him. Then, she hadn’t been desperate. Now, only vaguely aware of the fact that Bae was watching, she threw all of her hopes and prayers into making this one work.

For a second – or maybe several dreary days – nothing happened. Then he moved, there was a spark, and he kissed her back.

If she hadn’t been so delightfully otherwise occupied, she would have cried.

But it had to end. She pulled back, breaking the connection and rested her forehead against his, waiting for Rumple to open his eyes.

They were brown again.

“Belle?”

Then she actually did cry. “It worked!”

“What did?” he asked.

“Papa?”

“Bae?”

Apparently watching her snog his father hadn’t sent Bae screaming into the night, which Belle supposed was a good sign. Bae knelt next to them on the rocks and Rumple looked from her to his son and back again as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Letting them have their reunion, Belle held her love close, drinking in his warmth and smell and everything else that she thought she had lost one week ago. It was a practical embrace as well, given that it was freezing and she didn’t have a coat. Now that he was himself again, she was extremely conscious of the fact that she had no shoes.

But then he tensed, and the moment ended.
Rumple rather forcefully shoved her away, backpedalling into the side of the ditch. “You have to go.”

Belle got to her feet while he began to claw at his head. “What? Why?”

“Bae! Take her and go!”

“Papa, what’s going on?”

“GO!”

Far above them, somebody cackled. Not a shriek, like the monkeys, or a manic laugh. An actual cackle, which until then Belle thought was something only fictional villains did. A shadow appeared on the ridge above, somebody in a black cloak and fancy hat draped over their face.

Rumple yelled in pain. “GO!”

From inside their cloak, the figure withdrew a blade that could stain the forest with the blood of its victims, and an icy chill that had nothing to do with the winter air pierced Belle’s bones. She felt Bae grab her by the arm. Again Rumple screamed for them to go, and that time they did.

Twigs tore at her legs as they scrambled up the ditch. Belle dared not look back, knowing that she would turn around if she did.

They rounded a tree and skidded to a halt as Robin and Regina emerged from the woods, covered in scratches and soot and about as weathered as Belle had ever seen them. “What happened?” shouted Robin.

Belle couldn’t answer. And Bae wasn’t much better.

“My father, he – he told us to run. She’s got the knife.”

“The dagger?” said Regina. Bae nodded. “Where is she?”

Belle pointed, but there was no time for any of them to move, as the tree next to Regina exploded. Bae shielded her from the fragments while Robin and Regina armed themselves.

When the shrapnel cleared, Rumple was standing there, another fireball ready to loose at Regina. Belle stepped in the way. Dagger or no dagger, she knew Rumple would never hurt her.

“Rumple, stop!”

He shut his eyes. “I can’t,” he all but whimpered. “She won’t let me.”

“Who won’t let you?”

“Zelena! She’s –” He got no further, cut off by another scream of pain. “RUN!”

Then another tree went up in flames. A thin shield protected them from the worst of the fire but even as it was, Belle felt the heat on her face.

“Rumple –”

“RUN! I can’t stop her!”

She felt somebody grab her by the arms. There was a tug, then a gust of red and black wind and they
popped out on the old Toll Bridge, where Emma and Hook had just pulled up in the yellow bug.

Rumplestiltskin watched them disappear, his heart thumping in his throat. He could still hear Zelena’s order echoing in his head, the order to take Regina’s heart by any means necessary. He had known his former student could put up a good fight, maybe even win if he exploited enough loopholes. If only Belle hadn’t stepped in the way …

“Well, that was rather unfortunate,” said the voice he had sincerely hoped never to hear again. Zelena sauntered around him until she stood in front, her face shadowed by those gaudy feathers and the dagger in her hand, taunting him with each ray of sunlight reflected off the blade. “For you, that is. For me, it’s … ha, well, it’s a stroke of good luck.”

Rumplestiltskin glared. She had control of him – complete control now that there were longer eleven minds of previous Dark Ones jostling for dominance of his body – but that didn’t mean she had the upper hand. “I wouldn’t count your sister out just yet,” he said, intentionally letting the threat slip through. “You didn’t get the command in quickly enough, dearie. Now she knows who you really are.”

Zelena’s masked slipped for just a moment, and he grinned in sadistic delight.

“If I know Regina, she’ll go straight to the Saviour. And it’s only a matter of time before they kill you. Unless, of course, I manage it first.”

“Please,” she gushed sickeningly. “You can’t hurt me now. But I can hurt you. Like you once hurt me. Let me guess; Belle is the servant girl my sister once used to try and break your curse?” She grinned, not needing confirmation. “True Love. Who would’ve thought it?”

She raised the dagger, commanding him to remain still while she raked the blade over his forehead. Rumplestiltskin grimaced. His predecessors giggled. They must be a side effect of the resurrected Dark One, he’d guessed, as before there had only been one. And Rumplestiltskin had got rather good at drowning out his immediate predecessor over the centuries.

As for Zelena, she was positively giddy. “The kiss gave you control, but not your freedom. Interesting. You must remind me to thank her. This is … so much better. Not so cluttered anymore.”

“You may control me, but’s over,” he growled, refusing to bow down. “They know who you are, which means you’ll never get what you want. Regina’s heart, the baby … they won’t let you near them.”

“It no longer matters. Not when I have you,” she purred in a way probably meant to be seductive, but to him had all the allure of a rusty chainsaw dipped in boiled slugs. “You and your beautiful brain. Now, be a good little Dark One … and get back in your cage!”

The command pierced him, unsolicited and unrelenting, and his feet turned of their own accord and began to walk back to the farmhouse. Rumplestiltskin stared longingly at the black line, knowing that he couldn’t cross it. She’d already thought of that possibility.

“True Love, eh?” said Fafnir while the other Dark Ones laughed. “My, my, we are in trouble now, aren’t we?”

“Not a bad looker, though,” Cronus added. “Gorgeous face, and those legs –”

“Shut up!” Rumplestiltskin yelled out loud.
An onlooking squirrel, hidden in the undergrowth, watched the strange creature talk to itself and decided that its lunch could wait.

**Enchanted Forest, November 2014**

Fifty-eight.

Fifty-eight men, plus old Farmer Weathersky, had arrived at Tower Castle dead or nearly so. That wasn’t counting the two hundred on Elms’ Ridge, massacred by the ogres mere hours ago. David sat at the top of the circular table, his head in his hands at the thought of those men, their families, their children – Gods, what was he supposed to say to them?

In the stoic way that all princes were trained to be from birth, Philip and Frederick had filled him in. The ogres they expected to overrun Elms’ Ridge had somehow circumnavigated the area, obliterated two battalions from behind and then marched on the command camp in Ravenswood. Hundreds were dead, towns lost, and refugees pouring in from all over the kingdom. People who had just so recently been told that they could go home …

David just had no idea what he was supposed to tell them.

Snow was out there now, helping to tend to the wounded. She would be back soon, with Midas, and Philip – God, Aurora would be due soon, wouldn’t she? – and Frederick, Mulan, and Red, and Robin, Dorothy – if she hadn’t given up and struck out on her own again – and all those people – and they would expect him, expect Snow, to have an answer for them –

*Gods, what am I going to tell them?*

“We have to leave,” David murmured to the table. As expected for an inanimate piece of wood, it didn’t have a useful answer for him.

Regardless, he knew it was their only choice. Leave, or be overrun by ogres. Tower Castle was their last point of defence, and with Regina, Iron John and the peculiar man named Terry, they could potentially hold out for months. They had water as long as the snow held, but they were short of food already. And magic, according to Regina, could not make more. Not enough to feed several hundred people.

And all of that was supposing that the Witch couldn’t break through Regina’s wards again. Which apparently she had done, to kidnap Belle only the day before – *Gods, Belle. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

He had to remind himself that there was nothing to be done. Regina’s second locator spell, and her third, and her fourth had all produced the same results. The Witch was blocking the magic. Belle was alive, but whatever good that meant, David couldn’t fathom. Regina could fix the wards, now that there was no need for people to come and go, but she couldn’t trace Belle.

And she had been their last chance against the ogres, too. Now – David smiled as his daughter’s voice sounded in his mind – they were royally screwed.

Not for the first time, David wished Emma was there. Not just because he missed his daughter – he did, more than he needed air – but because he knew she would have had a plan. Even if that plan had been to shoot ogres’ eyes until she ran out of bullets, Emma would have had a plan to fight. And if he knew his daughter, she would either go down fighting or win the war single-handedly.

David just didn’t think he had the strength to do that anymore. So he gave the only order he could.
Evacuate. Evacuate or be overrun. Evacuate, or die.

**Storybrooke, 27 January 2014**

After pulling up at the Toll Bridge and seeing Robin, Regina, Neal and Belle appear out of nowhere, Emma had called an emergency meeting at the town hall. One call first to Granny to confirm that Henry was still at the diner, and to keep him there; a second to Archie and Leroy at the hall; and a third to Ruby, to bring Dorothy and Snow with her, and they had all crowded into Regina’s office.

Neal confirmed Dorothy’s story with the news that his father had shouted Zelena’s name before trying to incinerate them under the Witch’s commands. Emma had known that the dagger controlled the Dark One, she just hadn’t realised to what extent. If Gold – or Rumplestiltskin, whatever his name was these days – couldn’t disobey the command to fire upon the two people he loved most in the world, then none of them were safe.

And she could only guess at what horrors Zelena could force him to commit.

They cut the meeting short and agreed to reconvene the next day to decide on a plan of action. Regina went with Snow to put a ward around the loft. Robin went back to the Merry Men, saying something about patrolling the woods. Ruby took Dorothy and Belle to the bed and breakfast to put them both up for the night, and Emma dodged Hook by pulling a weary Neal aside and drove home.

Henry, naturally, had questions but, for once, seeing the look on his father’s face, hadn’t pressed the matter. Snow made the tea while Neal sat the edge of the bed. He looked lost, Emma realised, and when she put an arm around him, she was shocked to find that he was crying. Doing his best to hide it from Henry, but crying nonetheless.

Late at night, after Henry had gone to bed and Snow re-reading her book in hers, Emma tried her hand at being optimistic. “Well, at least we know who she is now.”

“Yeah,” Neal murmured. “But what good’s it gonna do if we can’t get the dagger off her?”

*It’ll be like Cora all over again,* Emma thought. But she was trying to be optimistic, so she didn’t say it.

Optimism was hard. She couldn’t think how her mother ever did it.

The docks got cold at night, Regina realised while standing in the shadow of a large sailboat. She’d gone for a walk after failing to fall asleep, too many thoughts and questions mulling about her mind to hope for a peaceful slumber, and somehow found herself there.

At the end of the jetty was a large fire, over which a short man stirred a pot of something that smelt delicious. Three others had made seats out of old oil drums. Robin was in the middle, holding a stick with a marshmallow on the end and teaching the boy, who looked like he might be his son, how to cook it. As she watched, the boy’s marshmallow caught fire and his father hurriedly extinguished it, leaving behind a crispy cube of half-baked sugar.

Not that it deterred the boy, who popped it into his mouth, not even a tiny bit put off by the burnt bits.

In the light of the fire, the lion tattoo became illuminated on Robin’s wrist. When she spotted it, Regina again recalled Tink’s prophecy. The urge to flee had passed but now she couldn’t decide on
what to do – take a chance, or risk disappointment again?

But then, who was she kidding? Villains didn’t get happy endings.

Ruby set Dorothy up with a blanket, a pillow and the couch in the living room. She’d been sleeping on a bench the last few days, so Ruby received no shortage of thanks from both her and her dog, Toto, who licked her hands and rolled onto his back for a belly rub, much to Dorothy’s amusement. Apparently, he normally didn’t like other people much. The reason being, according to Toto, that they smelt funny.

Afterwards, she went upstairs to her bedroom and cracked open the door. Belle had taken up one side, facing the far wall, with a pillow clutched to her chest. The smell of salty tears still flooded the dark room, though Ruby didn’t remember hearing any cries. She opened the door fully, walked in and shut it again.

“Hey,” she said, gently announcing her presence. Belle didn’t react, even when the bed creaked under Ruby’s weight. “You want to talk?”

After a moment, she answered, “No.”

“You want to be alone?”

Belle’s shoulder lifted a tiny amount in what was probably supposed to be a shrug. Ruby sighed. It had been a long day. So she kicked off her shoes, changed in the darkness – thank goodness for wolf’s eyesight – and laid down next to her friend, pulling the blankets over them both. Then she turned so her face was to Belle’s back, put an arm around her and – when there was no objection to her touch – just held her until Belle had cried herself to sleep.

Enchanted Forest, November 2012

“So we’re giving up?” had been Regina’s question. There had been no snark, no condescension, no ‘I-told-you-so’. For the first time in Snow’s memory, Regina had been well and truly dumbfounded.

Because Snow White had given up.

Snow almost couldn’t believe it herself. As much as she hated it – hated leaving their kingdom behind, hated leaving their home, hated that it would fall into the hands of the Witch before long, hated giving up – she knew it had to be the right thing to do. Five months of conflict had only lost them more land, more towns, more lives, in addition to the hundreds that had been massacred the night before. This time was not like the war with Regina and King George thirty years ago – that time Snow had known that no matter what, they would win eventually. She still didn’t know how she’d known that, but she had. This time was different.

Good had not won. Good was on the verge of losing.

The evacuation had taken some time to come through; recalling the last of their forces from the north, nursing the wounded into a condition suitable for travel, it had all taken time. Affordable time, as there was no real hurry. They had magic, and food enough to last a month or so.

And then they were on the Kings’ Road again, Snow on the back of her chestnut gelding and David on his white warhorse leading the train. A winter wind picked up off the mountains as if to hurry them along and though it was overcast, the snow held off. Like the gods had decided to grant them
one small favour in their thickening soup of bad luck.

While David stared ahead, Snow looked back along the train. About three hundred people followed them, with more to come. Some had chosen to remain and fight for their lands on their own; Snow had not been able to persuade them otherwise. She simply hadn’t the heart to.

At least nobody had outwardly protested the evacuation. Snow wasn’t sure how she would have held up if someone did.

She watched as the dwarves walked solemnly with their mules, Granny drove her wagon with Ruby on her left, her red hood pulled up; Dorothy walked nearby with Toto trotting by her ankles, Robin carried his sleeping son on his back and Regina rode next to Iron John, who had Farmer Weathersky’s hat on his head.

Snow looked further on, to where Tower Castle stood against the horizon, a jagged black peak amongst the snowy caps of the mountains. That was her home. Her father’s palace. Built by her grandfather after uniting the warring principalities into a united kingdom. The kingdom of the Midlands. Where the Blue Fairy had placed her blessing on King Leopold I, then on King Leopold II and on Snow when the crown finally passed to her.

Snow shut her eyes at the thought of her family’s patron. She didn’t remember all of the words – having been somewhat preoccupied with the man standing by her side, finally her husband in law, in magic, and by oath – but distinctly remembered a promise to come whenever Snow made a wish upon the blue star. To protect her family. To protect her kingdom.

And yet Blue hadn’t come.

*Why?* Snow screamed internally, lifting her head to the heavens. *Why won’t you answer me?*

Then it began to rain.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 17: Hope in Strange Places. In the Enchanted Forest, the refugees settle into Lakeside Palace and Snow is a bringer of good news. In Storybrooke, Maurice’s wake is rudely interrupted.

By the way, I find it rather amusing that I mention ‘angst’ and people immediately jumped to Belle and Rumplestiltskin. I mean, it was them, but still! (And just to note: it will end, I promise!)
“Thanks, Ivan,” David said to the young porter who had delivered his and Snow’s belongings to their chambers. The man politely bowed.

“Will there be anything else, Your Majesty?”

“No. Thank you.”

Ivan bowed again and left. David gathered up their things and set them on the floor, figuring that they could sort them out later.

Philip and Aurora had been incredibly gracious hosts in spite of Prince Hubert’s consistent whining. At least there was little else he could do, given that Lakeside Palace was technically Aurora’s, not Hubert and Queen Leah’s.

The south-eastern winter was wonderfully mild and they had their windows wide open, enjoying the view of the lake below. Right now, Snow was doing just that, though David had a feeling her mind was a long way from where they were.

“You’re thinking about Emma, aren’t you?”

Snow sighed. “Don’t you?”

There wasn’t a day that he went without thinking of their daughter, where she was, what she was doing, whether she and Neal had made up and become a proper family, with Henry. At the thought, David took his wife’s hands. “What are you thinking about?”

She sniffled. “I don’t know how we could just lose like that. I always thought … good would win in the end.”

“Well, it’s not over yet,” he said, giving her hands a squeeze. “We’re alive. And we’re together. So long as we’ve got that, they haven’t won.”

It earned him a sad smile, which was something. “I suppose you’ve got a point,” she said. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into him, and they held each other until the sun went down.

Tomorrow was another day, David thought. They would return to the fight eventually, but for now, they all needed to rest.

**Storybrooke, 28 January 2014**

The funeral went about as well as they ever did. Dug a hole in the ground, lowered the casket, a man in a collared gown said a few nice words and then everyone took turns paying their respects to the deceased. That part Emma could handle; it didn’t take much to stand quietly and then chuck a handful of dirt into a hole. The wake was a different matter.
She had never seen Granny’s so full, and yet so quiet. Everyone was in black. If words were spoken, it was in hushed tones as if the speaker was afraid of rebuke, or maybe of funeral fairies coming to steal their souls. Others abstained from talking altogether in favour of sitting quietly, perhaps drinking if they needed something to do with their hands. The mourners were mostly split into three groups. Some, like King Richard, were there to pay their respects to Moe, or Sir Maurice, or whatever the hell his name was. Most of the rest were there to support Belle. And then there was Emma, who didn’t have a clue as to why she’d come. She hadn’t known Moe at all, and doubted that Belle regarded her as a close friend, and most of all, she hated funerals.

Okay, so she’d been the investigating officer. But his murderer was still at large, and Emma probably should have been trying to apprehend Zelena and freeing Mr Gold instead of what she was doing, which was angrily throwing darts into a board. Even though she now had a name, a face and an address, she was no closer to getting the bad guy off the streets.

She launched her fifth projectile, which knocked two others out of the bull’s-eye.

“Maybe I should paint a bull’s-eye on the Wicked Witch’s back.”

Without turning to the pirate who appeared in her peripheral vision, Emma chucked the last dart, feeling satisfied by the heavy thud with which it stuck into the red centre. “She’ll get more than a dart when I find her.”

“I know you’re hurting, Swan, but there are better ways to deal with death than by letting anger overcome you.”

“Let me guess,” she offered, retrieving the darts from the board and floor. “Rum?”

“Never hurts.”

Emma sighed. She returned to her place and took aim. “Thanks. But I think I’ll stick with anger. At least until I’ve dealt with Zelena.”

Thud.

“Take it from me,” said Hook as she threw again. “Vengeance isn’t the thing that’s gonna make you feel better.”

“It’ll make the town safer. That’s my job, remember?”

She took aim, then felt Hook grasp her arm with his good hand. “Come on,” he said, holding up the flask. “One drink. What’s the harm?”

“What’s the harm?!?” she repeated and wrenched her arm free. “You are unbelievable. You know that?”

He smiled coyly. “Well –”

“A man is dead.” she reminded him before he got carried away. “And you want to have a drink.”

For the first time since Emma had known him, Hook actually looked offended. “Swan, I mean no disrespect. Just a toast to a man’s good life, is all.”

“And a way into a woman’s heart? Or were you thinking two feet south of there?”

It wasn’t that Hook was unattractive or anything. It was that … that was where it ended. Emma now
remembered who he reminded her of – the various guys, a few more than she liked to admit, that she used to seek out in bars during all those years as a lonely bail bondsperson. Pretty faces blurred by cheap whisky, and some not-so-pretty ones, who were invariably asleep when she left in the mornings, never bothering to leave a note.

Looking over his impractical overcoat, she spotted the corner booth where Belle had taken refuge behind Neal and Ruby from the tirade of former noblemen’s condolences. The women were chatting while Neal scribbled on his napkin. Sunlight glinted off the fourth finger of his left hand – or rather the ring around it, which he had still not removed.

Emma absent-mindedly twirled the matching ring on her own hand, thinking of another life lived day by day, in borrowed motel rooms and a battered yellow bug. Now she remembered why she had come.

“Swan, I –”

She held up a hand to stop him. “Hook, please. Just – just leave me alone. I’m –”

What, married? said a little voice. Go on, admit it.

But the word wouldn’t come, so Emma did the next best thing and walked into the crowd. Hook did not follow her.

Unknown to Hook or Emma, Neal wasn’t drawing anything. At least nothing had come out of it, just a large black scribble. Probably appropriate, given the mess he felt at the moment.

He hadn’t wanted to believe that Emma might go for Hook, not after the last year and a half. They’d been happy, hadn’t they? They’d made the best of a bad situation, survived all the curveballs thrown at them and ended up with a pretty good life.

Except that none of it ever actually happened. It could have, if Neal hadn’t royally screwed it all up. He wondered if the only reason she hadn’t left already was that it would hurt and confuse Henry.

He tried not to intrude, he really did. It was just that his eyes kept wandering to the scene, and any nearby conversation dulled as his ears sought out two particular voices. So absorbed was he that he didn’t hear Belle say something to him until Ruby snapped her fingers under his nose.

“Earth to Neal!”

“Huh?” he answered a little stupidly.

“I was going to go and talk to Archie for a minute,” Belle said, in the way of a person repeating themselves. “Could you –?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

He moved to let her out. She gave him a concerned look, but thankfully didn’t pry and joined Archie at another table. Neal purposefully ducked his head so he was looking squarely at the wall.

“What’s with you?” asked Ruby.

“Nothing!” he said. As he did, his gaze slipped, and Ruby turned.
“He never gives up, does he?”

“He’s a pirate. Do they ever?”

She chuckled. “So, uh, if you don’t mind me asking, what’s the deal with you guys?”

“What, with me and Hook?” Neal joked. “Look, I’m sure he’s very attractive and all but –”

“With Emma, wise guy.”

“Huh. What’s the deal?” he scoffed. Ruby glared, not letting it go. So he leant back and sighed. “The deal is I was happily married to the most incredible woman on the planet, then somebody literally barged into my life to remind me it was all a sham. And now he’s hitting on my wife.”

“Does she like him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see why she wouldn’t.”

“Have you actually talked to her about this?”

“Well, no, but –”

“Do you want to get back together?”

“Yeah, of course, but –”

“Then talk to her! You’ll never know how she feels if you don’t.”

“Ruby, I hurt her,” he said, leaning forwards. “Bad. I can’t make up for that.”

“Try anyway.”

She was then called away to help Granny with something, leaving Neal to ponder. False memories replayed in his head, as they had a habit of doing from time-to-time, though thankfully decreasing in regularity.

Although, what was so false about it? Yeah, it hadn’t actually happened. But he could remember it just as distinctively as he did any other events of his life. Who was to say that they couldn’t make it real?

He flipped the napkin over, wrote ‘Talk to Emma’ in block letters and underlined it three times for good measure. If she didn’t want to give it a shot, if she thought she could be happier elsewhere, that was fine. He could live with it. But Ruby was right; he’d never know if he didn’t ask. And this time, he was determined not to make a complete ass of himself.

What was it about funerals that made people start contemplating their lives as if they were to die the next day?

Enchanted Forest, January 2013

After meeting with David and commanders of the allied armies to discuss a possible re-entrance to the Fourth Ogres’ War once winter had passed, Mulan was greeted by a harried-looking young footman. In between deep breaths – he had clearly run a long way – he relayed the summons. She climbed the lamp-lit spiral staircase in trepidation.
The last thing Mulan would ever admit to was the fact that she’d been avoiding Aurora for months, unable to bring herself to face the truth that was True Love. Fighting alongside Philip in the Midlands was one thing; they had been far too busy to get distracted by other matters. But now they were no longer at war, things were different.

Having nobody to fight was an unusual feeling for Mulan. In the Eastern Kingdoms, there had always been someone invading, somewhere or other. Then she had gone on the road with Philip. Then battling Cora, then wraiths, and then the ogres. Now she didn’t know what to do with herself. There wasn’t a scarecrow at the barracks she didn’t know by name or a tower she hadn’t climbed. It was only a coincidence that such activities kept her from too many interactions with the Dacian royal family.

Maybe she should have gone into town with the Merry Men.

She had considered ignoring the summons. But it wasn’t in her nature to do that and it could easily be important. So when she reached the correct floor, she headed to the room. The door was closed. She knocked gently.

“Come in!”

She did. The room was better lit than the hallways but still dim, as a recent overcast sky threw the land into shadow and a nasty cold snap through the castle. There was still plenty of light to see by, and what a beautiful scene it was.

“Mulan!” Aurora greeted her happily, radiant in spite of the tiredness that seemed to permeate every essence of her being. Philip sat beside her on the bed, equally tired but with a smile that could light a thousand stars shining in his eyes. He had one arm around his wife’s shoulders and the other hand resting by a bundle of cloths in Aurora’s arms. As Mulan watched, the bundle squirmed, and a tiny hand forced its way out.

“Oh,” she said, feeling rather awkward. Her experience with children amounted to none at all, really. They didn’t annoy her – babies did as babies did, and they grew out of it eventually – but she’d never known what to do with them and felt it best to leave it to the experts. Aurora missed it entirely and held out a hand for her to come closer.

“His name’s Philip,” she said with a coy glance at the boy’s father. “Philip Stefan. We’re going to call him Pip for short.”

“Pip?” Mulan said with a laugh. “That’s a good name. Your father and his.”

Aurora nodded. “We were wondering – if you’d like to, that is, there’s no pressure at all – we wanted to ask you to be his godmother.”

“We know it’s traditional to ask for a fairy,” Philip added. “But we talked about it, and neither of us feels that anyone else would be better qualified.”

“You?” Mulan asked, sure she’d misheard. She could think of a dozen people more qualified just off the top of her head. “No, I –”

They both looked at her with pleading eyes. Mulan hesitated. She had no idea what to do with a kid, had never had any idea, and they wanted her? When she still found it difficult to look at them, at the happiness they shared? Be the godmother of the child whose mother she thought she still loved – how could she do that?

She looked over the bundle of cloths to the tiny human inside, still squirming in his fabric prison. He
was so small and so vulnerable. His hand was maybe the size of a moth cocoon and his fingers even smaller. She reached out to touch his hand and to her surprise, Pip wrapped his entire hand around her index finger and squeezed. He had his father’s strength, she could already tell, and would undoubtedly become a good man with the right guidance. And if he got anything at all from his mother, perhaps a great man. Suddenly, a feeling emerged from somewhere deep inside Mulan, a place she rarely ventured, the determination to see the boy grow up right and true and become a man worthy of his legacy. If nothing else, she knew she could teach him that.

Because it would make Aurora proud. That was how Mulan knew she could do it because, at the end of the day, all she desired was the young queen’s happiness.

“I’d be honoured,” she finally answered, to the delight of the new parents.

The magic had jolted her off her feet while she was in the middle of a heavy old book. Belle heard the crash as the summoning spell pulled her away. It dropped her on her knees on the floor of the Great Hall, with Zelena lording over her from Rumple’s seat at the head of the table. Magic kept her in the uncomfortable position. She glared at the Witch, using the sound of the book crashing to the floor to fuel her rage and refused to back down. She had been imprisoned by far worse than Zelena, after all.

“What do you want?” she snapped before the Witch could speak first. Zelena reacted much as she expected, with indignation at the lack of respect from an inferior.

Well, as far as Belle was concerned, there was no respect misplaced as they were on perfectly equal ground. She just happened to be closer to it at the moment.

Zelena took a while to answer, brooding in Rumple’s chair and twirling a champagne glass. Belle waited, grinning at the small things Zelena could not stop her from doing to undermine her misguided sense of superiority.

“Has there been any progress?” the Witch asked. She did not look at Belle as she delivered the question.

“It’d be going much better if not for the constant interruptions.”

Zelena turned on her. “I asked if there has been any progress. Do you know the cause of the Dark One’s affliction?”

“Not for sure, no.”

The table and chair scraped along the floor as Zelena got to her feet, the glasses clinking together from the rough movement. She walked away from Belle, wringing her hands as she did. “This is taking too long. I need the power of the Dark One.” She turned back. “Now.”

“Why? What hellish scheme have you got planned that you need him for?”

“Nothing that concerns you,” Zelena snapped. As she wandered around the room, Belle tested the spell keeping her on the floor. It would not budge and she remained stuck like glue. Behind her, she could hear the all-too-familiar creak of a wheel, slowly being turned by gentle fingers. She wasn’t sure why Zelena had Rumple spinning gold all day and night but his efforts over the past few months had amassed a tidy pyramid of gold thread on top of the table. While she waited for the Witch, Belle watched a little white dove poke its head out from behind a cabinet - all fixed now that Zelena had
taken up permanent habitation in the Dark Castle - eye the Witch cautiously and then dart out to the table. It snagged a bit of thread in its beak and then returned to the cabinet. Curious.

“You’re stalling.”

“Excuse me?” Belle snapped, turning her attention back to the Witch.

“That’s the only explanation,” the Witch accused.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’m not as familiar with the Dark One’s Curse as you imagine and that it’s just going to take some time?”

“Lies!”

In a blink, the Witch had Rumple’s knife at her throat. She pressed harder than before. Belle shut her eyes. It hurt, but it had become ritualistic. A few minutes more at most, and she would be back in the library.

Zelena appeared to have other ideas this time. She laughed, pulled the blade away – not without nicking Belle’s chin with the tip – and crossed her arms. “I can see intimidation obviously isn’t working.”

She waved her hand. The spell holding Belle to the floor lifted while a second one shoved her to the side, while the Witch trotted to Rumple’s cage.

“So we’ll have to go to the next level.”

“Next level?” Belle repeated, trying and failing to get up.

“Yes. You seem to have forgotten that I control everything your lover does.” Zelena waved the dagger for emphasis. Rumple continued to spin unperturbed. “But I can also command him into maddening, excruciating pain. If you will not cooperate, then I will have no choice –”

“Wait!”

Belle didn’t know what was worse, the self-satisfied look on Zelena’s face as the Witch knew she had gotten to her, or the way Rumple had seized up as she spoke. Thankfully, he soon recovered and resumed spinning.

“I have a theory.”

Zelena grinned. “I thought you might.”

Belle scowled. The dagger was still in Zelena’s hand, though, so there wasn’t much she could do about it. “I think … I think what happened is that when Rumple was brought back, out of the Vault – all of the Dark Ones were brought back.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been listening to him talk,” Belle explained, “and there are distinct voices. Different accents. And his eyes change colour as well. I’ve counted six so far, but there could be more. A lot of them. And they’re all in there, fighting for control of the body. That’s why he’s been having seizures. That’s the moment when one mind is forcing another out of the way so it can take control.”

“Do you know how to fix it?”
“No.”

Zelena raised the dagger again.

“It’s the truth. I don’t know how to fix it!” Belle protested. “Please! The only way I know of right now would be to break the curse entirely.”

“Well, that’s not an option.”

“I guessed as much.”

Zelena scowled at both her and Rumple, who was now muttering incomprehensible nonsense in tune with the creaks of the wheel. “Well, then you’d better get back to it.”

Another wave, another jolt like somebody had pulled a rope tied around her abdomen, and Belle landed on the floor of the library, this time on her feet. A fat jet black monkey, her guard just in case she did happen to try something foolish, greeted her.

“Hello, Cogsworth,” she hailed in return. The monkey’s portly stature and pointed face were distinctly like that of her father’s head of household. She gave him the name as ‘Monkey’ seemed too monotonous. She picked up the book. “Hmm. Damaged the spine a little.”

Cogsworth screeched. A familiar sound Belle had heard a few times. He was a good enough conversationalist and mostly friend, but got aggressive when she wasn’t doing what she was supposed to.

“Right. Back to work, then.”

**Storybrooke, 28 January 2014**

As it turned out, Emma wasn’t the only one unsure of why she had come to the funeral. Regina occupied the far end of the bar, keeping her distance from everything possible. The grumpy dwarf had taken her lasagne to distribute. She hadn’t failed to notice how more people accepted it from him than had from her.

The mourners seemed perfectly happy to ignore her. Not that she wished to talk to any of them. There was Sir Phoebus, Commander of the Kings’ Army, whose wife, Esmeralda, Regina knew (albeit from a distance) as a fellow enchantress. King Richard, of course, and his twit of a brother. A couple of men who may have been knights, and a scruffy young Pridelander with a scratch across one eye.

Regina watched a crowd of noblemen, including Richard, propose a toast to the deceased. She wasn’t deaf to the accusations levelled at her by Richard and a few others who hadn’t come over with the first curse, and so still saw her as the Evil Queen. Richard’s latest ploy, she had discovered the night before, was to insist that she knew of a way to return to the Enchanted Forest and was keeping it from them as a ransom. She didn’t care what he said about her – she’d heard it all before, and much worse besides – but people were listening to him, and dissent was in the air. Neal had made sure to tell her what happened at the town hall, and Regina had the sinking feeling that he was right when he said they could end up with riots in the streets. If they were to avoid that eventuality, they needed to win loyalties, and preferably soon.

The trouble was, Regina’s usual method of doing that was by inciting chaos, not tempering it.
On the other side of the diner, Henry turned the corner to the bathrooms. Regina watched him go with longing in her heart. She truly didn’t care what anybody else in the world thought of her, but knowing that Henry might overhear it – or worse, believe it – was enough to drive her to madness. She’d be happy to give them the damn town if it meant she could have her son back.

Figuring she could pick up her leftovers later, she got out of her seat to leave. She had a potion to check on. Just two more days …

The door opened and hit her in the face. Holding back a string of curses, she rubbed her forehead and scowled upon realising who it was.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Robin’s face shifted from apologetic to a scowl. He ignored her and looked down at the little boy whose hand he held. “Go on, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Can I have ice-cream?” the boy asked, showing gappy teeth. She couldn’t help but think he was adorable.

“Maybe, if you ask Granny nicely.”

The boy squealed happily and disappeared into the crowd. Robin then shifted back to Regina. “I wasn’t aware that the proletariat was forbidden from entering this establishment.”

“You aren’t,” she said, trying to end the conversation quickly. “Excuse me.”

“Regina, have I done something to upset you?”

Her hand was on the door. It would have been so easy to leave if she could make herself open it. But she couldn’t.

“No, not at all,” she answered with her gaze fixed on the linoleum.

“Then why did you run off yesterday?”

Instinctually, her eyes moved from the floor to his wrist. His sleeves were rolled up, the edge of his tattoo peeking out from beneath the right one. So she hadn’t imagined it.

She stared too long. Robin noticed, grimaced and with the briefest wink of self-consciousness, pulled his sleeve down.

“Why are you here?” she repeated, fixing her gaze on the floor.

“Belle saved my life a long time ago,” he explained. “I felt I owed it to her. And don’t change the subject.”

“I –”

“You look unwell.”

“If that’s your attempt to be charming, don’t bother.”

“Not charming, stating a fact,” he defended. “Look, I understand if you don’t want to talk. Nonetheless, I am sorry –”
“No, don’t be,” she interrupted. She finally let go of the door and looked him in the face. “I’m the one who should be sorry. It’s – it’s been a long week. I haven’t had much sleep.”

“None of us have, not with that Witch on the loose.”

“Well, it’s not just that.” She could have ended it there, but he leant against the door, making his grin even more crooked and she had to suppress a smile. “It’s – see, ever since coming back to Storybrooke, I’ve had this … recurring nightmare.”

“Of what?”

“It’s silly.” But that didn’t put him off. Instead, he seemed genuinely interested. So in spite of herself, she told him. “I’m – I’m trapped in a dark room. There’s fire all around. Every time I try to move, the flames lash out at me. When I wake up, it feels as if my hands are on fire.”

“No wonder you haven’t slept.”

She chuckled. “You know what the strange part is? It sounds exactly like the nightmare my son had after he was woken from a sleeping curse. The fire room is a – is a netherworld where the victim’s mind resides while they’re asleep. And sometimes, after the curse is broken, they find their way back.”

He nodded. “And, uh, you think you might have fallen victim to one during the missing year?”

“Except I’m awake,” she said. “And a sleeping curse can only be broken by True Love’s kiss.”

“I see.” He cleared his throat. “Any ideas as to who that might be?”

Her eyes glanced down to his wrist again, and she covered the slip by staring at the floor. “No. I don’t.”

Neal shoved the napkin into his jacket pocket and was contemplating eating something when somebody plopped into Ruby’s vacant seat, bumping the table with far more violence than truly necessary. Hook had been drinking, obviously. Neal sighed. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with a drunken pirate. Especially not this one.

“Look, I just want to talk,” Hook slurred, knocking his flask as he dragged his hand along the table. “About what?”

“I –” he stammered. Neal then noticed Hook seemed, well, upset. The pirate ran a hand through his hair, raised his flask to drink and put it down just as quickly. It hit the table with a hollow ring. It was empty. “I just want to say I – I owe you a – a long overdue apology. We got into so much mess over a … woman.” As he said the word, he glanced into the flask again as if he was hoping it might be magically refilled. “I forgot that, deep down, you’re still that boy I looked after all those years ago.”

“The one you sold out to Pan,” Neal replied automatically.

He almost regretted it upon seeing the hurt on Hook’s face but quashed the feeling. Emma deserved to know exactly what kind of man was contesting to become Henry’s stepfather.

“Bae –”
“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Giving you over to Pan is one of the things I truly regret and –”

“I trusted you!”

Hook visibly recoiled. Neal hadn’t meant to snap but frankly, he’d had enough. In the last day and a half, he’d found out that not only was his father alive but also that he’d been a slave to the Witch for over a year and been forced to do gods only knew what – like murder Belle’s father! They had a name and potentially an address, if she was stupid enough to keep using the farmhouse as a base, but no plan to catch her or get the dagger away from her, except maybe a vague hope that she might target Belle again – an idea that Neal had shot down without a second thought. Granny was right, she’d been through enough. And Henry was still asking questions, none of which Neal had a good answer for. He was just tired of it all, too tired to hold back the avalanche of emotion he’d kept bottled up for two hundred years.

“You know, the night you hid me from the Lost Boys, I – I thought you were different,” he said with a small sniffle. “Instead, you – you did even worse than what he did! Pan, he – you can’t imagine what it was like to live with him. But you – you used me and you lied to me and when I called you on it, you sold me out to a demon!”

“Bae –”

“I’m not finished! You could’ve done something back then but you didn’t! And it’s only now you’re trying to make nice because you want Emma to think you’ve changed, so she’ll like you!”

Okay, so that last part was purely accusation. But Neal knew Hook well enough that he’d have bet money it was true.

“I’m here because I want to make amends,” Hook protested.

“Really?” Neal doubted their conversation had been particularly pleasant from the way Hook kept picking up his empty flask. “All right. Prove it.”

“I’m sorry about your father.”

Neal scoffed. Sorry that the sorcerer he’d been trying to kill for centuries was now possibly being tortured as they spoke? “Yeah. Of course you are.”

“Bae. I mean that sincerely.” Hook leant forwards, enveloping Neal with a cloud of rum smell. “The Dark – Rumplestiltskin and I never liked each other and probably never will, but I wouldn’t wish that Witch on anybody. Not even him.”

Neal still had his doubts, but decided to accept Hook’s words at face value. For now, anyway. He said nothing, just nodded.

Hook still seemed to take that as encouragement, so he added, “Where’s Henry?”

“Bathroom. Why?”

“I was thinking – right now there’s a decent southern wind that should keep up for another few hours. How would you like to take the lad sailing?”

There had to be more to it. “Why?”
“Because now that the Witch’s cover is blown, I can imagine that it’s only a matter of time before she makes her move,” Hook explained. “Given the lad’s current state, it might not be a bad idea to have him out of harm’s way.”

“And you’re offering because –?”

“I told you. I want to make amends.”

As much as Neal wanted to tell Hook to shove off, he had to admit that the pirate had a point. Emma had said more or less the same thing last night. She expected that the Witch would start to attack people in and around town instead of just the woods. Neal, having a bit more experience with fairy tale villains, expected she would make some grand entrance, perhaps with an obligatory monologue and thunderous cackle. One of them, he didn’t remember who, had jokingly suggested a bet.

Either way, getting Henry out of town couldn’t be the worst thing in the world. Especially with his track record for trouble, which his false memories had not fixed.

“Okay. Deal. Just promise me you’ll sober up first, because I’m not taking my son sailing with the captain drunk at the wheel.”

Hook chuckled. “But what fun is that?”

Enchanted Forest, January 2013

The young royals had given her a small laboratory on the south tower, which was relatively isolated from the rest of the castle’s population. Regina wasn’t sure how she felt about the privacy. On one hand, it enabled her to get quite a lot of work done. On the other, she found herself strangely missing the hustle and bustle of the busy castle. More than once, she had actually sought out the company of others.

Said ‘company’ mostly consisted of lingering in the shadows because Regina knew few of them would gladly welcome her, but she had come to realise that she needed it.

Very peculiar.

The quiet did have some perks. In the last months, she had made enormous strides in her plan to capture Zelena. A well-placed arrow dipped in squid ink would no doubt hold her for a few minutes, and Regina thought she was close to finding a way to summon her without needing anything of Zelena’s to work the magic through. The problem she had now was finding a way to contain and question her.

Two months ago, that would not have been a problem. David, Midas, Josef and even Snow, albeit reluctantly, had agreed that eliminating Zelena quickly was the best way to deal with her. But now Belle was missing, most likely imprisoned, and if they were to have any hope of finding her, then they needed to take Zelena alive.

A lot of the commanders had objected when Robin brought up that possibility, arguing that one woman’s life was not worth losing potentially hundreds more. Regina couldn’t help but feel that some of them were biased because of Belle’s former relationship with Rumplestiltskin – or perhaps current relationship, if Zelena had succeeded in bringing him back as Dorothy believed.

Though a part of her wanted to agree that it wasn’t worth the risk, that they could always find her afterwards, a stronger part wanted to take the chance. She could justify it with the excuse that they
could discover the extent of Zelena’s plans, exactly what she was doing with the ogres, why she wanted to rewrite history and how close she was to succeeding. But at the end of the day, Regina felt as if she needed to prove something – not just to the commanders, not just to Snow and David, but to herself. That she really could change, use magic for good, and be a hero.

Like Henry would have wanted.

She left her potion – the one that would hopefully summon the Witch – to simmer and looked out of the window at the town below. It had been nearly a week since the Merry Men, and a few others, had left to try and earn their keep by working in the town. Regina had pretended not to notice Robin leaving, intentionally shutting herself in her room during the departure. He’d been morose, and furious at the fact that David refused to let him venture off into the Alps to look for Belle. He probably would have gone regardless if the friar and the large man they called ‘Little John’ had not forcibly held him back. He really did care for her. Regina hoped he realised that he’d have his work cut out for him if Rumple did come back, as she doubted her former mentor would just roll over and let another man steal his lover’s heart.

Of course, that was assuming Belle was even alive.

Regina tore herself away from the window, ignoring the way her heart twinged at the thought of the outlaw. She refused to allow the foolish notion that he could ever reciprocate how she felt, as it clearly wasn’t the case. When the feeling had settled, she went back to work, reminding herself for the hundredth time that her mission was for Belle’s sake, to save her from whatever horrors the Witch had subjected her to, and not because Regina gave a damn what some landlord turned thief thought of her.

Meanwhile, several miles out of the town of Stephanmeir, Robin and Alan followed the trail of a herd of sheep lost during a recent storm. They had been asked to help by the farmer’s wife, as her husband, who insisted on being addressed as Herr Blau, was too busy berating their eldest son for losing the sheep to be bothered to look for them. Then he had declared, in an unnecessarily loud voice, that he was off to Old Toby’s and wouldn’t be back until later.

At least the wife seemed the decent sort, as evidenced by the poultice she’d given the lad to rub under his eye while they headed into the woods.

The rains had washed away most of the distinctive tracks, but if you knew where to look – as Robin did – then the evidence was all around them

“It was an understandable accident, you know,” Alan told the lad, whose name was Eric, when he stopped to inspect a bush with twigs broken at about waist height. “Lot of wind, lot of lightning. It’s easy to get lost.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Eric replied. “I weren’t where I was supposed to be, and now the sheep’s gone. My fault.”

“How do you know that?”

“My father says.”

Alan huffed. “Well, then your father’s wrong.”

Even from a few yards away, Robin heard the latent anger in his old friend’s voice. Alan didn’t talk
about his family very often but once or twice, during late nights at the pub, he’d admitted to running away from home at a young age. His father drank himself to death not long after. It was still a sore point in the family. Since hearing that story, Robin was immensely grateful that his father had been a reasonable soul.

“He can’t be wrong. He’s my father,” Eric insisted.

“That doesn’t mean he can’t be wrong,” said Alan. “And when he says it’s your fault that the sheep wandered off in the middle of the night, during a storm, he’s definitely wrong. Sheep do stupid things like that and it’s nobody’s fault when they do.”

Eric shifted uncomfortably. Poor lad, thought Robin. He couldn’t be much more than eight years old. “You got any children, Herr Alan?”

“Just call me Alan, Eric.”

“Okay, H – Alan.”

“That’s better. Yeah, I’ve got a daughter. She’d be a bit younger than you, I reckon.”

“Why isn’t she with you?”

Another sore point. Eric might have missed the way Alan hesitated to answer, but Robin didn’t.

“She’s with her mother,” Alan told him. “She’s safer there than she would be with me.”

“What is she safer from, H – Alan?”

Robin interrupted. “There are a lot of bad men who want to hurt us, Alan and me, where we come from. She could get hurt.”

“But you got your son with you.”

“Right.” Robin paused. “That’s because Roland doesn’t have a mother to look after him. Not anymore, anyway.”

“Because of the bad men who want to hurt you?”

“That’s right.”

Eric looked down at his feet and mumbled something.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“My father hurts me.”

“Like your eye?”

Eric nodded. “And Mama, sometimes. When he come home from Old Toby’s place. I don’t like it.”

“And you shouldn’t,” Alan told him. “That’s not a good thing for your father to do.”

“Can I come with you?”

It wasn’t the first time they’d got that request, and Robin suspected it wouldn’t be the last. “How about,” said Alan hesitantly, “when we get back, I’ll talk to your mama. Promise. First we need to
find these sheep. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay. The trail goes up this creek. See those broken branches?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Follow them.”

Eric did, hoisting his oversized shepherd’s crook over his shoulder to make carrying the thing, which was nearly as tall as Robin, easier. He was a strong boy, well fed and healthy. It was a true testament to the lad’s mother that all he bore were a few bruises.

He let Eric get a few yards ahead of them – it wouldn’t do any good to give the lad too many ideas, after all – before suggesting, “What do you reckon Herr Blau would feel about a few drops of swobbersauce in his ale tonight?”

“Delightfully ill, but I was thinking a pint of Hexham’s world-famous scumble would do him wonders,” was Alan’s response.

“We want to intimidate him, not put him in the sickhouse for a week.”

“We could ask Regina to drop him off in Scarborough. That’ll teach him a lesson.”

“How about we try to deal with him first?”

“What? You and your girlfriend have a fight?”

Robin glared at him. Alan ignored the hint. “Come on, you really think any of us missed it?”

“Shut up, will you?”

Alan’s grin just got wider. “Just promise you’ll keep it more discreet than you did with Marian. I tell you, the number of times John and I had to –”

“Alan, now I really mean it,” Robin snapped. “Shut – up. And besides, Regina hates me.”

“Right. Of course she does.”

Alan threw his hands in the air, then drew a line across his mouth with his finger, so Robin refrained from hitting him. On the trail ahead, Eric had shouted something excitedly, and a smudge of off-white fluff appeared in the briar.

“Come on, let’s get these sheep home.”

“Mmm-hmm-hm-mmm,” Alan answered, incomprehensible because he spoke without opening his mouth.

Robin tried not to think about the dowager queen as they helped Eric herd the wayward animals home. After all, she had not spoken to him since leaving Tower Castle and now remained shut inside her lab at Lakeside Palace. As far as Robin was concerned, she had made her feelings perfectly clear.

**Storybrooke, 28 January 2014**
Robin’s little boy had made a friend. Quite a number of them, actually, including Snow and the wolf girl. Nobody – well, nobody important, at least not in Regina’s book – seemed to mind that Roland was making a terrible mess at a funeral, instead enjoying the break in the monotony. Ice-cream appeared to be the flavour of the month, though he hadn’t yet figured out how to keep it from dribbling over his hands and pants. Regina smiled. Henry had been like that, a long time ago.

“How old is he?”

“Well, a week ago he was four and a half,” Robin joked. “Then overnight he skipped five and became a six-year-old. Actually –”

He stopped mid-sentence, staring intently. Regina checked Roland first, thinking something had happened to the boy, but he was happily chatting to Snow. So that wasn’t the problem. She followed his gaze and found that he was focused on the group of noblemen, none of whom had noticed.

“Is something wrong?”

“You could say that,” Robin answered vaguely. “Sorry, m’lady, but I’d like to say hello to Belle and then it’s probably best if I leave.”

He exited politely, doffing an imaginary hat. As Regina watched him go, she noticed that he deliberately walked behind people and ducked to match their height. Tink was one of those, and unfortunately she spotted the same thing Regina had. Eyes wide, the restored fairy cornered her before she could duck out.

“Did you see that? It’s the lion tattoo!” she whispered excitedly.

“I know. I saw it yesterday.”

“And you didn’t tell me?!”

“Yesterday I had better things to do than gossip about boys!”

Tink glared at her with all the ferocity a tiny fairy could manage – which was quite a lot, actually. “Regina, you screwed this up once. Didn’t you learn anything from the last time? What’s he like?”

“Nauseatingly irksome.”

“Ha ha. I’m serious!”

Fortunately – or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how you look at it – Regina was spared further interrogation by the front door being blown open, and a red-haired woman saunter through with a familiar blade held aloft in her hand.

“Oh, dear. Did I arrive too late?”

“Mom, can I ask you something?” Emma asked, taking the stool next to Snow’s. Her mother looked confused, then proudly maternal, and it occurred to Emma that she’d never really done this before. But she didn’t think she was going to work this out on her own and there was nowhere better to go.

“Of course.”

Emma thought over what she wanted to say – given that it could be a delicate topic – but never got
the chance. The door blew inwards, crashing into the wall, and a tall woman dressed entirely in black sauntered in as if she owned the place. Gold’s dagger was in her hand and, in Emma’s opinion, she looked entirely too pleased with herself.

“Oh, dear,” Zelena trilled. “Did I arrive too late? I suppose it’s for the best. I mean, I am, after all, responsible for the poor man’s passing.”

She cast her gaze around the room with that sickening grin plastered on her face, settling on a spot near the back of the diner where a pale-faced Belle stood, unmoving. Neal and Archie both got to their feet and stepped between her and the Witch. Emma jumped up as well – she didn’t have her handgun, but her fists would work just fine. Snow grabbed her and held her back.

“Emma, no. Too many people will get hurt.”

“Listen to your mother, dear,” said Zelena. Now Emma really wanted to punch her, if just to stop the noise. “Anyone who tries to interfere with my plan will have to deal with the Dark One!”

“Fat chance!” Neal shouted from the other side of the room. “You want Belle, you’re gonna have to go through me!”

There was a shout of agreement from Ruby and the dwarfs, and a bark from Pongo that could have meant anything, but Zelena was unperturbed. “Oh, don’t worry about her. I’ve absolutely no interest in the little bookworm now that my secret is out. It’s been a ball watching you fools run amuck the last week, but now it’s time for me to claim credit where credit is due.”

“You’re too late.”

Eyes around the room darted to Regina in the corner. Emma hadn’t even realised she was there. She thought of taking the opportunity to attack while the Witch’s back was turned, focused on Regina, but Snow continued to tighten her grip. She had a point, Emma had to admit. Too many people would get hurt.

“We already know everything. Thanks to an old friend of yours,” Regina continued. “She’s safe, somewhere you’ll never get to her, so don’t bother to try.”

“Oh, you mean Dorothy?” Zelena laughed. “Wonderful! Although I must confess, Regina, you don’t know everything. Not dear old Dorothy’s fault, of course, given that she had no way of knowing about our little connection.”

Regina looked as confused as everyone else. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m your sister.”

Emma could have sworn she’d misheard. She turned to her mother, mouthed “Sister?” and got an equally confused look in return.

“Well, half-sister, if you want to get technical. Cora lied to you.”

Regina scowled. “Why should I believe anything you say?”

“Oh, you shouldn’t. That’s why I brought you – all of you – a gift to help.”

Emma struggled out of Snow’s grip. “We want nothing from you!”

“But you shall have it!” Zelena stepped forward; everyone else stepped back. “My gift to you is this
sad, sad day. Use it to dig into our past, little sister. Learn the truth and believe it. And then meet me on Main Street tonight. Say, sundown at the clock tower.”

Electricity began to crackle in the air between the two sorceresses. “This isn’t the Wild West,” said Regina.

“No, dear. It’s the Wicked West,” Zelena sneered. She turned to the throng of mourners and back to Regina as she spoke. “And you will all be there. To see the Evil Queen lose.”

“I don’t lose.”

“Neither do I. Guess one of us is about to make history. See you tonight, sis.” The Witch gave them all one last sadistic grin, then opened the door to leave. As the bell rang, she seemed to have second thoughts. “Oh. And, Belle, before I forget.” She looked over her shoulder. “Thank you so much for bringing my pet back to his senses. He’s so much more … complaisant.”

Snow couldn’t hold Emma back anymore. She lunged at the Witch, who disappeared with a poof of green smoke, leaving Emma to run unceremoniously into the door frame.

While rubbing her bruised nose, it occurred to her, in the peculiar way things do during stressful events, that this probably counted as a grand entrance. Which meant she owed Neal one breakfast in bed.

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**Enchanted Forest, February 2013**

Late in the fourth month of their stay at Lakeside Palace, with no favourable scouting reports to suggest that returning to the war would be anything other than a waste of life and time, David dragged her out of their chambers ridiculously early one morning and refused to tell her why. Snow was frustrated with him until he finally let her open her eyes at the bottom of the hill on which the castle sat.

The frigid winter winds had already broken in Dacia, giving way to gentle breezes and light rains that indicated spring was on the way. The breeze danced across the surface of the lake, sending silver ripples racing towards the bank. The sun was blocked by a thick layer of cloud above the mountain, but its light shone through holes in the cloud cover, sending rays down to sparkle on the water. A blanket had been laid out on the water’s edge.

“A picnic?”

David smiled her favourite smile in the world. “Surprise.”

He led her by the hand down to the waterfront, where a wicker basket was waiting for them. David opened it to reveal sandwiches, pears and a bottle of some liquor that the Dacians were strangely proud of.

“What’s all this for?” she asked, sitting down on the blanket with her reclining husband.

“I needed a break from dealing with Hubert,” said David, maybe half-joking and half-honest. “And I wanted to treat my wife, who I’ve barely seen outside of a dusty castle room in months. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all.”
They clinked glasses and took a sip. It wasn’t bad, in Snow’s opinion.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so busy,” he said.

“We’ve been fighting a war almost since we arrived. It’s not your fault.”

“I know. It’s just that – we had so many plans when we got back from Neverland, and it just feels like, with everything, it all keeps getting pushed back.”

“Yeah. I know that too,” she admitted.

“She’d be almost a year and a half old by now.”

She looked at him, feeling like she’d missed something. “Sorry?”

“Emma,” he clarified. “If we hadn’t had the curse, she’d be nearly eighteen months old. We’d be in the royal palace, teaching her to walk … maybe with a little brother on the way.”

He said that with a look Snow knew all too well. She kissed him, quick and chaste as she didn’t want to progress any further on the lake, in the open. “I know. I think about it too. But she’d want us to live for the future, not get caught up in what ifs. And I believe she’s happy. I don’t know how, I can just feel it.”

“I just wish I could know for sure.”

Snow had told David about what Regina said to her on the King’s Road, that Emma, Neal and Henry had no memory of them anymore. He had been understandably upset, blustered a lot, but then calmed down when Regina explained why she had to do it.

It still hurt, knowing that wherever Emma was, she thought of them as deadbeat parents who abandoned her as a baby and then made it impossible for her to find them. It hurt more than Snow could describe and if there had been a way for her to reach out to her daughter, she would have done it in a heartbeat. She wondered if that was how Rumplestiltskin had felt during his centuries-long search for Neal, and if she would ever be desperate enough to resort to his measures. But for now the situation was what it was, and there was nothing Snow, or Regina, or anybody else could do about it except believe that one day they would see each other again. If not in this life, then the next one.

David leant in close so that their foreheads touched. Snow had missed this, just being alone her True Love, in the long months they’d been forced to spend apart while he led the army and she managed diplomatic affairs in the wake of their return. They had responsibilities, but Snow had to admit that there were times she wished the rest of the world would spare them just ten minutes for themselves.

She was about to suggest that they disappear into their chambers for a short while, maybe to work on the future they had wanted so desperately in Storybrooke, when a dot of bright light caught her eye above the mountains. It wasn’t from the sun – that was on the other side, beyond a different set of peaks – and looked like a star, growing bigger and brighter even as Snow watched it. It flashed brilliant blue, and she gasped in realisation.

“David, look!” she exclaimed. Dozens more bright dots joined the first until all the colours of the rainbow glowing in the daytime sky. “It’s Blue! The fairies – they’re back! The fairies are back!”
Next, Chapter 18: A Shot at Redemption. In the Enchanted Forest, the war resumes with the fairies leading the charge and someone is hurt defending Knightsbridge Castle. In Storybrooke, Neal and Henry have father-son time while a witch fight takes place.
A Shot at Redemption

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Storybrooke, 28 January 2014**

After Zelena left, the diner fell into chaos. Left, right and centre, people demanded to know what the hell had just happened, who Zelena was, what she meant, if Regina was working with her and a thousand other things, all at once. After a while, Leroy climbed on top of the counter and shouted, “Oi! Settle down! This is still a funeral, for heaven’s sakes!”

That seemed to shut them up, although Regina could still feel their accusing eyes on her. She had to turn away before she incinerated the lot of them, as she had far more important things to think about.

Zelena had claimed to be her sister. That couldn’t possibly be true, but it was also a dumb thing for somebody to lie about given that any half-brained magician could prove (or disprove) the claim in ten seconds flat. That left two possibilities – one, that Zelena was delusional, which Regina was not ready to rule out, or two, that Cora had lied to her.

Strangely, she couldn’t bring herself to rule out that possibility either.

She then noticed that she and Tinkerbell had been joined in the corner by Snow, Emma, the one-handed wonder and Neal. Or Baelfire, whatever the hell his name was these days. They were all waiting for her.

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” she said after a moment. “I don’t have a sister.”

“She seems to think otherwise,” said Neal in that annoying way that reminded Regina far too much of his father. “Cora never mentioned her at all?”

“I think I would remember if my mother told me she had a love child with a scarecrow.”

“It doesn’t matter if Zelena is your sister or not,” Emma interrupted. “She wants you dead.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

Emma ignored her. “Any idea why?”

Regina huffed. “None. I’ve never even met her before today.”

“That doesn’t mean you didn’t do something to piss her off,” Tink added unhelpfully. “You did manage to step on a lot of toes back in our world.”

“Well, none of them were green.” The chair scraped against the floor as Regina got up. “It’s starting to sound an awful lot like you’re on her side.”

She headed for the door, thankfully this time with no outlaws, fairies or sororicidal witches to interrupt her.

“Where are you going?” Emma called after her.

Without stopping, Regina told them, “To find out exactly what this witch thinks I did to her.”
The door swung shut behind Regina, only for Snow to open it as she followed her stepmother out of the diner. Neal stopped Emma from going after them.

“She’ll be all right with Regina,” he reminded her.

“It’s not my mom I’m worried about.”

“Yeah, but –”

“Mom? Dad?” Henry suddenly popped out of the crowd, looking concerned. He’d been in the bathroom and missed it all, which Neal supposed was a small blessing. “What’s going on?”

“It’s all right, buddy.”

“I heard yelling.”

“Yeah, there was ... a development.”

That only made Henry more confused. “Huh?”

Hook stepped in, which Neal had never thought he’d be grateful for. “How about I take the lad down to the docks? We’ll wait for you there.”

Now it was Emma’s turn to look puzzled. “The docks?”

“Yeah. Uh, listen.” Neal pulled Emma aside, hoping Hook would keep Henry from eavesdropping. He whispered anyway just in case. “Hook’s offered to take us sailing. I was going to take him up on it but given what just happened –”

“No, you should go.”

“But the Witch –”

“It’d be good for you. For both of you. And if something does go wrong and the Witch turns on the town ...” She trailed off, casting a sideways glance at Henry. Her meaning hung in the air with no need to be said aloud. “It gets Henry out of the way.”

And as much as Neal wanted to stick around, he knew she was right. Their son’s safety had to come first.

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed, though still reluctant. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“With any luck.”

Regina’s vault was as dark as Snow remembered. She aimed her flashlight at various points around the walls and the floor, feeling more disturbed by the second.

“There aren’t any booby traps or anything I should keep an eye out for?” she asked her stepmother’s hunched back. “I don’t think a sleeping curse would be good for the baby.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Regina muttered as she rummaged through an old chest. “Although now that
you mention it, don’t step on that line.”

She may have been joking, she may not have been. Snow decided it wasn’t worth the risk and stepped over the crack in the floor anyway. She joined Regina next to the chest, which was full of old clothes. “Whose are those?”

“My mother’s. Can I have that?” she asked, taking the flashlight off Snow without waiting for an answer. Snow let her have it, then felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

“Emma says they’re locking down Main Street in case this fight actually happens. And Neal’s taken Henry sailing with Hook, so at least they’re out of the way,” she said, reading her daughter’s text. “Good.”

“So, is she telling the truth? Is Zelena really your sister?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t found anything –”

She broke off mid-sentence, having found something that crinkled inside Cora’s old clothes. It looked like a letter. Regina gingerly opened it, and as she read her expression fell from curiosity into anger.

“What is it?” Snow asked, wondering if she should run.

If it was possible, Regina’s face became even darker. “Zelena is my sister.”

“What? How do you know?”

Regina folded the letter and placed it in her pocket. “It’s my fight. I’ve got it in hand.”

“Regina –”

But she was already gone, and this time, Snow didn’t think she would be able to follow her.

**Enchanted Forest, February 2013**

The Council was summoned as quickly as possible after the fairies arrived on the shores of the lake. Snow, brimming with renewed hope, barely managed to keep herself from bounding up the stairs. Blue was back. That meant good had a chance once more.

The chamber set aside for the Council was brighter than it had ever been, illuminated by light fracturing from the fairies’ wings. Snow eagerly hugged Tinkerbell tight, then spotted Astrid and barely got out of the way before she ran to greet Leroy. Once the reunions were over, Blue cleared her throat and called the session to order.

“First of all, I would like to apologise for our absence these last eight months,” she began, using the power of her glance to make everyone settle. “As you undoubtedly understand, there’s been much work to do, restoring our homeland in the wake of the Dark Curse.”

Snow didn’t miss how Blue glanced accusingly in Regina’s direction, or how Regina bristled at the mention of the curse. She gently touched her stepmother’s arm. Now was not the time to be recounting others’ past actions.

“We were aware of the war being waged against the ogres, but until now we have been unable to get
away from a more pressing responsibility,” Blue continued. “An old enemy had emerged from the shadows in our absence. I’m happy to report that the situation is now dealt with.”

“So you know how to defeat the ogres?” asked David.

“Of course,” said Blue. “The challenge will be greater than it was in the past but I believe the fairy collective is up to the task. The Witch has increased their strength to a number unheard of.”

“What about the Dark One? We were told that she intended to bring him back to life and use his power for herself.”

“I’m afraid she has already succeeded. With the help of his former maid.”

“Belle? So the Witch did take her? Is she all right?” Snow asked in quick succession.

Blue darkened and fluttered her wings sadly. “I’m afraid, given the cost demanded of returning the darkness to the land of the living, that it is most likely the poor child is dead.”

The room went silent as people processed that information. Snow gasped. It couldn’t be possible. After a short while, David murmured, “Belle’s dead?”

“I’m sorry. It is a tragedy.”

On the other side of the room, Mulan spoke up. “Do you know how to kill the Witch?”

“We have a plan to drive the ogres back to their homeland. As for the Witch herself, she is crafty and elusive. It may take more effort to capture her, particularly if she has the Dark One in thrall.”

“So we break her alliance with the ogres first. Get the immediate threat out of the way,” said David.

“Precisely.”

“Excuse me.” Dorothy stepped out from behind Ruby and all eyes turned to her. “I don’t mean to be presumptuous, Your –” she faltered, seeming unsure of what title to give to Blue. Snow wondered if Dorothy had ever seen a fairy before. “Your – uh, ma’am. But I don’t believe that Zelena really is allied with the ogres. I know her from when I was a little girl. For her to depend on anyone but herself is entirely out of character. She’s not the type to ally with those monsters. She’s not the type to ally with anyone, really.”

Blue narrowed her eyes. “It’s Dorothy Gale, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The girl from Kansas,” Blue mused, looking Dorothy up and down. “Well, Miss Gale, I do appreciate your input but I believe it to be unfounded. There is simply no other explanation as to how the ogre hordes have become so powerful.”

“But –”

“Nonetheless, the immediate concern is reclaiming the lost kingdoms. So, Cyan, if you would, please.”

The fairies quickly outlined their plan of attack while David, Mulan and almost everyone else listened in, contributing to the project where necessary. Snow lost track of it eventually, but she wasn’t the only one to do so. Dorothy appeared to be only half-listening as well, spying on Blue with
a high degree of suspicion. Snow made a note to talk to her later and make sure she didn’t feel too offended. Blue could be a little abrupt and smothering, Snow knew that as well as anyone, but the senior fairy was the wisest person she knew. If she believed the Witch to be behind the attacks, then Snow couldn’t see how she could be wrong.

**Storybrooke, 28 January**

Word had spread quickly of the Witch’s show at the diner. People were flocking from every direction into Main Street, which was exactly the last place they needed to be at that moment. The dwarves were in the process of installing roadblocks and asking people to return home or to the town hall, but Emma couldn’t see it lasting long before something exploded. And if Regina didn’t show up – which Emma had a sinking feeling was a distinct possibility, as she wasn’t picking up her phone – then they all had a very big problem.

At least they had most of the day to deal with that problem. Mulan had volunteered to tackle the most immediate one, which was how to deal with the Witch.

“We can position archers on those roofs, that terrace and those alleys,” said the warrior woman, pointing to the appropriate parts of the street. “That way we should have at least one person with a clear line of sight at all times. We just need to come up with a way of signalling each other that won’t alert the Witch to their presence.”

“That’s easy, we’ll use radios,” said Emma.

Mulan frowned in confusion. “What’s a radio?”

“It’s a sort of long-distance communication thing. You talk into one end, and the other person can hear you.” Mulan still looked puzzled. “The Witch won’t be able to hear it.”

“There’s still the problem of the Dark One,” Tink chimed in. “I’ve talked to Blue, but she said she believes it’s wiser to heed Zelena’s warning and not interfere. I shouldn’t even be here right now.”

Emma nodded. “If you need to leave, that’s okay. We’ll sort something else out.”

Tink only grinned. “Since when have I been one to do what I’m told?”

“Excellent.” Emma gave the small fairy a grateful smile. “So we’ve got one fairy on the ground, archers – what about her monkeys?”

“We should have groups patrol the town and the woods just in case she tries to build the ranks,” said Robin. “I can take one group out, and Alan another. If we’re all armed, then we shouldn’t have a problem defending ourselves. And we’ll come back here before sundown to man those positions.”

“Okay. Go.”

The outlaw had disappeared before it occurred to Emma to ask where he intended to get the bows from. She figured she may have to offer the storekeeper an apology before the day was out.

“Question. What are we going to do if Regina doesn’t show up?” asked Tink. “I don’t know if I could handle the Witch alone, not if she’s got the Dark One on her side.”

“We need to get the dagger away from her,” said Emma.
“How? You saw her. She has it practically glued to her hand.”

Emma had an idea. “Dorothy. Dorothy!”

She turned and ran back to the diner, where she found Archie, Ruby and Belle trying to convince a large crowd to go home. Dorothy was among them, although on whose side Emma couldn’t tell. At the moment, it didn’t matter.

“Dorothy!” Emma panted as she reached them. She pulled her aside, so they could talk without frightening the rest of the crowd. “You said yesterday that you know Zelena from Oz. Do you know anything that could help us fight her?”

She looked thoughtful. “Uh, not really. Looking back, I escaped her more through dumb luck than anything.”

“So a bucket of water won’t do anything?”

“Well, she did sort of … melt,” Dorothy said with a look of disgust. “When I tried it. But I don’t know whether that had any actual effect on her or if it was just for show. Either way, I know it didn’t work long-term.”

“It’s better than nothing.” Emma took out her phone to call the fire brigade, then felt Dorothy’s hand on her arm.

“There’s something else I think you should know. When I was in Oz last, I learned that Zelena has been putting together a spell. A spell to travel back in time.”

“A time-travel spell? What for?”

In retrospect, she realised it was a dumb thing to ask. What would anybody use a time-travel spell for? Dorothy chose not to ridicule her for it.

“I don’t know exactly what it is she wants to change, but I do know that there are four ingredients. Courage, a resilient heart, a brilliant mind and one other I’m not too sure of.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Dorothy bit her lip. “Because I think she might be trying to get one of them from your friend. The woman she claims is her sister.”

“From Regina?” Dorothy nodded. “So are they really sisters?”

“I have no idea. But I think it might be worth it to warn her.”

“Yeah.” Emma dialled Regina’s number. “You might be right about that.”

The phone rang three times and then went to voicemail. “Hey, Regina. It’s Emma. Listen, I get it that you don’t want to talk but we’ve got some new information you might be interested in. Apparently Zelena’s collecting the ingredients for a time-travel spell. Dorothy says that there’s, uh, courage, a heart, a mind and something else that she isn’t too sure about yet. She thinks Zelena might be trying to get one of them from you. Uh, I don’t know if that makes a difference. But we’ve got Main Street locked down and ready to go anyway. Uh, hope to see you later. Bye.”

She could only hope that Regina would get the message.
Neal was glad that he’d thought to bring an extra jacket. The wind Hook appeared so keen on had frozen his exposed skin already. He hiked up the docks to where Hook was waiting with Henry, next to a boat that was very obviously not the Jolly Roger.

He did notice that the boat had a few fishing poles, though. He didn’t know what would be nibbling, but it was worth a try.

“So, ready to go?” he asked.

Hook extended his good hand. “Hop on board, sailors.”

“Wait, this is the boat we’re taking out?” Henry asked, looking disappointed. “I thought you had like, a pirate ship or something.”

“Of course I do. However, she’s, uh, currently indisposed. So we’re just going to have to make do.”

“We’re stealing somebody’s boat?”

“Borrowing,” Hook clarified, grunting as he hauled a cooler on board. “It’s only stealing if we don’t intend to bring her back.”

“We’ll leave some money for fuel when we get back,” Neal added. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Henry carefully climbed onto the side, wobbling as he found his sea legs. Neal’s replaced memories informed him that this was the first time Henry had ever been on a boat, even though in reality he’d helped sail the Jolly Roger from Manhattan to Storybrooke nearly two years ago.

Had it been two years? Neal shook his head at the thought. It seemed like longer.

Hook quickly took charge, getting the sails into position and occasionally shouting requests for one rope or another.

Henry watched them, his curious mind triggered and paying attention to every detail. “Where did you learn to sail?”

Neal chuckled. “Well, this is gonna sound crazy, but when I was a bit older than you, I was actually a midshipman on the Jolly Roger. That’s Hook’s ship, when he’s not ‘borrowing’ others’.”

“Really? You never said.”

“Yeah, well, it was a long time ago.” He finished rolling up a length of rope, dropped it neatly onto the floor and then sat on the side next to his son. A couple of days ago, he’d promised to tell Henry some stories from the Enchanted Forest. That hadn’t happened because, in the wake of everything else, Neal had just plain forgotten. No wonder Henry had been feeling left out. “Hey, I’m sorry Mom and I have been so busy.”

“It’s okay, Dad. You’ve had stuff to do,” Henry said with a crooked grin. “And I know the reason we’re doing this is because you and Mom want me out of the way of the witch fight. I’m not deaf, you know. Everyone at Granny’s was talking about it.”

Neal laughed. There really wasn’t a way to keep Henry out of anything, was there? “You know that’s not the only reason, right?”

“I know. I’m just saying, it’s okay.”
Hook shouted for help with something. Neal ruffled Henry’s hair, much to his son’s annoyance – even though the ocean wind had already shaped it into something resembling a bird’s nest – and went to assist. For all Hook’s seafaring wisdom, there was one thing he just couldn’t figure out: how to read the fancy dials in the cabin.

In the woods, it was unlikely that she would have to talk to anyone unless Zelena’s monkeys decided to have another go at her. For what felt like the millionth time, Regina unfolded Rumplestiltskin’s letter, re-read the familiar script and felt another chip in her resolve.

So absorbed she was that she didn’t realise she had company until Robin’s voice jolted her out of her skin.

“We have to stop meeting like this.”

She hid the letter from his gaze and glared at the outlaw, hoping he would get the message. He didn’t, or chose to ignore it. “Did Snow send you to give me a pep talk? Because I don’t do pep talks.”

“No, no, nothing of the sort,” he said, taking a seat beside her on the log. She shifted so that he was forced to face her shoulder. “I was concerned that Zelena might try to build the ranks of her simian army, so I took a group out to patrol the woods. How are you holding up?”

“I’m not a flying monkey, if that’s what you mean.”

He chuckled. “So, what’s in that letter you’ve been staring at?”

“What letter?”

“This one.”

Regina twisted on the log. Robin had the letter, unopened, in his hand, held up so that she could see it.

“I’m a pickpocket by trade,” he explained with a guilty look. “I’ve spent many years learning how to rob from magicians.”

“You’re lucky I’m saving my strength for the Witch.”

“Well, there’s that. But I think, deep down, you actually want to talk about what’s in here.”

She scoffed. “What makes you think you know me so well?”

“For one thing, I’ve a feeling I’d be charred to a crisp by now if you didn’t.”

“True.”

“So, can I read it?”

“Not stopping you,” she said with a shrug. She knew it off by heart anyway, and found herself thinking the words even as he said them.

“Cora, dear. I’ve finally got my hands on your first born. Never thought I’d find her, did you? Now I know why. She’s the most powerful sorceress I’ve ever encountered. Even more powerful than you.
Stunning in every way."

There was a crinkling as Robin folded the letter. “Rather complimentary, I’d say. Why is this troubling you?”

She shut her eyes. “I’ve seen that letter a hundred times before. In my – in my darkest moments, I’d go to it for comfort. For solace. For a boost when I needed it. Because I –” She stopped, unable to continue.

“Because you always thought it was about you,” Robin finished for her. She opened her eyes to see his. There was no pity, or anger, or anything else she was used to seeing in others. “It’s about Zelena.”

“Rumplestiltskin thinks she’s more powerful than I am.”

“Why care what that imp thinks?”

“Because if the man who taught me everything I know about magic,” she said, pretending that her voice wasn’t wavering, “thinks that she is stronger than I am … then there’s no way I can win this fight.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by her phone ringing. Regina grumbled when she saw the number.

“Aren’t you going to answer?”

“No.”

The phone clicked as it went to voicemail. “Hey, Regina. It’s Emma. Listen, I get it that you don’t want to talk but we’ve got some new information you might be interested in …”

As the library clock clicked to half past four, the rim of the sun dipped beneath the horizon. It was officially sundown, and Regina was nowhere to be seen. Emma scanned the crowd, which was thinner than it had been a few hours ago but still much denser than she would have liked. She growled and stomped back to the middle of the street where Archie, Snow, Leroy and Belle were waiting. Tink had hidden in a nearby shop, waiting for Emma’s signal to say that they were ready to play their ace card. Up on the terrace, a glint of streetlight on metal arrows was all that gave away the archers’ presences – sans Robin, who had also not shown up – and in a nearby alley, a fire crew stood by with hoses at the ready. A mismatched and hopelessly outgunned army, but the best they could scrounge up.

Not for the first time, Emma turned to her mother and asked, “Do you have any idea where she went after she ran out of the vault?”

“None,” Snow replied.

“We’ve checked her house, the town hall. Happy even went to check under the cannery,” said Leroy. “She’s done a runner.”

“Damn it, Regina,” Emma muttered under her breath. Any other time she was fine with Regina running off, but why did she have to do it now? “All right, let’s get the rest of these people out of the way before Zelena gets here.”
Then a gust of wind carried her words away, someone screamed, and something appeared in the crowd.

It was grotesque, a monster of some sort, with a glittering exoskeleton that may have been solid diamond. Hundreds upon hundreds of eyes covered its entire body, from its spiny tail to the curve of white talons jutting out from six lizard-like feet, and a pair of pincers at the front of what might have been its face made clicking noises, like a giant, dazzling insect.

People began to run onto the street as other monsters appeared; some with feathers, some with fur, some vaguely human mixed with lizards, birds, wolves and even an elephant. No two looked alike, and they were all deadly. They didn’t seem to be attacking, but rather shepherding everyone out into the open like lambs for slaughter. Flying monkeys bomb-dived onto the streets, grazing people’s heads with their feet, and then landed on the rooftops where they tussled with the hidden archers.

On the ground below, Emma drew her gun. “Everybody down!” she shouted. Then she fired. The bullet shot clean through the jewelled monster and into the brick wall of the library, creating a hole in the monster that rippled, then filled itself in like it was made of cloud.

“No one is going anywhere.”

Gun still drawn, Emma wheeled around to see Zelena emerge from the shadows, dressed in black with green gloves. A very battered Mr Gold stood behind her. His hair was lank and unkempt, patches of dirt – and other things Emma didn’t want to think about – stained his clothes and when he walked, she saw the distinct signs of a prisoner. Head down, shoulders hunched, determinedly not making eye contact. She spared one moment to glance at Belle, who was being held back by Archie.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Emma muttered under her breath, hoping Belle would be sensible and stay out of it. Louder, she shouted to Zelena, “Do not come any closer!”

Zelena waved her hand, and the next thing Emma knew she was on the ground at Snow’s feet, the breath knocked out of her lungs by the impact with the asphalt.

“Sorry, dear. But I don’t dance with amateurs.” Zelena smiled sadistically, knocking Emma down again when Snow tried to help her up. She felt like a toy being thrown around purely for the sake of it.

All around, people huddled together, fear radiating off them in waves as the monsters circled, clicking, clacking and chittering from creature to creature. A rising green cloud grew behind the crowd, obstructing outside view and trapping them in a magical dome. Their only magician was on the wrong side of the wall. In all likelihood, there wasn’t much Tink could do in any case.

Meanwhile, Zelena strutted around the middle of the street, revelling in the atmosphere of fear. “So where is she? Where is my sister? Hmm. Don’t tell me. She’s a coward. If Regina isn’t here in five minutes –” she raised the dagger above her head – “I’m going to let the Dark One off his leash.”

Stay on, Regina, Emma begged, looking around at the hundred or so people stuck in the dome, trapped with no way out by a sociopath who could kill them all in a heartbeat, because Regina hadn’t shown up. Where are you?

Shortly before the sun set, Hook directed the borrowed yacht into a secluded bay a few miles north of Storybrooke. There was no moon, just the speckles of stars and the yacht’s headlights reflecting off the water. They used the small escape boat to land on the beach, after which they found some
driftwood for a fire, Neal broke out the six-pack he’d brought along and Henry experimented with the fishing rod. So far all he’d managed to do was get tangled in the line. Neal shared a small laugh with Hook as they watched him try to free himself.

“He’s a good lad.”


He prodded a loose piece of driftwood back onto the fire while Henry continued to struggle, having somehow managed to tie the line in a knot around the sinker. Hook sighed.

“I guess I forgot about the promise I made you after our return from Neverland,” he admitted sorrowfully, tapping the beer against his knee. Neal shook his head, and Hook clarified, “To let the lad’s parents have a chance instead of running off with his mother like a proper rogue.”

“Oh. That one.”

In all honesty, Neal had forgotten about that. Neverland seemed like a lifetime ago. And in a way, it had been.

“I just wanted you to know, the promise still stands.”

He was sad, Neal realised, in the way of a man used to getting what he wanted and being refused. He wondered if Emma was the first woman who had ever turned him down. The thought gave him a small twinge of pride, knowing that she hadn’t turned him away as she apparently had done to Hook.

Okay, so Neal was biased, but he truly thought Emma deserved the best. He wasn’t saying it had to be him, although Neal still held out the hope that they could make things work and that would be a hell of a lot easier without Hook butting in to make a mess of things. They had a long way to go, and though Neal had no idea where they would be in a year, a month or even the next day, if it turned out that the only thing to come from them being together was Henry, then Neal was happy with that.

But there was one thing he was sure of, and that was the pirate now gazing wistfully at the ocean was not the same pirate who had sold Neal out to Pan as a boy. Hook was far from redeemed in Neal’s book, but he was starting to think that it wasn’t impossible.

“You know, Killian, you can be a good guy. Sometimes.”

“Aye,” the pirate agreed, chuckling with him. “It happens on occasion, usually at the most inconvenient of times.”

Neal thumped him on the back as a way of saying that there were no hard feelings, then had a moment of panic when Henry yelped in pain. He had succeeded in untangling the line, but when he tried to cast it, the sinker had come around and hit him in the hand. Chuckling to himself, Neal pardoned himself and went to help his kid.

“Here, do it like this,” he said, taking up the extra rod. “Kick the line roller back, hold the line with your finger, like this, and let it go as you cast.”

Henry watched him do it, the sinker hitting the water some twenty or so yards away with what Neal felt was a satisfying *plop*, and then copied the motions. He muffled an excited squeal as it landed about a yard beyond his father’s.

“Hey, not bad.”
They plunked the rods into the sand so they didn’t have to hold them up the whole time. Henry kept his hand on the line, waiting for the tiniest of movement. Neal didn’t bother. If something caught, they would know it straight away.

While watching the water ripple below, Henry asked, “Did your dad teach you to fish?”

“No. I learned to fish in California,” Neal told him. “Where Pop and I lived was near the sea, but we were usually too busy with the sheep to go fishing. Besides, our version of a fishing rod was a roll of twine tied to a stick.”

“What was he like?”

“Huh?”

“Your dad,” Henry repeated, jingling the line hopefully. “What was he like?”

Neal had to think for a moment. It had been such a long time, and most of that had been spent with not-so-fantastic memories of his father. But it had been good, once, if he thought back far enough. “He was … he was great,” he said after a minute or two. “I mean, it was just me and him for a long time after my mom left us. So we were pretty close.”

“Really?” Henry looked surprised. “The book said he was like, some evil sorcerer or something.”

“Yeah. No, that happened a lot later,” Neal explained. “He became the Dark One when I was fourteen.”

“Why?”

“He –” Neal paused, wondering how to explain it. Talk about positions he never thought he would have been in! “He was trying to save me from dying in a war. It didn’t exactly go according to plan.”

“His curse, you mean?”

“Yeah. It changed him, made him paranoid and angry. And violent. Not to me, but he hurt other people, and they began to treat me differently because of it.”

“But he was good once?”

“Yeah. He was good, once.”

“No,” Henry bit his lip, deep in thought – “Do you think he would have liked me?”

Neal was about to say that Henry could ask him that himself, then remembered that Henry thought Rumplestiltskin was dead. Among other things, he hadn’t got around to telling him about the whole somehow-the-Witch-brought-him-back-from-the-dead thing, and apparently Henry had yet to read about it in the book. That could probably be saved for after he got his memories back, and had a better understanding of magic. The simple truth would do for now.

“Yeah. He would have loved you.”

Henry smiled. Then his rod arced, and the line began to strain. Neal held it down before it went flying off the beach as his surprised son had let it go.

“Okay, grab it! Good. Now the handle – the handle, pull it! Attaboy!”
Five minutes felt like a lifetime to Emma, and it still wasn’t enough time. Wherever Regina was, whatever was waiting for them when Zelena was done with them, she made a silent promise to track Regina down and give her hell for the rest of eternity.

And if she wasn’t much mistaken, Zelena looked equally as enraged at Regina’s absence. Her monsters trembled excitedly as they watched the clock. Were they waiting for her orders, Emma wondered.

“Time’s up,” she declared. She walked over to Gold, and with a sinister sneer, held the tip of the dagger against his chin. “Who are we killing first, dearie? Too bad your son’s not around. He’d be the perfect candidate.”

At the mention of Neal, Emma felt something protective flare up inside her. “He’s not killing anyone!” she shouted, making sure the Witch heard her. This was her responsibility, and no-one else’s. “If you wanna fight someone, Zelena, fight me.”

Zelena scoffed. “Didn’t you hear me the first time? I don’t dance with amateurs.”

For the third time that night, Emma found herself tossed onto the road like a throwaway letter. Now she was really feeling insulted.

“Anybody else want to give it a go?” Zelena called out to the crowd. Her eyes fell on Belle. “How about you, lovely? I bet you’re just dying to free your lover from me.”

“Don’t you t–” Gold started with a sudden burst of spirit, but one wave of the dagger and he clamped up, looking as if he was trying to swallow his tongue. Emma grimaced. It was painful just to watch.

The creatures riled up even more, their sadistic creator cackled, and the dome started to collapse, pushing people into the middle of the street as they tried to get away from flashes of green lightning. Emma reached for her gun, figuring that they had nothing to lose –

“Stop!”

All heads turned to look at the spot where Regina had just walked through a giant blue praying mantis. In an instant, the crowd had become invisible to Zelena as bloodthirsty eyes turned on her sister.

“Didn’t anyone tell you?” Regina said, waggling a finger at Zelena’s get-up. “Black is my colour.”

When she arrived on Main Street, it had been to a crew of burly firefighters and one small fairy attempting to find a way through a wall of green smoke and lightning. Regina walked straight through – the Witch wanted her to come, and there was no reason to keep her waiting.

The Witch was certainly determined to show off, as evidenced by the magical dome and the scores of iridescent creatures surrounding the trapped crowd. The people were appropriately terrified, but Regina wasn’t. She knew the creatures were only illusions, and proved the point by walking through the one in front of her, ignoring the cold chill that it gave her on the way. The Witch wasn’t the only one who knew how to make a dramatic entrance.
“Didn’t anyone tell you? Black is my colour.”

Zelena chuckled in response. “But it looks so much better on me, don’t you think? I was beginning to think you weren’t going to show up.”

“I couldn’t let my sister off the hook that easily.”

Though she certainly wouldn’t mind borrowing the pirate’s hook to wipe the self-satisfied smirk off her face.

“Aha. So you’ve accepted me into the family?”

“I have accepted that we shared a mother, yes,” Regina admitted. The tale was just too ridiculous to be a lie, and she had already conducted a small test using one of Zelena’s hairs found at Snow’s loft just to check. Zelena was her sister, and now she had important things to do. “I still have one question, though: what the hell did I ever do to you?”

If ever there was an embodiment of jealousy – for that emotion Regina could recognise with no problem – then Zelena was it.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she sneered. “You were born.”

The green dome was suddenly gone, replaced by a blazing emerald fireball in the sky that hurtled down to where Regina had been a split second ago. She re-materialised on the other side of the street and realised how close it had been; her sleeves were smoking.

“He should have chosen me!” Zelena screeched, breaking a street light in half and sending it flying. Regina redirected it to collide with the library wall. “You don’t even realise what you had! You never did!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

She let her magic fly, hitting Zelena in the face with a cloud of electricity. Zelena simply waved it away as if it were nothing more than a fly.

“Rumplestiltskin, of course! He chose you, and now I’m going to prove him wrong!”

Regina dodged another fireball and flung back one of her own, grateful that the crowd had seen sense and fled as soon as the dome collapsed. Zelena’s illusions were gone as well, but she could hear the distinctive rustle of feathers. The monkeys were still around.

“You got everything I ever wanted! And you didn’t even deserve it!” Zelena continued to screech. She sent consecutive spells, too fast for Regina to dismantle or deflect them all, and the last one broke through her weakened defences. It sent her crashing through the window of the tea shop. Zelena floated through the broken glass. “But I’m going to take it all away from you!”

Magic-induced exhaustion was a funny thing, Regina mused as her muscles refused to work and lift her off the ground. The world became a mess of colour, like the kaleidoscope Henry used to love. She chuckled at the thought of her boy. Maybe one day he would remember her as his mother without a spell, and he would be proud of her.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” she goaded. Zelena could take everything, but she couldn’t make Regina give in. “Kill me.”

“I never said I wanted to kill you,” Zelena laughed, leaning in far too close so that Regina could
smell the lemon on her breath. “I said I want to destroy you. And for that, I need something from you.”

She plunged her hand into Regina’s chest. It hurt less than Regina had expected, but that may have been due to adrenaline. Or her body was too tired to register the pain. Zelena withdrew her hand after only a moment with empty fingers.

“Where is it?!"  

Regina smirked. Emma’s earlier warning had not gone entirely unnoticied, and so she had prepared for this possibility. “Our mother did teach me one thing, Zelena. Never bring your heart to a witch fight.” Weakly, she stood up. “Something you’d know if she hadn’t abandoned you.”

Anger blazed in Zelena’s eyes. “You haven’t won, Regina. I will get your heart! This isn’t over!”

“I would be disappointed if it was!”

Green smoke enveloped her sister, and she was alone. Regina leant against the wall. She could kill for a warm bath.

That would have to wait, as the door to the shop opened and three dark shadows walked in. She held up a hand to shield her face from Tink and Emma’s flashlights, and heard Snow’s gasp of relief.

“Are you all right?” her stepdaughter asked, rushing to look her over. Regina tiredly pushed her away.

“I’m alive, aren’t I?”

“Gold and all of those monsters are gone,” said Emma. “Uh, can somebody tell me what the hell all of … that, was?”

She gestured lamely at the street where only a few minutes ago, she had been a prisoner along with a hundred or so others inside some of the most advanced magic Regina had ever seen.

“Magic,” Regina explained weakly. “But not the sort of magic you’d be used to. It wasn’t human.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Tink agreed. Her old friend looked out the broken window. “It was fae magic.”

That was news to Regina. As far as she knew, the fae – distant cousins of the fairies, and far more powerful, at least according to legend – were long gone, driven into exile several hundred years before Regina had even been born. But she still had the taste of Zelena’s magic on her tongue, and she suspected Tink was right.

But if that was the case, how the hell did her mother end up spawning one of the creatures?

Navigating the woods at night by flashlight was a lot harder than Regina liked to admit, and she got lost more than once. After getting turned around by a deceptive-looking tree, she finally found the marker she had left just before sunset. She followed her own footprints up to the ridge where Robin appeared like a ghost, bow in hand and ready to fire. He lowered it when he saw her.

“Did the plan work?”

“That depends,” she said, hiking up the hill. “Is it still here?”
He nodded. “Right where you left it.” At the top of the ridge was a gnarled oak tree. Robin knelt in front of it, removed a log from between its roots and dug out a small canvas bag containing a blackened, pulsing heart.

She took the organ from him, turning it over in her hand and tracing the streaks of red with her finger. “Then it worked.”

“Good thing Emma warned you when she did. Now we can stop her from enacting whatever nefarious plan she has in mind.”

“It’s going to take a lot more than this,” Regina disagreed. “She already has one ingredient.”

Robin frowned. “She does?”

It had occurred to her earlier, but she’d had a fight to get to and no time to explain it to him. “The Witch sent Rumplestiltskin after you to get your courage. When you stabbed him with your sword, it became a talisman. That’s why he backed off.”

“She took my courage?”

“Well, symbolically speaking. If it’s any comfort, it means the Witch won’t want to kill you. Talismans don’t work if the person they’re taken from is dead.”

“Ah. Good to know.” Robin got to his feet, dusted himself off and then gave her a funny look. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about something Zelena told me,” she said truthfully.

“And what’s that?”

“Just that I don’t always appreciate what’s right in front of me.” She dropped her heart back into its canvas bag and pressed it into its hand. “Would you mind holding onto this for a while longer?”

He looked from her to the heart and back again. “You’re going to entrust something so valuable to a common thief like me?”

“Like I said, if I’m right, that means you have some measure of protection from my sister,” Regina explained, curling her nose at the use of the word ‘sister’. She let her hand linger on Robin’s for a moment, then folded his fingers over her heart. “And you can’t steal something that’s been given to you.”

She gave him a small smile and turned to leave before she could get caught up in the myriad of confusion that crossed his face with that statement.

Before she got too far, though, he called after her, “You still owe me that drink.”

She didn’t turn around to answer him. “Yes. I suppose I do.”

Emma laughed as she opened the door to the loft. “Huh. Déjà vu.”

“He’s getting way too big for this,” Neal said, grunting as he crossed the threshold with an unconscious Henry slung over one shoulder. “He crashed on the way back to town and I figured he could use the sleep. I’ll dump him upstairs.”
“Okay.”

“See you later, Killian.”

The pirate waved from the shadows of the staircase. Emma caught him just before he disappeared. “Hook. Thanks for taking care of them today.”

“Anytime, Swan,” he said, uncharacteristically avoiding prolonged eye contact. “You’ve a good-looking family here.”

“I know. Thanks again.”

He nodded by way of a goodbye, then headed off to wherever it was that he planned to spend the night. Emma shut the door.

“How was sailing?” she asked as Neal tried not to make any noise on the stairs. “Catch anything?”

“Nah, just a stick pretending to be a shark,” he reported with disappointment. “It’s a shame. Henry was actually getting pretty excited.” He dropped onto their bed, lay on his back and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “How’d Regina do?”

“She survived,” she told him, dropping down next to him. “The rest is probably a story for tomorrow when we’re not so tired.”

“Yeah. All right,” he agreed. And then a few things happened at once. She only meant to kiss him on the cheek but he turned his head, maybe to say something else, and she got him on the lips. He started, but after a second he pushed back, bringing a hand up to touch her cheek. After checking to make sure the shower was still running – she really didn’t want to face the embarrassment of having her mother walk in – she grabbed his jacket to pull him closer. God, she’d missed this.

After a second – or possibly a really long, good month – she let him go, having run out of breath. He held her by the cheek, and they lay there for a while longer, comfortable in each other’s presence.

“We should … talk.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “In the morning?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

To say that Zelena was angry would be to put it mildly. Rumplestiltskin was just grateful that she had shoved him in the cage and left him there, rather than take it out on him. He used the time to plot, to scheme how on he was going to get free. Unfortunately, without knowing exactly how Zelena brought him back – for he knew he had been dead, he could remember just a few minutes in a dark, shapeless and burning environment where nothing existed but one’s darkest nightmares – or how she got the dagger in the first place, he could only draw a blank. As much as he hated to admit it, it looked as if he would have to rely to Regina and the Saviour for this one. He didn’t doubt that they could do it – not when they had Belle’s devious mind and Bae’s true heart to help them – it was just a matter of whether he had lost his mind before they did.

He didn’t know for sure how long he was in the cellar with just the chubby grey monkey for company – if he could call his gaoler that – but when the cellar door opened, moonlight flooded the small, dark room. With the silver light surrounding her silhouette, Rumplestiltskin could almost
imagine fae wings – one thing she didn’t seem to have inherited from her father – glittering around her back.

“Get up,” she commanded.

He did. “What, no meat pie?”

The pain hit him in the chest, constricting and squeezing his darkened heart as Zelena let her anger fly. Through the dagger, he felt her sadistic joy at bringing her former teacher to his knees, as it were. It only lasted a second, but it may as well have been an eternity.

“I won’t let the small nuisance of finding myself trapped in this pathetic little town keep me from my goals, dearie,” she sneered, raising the dagger to cause him pain again. “Whatever it was my sister did to try and stop me, it won’t work. I’ve been working too hard for too long to stop now. Regina’s heart has to be somewhere. All I have to do is find it.”

He blacked out. For how long he couldn’t tell, but when he came to he was on the floor, straw was strewn across everything and Zelena, thankfully still on the other side of the bars, looking down at him with those cold eyes he detested.

“It won’t change anything, Zelena,” he muttered, and pushed himself as far off the floor as he could manage. “Whatever twisted curse you have planned, whatever hellish schemes you have in store, one thing will always remain the same. I’d still choose Regina.”

“Would you, now?” she scoffed. “I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“And what would we be waiting for, dearie?”

She grinned sickeningly. “I’m going to prove you all wrong. I’m going to accomplish what no sorcerer in history ever dreamed of doing. What you, who tore a kingdom in two to get back to your son, never managed. I’m going to rewrite history, to make things happen the way they should have always happened.”

Then the light clicked off, the door slammed shut and Rumplestiltskin was left alone in the dark, with only the beady, bloody eyes of his monkey guard to prove that he hadn’t yet succumbed to madness.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 19: The Heartless Witch. In the Enchanted Forest, the Kingdom of the Midlands gets reclaimed, someone acts suspicious and someone else gets hurt while protecting the town of Knightsbridge (meant to be in this chapter, but it got too long). In Storybrooke, Hook gets into trouble while Emma and Neal have a long overdue conversation.

I’d just like to say thanks for the comments and reviews, guys! Your positivity and support has been a great intro to the fandom and it’s why I’ve kept writing, so again, thanks so much!
Storybrooke, 29 January 2014

It was raining on the beach, a light drizzle that, according to the weatherman, was supposed to be the precursor to a larger storm later in the week. Emma turned to face the waves and the wind, enjoying the cold breeze on her face. She had always loved beaches for some reason – they felt secure, away from everything that made a lost girl feel alone, away from everything that reminded her she wasn’t wanted. Now she decided that Maine beaches beat Florida ones – the Floridian sun was better, no doubt, but the lack of mosquitoes and low humidity were definitely points in Maine’s favour.

In spite of the late night they’d had, she and Neal had both risen before Snow or Henry. In fact, they’d left a note because the two had still been asleep when they decided to talk a walk. That had turned into a lengthy stroll, then a short hike when they found themselves at the cannery and decided that the beach was too inviting to walk away from.

And they had a lot to talk about. She knew Neal wasn’t likely to take what happened last night the wrong way. And she wanted to give their relationship a go – she just wasn’t ready to jump back into any sort of long-term commitment. Or at least she didn’t think she was.

God, how had her parents managed having two sets of memories in their heads? Emma sometimes thought hers was going to implode from the pressure of conflicting memory and emotion, particularly where the father of her son was concerned.

Speaking of whom …

“Hey, look –” she said at the same time Neal started, “So, what –”

“You go,” she said before he could tell her the same thing.

“Ohay.” He shuffled his feet in the sand and couldn’t seem to decide on what to do with his hands. Eventually he let them settle in his pockets. “Uh, see I wanted to ask if – where do we stand? Exactly? On the whole –” he asked, gesturing wildly. “You know?”

“Where we stand after having been ‘married’ for a year?”

“Yeah, basically. I mean, I’m not trying to pressure you or anything,” he said, looking sheepish. “I just – I just want to know what you want to do.”

Great. No pressure at all. “What – what do you want to do?”

He chuckled. “You know the answer to that. Look, if – if you want to run off with Hook or … you know, whatever –” he stared at the horizon as he said it, perhaps because he thought he already knew the answer – “I’m not gonna stop you. I’ll probably have to drop Henry a warning when he starts to notice girls. Seems to run in the family –”

“Neal,” she murmured, cutting him off before he really started to ramble. He stopped, took a breath and then met her eyes again.

“I just want you to be happy,” he admitted. “Even if it’s not with me.”
This time she was the one to break her gaze, unable to think of what to say to that. She had said once that if she had to choose, she chose Henry. But that had been before she’d known what they could have had. Because the bottom line was, they *had* been happy in New York. If she focused on that … maybe they could both be happy again.

Finally, she said, “We had something good in New York.”

Neal chuckled, a light entering his eyes and she knew he was thinking the same thing. “Yeah. We did.”

“And, gotta admit, you weren’t bad at the husband thing.”

At that, they both laughed. “Gee. Thanks.”

“Look,” she said once the laughter trailed off, deciding to attack the serious subject head-on. “I want to give it a go.”

His eyes widened. “Really?”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised.”

“Ha. Right. Sorry.”

“It’s just –” she paused and chewed the words, making sure that she said what she needed to say. “I’m still trying to figure out how much of the last year was us and … how much of it was Regina. You know?” He nodded. “Getting my memories back was like … like waking up from a dream. A really good one. And then to have all of this crap come back –”

“Yeah.”

“I’m still angry.”

She hadn’t meant to let that little admission out, and almost took it back upon seeing the guilt on Neal’s face.

“I know that too,” he said after a moment, then continued quickly before she could interrupt. “Look, whatever you decide, all right? I’m not gonna leave, not as long as we’ve got Henry, but I’m not gonna push it. ‘Cause you already know what I’m gonna say.”

“I wanna give it a go,” she repeated. Neal still looked surprised and she had to keep herself from laughing at his expression.

“Would – would you want have that lunch date at Granny’s?” he asked. “We never really did get around to it, you know, before my grandpa tried to destroy the town.”

“Uh, I’d love to, but Regina wants to teach me magic. She’s hoping if we can build up enough magicians, we might be able to tackle the Witch together.”

“She wants to teach you magic?”

“Yeah.” Neal had a funny look on his face, one she knew meant he wasn’t comfortable with something he’d just been told. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, just – well, it’s not really any of my business,” he murmured, and she wondered if he’d intended for her to hear that.
“See you at dinner?”

He brightened. “Absolutely.”

Granny’s made something called ‘apple pie’, which Tink had recently discovered was delicious. She wasn’t sure whether that was because the pie was actually any good, or whether she had simply spent too many years eating coconuts on Neverland. There were a lot of things she had yet to figure out about this world, but with the inclusion of so many people who also had no idea how things worked, she no longer felt quite so lost. When Belle had asked to meet her at the diner, she had arrived to find the librarian attempting to explain aeroplanes to a fascinated Dorothy Gale.

With the agreement to show them both photographs later, they got down to the purpose of the meeting, which was to combine Dorothy’s knowledge of Zelena, what little Tink knew about the fae and Belle’s research skills in the hopes of capturing or killing the Witch the next time she showed her face. Regina had a prior commitment, or else she would have joined them as well.

“There are four ingredients to this time travel spell,” Dorothy informed them, producing a list from her pockets. It took Belle a minute to interpret the chicken scrawl that was apparently the Witch’s handwriting, but they got there in the end. “But I don’t know what the fourth one is.”

“I’ll cross-reference these with Rumple’s books at the shop,” said Belle, placing the list safely inside one of the books she had brought with her. “If we can figure out what it is, we might be able to lay a trap for her. What about her monkeys?”

“They all started off as human, as far as I know. Their leader is, or was, the Great Royal Marshmallow. He was a king of one of Oz’s neighbouring countries,” Dorothy explained, leaving Tink with the mental image of a giant marshmallow wearing royal robes and a crown. “According to the Scarecrow, he was cursed into monkey form but somehow Zelena reversed it. Now he’s her servant in exchange for the ability to change forms at will.”

“What about the rest of them?”

Dorothy shrugged. “I don’t think they can change like he can. Zelena modified the Marshmallow’s form so he can pass the curse onto others through a bite. But I don’t know how to demonkify them, if that’s even possible.”


“Uh, that’s how Ruby referred to it,” Dorothy explained sheepishly. “We talked about this last night. And the, uh, wolf thing. She was thinking that her red cloak might work on them too. But even if it does, there’s only one cloak –”

“Hem, hem.”

All three women jumped at the sound of Blue, who had appeared amidst the breakfast rush crowd, clearing her throat. And, as usual, she did not look happy with Tink.

“Pardon me for interrupting, ladies,” she said, giving Belle and Dorothy polite nods. “Green? A word?”

Tink excused herself and followed Blue into the corridor. “Blue. How are you?”
“I gave you an order to stay away last night,” Blue snapped, getting right down to business. One of the many things Tink just loved about the senior fairy. It was all she could do not to roll her eyes. “Do you want to tell me why several witnesses put you on Main Street during the fight?”

“With all due respect, Blue, your order was not to interfere in the fight. And I didn’t.”

That wasn’t to say that she wouldn’t have, but there was no need for her to admit that to Blue. After forty years on Neverland, Blue was no longer as frightening as the younger Tinkerbell had found her. To hell with being a fairy if she was going to let Blue dictate her future anymore.

“And yet here you are, interfering in the fight.”

“I don’t understand.”

Blue stepped uncomfortably close. “When I told you not to interfere, I meant at all. You will not offer them any further assistance.”

Tink couldn’t believe her ears. “We’re supposed to help people! Or is that only when it’s convenient to you?”

“Some battles, humankind has to fight for itself,” Blue stated as-a-matter-of-factly. “Now, you will return to the convent and not involve yourself any further.”

The ancient fairy turned sharply, giving Tink the coldest look she had ever seen as she did. Even worse than Pan.

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint,” Tink snapped at Blue’s retreating back. That stopped her in her tracks.

“Excuse me?”

Tink stepped up to her elder, standing tall so she met Blue on equal ground. “I’m sure you already know this, but Zelena is either fae or part fae. That makes it a fairy problem. They’ve asked for my help, and I intend to give it regardless of whether you approve or not. I’m going to do the right thing now, which is to help them fight the Witch. And don’t threaten to take my wings again, because I know you can’t. So do your worst.”

“You will regret this,” Blue warned.

“I don’t care. Now, if I may be excused, Mother Superior,” Tink growled, using Blue’s secondary title for spite. “I’d like to get back to work.”

She would pay for her insubordination, but Tink no longer cared. If the look Regina had given that strange man yesterday was any indication, then Tink had been right in her attempt to help and Blue had been wrong. There was no reason why she couldn’t be wrong again.

Regina arrived at the diner late, having slept late for the first time in over a week. Apparently a good method of breaking a string of nightmares was to get beaten in a witch fight. However effective it had been, she hoped she would not have to resort to that strategy again.

It also meant that she arrived in the middle of the breakfast rush, and there was not an empty seat in the place. There were eyes everywhere, and she knew that more than a few of them kept glancing
her way as if they expected the Wicked Witch to pop out of the shadows for round two. Regina waited at the end of the counter until Ruby was done serving one of the dwarves. The young werewolf gave her an unusually friendly smile, showing teeth Regina was all too aware could tear out her throat in an instant. That, fortunately, did not appear to be Ruby’s intention.

“Hi, Regina. Your regular to go?” she asked with an odd sense of friendliness.

“Please. Thank you.”

Ruby nodded and wrote down the order. “By the way, there’s a phone call for you out the back.”

“They can call me on my cell. I have things to do.” Like teach Emma magic …

She shivered, wondering exactly what it was she had got herself into.

“They said it was urgent.”

“I don’t care, they can –”

“Urgent,” Ruby repeated, flicking her pen ever so slightly towards the back of the diner. When Regina frowned, she made the tiniest of gestures in the same direction. Out of the corner of her eye, Regina finally spotted what the werewolf wanted her to see.

“Of course. Out the back?” she asked casually.

“Out the back,” Ruby confirmed.

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

The last booth had been taken over by five of the most influential royals in the Enchanted Forest outside of the Midlands – Kings Richard, Josef and Simba, Prince Ernest and a white-haired man Regina recognised as the Duke of Weselton, her father’s much older brother. Four of them avoided eye contact as she walked past on her way to the hallway; Richard stared intently, like a guard dog on alert. Regina stared back, meeting his challenge. He would need to do much better if he hoped to intimidate her.

In the hallway, Regina went to the phone, checked that nobody was watching and then ducked into the bathroom. She sealed the lock magically for extra security and then cast a scrying spell on the mirror. It was one of the earliest spells she had mastered, and something she proudly considered a speciality since it was also the only one she had ever improved upon. Rumple had taught her the spell using a bowl of water. Regina discovered that mirrors produced a clearer and less easily disturbed image.

The bathroom mirror flickered and the image of the diner appeared, scanning and finally focusing on the booth with the five royals. Sounds were harder to generate through a scrying spell but the closer the proximity, the better the result. Regina still had to listen closely but there was no missing what was being said.

“…We need to start rallying the people against her,” said Richard. “They’re blindsided by the curse, by her supposed redemption.”

Josef shook his head. “We don’t know for sure that they’re working together.”

“Oh, come on. The Witch has her, dead to rights, and just lets her go?” Richard scoffed. “It was a show, nothing more.”
“It’s out of character. The Evil Queen I know would want us all to know that she and the Witch are allied,” countered Josef. “In fact, the Queen I know would have burned us all to the ground already.”

“I was here during the first curse,” said Ernest, sipping his coffee. “She hasn’t changed. I don’t buy any tales of her ‘redemption’. I certainly didn’t witness anything to suggest it.”

There were murmurs of agreement, though Regina noted not from Josef or Simba. Then Richard continued. “People are suspicious enough. We only need to persuade enough of them to force Regina from power and contain her. Snow managed it once, I’m sure it can be done again. If we move quickly –”

Regina ended the spell, having heard plenty. She should have expected that there would be those who expected that she and Zelena may have formed an alliance, but it was ridiculous! The Witch nearly killed her, and they accuse her of working with the monkey-lover? Those idiots were going to get them all killed.

She forced herself not to catch Richard in a choke-hold as she made her way back through the diner to collect her coffee. As good as it would feel, it would not accomplish anything and worse, it would validate Richard’s claims. No, now was not the time to resort to her usual methods.

“Keep the change,” she told Ruby as she handed the werewolf a twenty and closed the door to the diner, somehow managing not to slam it. Neal may have been onto something when he warned her of a possible uprising in the town. After all, they had been in this situation once before, when the first curse broke.

But it hadn’t been Regina who dispelled the mob. That had been David’s doing.

In all honesty, Regina had not given Snow’s missing husband much thought. There had been plenty of confusion going around without worrying about somebody who could take care of themselves, and Regina knew there had to be a good reason for David’s absence. There always was. But now she was worried, knowing that if anybody could prevent a town mutiny – which she had to admit was becoming a greater possibility by the day – it was Prince Charming. Nobody wanted to rally behind the Evil Queen. Snow, although she had immense influence among the lower classes, had never been well-respected by the patriarchal royalty who thought a young woman had no business running a kingdom. And that would only get worse after the baby arrived. Emma was much the same, and Neal – well, he was the Dark One’s son. It was something of a miracle he hadn’t been run out of town already.

No, they had a serious problem. And the best person to deal with it was nowhere to be found.

**Enchanted Forest, March 2013**

With the fairies back in play, the allied armies had reclaimed almost the entirety of the Midlands within a month. While thoroughly impressed at the speed at which the army could move, recover and launch attacks with the added magical forces, Robin couldn’t help but resent the fact that the fairies had been absent for so long. If they had turned up to help sooner, so many lives could have been spared – Farmer Weathersky, who despite his prickly and conservative nature had been a valuable asset to the people of the north. Captain Whytehound, a good man Robin knew from his days in Agrabah, dead on Elms’ Ridge. Belle …

Whether she had been kidnapped by Zelena or whether she had left willingly and run afoul of the
Witch later, Robin didn’t know. As angry as he wanted to be with her for walking straight into a trap, he understood why she’d done what she had. If he had been in her shoes, with a chance to bring Marian back, he couldn’t imagine that he would have just walked away either.

But that didn’t lessen the feeling that he had let her down. If he had been there …

“You all right, Robin?” David asked. He sat astride the great grey warhorse, casually observing the valley below in the dim dawn light. Their latest campaign was to retake Perrault’s Pass, the passage through which the King’s Highway split between the Midlands, Gaul and the Northern Kingdoms. If they could retake the pass, they would be able to unite the three armies and (hopefully!) push the ogres south, back into their home country. Robin and David were waiting for Josef’s signal that his infantry were ready on the north side of the valley, to help Richard’s cavalry steer the ogres into the valley. Robin had three burning arrows ready to go, as did every archer perched on top of the ridge. All volunteers, since this was the most precarious position to be in during this operation.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s been a long time since I’ve fought as part of an army. I’d forgotten how much coordination was involved.”

It was technically true, even if it wasn’t exactly what had been on his mind.

“I think you’re pretty good at this. For a bandit, that is,” David commented. Robin smiled.

“I didn’t learn this as a bandit. I learnt in Acre.”

David lowered his spyglass to stare at him. “You fought in Agrabah?”

“The Régiment de Leon. I served under Richard.”

“No kidding?” The young king chuckled. “Funny. I thought you hated him.”

“I do. As a younger man, I foolishly worshipped him. Then I went home and discovered that he is a great commander, but he is a clown of a king. We’ll most likely finish up with the ogres and he’ll sail straight back to Agrabah.”

David huffed in amusement. “If I had a better relationship with the man, I could have you hanged for that comment.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t like him that much either, then.”

“Would I be right in assuming that you’re a dead man the moment you set foot in Gaul regardless?”

Robin shrugged. “Richard’s got a substantial bounty on my head, certainly. But no self-respecting outlaw would get by without learning a trick or two.”

“I meant, is he likely to pardon you for your help in fighting the war?”

He hadn’t considered that. But that depended on whether Richard would forgive a grudge he had burned for nearly seven years. He shook his head. “I doubt it. Richard’s not the type who forgives easily.”

David nodded, looking thoughtful. “You know … there is always such a thing as political asylum. Snow and I could do with a good man like you on our side.” He gave Robin a small grin. “Just something to think about.”

A moment later, a shining silver fireball illuminated the dawn sky, the signal that the infantry was in
position. When that fizzled out, a second ball – this one coloured pale blue – appeared. The cavalry charge had begun. Robin held his bow at the ready and waited, all the while contemplating David’s offer. It would be nice to settle down somewhere out of Richard’s reach, if not for his sake then for Roland’s. And it wouldn’t hurt to see Regina more often –

Before he could finish the thought, dust filled the valley as the ogres advanced, and the real battle began.

Four and a half hours later, said battle was over. Richard’s cavalry and Josef’s infantry had successfully chased the ogres into an ambush that trapped them in Perrault’s Pass. A few well-placed fire arrows ignited the several tonnes of oil the army had spent the previous day soaking into the ground, and the entire valley was consumed by the inferno. Robin was glad to see that he was not the only one who felt nauseous after witnessing the destruction (safely contained by Regina, the green fairy who went by Tinkerbell, and her silver friend Willow). He reminded himself again that he did this for his son’s future, and for the future of their entire realm. If they were to have any hope at all, they needed to reduce the Witch’s potential allies as much as possible. Which meant death was inevitable.

He still hoped that Belle’s young ogre friend had remained in the Alps, and that maybe its friendship with a human might resonate among those left behind. If he took up David’s offer, he wondered if he might try to track it down when this was all over and attempt to negotiate a lasting peace with the younglings. In Belle’s name. She deserved a far better legacy than just being the Dark One’s lover, and if Robin could give her that, maybe then he could make peace with himself.

**Storybrooke, 29 January 2014**

While Emma was off with Regina, learning magic – *that* was going to take some getting used to – Neal decided to take advantage of the peace and quiet to take Henry out to the park. Snow, eager to get out of the loft, went with them. A couple of times, Neal had to catch her from tripping over a rock or stick she had missed on account of the fact that she couldn’t see her feet. The third time it happened, he finally convinced her to take a break. They sat on the bench overlooking the lake, watching the ducks splash about in the water and enjoy the cold water like nobody else could. Henry had watched them with little interest – Neal’s false memories informed him that his son had never been terribly interested in birds, unlike almost everything else which he would devour all of the relevant reading material inside of a week – and then run off when Archie dropped by to say hello. He was now having far more fun throwing sticks for Pongo, leaving Neal to re-enact one of the most awkward conversations he had ever had with Emma’s mother.

That had been at Granny’s the day after they got back from Neverland, and Neal believed Emma had decided not to take up his offer of lunch. He hadn’t expected any better, not really, but kicked himself for getting his hopes up. Snow had dropped into the seat opposite to tell him not to give up, that her daughter was a stubborn woman who didn’t always know what was best for her. Coming from her mother, Neal figured he should probably take that as high praise.

Now she wanted to know what they had talked about on the beach.

“I think we’re okay,” he told her while watching Henry fake his throw, which Pongo was *not* happy about. “There’s a lot of history to work through, and Henry makes things complicated.”

“You told me that last time,” said Snow, with a knowing smile Neal had come to associate with mothers.
“Well, there’s also the last year. I don’t know about Emma, but I don’t wanna let that go. It was —” *(The happiest I’ve ever been)* – “good. Really good.”

“Did you ever think that maybe Regina used your own dreams when she made those memories for you?” Snow asked. From the cheeky look in her eyes, she already knew the answer even if Neal didn’t. “So, what did she say?”

*Were all mothers this nosy, or was it just Snow?* “She said she wants to give it a go,” Neal admitted, his heart beating just that little bit faster at the thought. It was better than he’d ever allowed himself to hope, and a hundred times better than he deserved.

“What about you?”

“I want it to work,” he said without hesitation, still thinking of New York and movies and Central Park. Storybrooke didn’t have a decent cinema, but he was sure they could rustle something up. “More than anything.”

Killian really wished that they served rum at Granny’s. Or anything that was stronger than the dog piss sloshing in his glass.

He needed the drink after seeing Emma walk around town with Baelfire. She had looked so damn happy, smiling like it was the most natural thing in the world, looking at him in a way Killian now realised she had never once looked at him. He kept telling himself that it would pass, that with her memory returned she would remember Bae’s past actions and see sense. But it had been a week. A dark corner of Killian’s brain, one he thought he had squashed long ago after the death of his brother, nagged at him to forget about her. Tried to tell him that she was happy, and he should be satisfied with that.

But it damn well hurt.

“Is there something wrong?” said a female voice. Killian looked up to see the long-legged werewolf standing on the other side of the counter with something that was maybe concern on her face.

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re staring into that cup like it’s got slugs in it or something.”

He put up his most charming grin and told her, “There’s nothing wrong, love.”

Ruby nodded. “All right. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Wait a minute,” he said, reaching out to stop her from leaving. “Why don’t you join me? You’ve been working double shifts for a week. I daresay you’ve earned it.”

“I’m busy. And you’re drunk.”

“On this stuff?” He held up the mug. “Not bloody likely. Come on? What harm could it do?”

“Oh, plenty. But I’m not interested.”

She snapped the tea towel on the counter and stormed off. Killian looked on, a bit confused. That was now twice in as many days that had happened. He shook himself, trying to clear his head. Maybe the wolf was right and the drink was affecting him more than he thought.
He pushed the mug away and went to the door, thinking he could find another establishment, one of lower standards and moral standing at which he could find somebody to beat at dice or cards. He’d need the money if he planned to stick around town, and with the Jolly Roger gone, traded to an explorer with a funny accent in exchange for a magic bean, that was beginning to seem like his only option.

As he left the diner, something landed on his shoulder the street was suddenly ripped away from him in a gale of red and gold. His breath was sucked away like ropes had been tied around his chest, and when his feet found solid ground again he took a good second or two to recover. That was a bad recovery time, especially since he knew that if the Witch had sent the Dark One after him, she could have no good intentions for doing so.

The Dark One deposited him in a field somewhere, and directly in front of him, sitting on top of a hay bale, was the Witch. She grinned in satisfaction, then waved her hand and said, “Thank you, dearie. You will resume the search for my sister’s heart now.”

Another whoosh of wind and Killian was left alone with the Witch.

“My apologies for the rude manner in which you were brought here, Captain,” said the Witch, hopping down from her throne of dried grass stalks. “I hope I haven’t inconvenienced you.”

Killian drew his cutlass. The Witch merely laughed and batted the blade aside.

“Relax. I haven’t brought you here to hurt you.”

“I suppose.” He sheathed his sword. It was probably less than useless against a sorceress of her standing anyway. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Straight down to business. Good. I like that in a man.” She grinned wider, if that was possible, and waved her hand again. Killian felt the stump of his left arm tingle. When he looked down, his hook glowed green, shimmered, and then went back to its normal colour.

“What did you do?”

“I need a favour from you, Captain,” said the Witch. “I need you to steal Emma Swan’s heart for me.”

“Ah, love, I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong man. She doesn’t want me.”

“Literally, Captain, not figuratively.” The Witch glowered, clearly not amused. “I’m given to understanding that you know how to remove a heart. Your hook can now do it. Bring me her heart.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Killian repeated. “I won’t do it.”

“I haven’t even told you what’s in it for you.”

“You don’t have to. I won’t do it.”

Her smile turned sadistic. “Then I’ll hurt her boy.”

No. Emma may have turned Killian down, but heaven help him if he let the Witch lay one finger on her son. “If you really are Cora’s daughter as you claim, then you should know that Emma’s heart
cannot be removed by magical means. Your mother attempted it once and failed.”

“Because she is the child of True Love. Yes, I know.”

“You know?”

She twirled the Dark One’s dagger in her hands. Killian calculated his odds of grabbing it, and came up with unfavourable chances. “It is legendary. And you are correct, if my mother attempted to take Emma’s heart for nefarious means then there is no way she would have been able to remove it. According to legend, the heart of an agape child cannot be stolen by anyone who wishes them harm. It is magically protected from birth, by a magic which is the product of her parents’ love, in ways a dark magician could not hope to defeat. But somebody who loves her … well, that’s a different story.”

“And this is supposed to persuade me to hand her heart over to you because …?”

“I don’t intend to crush it or use it to control her. I can’t, for the same reason I can’t just take her heart myself.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Killian snarled, stepping closer to the Witch. “Why do you want her heart?”

“You know of my plan to travel back in time, to fix history to the way it should have been?”

Either the Witch really did expect him to know that, or Killian had just stumbled onto the dumbest villain in history. “Actually, no, I was not aware of that.”

For a moment, he gloated in his win as the Witch’s expression changed from menacing to seriously worried. It did not last, as she righted herself in seconds. “Never mind. It is not important. The important thing is, I plan to correct my family history and for that, I need a heart. A resilient heart, one that has been through the worst of heartbreaks, the temptations of darkness and survived. I would prefer Regina’s, of course, but ah, well, my sister has proven more resourceful than I thought in hiding hers from me. It will be less satisfying, but I do not have the time. My final ingredient will arrive in a matter of days.”

“And if I don’t do what you ask?”

“Then I will kill the boy,” Zelena growled. “And his father, too. Unless, of course, you would prefer it if the Dark One’s son was out of the picture? Remove the competition for your dear lady?”

Killian raised his hooked hand threateningly. He was a pirate, but he still had some standards, and killing a man to bed his wife was a line he had never crossed. Knocked them out for a few hours with some strong whisky, maybe, but not murder. And not Milah’s boy. “Don’t touch him.”

“Why ever not?” Zelena all but laughed. “You spent over three hundred years trying to kill his father. What better way to get revenge for the death of your beloved than to have the Dark One kill his own son, and then take his wife as spoils?” She raised an eyebrow, and Killian felt sick to his stomach. “Still no? Well, I’ll kill him anyway if you don’t bring me Emma’s heart. And the boy. And her mother too, just for good measure.”

“I’ll stop you.”

Zelena did laugh then, the sound cutting Killian right to the core. It was akin to nails scraping on slate boards used by his instructors in the Navy. “Me? That pointy hook of yours might be able to scratch a mere mortal, but me? I’m afraid you’re out of your depth, Captain.” To prove her point, she...
grasped his hook and pushed him back, the acrid taste of magic filling his mouth as she did. “The choice is yours. Bring me Emma’s heart, or watch everyone she loves die. Think about it.”

And with that, she vanished in a green cloud, leaving Killian alone in the field with his hook tingling like crazy, and an ever sinking feeling in his stomach.

**Enchanted Forest, April 2013**

It had been Robin’s idea to celebrate the accomplishments of the small platoon who had reclaimed Villeneuve’s Ridge just that morning. Two and a half days ago, they had surprised the ogres holding the ridge and taken it. Then, against two-to-one odds, the platoon had held their ground against the inevitable counter-attacks until reinforcements arrived and the ogres retreated. Though the commander wished to press forwards, Robin respectfully told him that the troops needed rest. That part the commander had agreed to. The rest of it had gone ahead without approval, but no-one except Robin, Alan or Regina knew that thanks to a simple sleeping draught slipped into the commander’s evening tea.

Once, Regina would have pressed forwards regardless of her army’s exhaustion. But upon seeing lifeless spirits lift with the celebration, she began to realise how important acknowledgement of hard work and expended effort was. She could feel their rejuvenated energy even from a distance. It was powerful, and contagious. Celebrating people came with rewards Regina would have once thought useless, but actually being in the middle of it … okay, so being nice was not something that always came easily, at least not to her. But it was worth it.

“A toast!” Robin declared, holding his canteen high. The troop joined in with hoots and cheers and clicks of tankards. Hiding in the shadows, Regina raised her cup with them. “To the bravest men and women to fight the invading hordes! May we soon reclaim our lands and our homes, and this war come to an end!”

There was a chorus of ‘hear, hear’ and the general revelry began, harmless drinking to begin with that later became contests of strength and other friendly matches. For the most part, Regina stayed out of it. Even though she had fought with these troops for the majority of the campaign, she wasn’t sure how welcome she would be in the festivities.

She wasn’t to be left alone in her private celebration. The infamous outlaw himself dropped onto the ground beside her, more than a little tipsy on alcohol and elation, with a drink in either hand. He offered one to her with a crooked grin.

“No, thank you. I think one of us should remain in control of our inhibitions tonight.”

“Fair enough,” he said, putting the extra pint down. “Do you mind having company?”

“Do you mind tarnishing your fine reputation to accompany an evil queen?”

“If I were drinking with an evil queen, I would be doing it as an ogre’s breakfast,” he said with cheek. Nearby, a loud cheer broke out as one soldier successfully wrestled another to the ground. Robin cheered along with them – Regina recognised the victor as his friend, the not-so-Little John – and then turned back to her with laughter on his face. It was odd, she thought, how infectious joviality could be. She could get used to it.

“You don’t have to hide in the shadows, Regina,” he said soberly. “Without you, we’d have never taken that ridge. Every one of those lads knows it.”
“That doesn’t mean I don’t make them uncomfortable.”

“No, you don’t. You’ve been vindicated.”

He said it with such certainty that if Regina allowed herself to dream for one moment, she might have believed it. But that was a foolish thought.

“I don’t –”

Whatever she had been about to say to escape the situation was forgotten as a blinding green light appeared in the dark forest, warping and shrinking until it solidified into the form of Tinkerbell. Regina scrambled to her feet, Robin somewhat sluggishly following, and ran to the fairy, who was scanning the unknowing camp for something. She was panicked, Regina realised.

“Tink!” she called, attracting the fairy’s attention. “What is it?”

Tink flustered, speaking rapidly. “You need to come quickly! They’re advancing on Knightsbridge. I’m all they could spare –”

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down!”

She waited until the fairy took several deep breaths, then motioned for Tink to continue.

“We got word from Captain Phoebus in Knightsbridge just a few minutes ago,” she reported, now much slower. “Ogres are advancing on the town. Blue’s got all of the fairies tied up defending Halstaff and Bremen, and Richard’s army can’t get there for another few hours at most. By then it might be too late.”


“What?” Regina looked at Tink, wondering if she knew what he had said. However, the fairy seemed to be just as clueless and within a minute, Robin had returned with the Merry Men hot on his heels.

“Leave the others to enjoy the celebration,” he said, waving a hand at the soldiers who hadn’t noticed that there was anything wrong. “They’ve earned it, and we can do this with just a few.”

“Do you know if there are any survivors?” the pipe-playing Merry Man asked, sounding even more worried than Robin.

“I don’t know anything except that Esmeralda’s call was desperate,” said Tink, to nobody’s assurance. “We need to leave as soon as possible.”

“I’ll come too,” Regina offered. Nobody objected, so she grasped Tink’s arm in one hand and Little John’s index finger in the other, and swept them all away to the small Gaulish town.

They were met with a thick cloud of smoke, filled with the sounds of people shouting, wood burning and ogres roaring. Rocks pelted the wall, taking away shards of the wooden fortifications with every impact. Regina ducked to escape a burning missile and pulled her cloak over her face. She felt rough hands grab her and pull her down; she couldn’t think clearly enough to fight them off, but at least the air where they had unceremoniously dragged her was clear of smoke.

“Sorry about that, m’lady,” mumbled a helmeted man with a cloth over half of his face and soot over
the other half. “You don’t want t’be caught up there for too long, I tell you.”

Robin appeared beside her, his hood and a scarf covering all recognisable features of his face. “What’s the situation, sergeant?”

“They breached the perimeter approximately twenty minutes ago, sir,” the sergeant shouted around a mouthful of cloth. “Miss Esmeralda managed to fight ’em off, but she’s badly hurt. Right now, we’re just tryin’ to stop the fires, sir.”

“How close are they?”

A burning tree impacted the watchtower next to them, and the structure toppled. Regina raised both hands and thought of fountains, oceans and rivers, calling up a bubble of water that crashed over the fallen watchtower. As she did that, Tink took flight, sparkling fairy magic falling from her. It turned into rain. Regina called up another bubble to crash on the wall above them, but it was harder than the first time and she knew she couldn’t make it last. There wasn’t much moisture left in the air and spreading the catchment further beyond the town would only sap her strength quicker.

“Reckon they’re pretty damn close, sir, if you’ll pardon me tongue.”

Robin nodded. “Pull all soldiers off the north and west walls and concentrate on putting out those fires. We’ll handle things from here.”

“Right, sir. Good luck, sir.”

When the sergeant was gone, he muttered, “I hate that.”

“I’m sorry?” Regina asked.

“Being called ‘sir’. It makes me feel like my father,” Robin explained. “Come on, we should get away from here. The ogres won’t come through the fire, which means they’re probably trying to draw us away from where they will attack.”

“Agreed.”

“East wall,” he said, pointing in the appropriate direction. “That faces the forest, less than two miles away. If we position ourselves there, we can buy time for the army to arrive.”

He began to run. Regina hurried to keep up. “How do you know all of that?”

“Knightsbridge is my late wife’s home! Roland’s mother!” he shouted as he ran along the wall. “Technically, this place is his inheritance! Or it would be, if Richard hadn’t annulled his grandfather’s title!”

He stopped beneath a set of stairs leading up to another watchtower, so suddenly she almost ran him over. “Position yourself up there! It’s the best vantage point you’re going to get!”

“What are you going to do?” she shouted before he ran off.

“I’m going to stop them before they get to the wall!”

Before she could ask how, he was gone, vanishing into the stonework like a bird in the forest. His personal brand of magic, Regina thought fondly as she climbed the wall.

As Robin had said, it was probably the best vantage point she was going to get. Smoke obscured one side completely – she had to put up a shield to stop it from overwhelming her – and she could see
nothing at all amongst the solid blackness. She could hear them, however, and a cold chill rippled through her. There were a lot of them.

Then the wall began to shake, and she realised she had been looking in the wrong place. Ogres milled beneath the wall, beating it with clubs and crude swords and roaring at the dozen or so defenders who threw rocks down at them. Of the Merry Men, there was no sign. Regina shut her eyes, and pieced together a defensive shield that could be constructed quickly, but that she used rarely as it was easily dismantled. The ogres had no magic of their own, so unless the Witch was somewhere nearby, it would serve her purposes just fine.

The ground directly below her shimmered, and the ogres fell back, hissing in pain as the shield took effect. She noticed then how tall the ogres were, the heads of the largest ones perhaps only five feet lower than the wall. Less than the height of a short man. Watery eyes followed the shield up and onto her. The biggest of them, a brute with tusks the size of Regina’s leg and a studded mace in its hairy paws. It leered at her, and she leered back, knowing it had no way of breaching her magic.

While its friends batted their clubs uselessly against the wall, the big brute continued to stare. Then its mouth moved, contorting into what Regina could have sworn was a smile. A toothy, rotted smile that no doubt smelt of decaying cow, or whatever it was these ogres had eaten lately, but a smile nonetheless. Regina knew that smile well – it was the smile she had worn when facing an enemy who was about to meet its doom.

That was when the tree crashed into the watchtower, showering her with splinters and burning needles. The tower’s supports buckled, and the tower collapsed with her in it. She managed to cushion her fall, but something heavy collided with the side of her head and the world went black.

**Storybrooke, 29 January 2014**

Regina must get a kick out of humiliating her, Emma decided as she stumbled into the loft and, without greeting anybody inside or otherwise acknowledging her entrance, collapsed into bed. Her magic lessons consisted first of teaching her to read Elvish (which looked nothing like the writing in *Lord of the Rings*; Emma was almost tempted to write and complain), then making a bridge collapse beneath her feet and then throwing rocks at her until she could successfully stop them in mid-air. She had bruises down the length of both arms and she was fairly sure she’d have a few more on her legs tomorrow, as Regina had not pulled any punches. A lesson from Rumplestiltskin, apparently, who, according to Regina, had been even more of a bully in his teaching methods. How, Emma wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Instead, she pulled her pillow close. A shower sounded appealing, but that would mean she’d have to get up.

“Hey, you.” The bed creaked and dipped under Neal’s weight. “Rough day?”

“Mmm-mmm.” She shifted the pillow an inch so she could talk properly. “Regina’s a bitch of a teacher.”

“What else is new?”

“Ha, ha.”

“So, how was magic class?”

“Oh, wonderful,” she drawled. “It was like being the goalie in school, only instead of soccer balls, it
was rocks.”

“Big ones?”

“Huge. You could build a house inside of them.”

He chuckled. “You up for dinner?”

“Nope,” she mumbled, in spite of her earlier promise. She’d made it before she spent a day having boulders thrown at her. “Gonna stay right here and sleep.”

“Aww,” Neal protested. She felt him snuggle close, like he always did when he tried to get her to do something for him. She shoved him playfully, like she always did when he tried that, and he laughed. “All right, fine. I’ll just have to eat all of Granny’s pumpkin pie by myself.”

Her traitorous stomach growled.

“I don’t think that was a truck.”

“Damn you.”

“Come on, I’ll carry you –”

She pushed him again. Somewhere else in the loft, she heard Henry grumble. “You guys are gross.”

An hour later, the family with too many surnames arrived at Granny’s for a normal, if slightly late, dinner. Unknown to them, Killian stood on the other side of the street, masked by shadows, and watched them through his spyglass.

Unknown to anybody, Rumplestiltskin was doing much the same thing. His view was not as good without a spyglass and, under orders to use no magic except in self-defence, he couldn’t conjure a spell for better vision. Zelena told him to watch Regina, but every so often he found his eyes straying to the beauty eating with Leroy, Tink and the newcomer Rumple didn’t recognise. Or to his son, sharing a slice of pie with Emma and Henry, and looking happier than Rumple had seen in centuries.

He fought the orders, for sure, until his ears bled and his body felt like it was going to shatter from the pain. He could only pray that he could find the loopholes in Zelena’s plans soon, or hold out until Regina found a way to beat her. If she played her cards right, she could do it. Rumple didn’t doubt that. It was a matter of whether he could buy her enough time.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 20: Pressure Points. In the Enchanted Forest, Regina recovers from her injury, the Charmings return to Tower Castle and an announcement is made. In Storybrooke, Regina and Belle come up with another way of getting to the heart of Zelena’s plans (that does not involve a séance) and Rumple is defiant.
“Ow! Oh,” Regina groaned as she steadily worked her way back to the land of the living. *Everything* hurt – her back, her front, her head, arms, legs. Parts of her that she hadn’t been aware *could* hurt, ached like a horse had run her over and then sat on her until she passed out. Her throat burned and it was difficult to breathe. She had no idea where she was – the last thing she remembered was running after Robin through a smoky, burning street. She tried to sit up and swore to damnation at the result.

“Hey, whoa. Don’t move, okay?” said someone who sounded like Tinkerbell. A wet cloth was pressed to her lips. “Here, try to drink.”

“What happened?” Regina managed to croak once the fluid had soothed some of the fire in her throat. She heard creaks and the ground beneath her dipped, then she realised she was on a mattress.

“The watchtower you were standing on collapsed,” Tink explained, pressing the cloth to Regina’s forehead. “Robin found you shortly after the army arrived. You were badly burnt.”

“What about the town?”

“Gone. The army tried to put the fire out, but the damage was done. In the end, it was easier to evacuate than to try and defend it. Minimal casualties, though.”

“Oh,” Regina murmured, wondering how many ‘minimal’ was. “Good. Where are we?”

“Nottingham Castle.” The mattress shifted again as Tink got up. Regina cracked her eyes and blinked until she could tolerate the low levels of light, then watched the fairy wave her wand over Regina’s feet. “Healing spell,” Tink explained, though Regina had guessed that from the way her feet began to tingle. “It’s taken me the better part of two days just to get you this well.”

“Thank you.”

Regina wasn’t sure which of them was more surprised at that, her or Tink. A moment of silence passed, broken when Tink nodded in humble admission. “Don’t mention it.”

When she finished with the spell, Tink went to get her more water. Regina sipped it slowly, still feeling the effect smoke inhalation had made on her airways. While she had been unconscious, somebody – hopefully just Tink – had changed her out of the red dress and into a cotton nightgown. There were sensitive red blotches on her arms, the remains of severe burns, and she could feel other patches on her legs and face. “Did you say Robin found me?”

Tink nodded. “And a good thing he did. Might’ve lost you. Of course, that could also be considered a bad thing for some of us – just a joke,” she added when Regina glared at her. “You should be as good as new after a few more courses. I will insist that you stay in bed, however.”

Under other circumstances, Regina might have objected, but staying in bed sounded like an extremely attractive proposition. “Where is he? Robin. I’d like to thank him too.”

Tink opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off by a loud cry, like that of a large mob,
“What’s going on?”

“Richard arrested Robin and his friends when they brought you to me,” Tink said soberly. “They’re to be hanged in the square this afternoon.”

“Over my dead body,” Regina declared, slamming her cup on the nightstand. She struggled into a sitting position despite Tink’s protests and swung her legs over the bed. “Help me up.”

“No, no, no, you’re not in any sort of condition –”

“I don’t care!” Regina cried, hauling herself up by Tink’s shoulders. She would pay for it later. “Robin’s now saved my life twice. I’ll be damned if I let four good men die on the orders of some self-indulgent teenager.”

**Storybrooke, 30 January 2014**

A mountain of paperwork greeted Regina the next morning, most of it to do with the building project on the north side of town. She could never have imagined how much work went into constructing a bunch of houses, but in this world, there was a *lot* of work. And a lot of red tape that went with it, though one benefit of being mayor was that they gave you the scissors for that red tape on your first day.

She set her fountain pen to work signing away the pile of papers and turned to her most pressing concern. Henry’s memory potion bubbled in the cooking pot on her desk, coloured just the right shade of pale gold. Regina gave it a stir, nodded in satisfaction and threw in a sprig of rosemary. The potion instantly turned bright blue.

A smile crept up on her. Memory potions were tricky magic and her first attempt had boiled over a few days ago. One wall of her office still bore burn marks from that accident. Thankfully, she found her error and avoided it the second time. She set the burner to a simmer and replaced the protection spell – not taking any chances – over the potion. One more day and she would have her son back.

That done, she prepared to leave – another magic lesson with Emma to review the previous day’s work, though Emma was not yet aware of it – when there was a knock at the door. Regina opened it to see nobody. Then she kicked over a basket of green apples.

“A gift. From sister to sister.”

Regina swore – her toe really did hurt – and waited to acknowledge the woman who had barged into her office, then made herself comfortable in Regina’s chair.

“What are you doing here?” Regina asked, not at all caring unless Zelena’s intention was to throw her through another window.

That did not appear to be the case, as Zelena picked an apple – coloured red, of course – off Regina’s desk. “I saw your tree and thought you could use something better. Red apples are just so sickly sweet, don’t you think?” she said, rocking in the chair. “People tend to like something, hmm, sharper?”

“And green apples are just bitter,” she spat. Zelena scoffed, chucking the apple to make Regina catch it. “Why are you here?”
“Oh, you know, sisterly concerns, sisterly advice,” said Zelena, getting to her feet. “I wanted to make sure you were all right after our little showdown.”

“I’m fine. How about you?”

“Getting there.” She walked around the office like a buyer at an auction, inspecting each piece for authenticity. “This is nice, isn’t it?” she mused, delicately touching a ceramic pot with one of Regina’s favourite figs. Regina had a feeling she didn’t care about the plant. “So luxurious. You really don’t appreciate what you have, do you?”

“Right,” she drawled. “Because I got everything, and you have nothing. If you want your superpower to be envy, dear, go right ahead.”

“Envy is just another word for ambition.”

“Well, that’s just not true.”

“Isn’t it? I strive for things. I work. Whereas you – ha! you cast a curse that was just a fancy form of running away. With every advantage, you still turn your back on every opportunity for happiness! You just don’t take risks! You don’t live your life! Such a waste. I can see why our mother was so disappointed in you.”

“Disappointed in me?” Regina laughed. “She gave you away.”

Zelena looked murderous. “You have no idea what really happened. That’s exactly what’s going to hurt you.”

“You didn’t come here to give me ‘sisterly advice. What are you really doing here?”

“So perceptive,” Zelena snarled. “I’m here, Regina, to make sure that you weren’t somewhere else. So I can take what I need.”

The other shoe dropped, and Regina started. She thought it had to be a lie, that she would know if her heart was in danger, but Zelena only grinned wider. Magic forgotten, Regina threw the first thing that came to hand – the apple – and her sister disappeared in a puff of green smoke.

One rather interesting discovery that the Merry Men had made during a venture into town was a place of amusement and mystique known as a ‘playground’. Roland had taken to it instantly, attracted as all small children are to the bright colours and various hidey-holes through which he could expertly demonstrate his hiding abilities with loud declarations of “Papa, look! I’m hiding!”

“Where? I can’t see you!” Robin shouted, looking everywhere except the fort-like structure at the top where Roland poked his head out to ensure his father was watching. Interesting how the architects of this world had taken castles, usually quite droll and suffocating in Robin’s opinion, and turned them into places of children’s play.

Or perhaps John had been right, and little children were just easily entertained.

“Charlotte would like this,” he remarked to Alan once Roland had become bored of hiding and turned to the climbing wall. Alan leant against the fence, stared at the ground and did not answer. “Do you know if they’re in town?”
“Yeah. Evy’s staying at the Duke’s Head. It’s on the other side of town, run by Mr Tumble’s eldest boy."

Robin decided not to ask when or how Alan had come by that information and instead said, “Sounds nice. Do they do supper?”

Alan made a noise halfway between scoffing and choking. “Evy won’t want to see me, Robin. You know that.”

“Actually, no, I don’t know that. And neither do you.” Robin fought the urge to smack his old friend upside the head. “How long has it been since you’ve seen Charley? Four years? Five?”

“Exactly!” Alan snapped. “She doesn’t know me. She’s better off that way.”

“That’s not true.”

“What would I even tell her? That I’ve been absent from most of her life because I’m a wanted criminal?”

“In the old world,” Robin reminded him. “Here, you’re not. None of us are. Maybe Tuck’s right and we should be taking this chance to start over. Clean slates.”

Alan huffed. “You sound like your grandmother.”

“Good. You listen to her.”

“Only because she makes me lovely biscuits. You burn water.”

Then Robin actually did punch him – playfully, not intending harm. Alan pretended to be hurt anyway but before things descended into a punch-up, a rush of wind disturbed the nearby trees. Robin tasted tarnished metal as Regina appeared in a deep red cloud. The bottom of his bag – where Regina’s heart lay, wrapped safely in a canvas cover – warmed as the heart felt its owner approach and Robin felt it begin to pulsate quicker. Whatever the problem was, Regina was worried enough that it affected even her detached heart.

“Regina!” he called as she all but ran towards him. “Is something wrong?”

“Have you still got it?”

“Of course.” He reached for the bag, only for her to stop him.

“Don’t,” she whispered. He and Alan watched in confusion as Regina scanned the nearby trees, looking for something. He then realised what must have happened.

“Did Zelena pay you a visit?”

Regina nodded. “Yes. She played me. Made me think she had located my heart so that I would lead her straight to it.”

“Clever,” Alan commented.

“Not clever enough,” Regina returned.
Hidden by trees, Rumplestiltskin let out a sigh of relief. Regina must have realised what Zelena was up to, as she continued to chat to the outlaws about this and that, things Rumple would not have cared about even if he were not enslaved to a half-breed sociopath. He guessed that the pointless chit-chat was to make her arrival at the playground less suspicious. Rumple was not fooled, and had he truly wished Regina any ill will would have snapped the outlaw’s neck and searched his dead body for the heart in a safe place, away from Regina’s interference. But Rumple had not seen Regina’s heart with his own eyes – therefore, Zelena’s order to take it remained useless as he could deny any knowledge of its hiding place.

“You’re dancing with trivialities, dear,” said a female voice Rumple had not yet put a name to. “She will get it out of you, one way or another.”

“I don’t care,” Rumple growled, low enough that nobody except the voices would hear.

“You will. Take it from us. You will.”

**Enchanted Forest, April 2013**

The worst part of being executed, Robin had decided, was the waiting. For some reason Richard felt the need to have him to hear the long list of criminal activities Robin had been involved in right before he had him killed. As if he were not aware of why he had a rope around his neck and a temperamental horse tied to the cart under his feet. Even worse, the man chosen to read the charges was Nottingham’s town clerk, who had to be the most sinfully boring man Robin had ever met. He could have added just a touch of inflection to his voice.

“For your wilful commission of crimes against the crown, including but not limited to the crimes of arson, armed robbery, outlawry, extortion …”

While the clerk continued to drone, Robin attempted to twist his hands to get at the knot. It seemed that Regina’s amulet only worked when he held it in his hands – which made sense, otherwise he would have been jumping all over the realm every time he thought of something – but it was incredibly unfortunate in Robin’s current predicament, with his hands firmly tied behind his back – Richard apparently having learnt from the last time he arrested the Merry Men – and the guard behind poking a halberd into his back. Every once in a while, just to remind Robin he was there.

“… possession of and trafficking of stolen property, smuggling, bribing an officer of the law …”

Well, he didn’t have to take the bloody money! Robin defended. He didn’t have much else to do.

“… assaulting officers of the law with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, impersonating an officer of the law, impersonating a cleric of the Church …

**Hardly! Tuck’s ordination is perfectly legal, thank you!**

“… forging legal documentation …”

**You shouldn’t make your signature so easy to copy, then!**

“… tax evasion …”

**Tax evasion? Okay, now Richard’s really just embellishing things.**

He scanned the waiting crowd. The only ones who looked at all happy were wearing Richard’s
crest, holding back the lay folk in case some brave idiot got it into his head to interfere. They didn’t have to bother, as Richard had taken no chances. If somebody tried to approach the gallows – erected last night so that there was no chance of them escaping on the road to Tyburn – one of a dozen archers would have shot them before they got within ten yards.

Movement in the left corner caught Robin’s eye. “Oh, Lord. No,” he murmured to himself, praying that God might acknowledge whatever righteousness Robin had left and spare Alan from the knowledge that Charlotte was there, held back by a helmeted soldier while she struggled against her mother’s arms.

“Papa!”

“… and perverting justice by assisting in the escape of convicted persons awaiting trial. For these crimes, you have been sentenced by His Majesty the King to be hanged, drawn and quartered. May God have mercy on your soul.”

It was poetic, really. They helped save an entire town’s population, so Richard had them executed. Robin raised his chin, refusing to look weak in front of the king he had once sworn fealty to. Lounging in his pavilion, Richard looked almost giddy. Four years ago, he had sworn to kill Robin if it was the last thing he ever did. Well, he had succeeded, and Robin felt no qualms as he wished on his last breath that Richard might choke to death on his own forked tongue.

At least Roland was safe with Tuck. Robin wondered if David would extend his offer of sanctuary to his son. He undoubtedly would – the prince didn’t seem the type to turn away a young orphan – which meant his son would live, safe and far away from Richard.

Thinking of David inevitably led Robin to think of Regina, and the bloodied mess he had left in Tink’s arms. Spending a night in prison meant he didn’t know if the fairy had succeeded in healing her. That was maybe his one regret, Robin thought, that he never took the chance to tell Regina the truth.

While Richard watched with victory blazing on his face, the executioner finished securing his, Alan, John and Much’s knots. Robin let his eyes fall shut as he heard the whip crack, prayed for his boy and thought of Marian, and of Regina as well, as the wheels began to roll and the cart pulled out from underneath his feet …

And then fell flat on his face onto cold, hard earth.

“Sorry to interfere, Your Majesty, but I’m afraid these men will not be hanging today.”

There was a pop, a metallic taste in his throat, and all of a sudden Robin felt his binds loosen. His survival instincts kicked back in; he quickly removed the ropes from his hands and throat – the noose having unravelled from its ties – and stood to see Regina, her back to him and facing Richard. She had her hands in the air, pushing the crowd – or rather, the soldiers – back by means of a shimmering, transparent wall of magic. Tinkerbell raced over to check them.

“I’m fine,” Robin insisted, even though his face hurt where he had hit the ground.

“Papa!”

“Ooofff!” Alan exclaimed as a red-haired cannonball attached to him, limbs all over the place as he held his daughter close. “I’m all right. I’m all right, sweetie.”

“DON’T JUST STAND THERE, YOU FOOLS!” Richard thundered. “SHOOT THEM!”
Regina easily beat back the storm of arrows, though Robin thought he noticed her falter. She was still unwell, and more fatigued that she would ever let on. He had to hide a grin. Amazing woman.

“You’re going to start a war,” he told her.

“Too late,” was the reply. “Grab them; I can’t keep this up for long.”

Charlotte was still attached to her father like a limpet, so Robin dived into the terrified crowd and grabbed Evelyn’s arm. This time they would do what they should have done six years ago. She did not protest when Alan reached for her hand – more contact than they’d had in years – and gathered the six of them around Tink. Arrows, rocks and the odd throwing knife continued to bombard the air six feet from them until Regina let the shield drop and carried them away in a swirling black cloud.

**Storybrooke, 30 January 2014**

Rummaging through Rumple’s shop had gotten her nowhere. Regina turned through book after book for a mention of the fae or information on how to fight one. So far, she had learned that the fae disappeared from the Enchanted Forest around eight hundred years ago – making her wonder how her mother had ever managed to reproduce with one – after a century-long three-way war between Damhsa a’Deireadh, Rheul Ghorm and Fionn Cosantóir. Though who the hell they were, Regina didn’t have a clue. Nobody had seen or heard of the fae since then, leading to theories that they had been banished from the realm, gone extinct, or a combination of both. Unlike the fairies, fae were avid practitioners of dark magic and, according to one account, suffered from far fewer moral qualms. Given how many the blue bug had, Regina didn’t think she would like to meet a full-blooded fae.

That was a worry for another time, however. Right now, Regina needed a way to beat her sister, and for once, it looked like Rumplestiltskin didn’t have the answers she needed – or, at least, no way to give them to her.

After several long minutes, a growing pile of books and a rising case of gall, Regina shoved the whole lot onto the floor. “This is all useless crap!”

“Hey! Stop! *Stop it!*” Belle cried, wresting from her hands the book Regina had been about to throw across the shop. “I didn’t let you in to wreck the place.”

“I need to find a way to destroy my sister, and this historical nonsense is a waste of time!” Regina stormed to the cabinets, opening them at random in the hope that the answer would be there. “What else have you got here?”

“**What have I got here?**” Belle repeated, angrily enough that Regina turned around and forgot about the dried nightshade in the cupboard. The bookworm slammed her precious tomes onto the table and crossed her arms. “Self-respect, thank you. I want to protect this town from the Witch as much as anyone, but not if it means being bullied by a woman who imprisoned me in a tower, put me in an asylum for twenty-eight years and has done nothing but mentally and physically *torture* me ever since we’ve known each other!”

“Huh. Bookworm’s got teeth.”

Belle scoffed. “Get out.”

“Yes,” Regina agreed, stepping between Belle and the door. “I admit it, I did *all* of those things. In the *past.*” She did not look convinced, but at least she didn’t try to throw Regina out of the shop. So
Regina sighed, and continued, trying her best to be non-antagonising. It was harder than it sounded. “Belle, I need your help. I need to defeat the woman who is puppet-mastering your boyfriend. She’s got Rumple, and if you don’t help me, you may never see him again.”

The bookworm continued to glare, seeing right through Regina’s attempt to tug on her heartstrings. “I’m sorry, Belle. I really am.”

Belle let out a long breath and looked down at the table, her mind a world away from Storybrooke. For a moment, Regina felt guilty, using Rumple against her like that when she was trying to apologise for having used Belle against Rumple in the exact same manner. The feeling was alien, and Regina did not like it one bit. She shoved it aside, hoping that the overdue apology would be enough – at least for now – and waited for Belle to respond.

“Tink doesn’t know of anything that could be used against a fae, or half-fae, whatever Zelena is,” Belle started, slowly. Regina fought the urge to make her hurry up. “Iron and iron alloys would injure her, turn her own magic into a poison, but it won’t contain her. She’s talking to the other fairies, trying to get some of them to help, but from what she tells me it sounds like Blue has forbidden any of them from getting involved. They’re either too scared or too loyal to Blue to turn against her.”

“Naturally,” Regina growled, her distaste for the blue bug growing by the minute.

Thankfully, Belle took the comment the right way and brushed straight past it. “Right now Dorothy and I are trying to figure out the fourth ingredient to her time-travel spell. We thought if we could identify it, then maybe we could lay a trap for her. That still leaves us with the problem of how to contain her, though.”

“You said something about iron?”

“Yes. But Tink believes she would sense it if we used it in a trap.”

“Of course. What about –” Regina stopped, having had a thought. “Have you got any squid ink around here?”

Belle frowned. “Uh, there should be some in the safe. Why?”

“Because looking for what I did to this Witch is getting me nowhere,” Regina told her as she marched into the front room. “So I thought I’d ask her instead.”

When Neal turned up at the sheriff’s station, he walked straight into the door. It had been cleaned since the last time he’d been there and, much like an unfortunate sparrow, he didn’t see the glass until it smacked him in the face.

“Ooofff!”

“Don’t hit that.”

Neal rubbed his nose and gave a terse laugh. “Thanks. That’s very helpful.”

The wall above Emma’s desk had been taken over by a giant map of Storybrooke, with pins stuck in various locations. Some of them were labelled with Post-It notes, with times, dates and a brief
“Potential Witch sightings,” she explained with a sigh. “I’ve had fifteen calls just this morning.”

“Anything interesting?”

She shook her head. “I had another elderly couple who thought they saw floating lights that was just more teenagers with glow-sticks. Judge Herman – that’s Prince Ernest – came round to complain that his sprinklers keep shutting off. Oh, and I had someone call me because they thought they saw a dragon in the park.”

“A dragon? Did you get him?”

Emma made a face. “No. I’m not in the dragon-slaying business anymore. Besides, it was only Pongo chasing a squirrel.”

Neal snorted and doubled over. When they had both recovered, he asked, “So, lunch?”

Her face told him the answer he had already predicted. “Sorry. I do need to follow up a couple leads. And since I’m currently the only cop in town …”

“Yeah, I figured,” he said, revealing the paper bags and hot cocoa from Granny’s. “Ta-da! Apparently Granny now does do-it-yourself deliveries.”

She smiled from ear to ear and took the offered cocoa, standing up to thank him with a kiss on the cheek. Neal pretended to brush it off while his face heated several degrees. He wished one day it that would stop, while simultaneously hoping that it never would. Thankfully, the landline rang and provided a much-needed distraction.

“Hold on one second,” Emma said, holding it to her ear. “Sheriff Swan … Hi, Mrs Dish … Yes, there is some good news and some bad news. The good news is that your daughter turned up in St Ives’ Street … No, St Ives’ … Uh, you might want to sit down … Well, she’s married to Walter Spoon.”

Something sounded down the line. It could have been a shrieking banshee or a squirrel on caffeine; Neal would never know and he was happy to keep it that way. Emma gave him a look as she yanked the receiver away from her ear.

“No, I’m sorry but I’m afraid there’s no ground for criminal proceedings unless you can prove to me that she was forced into the marriage … Because she told me personally that she wasn’t … No, I can’t show up at their house just to show Mr Spoon a lesson … Because here, that’s called police brutality … Yes, it’s illegal … Mrs Dish, I’m really sorry but this is not a police matter … Yes, I’m sure the cow will be over the moon … Okay … Okay. Thank you. Goodbye, Mrs Dish.”

She hung up. “Did I just say what I think I said?”

“Yes, think so,” Neal told her while dividing a grilled cheese and onion rings.

“Just when I thought this place couldn’t get any weirder.”
be found in New York.

He sipped it on the way to the sheriff’s station, checking his e-mails on his phone as he did. Avery wanted to know when he was going back to New York, which he still didn’t know. After fishing with his dad and Hook, his parents had become strangely tight-lipped about what was going on and so he had no idea how much progress his mom had made with the curse. If she was making progress at all. Henry would have helped if he’d known how, but nobody would tell him anything. Everything he knew came out of the book, which – while very helpful in explaining so many strange people in Storybrooke – did not exactly contain a curse-breaking manual. And then there was this whole business with Regina being the Evil Queen, which made no sense at all. Unless the whole thing was just a cover …

Nah, his mom would’ve seen straight through it, Henry reasoned. He must have heard Zelena wrong.

“Whoa!” someone shouted nearby, making Henry look up and then jump onto the street. A burly man in blue overalls sidestepped to avoid him, which took a lot of talent considering he had a large piece of timber balanced on one shoulder. “Watch out, son!”

“Sorry!”

The man crossed to the other side of the street, where a number of other men and women in similar blue overalls stood beneath a scaffold. Bits of broken timber and glass were laid out on tarps held down by paint buckets and there was hazard tape surrounding the scene. Henry wandered over.

“Hi,” he said meekly to the nearest person, an elderly gentleman with a fluffy white goatee. “You’re Geppetto, right?”

“Of course,” Geppetto said with a smile. “How are you, Henry?”

Henry only recognised Geppetto because of the book and couldn’t think how the elderly carpenter knew his name, but then there were a lot of people in the town who seemed to know him even though he had never met them before. So he nodded and let the matter slide.

“I’m good, thanks. What happened here?”

“A bloody witch fight!” shouted someone else.

Geppetto shook his head, exasperated. “Mayor Mills was thrown through the window during an altercation with her sister two nights ago,” he explained. The same night Hook took Dad and me fishing, Henry thought. “You didn’t hear about it?”

“I must have missed it.” Henry shrugged. “Who’s Regina’s sister?”

“The Wicked Witch of the West,” said Geppetto. “She came into town and demanded to meet the mayor on Main Street. You’re a lucky boy if you did miss all of that. It was not a pretty sight.”

“I still reckon the whole thing’s a sham!” shouted the same man as before. “It’d be just like the Evil Queen to stage a fight with her so-called ‘sister’, make us think that they’re enemies! Ha! The sheriff should’ve locked her up first chance she got!”

“Gideon! Back to work with you!” Geppetto shouted back, with a sideways glance that Henry didn’t miss. “My apologies, Henry. Many of us have history with Mayor Mills that we would much rather forget.”
“That’s okay,” said Henry, as he had a much more pressing question. “So Regina is actually the Evil Queen?”

“Yes.”

So he hadn’t misheard Zelena at all. “Can you tell me if there are ways for people to … I don’t know, like, magically cloak their real natures from others? Like a mask – they project an image for others to see, while keeping their true motives hidden?”

Geppetto thought for a moment. “I’m no expert on magic, but I suppose it would be possible.”

“What about controlling other people? Without them knowing, I mean?”

It would explain why his mom didn’t suspect Regina, Henry thought. And why his parents had been acting so weird lately.

“Control them with their hearts, do you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Can their heart be put back?”

Geppetto shrugged. “I do not know, Henry. I prefer to stay away from dark arts.”


“Anytime, Henry. You’re a good son.”

That certainly threw a spanner in the works, Henry thought as he headed for the sheriff’s station. If Regina – or the Wicked Witch, whose name he then realised he hadn’t asked for – could take a person’s heart without their knowledge and make them obey her, make them believe whatever she wanted them to believe … then Henry couldn’t trust anyone.

**Enchanted Forest, May 2013**

Another long month of fighting had finally cleared the Midlands of ogres. A border spell, cast by the fairies at the foothills of the Alps, ensured that it would be a long, long time before another Ogres’ War threatened to devastate the kingdom. At long last, things had begun to normalise – a good harvest was underway as the soldiers had been able to return to their lands, Tower Castle was once again in the Charmings’ hands and David no longer felt as if he were being pulled in a dozen different directions. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept in the same bed as his wife.

That didn’t mean they were completely free of troubles, however, as the images in Regina’s enchanted mirror demonstrated. King Richard appeared to be far from finished with them. Soldiers massed on Glass Hill – less than forty miles from the border – and they didn’t seem to be there for a picnic.

“This is my fault,” Regina murmured, pacing the war room as she, Snow, David and Blue spied on Richard and his oversized battle horse.

“No,” David said firmly. He guessed she was referred to the incident a month and a half ago when
she rescued the Merry Men from hanging in Nottingham. “If it wasn’t this, it’d be something else.”

“And you saved four lives,” Snow added. “That counts for a lot.”

“I should have turned his sword on him when I had the chance.”

“No. Murder isn’t the answer, Regina,” Snow insisted, laying a hand on her stepmother’s shoulders. “And we can fix this. We just need to be patient and let diplomacy take its course.”

Regina didn’t seem convinced. She took her seat at the round table, her arms folded in front of her, and stared into the mirror as if she were trying to magically snap Richard’s neck from sixty-two miles away.

“Richard can’t afford another war any more than we can,” Snow continued, still trying to raise Regina’s spirits. “We can talk him down.”

“On the contrary, it may take more than mere negotiation to convince King Richard to turn away from the kingdom,” said Blue. “And there is still the matter of the Wicked Witch. Despite her armies having been banished from the kingdom, the Witch remains at large. And she is still a very real threat.”

Snow bristled in the way she did when she thought people were being far too negative. “We won a major victory. We need to be focusing on that rather than the what-ifs of a future none of us can see. The kingdom is healing, and if it is to continue then we need to give our people hope.”

“Snow –”

“I will not let my child grow up in a world of fear, Regina!” Snow snapped, slamming her palm onto the table. David reached for his wife, but she continued nonetheless. “This is our kingdom, and I will not let anyone take it from us again!”

“Did you say ‘child’?” Regina asked.

Snow did a double-take, realising that she had let slip the news she had given to David only a couple of days before. He held his wife, rubbed her back reassuringly, and nodded at the astonished fairy and stepmother before him.

“We found out a few days ago,” he told them. “We were going to tell everyone after Ruby and Mulan got back from Breton.”

“And then the rest of the kingdom once everything had got settled,” Snow added. “To let them see that we have hope for the future, and so should they.”

“And what about the Witch?” Regina asked, getting to her feet. “How do you know she won’t come after your baby? For all we know, that could be the last piece she needs to complete her plans!”

“We’ll deal with it when the time comes. As we have done before,” Snow said with a cheeky nod at her stepmother. David stifled a laugh as Regina grimaced at the reference to the last Dark Curse. “Right now, everyone needs the chance to recover and settle down again. That includes you, Regina.”

After letting out a heavy sigh, Regina reluctantly allowed Snow to hug her – returning it with an awkward one of her own – and Blue gave them a short congratulations. David understood where they were coming from – it was hardly the ideal time or climate to be continuing their family – but he’d had enough of waiting. They had delayed it for a year because of the war but frankly, now that
the end was in sight, David was over the moon.

**Storybrooke, 30 January 2014**

“So, explain this to me again?” Belle asked when they got to the park and found a relatively isolated area, away from any curious onlookers or no-good peepers who might scream and ruin Regina’s entire plan. “You’re going to summon Zelena, see if you can make her talk to you, and –”

“Yes, exactly like that,” Regina interrupted. She didn’t need the bookworm spoiling the whole thing by accidentally outing the whole thing to a nearby monkey – or worse, Rumplestiltskin.

“Okay, but that still leaves me with the question of how you’re going to – what are you doing?”

“Oh, relax,” Regina chided as Belle took several steps backwards, stopping short of falling over a bush. She pressed the knife to the side of her left index finger – where, from experience, she knew it would hurt less – until it drew blood. Sheathing the knife and dropping it back into her pocket, she let the red droplets fall from her finger onto the frosted grass. “Blood calls blood. Zelena shares mine, so I can use it to call her here whether she wants to be called or not.”

“Uh huh,” Belle agreed, though she still looked as if she expected Regina to turn the knife on her.

Regina rolled her eyes and watched the droplets bubble and disappear into the earth. The spell would bring Zelena to the park, but it wouldn’t force her to stay there a moment longer than Zelena wished to be there.

That was what Robin, hidden in the trees with an arrow coated in squid ink, was responsible for. It wasn’t a long-term solution – the ink’s effects were only temporary – but if it worked, it would be long enough to get some answers. And the dagger.

They waited for a minute – which felt more like several days – until the wind picked up, turned green and Zelena appeared in the midst of it.

“You called, sis?”

“Yes,” Regina said, stepping forwards so she was between Zelena and Belle. “I thought we should talk. Properly, not deceiving each other in the manner you tried this morning. Which failed, by the way.”

Zelena made a face and looked past Regina. “Belle, dear! How are you? Keeping well? I’d bring Rumple by to say hello but I’m afraid he’s got more important things to keep him busy.”

“Leave her out of this,” Regina growled. She held up a hand to stop Belle from rushing at Zelena. “I just want to talk.”

“So talk!” Zelena trilled, spreading her arms wide.

“We know about you’re trying to cast a spell to travel back in time,” Belle asked. “Why?”

Zelena shrugged. “To fix the past, of course.”

“What do you want to fix?”

“That’s my business, dearie.”
“To make our mother keep you?” Regina suggested, fixing her gaze on Zelena. She had to keep her talking. “Or maybe to find your fae father? How did that happen, by the way?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Zelena. “Not to you. When I’m done, you will have ceased to even exist.”

Twang!

Zelena twirled, faster than Regina would have thought possible, and caught the arrow mid-flight. She laughed, letting it fall to the ground. Regina stared. She’d had enough experience with squid ink to know that it worked almost instantly, yet Zelena appeared to be unaffected.

“I should have guessed there was more to this little meeting,” the Witch sneered. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

“How did you get like this?!” Regina screamed as the wind began to pick up again. In the midst of the cloud, Zelena scoffed.

“Why don’t you ask your friend, King Josef?”

And with that, she was gone.

Robin let his bow drop, disappointment etched on his face. Regina continued to stare at the spot where Zelena had disappeared, and the arrow in the grass, its tip glistening in the sunlight.

Somewhere behind Regina, Belle sighed. “You only coated the tip, didn’t you?”

As Robin nodded, Regina turned on her heels.

“Regina! Where are you going?”

“Eugene! There’s someone at the door!”

“I’ll get it,” Josef called, dropping the newspaper on the table. He pecked a kiss on his daughter’s cheek on the way to the door, breathing in the scent of whatever she was cooking. That was one advantage of having a daughter and a son-in-law who had been in Storybrooke during the first curse – they had a house and a spare room they were willing to lend to him. It wasn’t Corona Castle, but it was better than living in the town hall or the tent city, and (though Josef freely admitted he was biased) Rapunzel was an excellent cook. The doorbell continued to ring – blasted inventions, Josef thought – and he hurried to answer it.

“Regina?” he said, gaping at the former queen on the doorstep. “What are you –?”

“How did you know my mother?”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 21: The King’s Tale. In the Enchanted Forest, Dorothy has a proposal for how to catch the Witch and Belle tries to get through to Rumple. In Storybrooke, Josef tells his story, Regina realises something important and Robin makes a discovery.
Some historical notes: the Tyburn Tree was a triangular gallows constructed in the village of Tyburn (about three miles from Newgate Prison) where public executions were carried out. The gallows could be used to hang up to 24 people at once. Some people who were hanged there include Elizabeth Barton (a nun who prophesised that Henry VIII would die within six months if he married Anne Boleyn), Francis Dereham and Sir Thomas Culpeper (courtiers of Henry VIII who were accused of sleeping with his fifth wife, Catherine Howard) and highwaymen Claude Duval, James MacLaine, Jack Sheppard, John Rann and John Austin. Austin was the last to be hanged at Tyburn, as public executions were discontinued in the late 18th century in favour of private hangings at Newgate and Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

Also, just in case anybody is wondering why Regina hasn’t tried squid ink in the EF, it’s because she doesn’t have a way to summon or ambush Zelena yet (in the EF, she’s not aware of their familial relations so wouldn’t know to use her own blood to call Zelena). They also didn’t have a means of long-term containment until the fairies showed up and the ogres have been their main priority up until now.
The command yanked Rumplestiltskin from his hiding position on Muffin Street – where he had followed Regina from the park – to the driveway of Zelena’s farmhouse, where an incensed witch burned with rage and held his knife above her head. The moment he arrived, she sent him crashing to his knees. He yelped as the gravel cut into his skin.

“What do you want now?” he snarled. That earned him another blow, and he found himself looking up at Zelena’s contorted face from the ground as magic fixed him to the earth.

“Manners.”

Rumplestiltskin did his best to glare at her, in spite of the pain paralysing him at that moment. You killed Belle’s father, he would have screamed if the dagger’s control had let him. No doubt she believes that I am the one who committed the murder. Don’t expect me to be so charitable after you dared to hurt her like that.

“I’m running out of time,” said Zelena, lifting the spell. Rumplestiltskin waited a moment before he tried to move, found that she had not forbidden him from getting to his feet and did so. No sense in staying on his knees if he didn’t have to. “I need to find a suitable heart. The pirate has proven useless and Regina, regrettably, has hidden hers. Now tell me, doll, where did she go after our little chat?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific. You’ve had a number of discussions in the past few days.”

She flicked the dagger, and he was on his knees again. No doubt he would have a few more scars to add to his collection when this was all over. If it ever ended.

“I don’t have time for your games, Rumple!” she shouted, disturbing the chickens beneath a nearby tree. “I need Regina’s heart before Snow White’s baby is born. Where is it?!”

“I don’t know,” Rumplestiltskin told her, semi-truthfully. He hadn’t seen the heart with his own eyes – therefore, he could only guess as to its location.

“I know Regina wouldn’t just leave it lying around. Even she is not that stupid,” Zelena snarled. She flicked the dagger again, forcing Rumplestiltskin to his feet, and stood uncomfortably close, raking his chin with the blade. “She went somewhere after I paid her a visit this morning. Tell me where she went.”

“The park,” he growled, unable to disobey a direct command with the Kris dagger currently pressed against his jaw.

Zelena’s cold eyes narrowed. He wished he could push her away, but by the law of the dagger he
could not deny the wishes of the one who held it. “You’re leaving something out,” she said. She flicked her wrist again, this time to bring the tip of the dagger against his chin. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“The pigs didn’t get fed this morning. There’s a rat in the cellar –”

For the third time, she forced him to his knees. The dagger cut his cheek as he went down and he felt blood begin to seep from the wound.

*Oh, just tell her already*, said Fafnir, the old dragon’s voice cracking in Rumplestiltskin’s head. The other Dark Ones must be able to feel the commands as well, and they cared far less than Rumplestiltskin did about stopping Zelena. *You’ll have to sooner or later. You might as well get it over with.*

“Did she speak to anyone at the park?” she asked, eyes blazing. “Did anyone speak to her?”

“Yes.”

“To whom did she speak?”

Rumplestiltskin clenched his teeth, a vain attempt to keep the answer inside his mouth. “The outlaw,” he grunted. “The one they call Hood.”

Zelena snorted in disgust. “She’s sharing a bed with *outlaws* now? Just when I thought she couldn’t sink any lower.”

He shut his eyes, taking a number of long breaths – much needed after so long having his movements so heavily controlled. Zelena would put two and two together – even on his knees, cursing every moment of her abominable existence, Rumplestiltskin could not deny that she had enough intelligence to determine *that* – and conclude that Regina must have either entrusted the outlaw with her heart, or that he was somehow linked to its protection. Either way, if he wanted to keep Zelena from obtaining her goals – because he knew Regina’s chances were minimal at best – then he needed to find a loophole, and *quickly*.

_You fool_, Fafnir snarled. *Why do you care so much about the girl? She’s not even your daughter.*

“It’s not something *you* would understand,” Rumplestiltskin snapped back.

“Oh, I understand *perfectly,*” said Zelena. She must have thought he was talking to her. “Love is weakness. One that can be exploited. And I think I know just the way to do it.”

**Enchanted Forest, May 2013**

Despite the palace being occupied by the ogres until recently, Regina’s apple tree still grew strong as it always had. It was flowering, too. She smiled. It should have a good yield come autumn.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

She chuckled. “It’s about time. You’ve been hiding in the shadows for long enough.”

Robin stepped into the light of day, his soft-soled boots making almost no noise on the stone floor. “You heard me?” he asked incredulously.

She shrugged, choosing to let him wonder. She’s actually had no idea he was there at all. Sometime
over the last months, she’d just stopped being surprised by him popping up out of nowhere.

It didn’t hurt that his confused face was rather attractive, though Regina had no intention of letting anybody know it.

He cleared his throat, and she waited for him to sort out whatever it was he wanted to say. “I – I just wanted to thank you again. For saving our necks. Literally.”

“You saved my life in Knightsbridge,” she reminded him. “Call it even.”

He nodded and shuffled his feet. “It’s a lovely tree.”

“One of my favourites,” she told him. “I’ve tended to this one since I was a little girl. It was one of the only things I was allowed to bring with me from my father’s estate.”

“When you married the king?”

Regina snorted. “I hate this place.”

“Oh, of course. Cold draughts, stuffy hallways, and it still smells like monkey,” Robin joked. “What’s there to love?”

“It’s also the place I was trapped for so many years. First as Leopold’s unwilling wife, then in exile.” She sighed. A little white flower budded from a branch above her. She reached out to stroke its petals. “Like this tree, I never truly belonged here. And I could never leave. Not without power. So I became the Evil Queen.”

Why she told him this, she didn’t really know. Maybe she hoped he would be scared off and leave before she had her heart broken, yet again. Villains didn’t get happy endings, after all.

Instead, Robin climbed onto the low wall and crossed his legs, like a schoolboy listening to his teacher tell a story. “Sounds lonely.”

“It was,” she said, still attending to the little flower bud.

“Is that why you learned magic from Rumplestiltskin?”

“More or less. Though the truth is, he can only take some of the blame for the person I became,” she told him. Robin still wasn’t leaving. “I lost someone I loved, and then I was forced by my mother into a marriage I didn’t want. My whole life, someone else had always seemed to be making the decisions for me and at some point, I snapped. I swore to myself that no-one would ever hold that kind of power over me again. I even killed to ensure that power remained unrivalled. Scared yet?”

“Not at all.”

“Then that makes you a very small minority.”

“My wife was killed because of me,” Robin said suddenly. “My foolish dreams of heroism, that Richard was really so blind as to what his brother had made of the kingdom, got her and both of our fathers arrested in the capital. The lads were able to break me out but … we couldn’t get to them in time.”

“I’m sorry,” Regina said, though it seemed rather pointless. Robin gave a pained smile.

“It’s okay. It was years ago. Mostly it’s Roland that I –” He broke off, chewing his lower lip. Then he laughed. “What I’m saying is that I understand. I, too, have walked the road of darkness and
regret. If it hadn’t been for Roland, I can’t say for certain what would have become of me.”

“You never sought revenge for your wife’s death.”

“I tried,” he admitted. “A few months after Marian died, Richard was preparing to leave for Agrabah again. I caught up to him in Hamelin without the lads knowing and laid a charge in his tent.”

Regina lowered herself onto the wall. “What happened?”

“Tuck stopped me. He’d suspected I might do something like that and followed me. He reminded me that there was a difference between justice and revenge, and I shouldn’t blur the line. If not for my sake, then for my boy’s.”

“So you let him live.”

Robin nodded. “It doesn’t make me the better man, not by a long shot. I’m still a thief. And I have got blood on my hands. On the battlefield, mostly, but that doesn’t make them any less dead.” He leant back, gazing at the sky. “I don’t think there’s as much of a difference between us as you might think.”

“Have you decided to take David’s offer and stay here?” she asked, uncertain as to what she hoped the answer might be. Once, she had wanted to get to know him better. There was more to the outlaw than he had let on, even in the last few minutes, and she wanted to know what it was.

“We’re going to stay in the Midlands, certainly,” Robin told her. “It’d be nice not to live on the run for a while. As for staying at Tower Castle, well, it depends on what’s here to stay for.”

She thought she caught a glint in his eye, and he was about to say more but, of course, there was an interruption.

“Oh, beg pardon,” said the clumsy pink fairy who was enamoured with the grumpy dwarf. Regina resisted the urge to growl at her. “Queen Snow says she needs you both in the war room right away.”

“We’ll be right there,” said Robin. The fairy nodded, and scooted off. “Shall we, m’lady?”

“Only if you promise to stop calling me that.”

“Well, most people I call ‘Your Majesty’ try to kill me.”

“Then how about ‘Regina’?” she suggested coyly, even though he usually called her by her name rather than her title anyway. Still, it felt nice to say it on an official basis.

“All right. Regina, it is.”

**Storybrooke, 30 January 2014**

“How does everyone take their tea?” Rapunzel asked the room once everyone settled into the small apartment on Muffin Street – Belle took the armchair next to the heater, Robin the desk chair and Josef sat on the spongy old sofa opposite Regina, who stood.

“White with one, please,” said Robin.

“White without,” Belle added.
Rapunzel nodded. “Regina?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” She’d much prefer a strong cup of coffee. Or if this conversation went the way she thought it was going to go, a large glass of brandy.

Josef also turned down the drink. “What is it that you’re after, exactly? I knew Cora for many years as Prince Henry’s wife. Mostly from a distance – thankfully, we had little reason to interact. I can count on one hand the number of times we spoke.”

“I spoke to Zelena,” she told him. “It went about as well as could be expected. I asked her how she got to be the way she is, and she told me to ask you. Do you have any idea what she meant by that?”

“None whatsoever,” Josef said, shaking his head. “To the best of my knowledge, I’ve never met Zelena before.”

“Did you know my mother had another child?”

A look crossed his face; one Regina couldn’t interpret. Before she could ask the question again, there was a thump and a crash as Robin bumped into the desk. He leapt up, his chair still spinning in circles.

“Sorry,” he repeated several times while he righted the lamp, books and empty coffee mug that he had knocked over. “It’s, um … wheels on chairs. Fascinating.”

He tried to look apologetic – it didn’t quite work, as he was still swinging the chair from side to side. Regina stifled a chuckle. Sometimes she forgot how strange some things in this world must seem to those who had no cursed memories.

“Maybe we should let you two talk in private,” Belle suggested, barely managing to conceal a grin as she rose from the armchair. She, Rapunzel and Robin disappeared into the kitchen. Regina noted that Robin took the swivel chair with him. She smiled. Like a little boy with a new toy.

“He’s right, though,” said Josef when they were gone. “Swivel chairs are a great deal of fun.”

“If you say so.” She sighed and got straight back to the topic at hand. “Did you know my mother had another child?”

Josef got to his feet, wringing his hands. “In all honesty, I thought she had lost it. It happens, unfortunately.”

“So you knew? How?”

He had his back to her, facing a wall covered in paintings of landscapes, horses and a chameleon. A moment passed, and then he said, “I knew Cora before she married your father.”

“How?”

“Are you sure you want to know the story?”

“Yes!” Regina insisted, growing frustrated. “All my life, my mother kept the existence of my half-sister from me! And I need to know why!”

Josef turned around again, a distant look in his deep brown eyes. “I think it was about … two, maybe three years before you were born …”
Enchanted Forest, about 70 years ago

“Your Highness!” the esquire called, urging his pony across the last few yards of muddied ground. The horses’ hooves had churned the soaked earth into thick sludge, so no tracks remained for the hunters to follow. Josef petted Clemens’ neck as his faithful old friend whinnied at the smaller pony, and nodded at the esquire.

“The weather seems to be against us, Mikhail,” he commented as the esquire brought his pony to a halt. “A pity. With the Arendelle ambassador coming to visit, we should not have a chance to hunt again until the end of the month.”

“Yes, sire,” said Mikhail. “Shall I tell the men to return to the castle?”

Josef sighed. He had not been out of the palace grounds for many months. With fresh air in his lungs and Clemens’ muscular frame beneath him, he felt alive again. Oh, his father would be angry if he stayed longer than necessary, but it wasn’t as if the man had the ability to reach out and drag his son out of the woods. No, Josef could wait a little longer. Whatever awaited him at the castle was nothing he had not endured in the past.

“Give it another hour,” he told Mikhail. “We may have better luck in Andersen’s Wood –”

Clemens stiffened and pricked his ears, making odd noises. “What’s the matter, boy?” Josef asked. Clemens stomped one hoof as best he could against the mud, whinnied again – upsetting Mikhail’s pony – until Josef heard what had bothered him. A faint scream, carried by the wind, sounded again across the downs.

“What was that?” asked Mikhail.

“Someone’s in trouble,” said Josef when he heard the scream a third time. As Mikhail began to protest, he nudged Clemens’ sides and the horse took off, expertly navigating the flooded field with the tiniest of direction from his rider.

“Help me!”

Clemens’ hooves impacted the water with a splash as Josef brought him to a halt at the top of a muddy ridge. There was a young woman, a peasant woman in a dress that had probably been her mother’s from the number of patches in its hem, on her knees in the mud, holding a satchel close to her belly. Somebody else rolled down to the bottom of the ridge and Josef growled, guessing what had happened. He brought Clemens’ head around as the hunting party trudged up the hill behind him and pointed to the running scoundrel. “That way! After him!”

The hunting party rode off. Josef slid out of his saddle, his boots and trousers becoming soaked the moment he set foot on the ground and carefully approached the woman. Having just been robbed, he knew there was a risk she could lash out at him as well. “Are you alright, m’lady?” he asked as he approached from the side. She remained downcast, cradling her belly. “What happened?”

She was crying, he then realised. “A bandit on the road,” she said with a sob, sounding as if her mind was miles away from her body. “He took everything from me.”

“I’m sorry.” Josef knelt next to her in the mud – Elyse the washerwoman would no doubt have a thrashing ready for him when he got back; oh, well – and held out his hands for her to take if she so wished. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No. There’s nothing you can do for me.”
“Allow me to try,” he said, adopting his ‘princely voice’. “I’m Prince Josef.”

As much as he hated using his title, it had the needed effect of jolting the woman back to reality. She started, tearing her gaze from the now far-off hunting party to stare, wide-eyed, at him instead. “Prince Josef?” she gasped.

“Please,” he said, gesturing for her to take his hands. “Come with me. We’ll see what we can do for you.” She hesitantly slid her hands into his, and he helped her to her feet. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Cora, Your Highness,” she told him with a curtsy.

**Storybrooke, 30 January 2014**

“We, uh, we became friends. Quite close friends, actually,” said Josef. He chuckled, though Regina sensed it was out of discomfort as opposed to amusement. “Cora was unlike any woman I’d met up to that point. I asked her to stay at the palace until she was better. We took a walk, or two, or three on the grounds. My father, of course, didn’t approve at all. But that only made me like her even more.”

“What happened?” Regina asked with a sense of dread.

“I asked her to marry me.”

“What?!”

Josef smiled. “I was young and I was in love. And I thought it was the best way to annoy my father. As the only son and with plenty of unwelcome rivals to the throne, he could hardly disown me for marrying a commoner.”

“But my mother –”

“It never went any further than holding hands, if that makes you feel any better.”

It didn’t, as for all she knew about her mother she still felt squeamish thinking of Cora being with anybody but Prince Henry. But Cora was hardly around to defend herself, and as he had said, it had been long before Regina was ever born. Josef’s words then gave her another thought.

“So you’re definitely not Zelena’s father, then?”

He laughed. “Do I look like I’m her father?”

“No.” *Not unless she got all of Mother’s genes and nothing at all from you*, Regina thought. “Why did you break the engagement off?”

She knew there was no chance that Cora had been the one to call it off, the power-hungry social climber she had been.

“I found out that she was pregnant,” said Josef. “I had to formally call off my prior engagement to Maria, Rapunzel’s mother. As you can imagine, King Harald wasn’t thrilled with the situation. He came down to Corona to negotiate with my father. His daughter overheard Cora talking to her handmaiden, told Maria and then she told me.”

Regina shut her eyes, seeing a pattern begin to emerge. “His daughter?”

“Princess Eva. Or Queen Eva, as you would have known her.”
“Snow’s mother.” **Apparently a big mouth is a family trait.** Regina sighed and ran her hands through her hair. “Then why didn’t you say anything when she married my father?”

“The Southern Isles and the Northern Kingdoms have had a … difficult relationship for hundreds of years, Regina,” Josef reminded her. “King Xavier tapped into a gold mine with Cora. He was hardly going to listen to my opinions on the matter. And your father should have been allowed to marry whomever he wished.”

“No matter how evil she was,” she muttered.

He gave a small smile. “I would never say that in front of her daughter.”

“Even a daughter who became the Evil Queen?” she snorted.

“The Evil Queen would have held my heart in her hand and tortured me rather than engage in civilised conversation,” said Josef. “Mayor Mills, I find, is worthy of greater respect.”

Regina stared at him. That was probably the nicest thing a noble had said to her in, well, ever. Then she shook her head to clear the thought, and asked, “What about Zelena’s real father? Do you know anything about him?”

“No. After Cora left, I never bothered to find out anything more,” he said with a sigh. “I didn’t want to know anything more. I thought I was in love. And she played me for a fool.”

“I guess that makes two of us,” Regina admitted sadly.

**Enchanted Forest, May 2013**

“This is absolutely, and unequivocally, insane!” Regina declared, her voice carried around the war room with the force of a thousand trumpets. Robin was tempted to yell along with her – he was the king of bad ideas, but this one was truly a corker. And most of the Council seemed to agree. “You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“It’s not a fight to the death,” David protested. He put Richard’s communiqué on the table. Though the prince had just finished reading it aloud, Robin grabbed it and read it for himself. Over his shoulder, he felt Ruby do the same thing, and the little cricket fluttered down to read it too. “Richard can’t afford a war any more than we can. A duel is the quickest and simplest way to settle the matter.”

“You could tell him to stuff it up his ass. That’s simple,” said Regina.

David sighed. “Look, there’s no trickery involved here. Richard’s terms are simple; if he wins, we hand the Merry Men over to him to be executed, or he declares war on the Midlands. If I win, they walk free, and this whole thing blows over.”

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, especially since it’s my head you’re offering to fight for here,” Robin began, double-checking the signature. Being himself a master forger of Richard’s signature, he was fairly sure it was genuine, but one could never be certain. “But I think you might be underestimating how badly Richard wants me dead. You could win and he’d just find some other reason to declare war.”

David shook his head. Robin groaned. Royals could be stubbornly stupid sometimes. He knew David – and Snow, too – wanted to see the best in everyone but they didn’t know Richard like he
did.

“As king, he has a reputation to uphold. He won’t ruin it over – well, no offence intended, but a bunch of outlaws.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Robin muttered.

“Robin, I’m doing this. You can thank me when it’s over.”

Snow reached for her husband’s hand, whilst holding the other over her belly. “David, are you sure about this?”

“I’ll be careful.”

Then the Blue Fairy cleared her throat, attracting everyone’s attention. “Good. The sooner it’s done, the sooner we can get back to dealing with the real enemy: the Wicked Witch.”

“But we haven’t heard anything from her since we beat the ogres out of the kingdom,” said Ruby. “Is it really a good idea to go looking for a fight?”

“Just because we’ve not heard from her doesn’t mean she couldn’t be plotting something for the future. And she has the Dark One on her side,” said Blue.

“Says you,” Regina muttered, though it was for Robin’s ears only. He grimaced. She had shared with him her doubts about Blue’s story and though Robin agreed that there were holes – like why, with all the extra power at her disposal, the Witch had chosen to retreat – he also couldn’t think why Blue would lie. Fairies supposedly worked for the common good of the realm, after all, and opposing the Witch had to fall into that category. Regina’s ill feelings towards Blue must be clouding her judgement, Robin concluded.

“I don’t want to have another baby with another evil sorceress on the loose,” Snow added. “No offence, Regina. At least with the fairies back, we can lock her up somewhere safe.”

“I’ve actually had an idea in regards to that,” said Dorothy, holding up a hand for attention. “I don’t know of a good way to fight Zelena that hasn’t already been tried, but I think I know someone who might: Glinda. The Good Witch of the South,” she explained to the room full of confused faces. “She knew Zelena long before I did. In fact, I think she may have mentored her before she turned to evil. If anybody knows how to defeat her, I’d say it’d be her.”

“So you know where she is?” asked Snow.

“Well, not really. Apparently Zelena exiled her to the northern continent sometime after I left Oz the first time. Nobody knows where.”

“Great. So we know who to ask, but not how to find the person to ask,” Regina grumbled. “This is supposed to be an idea?”

“Glinda’s fortress still stands,” Dorothy explained, staring Regina in the eye. Robin fleetingly wondered which of them would win in a fight, but shoved the thought away for the time being. “I understand you can use something that belongs, or belonged, to someone to magically track them down.”

Regina, to her credit, took the farm girl’s defiance in stride and moved on. She even let people see it, or maybe Robin had just gotten to know her too well. “It would have to be something of great importance to get past any traps Zelena put in place.”
“I can think of a few things.”

“How long would it take to get them?” David asked.

Dorothy shrugged. “A day or two. I can get to Oz and back via my shoes, but I’d have to walk a few miles to the fortress itself.”


“We can spare her,” David said when Dorothy looked like she was about to refuse. “Go. We’ll see you in a few days.”

*If he survives the next few days,* Robin thought glumly.

Cogsworth snored. Belle had no idea why she found that amusing, the fact that her winged monkey prison guard snored, but she did. Maybe she was slowly losing her mind, and finding amusement in odd things was her mind’s desperate attempt to hold it all together. Or maybe it was that she was now more or less used to her situation – after all, she had spent most of the last thirty years in various prisons of differing conditions, with jailers of all sorts and Zelena was hardly the worst of them. No, Nurse Ratched would forever hold that title.

While Cogsworth continued to snore, curled into a ball in a pile of books deemed unhelpful, Belle gently lifted the latch of the library door. It came away with a small creak – Cogsworth grunted and shifted in his sleep – and Belle carefully slipped out of the tower.

The Dark Castle lived up to its name, now more than ever. Belle heard nothing except the slip of her bare feet on the stone as she felt her way down the stairs, her breath a raging storm in silence like a waking sleep. She clung to the bannister, relied on feeling and memory to guide her to the bottom of the tower and counted her steps – remembering just in time to jump over the sixth step from the bottom.

At least the corridors around the Great Hall were illuminated. If Belle’s counting was accurate, then she had been Zelena’s prisoner for almost six months. Summer was coming, Zelena was away more often than not, and she never bothered to lock the doors. If she had been so inclined, Belle imagined that she could have left quite easily. The Alps were not so harsh without their snowy armour and, inexperienced as she was, Belle felt that she had a decent chance at reaching the nearest town before Zelena realised she was missing.

She would not, however, be doing that.

The Great Hall had been cleaned, the shattered windows repaired and curtains replaced to return it to the stuffy, smothering place Belle remembered from her early days at the castle. Rumple’s many knickknacks had been removed as well, replaced by Zelena’s own peculiarities. The dove was still nesting in scraps of cloth interwoven with gold strands; why it stuck around, Belle wasn’t sure. She didn’t know if the monkeys ate birds - probably not, but it was still curious. There was a collection of maps stuck to one wall, several tables covered in potion bottles, retorts and pots, a giant cauldron simmering above a simmering wood fire, a dozen broomsticks in various states of repair stacked like muskets against one wall, and a spinning wheel, trapped along with its spinner inside a cage.

As had become her custom in the few weeks she had been breaking out of the library to sneak into the Hall, Belle knelt on the floor where Rumple could see her. She clasped the bars – made of a silvery-blue metal that was not steel, for some reason – in both hands and prayed that, this time, she
might see her love again.

“Hey, Rumple. I’m back,” she said, as if she were picking up any ordinary conversation. “I’m sorry. I didn’t find anything today that might help you come back to yourself. I’m not giving up, though. I won’t give up.”

“Mesecola e rimsecola, Mamma started to cook,” Rumple crooned, turning the wheel ever so gently. “Gira, gira e rigira, she added della farina, un po’ di burro ed un uovo grande, ed un pizzoco di zenzero.”

“Rumple?” Belle sat up straighter, wishing she spoke Calabrian. “Can you hear me?”

“Mamma took a handful of dough and with it, made uno stomaco, poi una testa, due braccia e due gambe,” he continued to murmur with the creak of the wheel. “Ed un piccolo nose, due occhi e una bello bocca sorridente. Mamma cooked the gingerbread man in the pan and waited. When he came out –”

“Rumple!”

The wheel stopped. She then realised two things – one, that her hand was on his knee, and two, his eyes were brown. Rumple’s brown. He blinked once, then twice, seemingly unable to tear his eyes away from her. She grasped his knee, afraid of what would happen if she let go.

“Is it – is it you?”

He leant forward, as far as he could go without falling off his stool. She reached up, her fingertips brushing the smooth line of his jaw. “Take aw, but leave my books tae me.”

“Shh.” One long finger gently caressed her cheek, then brushed a tear away from where it had fallen. “Take aw, but leave my books tae me, these heavy creels of auld we buir –”

A memory of Rumple reciting a poem in his thickest accent, late one night in the library, flashed into Belle’s mind and she cried aloud, grasping his hand in hers as she joined in, her southern accent in stark contrast to his heavy brogue.

“– We fill no’ now, nor wander free, nor weir the heart that once we wuir; no’ now each river seems tae poor his waters frae the Muses’ hill; tho’ something’s gane frae stream an’ shore, the books I loved, I love them still.”

“I knew you were still in there,” said Belle when the verse finished. She brushed a strand of unkempt hair away from his face while he grinned. He was so close, if she reached up, just a touch –

Then he seized, wrenching his hand from hers and stumbled to the back of the cage, clawing at his head like he intended to rip his hair out.

“Rumple!”

“No!” he cried, ignoring her pleas. “No! No room! No room!”

Belle sighed and rested her head against the cursed metal bars, refusing to cry. He was so close, and yet so far away.
“I’m going to get you out of here, Rumple,” she swore, though she knew he couldn’t hear her. “I promise.”

**Storybrooke, 30 January 2014**

“Thanks for the tea, Rapunzel,” Belle said, giving the younger woman’s hand a squeeze as they said goodbye at the door.

“And tell Flynn we’ll have to catch up sometime,” Robin added. “Married a princess, ay? Who’d have thought?”

Rapunzel chuckled. “Oh, it’s definitely an interesting story. I guarantee you’ll never look at a frying pan the same way.”

They waved goodbye as Rapunzel shut the door, then they hurried to follow Regina down the street. She didn’t seem to be angry or otherwise trying to get away from them, Belle thought, just distracted. Whatever it was Josef had told her, it had affected her.

“So?” asked Belle. “Did you find out what you were looking for?”

Regina shook her head. “I don’t know yet.”

“Well, what did Josef say?”

She stopped halfway up the footbridge that would take them from Muffin Street to Drury Lane and leant against the railing. Belle stood next to Robin on the other side.

“Josef was once engaged to my mother,” Regina told them. “He called it off because he found out that she was pregnant with another man’s child. That child was Zelena. I think that’s the event that Zelena wants to go back and change – Josef found out about Cora’s pregnancy because of Snow’s mother. Seems to run in the family. If Zelena goes back and, I don’t know, kills Eva, then she can change history to make Josef believe the baby was his. And my mother wouldn’t have to give Zelena up.”

“So you’ve solved the mystery. Well done.”

All three of them jumped as Zelena trotted up to join them on the footbridge. Belle instinctively took a step back, but this time it wasn’t her that the Witch was interested in. Zelena smirked at Regina, then turned her attention to Robin. “And now you’re going to give me my sister’s heart.”

“Not bloody likely,” said Robin. He had his bow drawn and aimed at Zelena’s chest before he’d even finished saying the words. Zelena was entirely unconcerned.

“Oh, you will. Or this is going to get really messy,” she said with a sinister chuckle. “Show yourself, dearie!”

There was movement in the bushes on the other side of the bridge. “Rumple!” Belle cried at the same time Robin shouted, “Roland!”

Zelena laughed against as Robin’s little boy struggled in Rumple’s grip. Belle held the railing so tight that her fingers went numb. He looked so sick, pale-faced and with muck staining his clothes. He was fighting the command; she knew he had to be. Zelena was about to push him over the one line he had never, ever imagined crossing, even in his darkest moments, and all Belle could do was
watch. Even if she had been able to push past Robin and Regina, Zelena stood in the way. And after her recent experiences in the woods, she didn’t think she would last long if she jumped into the freezing water under the bridge.

“It’s to you, outlaw,” Zelena continued. “Give me the heart, or watch the Dark One tear your son into scrap meat. Your choice.”

Robin fired. From less than five feet away, there was no way he could miss – unless, of course, the target had magic and batted the arrow away as if it were no greater a nuisance than a mosquito.

“Zelena,” Regina started, taking a step in front of Robin. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Of course I do,” the Witch snarled. “You know the story. You got everything I should have, and you didn’t even deserve it! Now I’m going to take it all away from you! Dark One!”

Roland screamed, Robin shouted, and Belle shut her eyes.

“Give me the heart!”

“Robin,” said Regina somewhere amongst the shouting and screaming. “Give it to me.”

The horrible noises stopped, and Belle opened her eyes in time to see Regina toss her own heart into Zelena’s waiting hands. “Now let the boy go.”

Roland screamed one last time before Zelena finally let go, and Rumple pushed the boy to safety, far away from himself and the Witch.

“Thank you,” said Zelena, turning Regina’s heart around in her hands. “See you later, sis.”

Then she and Rumple both disappeared. Robin’s bow dropped the floor with a clang as he ran to his son, scooping him up in a bear hug and checked him for injuries. “You’re okay, Roland. You’re okay. It’s safe now.”

Belle stared at the spot where Rumple had disappeared. He had been looking at the ground the whole time, unable to bring his eyes to hers. Was he ashamed that she had to see him like that? Well, she damn well wasn’t! This wasn’t his fault!

Meanwhile, Regina stood stoic on the bridge, watching Robin comfort his crying boy. The shock passed, and Belle then realised exactly what had happened.

Regina had actually handed her own heart over to Zelena to save a little boy. Part of Belle wanted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming.

“I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Nothing is worth the loss of a child,” Regina murmured, still staring at the father and son below them. He was shaken up and scared out of his mind, but Roland didn’t seem to be hurt too badly.

Belle figured she must have still been in shock about the whole thing, because the next words that tumbled out of her mouth sounded foreign to her ears. “I thought it was you.”

Regina turned to face her. Belle thought she had better explain.
“When I woke up, locked in the barn, I thought I was somewhere in the Enchanted Forest and that you’d imprisoned me again,” she elaborated. “That you’d gone back to being the Evil Queen again.”

Nobody would blame her for making that assumption – not even Regina, judging from the understanding look on her face – but Belle had been wrong, and that merited an apology. No matter what she may have felt about the woman standing in front of her. It didn’t hurt that Belle’s opinion of her had skyrocketed in the last five minutes.

“I made an assumption, and I wanted to say I’m sorry;” she said, still rambling. “Emma was right. You have changed.”

Regina shifted her weight. Belle didn’t blame her for feeling uncomfortable. The whole situation was a little unbelievable to Belle as well.

“For what it’s worth, Belle, I – I really am sorry;” Regina said slowly, as if she had never said the words before. Belle wondered if she ever had. “For everything.”

Well, that was an apology Belle was happy to accept. She held out a hand, which Regina shook after staring at it for a good minute or two. So long as Regina had no intention of locking her up or using her against Rumple again, Belle was willing to consider their past as passed.

“So;” she said, trying to break the tension. “What do you plan to do now that Zelena’s got your heart?”

“I have no idea;” Regina admitted, leaning back against the railing. She frowned. “You’re, uh, you’re crying.”

“Oh;” Belle quickly wiped her eyes. She hadn’t even realised. “It’s just … seeing him like that …”

Fortunately, Regina seemed to understand before she had to go into too much detail. “You really do love him, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Even the dark parts?”

Belle gave a small laugh. “That’s what true love is. It’s unconditional.”

If she wasn’t much mistaken, Regina’s eyes darted – briefly, no longer than it took for light to crack through a gap in the leaves – to Robin, who was carrying a calmed Roland back up to the bridge. Belle wondered if she had missed something, but then the sight of Roland in his father’s arms sparked another, terrible, thought.

“She was pretending to be a midwife.”

“Sorry?” asked Regina.

“Zelena. She was pretending to be a midwife to get close to –” Oh, no.

High heels were not designed for speed, which was what Belle needed just at that moment – especially if she was right, which she was not yet willing to say for certain, but she feared that she was. Regina grabbed her arm before she could run off.

“Belle! What is it?”

“I think I know what the fourth ingredient is.”
This should not be that hard.

Emma growled, shut her eyes again and concentrated. *Picture it in your mind,* Regina had said. Well, she was picturing it and it damn well wasn’t happening!

Why did magic have to taste like rust, anyway? She’d never noticed it before and wondered if it was a sensitivity thing now that she was beginning to learn magic for herself. For that matter, why did magic have a *taste*? Wasn’t it just like energy? Fire didn’t have a taste. Electricity didn’t have a taste. At least as far as Emma knew. She’d never been electrocuted before.

*Focus!*

*Great,* she thought. *Now Regina’s barking orders at me even when she’s nowhere around.*

She opened her eyes, thinking that maybe it had worked. But no. The cocoa mug remained stubbornly fixed on the counter.

“Oh, come on! Move!”

There was a *pop* in the fabric of reality. Emma shivered at the strange feeling – the best way she could think of to describe it was like popping her ears after a plane flight, but through her whole body. She turned in her chair to see the mug reappear on the dinner table.

“Boom!” she declared, slamming her palm on the counter in triumph. “Cocoa to go!”

“We should open a franchise,” Neal said around a mouthful of Cheerios. “*Angry Foods!* Delivered in thirty seconds or it’s free!”

Emma laughed as she dropped into the seat opposite him, feeling like she was seventeen again. Just joking around with the love of her life, with no past mistakes or crazy witches threatening to come between them. “Hey, you want to see something really impressive?”

She hoped this would work the first time, or else it could get *really* embarrassing. But it did, and the look on Neal’s face when his spoon turned into a balloon – now whizzing around the loft on the power of pressurised air – was priceless.

“I was using that,” he protested, getting up to grab a new spoon. His eyes gave away his amusement, however, and Emma celebrated by licking the cream off her cocoa. The taste of rust was going to take some getting used to, but damn, could magic be fun sometimes.

Still, there was something slightly off about the way Neal laughed at her antics. He tried to hide it, but you didn’t spend ten years married to someone – even if the memories weren’t entirely real – and not recognise when something was wrong.

“Are you okay?” she asked as he returned to the table, new spoon in hand. “You seem a little … *off.*”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Really?” He was far too interested in his cereal for that to be true. “Are you okay with, you know, this whole magic thing?”

“Yeah, ’course.”
She fixed him with a hard stare. He wasn’t lying, *per se*, but it wasn’t the whole truth.

“Okay, it took a bit of getting used to,” he finally admitted. “I spent a long time running away from magic. And it is the reason I lost my father. I just –” He sighed, dropping his spoon to rub the back of his neck. “Sometimes, I worry that it’s gonna happen again.”

“You know it’s not the same, right? This isn’t dark magic –”

“Yeah, I do know,” he said hurriedly. “And I know it’s not like you’re gonna suddenly turn into the Dark One or start ripping people’s hearts out. Or at least I hope you’re not going to.”

He chuckled humourlessly at his bad joke. She reached for his hand, trying to offer some measure of comfort through touch.

“I’m still me,” she reminded him. “Still the same Emma you’ve always known. Just with a few more fairy tales thrown in.”

“I know,” he said with a smile.

“Good. And if I ever *do* start to go dark – like if I start tattooing people’s arms with Dark Marks – I give you full permission to throw me in Azkaban. Or the asylum under the hospital, whichever’s quicker and safer.”

He laughed, and she laughed with him. *Just like when we were kids*, she thought. She went to say something else but got interrupted when the door slammed inwards, and a panicked Belle all but blasted through, followed by Regina.

“Belle?” Neal stood, stepping in front of her and holding her by the shoulders. Regina, meanwhile, began to mutter under her breath. The taste of rust filled Emma’s mouth again. “What’s happened? What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Snow?” Belle panted, leaning forwards in an effort to catch her breath.

“She’s having dinner at Granny’s,” Emma told her. “Regina, what are you doing?”

“Putting a protection spell around the loft. One that can’t be broken by blood magic.”

“Why?”

“Because I know what the fourth ingredient is,” said Belle. “She’s after the baby. Snow’s baby.”

Regina’s heart was certainly a battered thing. Black veins circled the crystallised organ, pulsating with a poison Rumplestiltskin knew he had to accept some measure of responsibility for. Unlike the lump of coal his had to resemble, Regina’s was still mostly red. And amazingly, if he angled his head just so and looked through the right spot, it had a tiny white light at its core.

*True Love*, murmured a little voice. Rumplestiltskin knew it had to be the case – one didn’t spend two centuries trying to bottle True Love without learning to recognise the signs, after all – but for the life of him, couldn’t think where it had come from. It might have been left over from her stable boy, but he doubted it would be that persistent, not after the boy had been dead so long. Henry, perhaps. Or possibly – miraculously, against all odds – had Regina been granted a second love? With who?

“It’s a miserable little thing, isn’t it?” Zelena commented as she held the heart up to the kitchen light.
She didn’t seem to have noticed the white core. That was probably a good thing. “Although I suppose that’s the point. Yes, this will do perfectly.”

“Does this mean you’ll tell the pirate to leave Emma’s heart in her chest?” Rumplestiltskin asked. He didn’t think Hook would intentionally hurt Emma, but unfortunately, the risk did not just extend to the Saviour. If Hook didn’t follow through – and given that he was currently in a drunken stupor beneath a dingy bar somewhere in town, Rumplestiltskin feared that was the most likely outcome – then Bae and Henry were both in danger. If Zelena ordered him to harm his son … no, Rumplestiltskin refused even to think of that possibility.

“Why would I do that?” Zelena placed the heart into her trunk, next to the remains of the outlaw’s sword. “It would be entertaining to watch him squirm for a little while longer. And having an extra heart on hand never hurts.”

“You can’t control her with it.”

“No. But I highly doubt our dear Saviour knows that, which makes her heart a valuable bargaining chip.” She grinned, resembling her mother far too much. “If it’s your son that you’re really worried about, you needn’t bother. It’s hardly a priority of mine, not with Snow White so close to delivery. What’s the harm in having a little fun in the meantime?”

She clicked her fingers. An ironed suit, tie and trousers appeared, draped over the chair to Rumplestiltskin’s left.

“And what, exactly, do you want me to do with those?”

“What do you think?” Zelena crooned, sauntering over. She leant forwards on the table in what was probably supposed to be a seductive manner. He felt sick.

You have nothing on Belle, dearie, he thought, looking at a point on the wall over Zelena’s shoulder. And never will, no matter how hard you try.

Not a bad figure, though, said Cronus. Rumplestiltskin fought the urge to vomit.

“Wear it,” Zelena continued. She brought a hand up to touch his temple, and he couldn’t stop her. “I have Regina’s heart, the outlaw’s courage and right in here, ready to be plucked, are your lovely brains. So I’m giving you a choice on how you spend the time until the baby comes. One is in screaming agony. The other is far more pleasant. Choose well, doll.”

He met her eyes as she waited for an answer, and gritted his teeth. Do not show weakness! It took a minute, but finally Zelena’s patient wore out.

“Fine. Marshmallow!” she shouted. The monkey, somewhere Rumplestiltskin couldn’t see, screeched in response. “Take him back to his cage. And no, there’s no need to be gentle.”

The bartender at The Snuggly Duckling was a tough but surprisingly gentle man with most of his lower left arm replaced by a twisted piece of metal. He was hardly the friendliest of sorts, but quite willing to exchange information for a tidy sum of gold – but then most who frequented the establishment, which had changed little in its transition from the Enchanted Forest to Storybrooke, were cut from the same mould. Regina had done business with him a few times, back when she had still been after Snow’s head. Now, her intentions weren’t so nefarious.
Before running to the loft and explaining Belle’s epiphany to an understandably frightened Snow (and arranging to meet properly the next morning), Robin had mentioned the place to Regina. With Zelena having gone after him, his friend and now his son, Robin no longer trusted the winter canopy to keep them safe. He, too, had friends in low places and had gone to see if they could get a room for the night.

“That’s what true love is,” Belle had said. “It’s unconditional.”

Not for the first time, the image of the lion tattoo flashed in Regina’s mind. If, if, for one moment that she allowed herself to believe that Tinkerbell had been right, that the pixie dust trail had, in fact, led her to a prophesied love … and that the fire room was the same one Henry had dreamed of after waking from the sleeping curse … and that, since she was awake, someone had to have woken her with True Love’s kiss … and that someone could possibly have taken a room behind the tavern …

Oh, what she wouldn’t give to have her memory of the last year right now.

She found the room number Garrett had given to her and stood in front of the door for minutes, hours, several long days, her hand an inch from knocking the wood. She could be dead wrong … or she could be entirely right.

Thankfully, Robin was the one to answer the door instead of one of his friends. “Regina,” he said, sounding shocked to see her there. He rubbed his eyes. It must have been later than she’d thought. “What are you doing here?”

Words didn’t often fail Regina, but now they did. “I – I don’t really know.”

“If you wish to admonish me, go ahead,” he said, shaking his head sorrowfully. “I let you down. Your heart was lost on my watch –”

Acting on instinct, she kissed him. Mostly to shut him up. She had come here to talk, not to spend the entire night listening to him blame himself for something that had not been his fault. But also because she wanted to, and she was tired of letting the Evil Queen dictate her every decision.

She broke it off after only a second, but it had been long enough to know one thing – whatever had happened in the past year, this felt right. And though Robin was clearly trying to figure out what had just occurred, she knew he’d felt it too. At least that was the impression she got a moment later, when he closed the gap between them and kissed her back.

Okay, so she had intended to talk to him. But being quite comfortably pressed between him and the wall, she had the feeling not a lot of talking was going to be done that night.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 22: The Edge of the Storm. Ruby and Dorothy travel to Oz while in the Enchanted Forest, David and Richard face off. In Storybrooke, the heroes ready for a battle, Hook is rudely woken up and Henry makes a serious mistake.

The verse Belle and Rumple recite in the Dark Castle was written by Scottish poet Andrew Lang (1844 – 1912). It’s called ‘Ballade of the Bookworm’. Seemed appropriate

Thanks again for all your support! This has been such a great project and I can’t believe
how receptive you’ve all been, so thank you! Also, awesomeness shout-out to ctdg for the Italian translations!
Storybrooke, 31 January 2014

It was morning, and there was sunlight spilling from the window. Robin heard birds chirping in the garden outside. Silky black hair spread out across the neighbouring pillow and tickled his nose, but he dare not reach up to move them for fear of waking the sleeper next to him. If there had been a pot of tea and a warm plate of biscuits, he would have been happy to regard it as one of the best mornings of his life.

Thank God that Garrett always kept the vacant rooms unlocked.

He’d have to wake her eventually, he knew. If he stayed too long, then the lads would be up and wondering where he’d gone – he didn’t fancy the hell Alan would give him if he got caught trying to sneak back into their room. Or Roland. God, that could take some explaining. But in spite of that – and the fact that his arm had gone numb from staying in one spot too long – Robin felt absolutely no desire to go or be anywhere but exactly where he was.

Though he really did need to move; he’d lost all feeling in his fingers.

He tried to move the bed as little as possible as he shifted his weight, but the creaky old thing just didn’t want to cooperate. She let out a small, irate groan and then tried to burrow deeper into the mattress, bumping her knee against his in the process. Sleepy brown eyes opened, and Robin grinned sheepishly.

“How long you been staring at me?” Regina asked, her words slurry with sleep.

“No. None,” he told him with a smile. “Must’ve been the change of scenery.”

“Hmm. ’Course it was.”

She chuckled and reached for his hand – which had been steadily travelling south – interlocking her fingers with his. “One day, you’re going to have to tell me where you got this,” she said, rubbing her thumb against the black mark on his wrist.


There was something, though, about the way she looked at the tattoo that went beyond simple fascination. But she let the matter drop, and instead reached out to touch the wooden pendant tied around his neck. Hers, if he remembered correctly, which made him wonder – not for the first time – what had happened in the past year that he had come to possess it. If it turned out that he had stolen it
… well, given what had happened the night before, hopefully she wouldn’t be too upset about it …

She seemed to have different thoughts. “What do you see in me?”

“Hopefully, the same thing you see in me,” he answered after discarding a dozen different answers, all of which were honest flattery but not the answer she needed to hear. “A second chance.”

If, as little as one year ago – discounting the one he had forgotten, of course – someone had shown him a picture of this moment, he would have told them to get a career in peddling fantasies. And from the look on her face, she felt much the same.

“And you’re quite a good kisser,” he added. “Among other things.”

They both laughed. “Just wait ‘til I have my heart back,” she said with a coy grin. While he tried to remember what words were, she wriggled closer and claimed his lips, stealing his breath and all other, suddenly unnecessary, thoughts. She was welcome to have them, if it meant more moments like this.

“What is that like?” he asked when the need for air forced them to separate. He pressed his palm against the spot above her breast, where her heart should have been but where a strong, healthy pulse still beat nonetheless. “I mean, can you …?”

“Feel? I can, just not –” She grimaced, searching for the right word – “fully. It’s difficult to explain.”

“Then don’t,” he said, removing his hand from her chest. He sought out her hand, and then pressed it to the same spot on his own body. “Use mine for both of us.”

She smiled and kissed him again. God, he didn’t want to stop. He rolled onto his back, pulling her with him and held her as close as he could.

It did have to end, much to his disappointment. She pulled back, pressing a finger to his lips to stop him from interrupting. “I have to go,” she murmured. “Or they’ll be waiting for me.”

“And I need to get back before Roland wakes up and wonders where I’ve gone.”

She waited a moment longer – a moment in which Robin had to force himself to lie still and not roll them both over for round two, the Witch and her dastardly plans be damned – until she sighed, allowed them one last kiss and then threw the blankets off, quickly finding and dressing herself in yesterday’s clothes. He deliberately took his time so as to enjoy the view for a little while longer – until she noticed and playfully tossed his shirt at him.

“I’ll come ‘round after I check up on the lads,” he told her when they finally made it into the hall. “If Tuck doesn’t give me a flogging first, that is.”

“Hmm. Tell him that he’d better leave you in one piece, or he’ll have to deal with me,” she said with a low growl, like a lioness claiming her prey, and leant in again. They were going to be there until Easter at this rate, Robin thought – and then the door across the hall opened and his son’s little voice called, “Papa?”

“Ah, bugger,” he muttered for Regina’s ears only. Over the top of her head, he could see Alan leaning on the doorway, arms crossed and a knowledgeable smirk on his face. Roland, still in his night clothes, rubbed his eyes and looked confused.

“Roland, Alan,” Regina greeted, going red with embarrassment. “Good morning.”
“Morning, Madame Mayor,” said Alan, almost in sing-song. “Sleep well, did we?”

Robin cleared his throat and shot him a deadly look. *Shut up!* It only amused him even more. “I’ll see you soon, yeah?” he said to Regina.

“Yeah,” she agreed. She gave his hand a squeeze and then left, avoiding Alan’s gaze.

“Papa, where you go last night?” Roland asked, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“Ah, Roland, how ‘bout you go and get dressed, okay?” Alan suggested, gently pushing him back into the room. “Papa and I’ll be along in a sec.”

“Kay.”

Alan shut the door behind him, and then cocked his head at Robin.

“Look, spare me the lecture, all right?” Robin held up his hands in surrender. “I already know what you’re going to say.”

“You two would have absolute *shit* magnets for children.”

Robin blinked. “Okay, I didn’t think you were going to say *that*.”

Alan snorted. “Come on, lover boy. Breakfast is nearly done, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want to miss out on seconds.”

“Ah, *shut up!*”

Emma watched the antique cuckoo clock tick to half past nine, then double-checked the time against her watch and – just for good measure – her phone.

“Okay, let’s just start without Regina,” she said to the group assembled in Granny’s lounge area. “Obviously she got held up. We can fill her in when she gets here.”

Neal cleared his throat to start. “Right. Belle, are you absolutely sure that what Zelena wants is the baby?”

“Positive,” said Belle, leaning forwards on the sofa next to Dorothy. “Why would she want to get close to Snow? Why would she pretend to be a midwife, of all things?”

There was a knock at the door, and Regina entered. Emma nearly pinched herself to make sure she was actually seeing the giddy grin splitting the other woman’s face from ear to ear. She turned to Neal, who looked equally clueless. So did everyone else.

“Why, Regina, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you look smitten,” said Snow, giving her stepmother a mischievous grin.

Regina sneered and the mayor Emma knew returned. “And if I didn’t know any better, I’d say Haagen-Dazs is smitten with your stomach. Can we get started?”

“We got started five minutes ago,” said Neal. “You’re late.”

At least Regina had the good grace to look embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“Anyway, to the problem at hand,” Emma directed – though she was definitely coming back to *that*
later – “So we’ve established that Zelena’s next target is the baby. So what’s our next move?”

Two by two, eyes turned to Belle, who shifted uncomfortably in the spotlight. “Uh, well, Tink thinks she’s found a way to contain Zelena. A way to stop her from using her magic.”

She didn’t say the word, but Emma heard a ‘but’ in that sentence. “And …”

“Well, it involves copying the power-suppressing magic of the cuff that Pan used on Rumple and, uh, embedding them into a pair of iron cuffs,” Belle explained, looking uneasy. “We’d still need to get close enough to put them on her, though. But if we can, Tink says she’ll be no more magical than an ordinary human. She just needs a few more things to finish it up.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well, it’s not exactly humane.” Belle grimaced. “As I understand it, iron reacts with fairy magic and essentially turns their blood into poison. If we don’t come up with another means of keeping her trapped, it could kill her.”

“We’ll worry about that when it comes to it,” said Regina. “Right now, we just need her contained and powerless and, most importantly, away from Rumplestiltskin before she makes him hurt anybody else.”

“Agreed,” Emma said when it looked like Belle was going to protest. “But there’s something that doesn’t make sense to me – why did Zelena bother casting the Dark Curse if what she intended to do all along was travel back in time?”

“Well, no-one’s ever succeeded at travelling through time,” Regina said as the door opened again. “Perhaps there’s something in particular about this world that makes it possible.”

Robin poked his head through the doorway. “Hey. Sorry I’m late.”

His eyes lingered just a touch too long on Regina. Emma frowned and raised an eyebrow at Henry’s other mother, fighting down the urge to snort when Regina mouthed the words, “Shut up.”

“Can someone explain this whole ‘Dark Curse’ business to me, please?” Dorothy asked. “Sorry, I’m new.”

“It’s all right,” said Neal. “It was something that my father engineered as a way of getting to this world from the Enchanted Forest. Not a highlight of my family history – it tore most of the population of an entire kingdom out of the old world and dumped them here.”

“What’s really troubling is the fact that Zelena was able to cast it in the first place,” Regina interjected.

Dorothy frowned. “Why is that?”

“Because to do it, you have to give up the thing you love most,” Regina explained. “From what I gather, she doesn’t love much. Unless you know something we don’t.”

“Not really. You’re right, she doesn’t seem to care for much.” Dorothy took a breath and thought for a second. “I know she was raised by a woodcutter and his wife somewhere in Munchkin Country. But her mother died before I ever met her, and she set her father’s hovel on fire some years ago.”

“That’s not so bad,” said Emma, who could remember doing terrible things to more than a few of her foster parents.
“With him in it.”

“Oh.” Okay, that I’ve never done.

“But it could explain why Zelena cast the curse,” Snow offered. “If we discovered something in the past year – a weakness – that could defeat her, then perhaps the reason she cast the curse is to buy time without us interfering.”

“Yeah, but why erase some parts of the year from the book and not others?” Emma asked. “For that matter, why make people forget only last year?”

“The missing memories were undoubtedly intended to keep us in the dark. If you two hadn’t come back, we wouldn’t have even known that a year had passed,” said Regina. “And as for the book, I now think that it may have been beyond her control.”

That gave Emma another thought. “Okay, but if Zelena wanted to keep everyone in the dark so she could cast her curse, then why did she get Hook to bring me and Neal back here? It doesn’t sound like she really needs either of us for anything.”

Regina shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong, and she didn’t write the note at all. Somebody else could have found out and concluded that you were our best chance at stopping her.”

“On that note –” Robin grimaced when he realised what he’d said – “Where is Hook?”

“It seems the one-handed wonder has yet to master the use of a cell phone,” Regina quipped.

“Didn’t you say he still has his memories?” Belle asked.

“Yes, but he apparently spent the last year getting back to his old roots. So not much help there.”

“Still, it’s worth another shot, now that we’ve got some idea of what we’re looking for,” said Neal. “He’s got to be somewhere in town.”

“I’ll go with you,” Robin offered. “Tracking people is my business.”

“Sold.”

“Belle, you and Dorothy help Tink finish up those cuffs,” said Regina.

“What about you?” Emma asked. “Without Gold or the fairies, you’re the most experienced magic-user we have.”

“We have something else we need to do first. Break this curse.”

She looked amused, which made Emma suspicious. “I would love to, but there’s one problem. Last time, all it took was me believing in magic and kissing Henry. Since we’ve been back, I’ve done both and nothing’s happened.”

“I know. This time the problem isn’t you, it’s Henry,” Regina explained. “He needs to remember. The potion’s done. All that’s left is to get him to drink it.”

What the hell?! Henry thought, pressing his ear harder against the door to make sure he’d heard properly. The thumping pain in his head – which had started sometime yesterday, and resisted the two Tylenol Henry took with his breakfast – didn’t make it easy. Sadly, he could really only hear the mayor and the woodsman guy (who Henry wasn’t so sure about – he looked pretty shifty); the rest of
them, he caught a word or two here and there but nothing definitive.

But he had definitely heard his name, and something about a potion that Regina wanted him to drink …

He heard a table shift, and footsteps, and realised that they must have been leaving, so he scurried back into the diner and pretended to be doing his schoolwork.

“Hey, kid,” said his mom, giving him a peck on the top of his head, as the group exited from the B&B lounge. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” he said, trying to keep his voice level. She fell for it.

“Listen, Dad’s gotta go out somewhere and I need to drop by the town hall with Regina. You gonna be all right by yourself for a bit?”

“Mom, I’m nearly thirteen,” he told her indignantly even though his birthday was still months away. “I’ll be fine. It’s only English.”

“Good. See you soon.”

He waited until the group – his parents, Belle, Regina, the shifty-looking woodsman and the tanned woman with weird shoes – had left the diner, then quickly stuffed his English homework into his backpack and followed his mom and Regina.

One way or another, Henry was getting to the bottom of this.

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**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

Robin knew that he shouldn’t be there, that he should just let David take care of things and stay clear of the fight, as Snow and David had requested of him. However, Robin had never been one to let someone else fight his battles for him and now there was a lot more at stake than just his own neck.

David had not exactly provided Robin with an answer as to whether he would actually hand the Merry Men over to Richard if he lost this duel, either due to overconfidence in his own abilities – which didn’t seem likely – or a refusal to consider that possibility. As much as Robin found it flattering that he’d won the loyalty of the Midlands royalty, he knew Richard better than they did and feared that David underestimated Richard’s pride.

That said, Robin knew full well that David was a skilled swordsman – far better than Robin, whose preferred weapon had always been the longbow – and believed that if anyone stood a decent chance against the Lionheart, it was him. But if Richard turned nasty – or worse, betrayed the terms of the duel – Robin wasn’t taking the chance.

And that was why he had positioned himself on top of a small hill overlooking the arena. Crawling on his stomach and using the heather to keep hidden, Robin had a good vantage point – not just to observe, but also to shoot if needed.

If all went well, he could be back at Tower Castle before anybody realised he was missing. If it went poorly, shoot his former king, teleport down to the arena and take responsibility so that no-one could accuse David of foul play, teleport out and make for the border as fast as the ‘borrowed’ bay pony’s short legs could carry him. A terrible plan by all accounts, but Robin didn’t have any better ideas.
He didn’t know how far he’d have to run. The Northern Kingdoms weren’t exactly friendly with Gaul, but he couldn’t trust King Josef to shelter him. Arendelle might work if he could get on a ship, or the Southern Isles. They hated the Gauls almost as much as they hated the Northerners.

And maybe, in twenty or thirty years – if he lived that long, that was – he’d be able to come back. Come back and explain to Roland – for he had no doubt that his boy would be fine with Alan and Evy once they sorted out their marital problems – why he left, beg for his boy’s forgiveness and maybe – just maybe – Roland would grant him a second chance.

“I still say this is a terrible idea.”

David finished buckling his breastplate before he answered his wife’s stepmother. “You said that. Eleven times, now. I’m doing this.”

“I could take care of it in two seconds –”

“Uh-uh,” he countered, raising a hand to stop her. “I’m doing this, the honourable way. No magic. And you are not interfering.”

Regina sighed in exasperation. “You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“It is not a fight to the death,” he reminded her for the umpteenth time.

“And you’re taking Richard’s word for this?!” she growled, forced by the nearness of the pavilions to keep her voice down, or David was sure she would have exploded. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. She’d been hanging around Robin too much. “At least let me put a protection spell –”

“No. The terms are ‘no magic’, and I intend to uphold them.”

“Even if Richard doesn’t?”

“Even if he doesn’t.”

He knew Robin had strong, but extremely biased opinions on the Gaulish king’s character – opinions that had rubbed off on Regina, apparently – but anyone else David spoke to had only positive things to say. That he was a decorated war hero with significant victories in Agrabah, an honourable knight who stood by his code of chivalry and a decent, if somewhat absent, administrator. He was abrasive and not much of a people person, as David knew from the one or two times he’d met the man, but surely not dishonourable. At least not as much as Robin painted him to be.

Well, they would see it for themselves in short order. But just in case –

“Can you do me one favour?” he asked while double-checking that his boots were tied properly. Regina, a dark shadow in the tent entrance with her hands on her hips, gave a curt nod. Slowly – and allowing himself the thought for the first time since he’d agreed to the duel – he said, “If things … do go badly, will you promise me that you’ll look out for Snow and our baby?”

“You’re asking me this?” Regina said, pointing to herself.

“Is there anyone else in the tent?”

Regina stood still, not so much as blinking. When enough time had passed that she became convinced he was serious, she said, “I – I will.”

“Thanks, Regina.” He stood and took up his sword, tossing it from one hand to the other. “All right.
Let’s get this over with.”

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

A few people gave Henry funny looks as he tried not to be seen by his mom or Regina on the way to the town hall. He waved at them and tried not to look suspicious, which worked for the most part. Well, nobody really took much notice of him, anyway.

Regina did shut her office door, thankfully, and Henry positioned himself near the hinges, wiping his hands on his pants and trying to look casual in case anyone asked him what he was doing there.

“This is it?” Emma asked, studying the rather unexceptional potion. It looked like milk coloured with blue dye. She shook it, as if that might somehow make it more interesting. “I was expecting something, I don’t know, a little more –”

“A little more what?” Regina snapped.

Emma shrugged. “I don’t know, more … magical.”

Regina rolled her eyes. Thankfully her office phone rang before she could deride Emma with her usual snark. “Mayor Mills … uh huh …okay, give me a minute.”

“Ouch!” Emma winced as Regina stopped her from shaking the potion again.

“Don’t shake it too much. Memory potions are extremely temperamental,” Regina chided. “No, that wasn’t for you, Marco … no, that’s all right …I’ll deal with it. Right.”

“What happened?”

“Had a problem with the town planning committee,” Regina explained, pulling some papers out of her desk. “Or more accurately, Miss Ginger is causing problems. Sorry, I’ve got to deal with this.”

Emma nodded. “Right. Okay, you deal with that and I’ll deal with this.” She held up the potion. “You’re right – the sooner we break this curse, the better.”

She thought Regina might protest, but she didn’t. “Tell my son I love him.”

“I will. Any advice on how to get him to drink it?”

“Slip it into his cocoa. We don’t have time for things to get messy.”

Emma’s pager beeped. She sighed. “Since when has anything in this town not been messy?”

“Problem?” Regina asked with a frown.

“Dunno. Someone’s asking to see me at the station,” Emma explained. “I’ll call Henry to meet me there and I’ll … improvise.”

“Good luck.”

Henry scarpered before his mom could catch him spying, quickly jumping inside a janitor’s closet as Emma exited the mayor’s office with something small clutched in her hand.
What's in that potion? he wondered, peeping out of the thin crack between the door and the wall. And why does the Evil Queen want me to drink it?

A moment after Emma disappeared down the stairwell, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Good thing he’d switched it to silent, or he would have been done for.

“Hi, Mom,” he said, trying to keep his voice level.

“Hey, kid. Listen, can you meet me at the sheriff’s station? Sometime soon?”

“Sure. I’ll be there in five.”

“Have you got an echo?”

Henry looked around the dark closet for inspiration. “I’m in the bathroom.”

“Oh. Sorry. Well, I’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Love you.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Henry told her before ending the call.

________________________

“Good morning!”

Killian wasn’t sure which was worse, the shrill voice of frankly the most attractive woman he’d ever despised, or the bucket of cold water poured over his head by the crocodile who had just been demoted to second on his most-hated list. Either way, it made for a bloody awful morning in his opinion. His hangover didn’t help, nor did the cold ground or the rough tree bark digging into his back.

“Good God, did you go to sleep in a pig sty?” Zelena asked, her nose wrinkling. Killian chuckled.

“Nah, one of my old crewmates spilled his drink on me,” he joked, neglecting to mention that this had been shortly after cheating the man out of five dollars. “To what do I owe the displeasure?”

“Amusing,” she sneered, flicking the dagger so Rumplestiltskin was forced to take several steps back. The man looked awful – like he’d been dragged under the keel and then tied to the mast for three days. As much as he disliked the Dark One – and always would, no matter what Zelena put him through – Killian felt bad for him. Having one’s free will denied like that was simply bad form.

“Why haven’t you brought me Emma Swan’s heart?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, she’s rather happily married,” Killian told her, flicking water off his sleeves. “Unlike you, I’m not one to make a person do things they don’t want to do.”

“Such a gentleman,” Zelena drawled, though she clearly did not hold any belief of that sort. “You know, I could always set the Dark One loose on you.”

Killian laughed. “Yeah, go ahead. Give me an excuse. Even Baelfire couldn’t be mad at me for killing his father if it was done in self-defence.”

“This is not a joke, Captain,” she said, suddenly turning serious. She had the dagger angled so that some of the noon-day sun reflected into his eyes. Killian held up an arm to shield his face. “I need her heart. If you won’t get it for me, then I’m going to have no other option. I’m going to have to
start killing people. In fact –” She flicked the dagger; the Dark One disappeared and then reappeared, holding the collar of a man who had been bound and gagged. Killian frowned – he knew the man, but couldn’t see past the thumping headache to think of how.

“It seems I have to enlighten you on the severity of your situation,” Zelena continued, using the dagger to scrape the struggling man’s temples. “You remember Mister Aaron Tumble?”

The name clicked with a memory of being dumped beneath a pile of fresh laundry, and Killian stared. No. The bartender was innocent. He had nothing to do with this! He had children!

“No!”

Stiff joints and a hangover made him wobbly as he tried to get to his feet. Zelena chuckled. “Sorry. Too late, and I simply must make a statement,” she said, and then plunged the dagger into Tumble’s belly. Killian shut his eyes and attempted to block out the squelching noise and muffled screams. In the end, he had to turn away.

His eyes still shut, he heard a thud, and a cold hand touched his face. “Bring me Emma’s heart, Captain, or her little brat is next.”

When the pirate was gone, Rumplestiltskin muttered, “That was unnecessary.”

Zelena giggled and reached for his jacket. Her commands kept him from moving as she wiped the poor man’s blood off the blade with the mud-encrusted fabric. “Wholly. But I told you – I wanted to make him squirm. Surely you, of all people, are hardly adverse to a little murder?”

“Murder when it has purpose,” Rumplestiltskin growled. “I never killed a man for the fun of it.”

“Of course not,” she snorted in disbelief. “Come, we’ve a baby to wait for.”

As she stepped over the bartender’s body, Rumplestiltskin resisted her command to follow for the briefest of seconds – not long to do any real good, but enough time to put a small (and hopefully unnoticed) preservation spell on the man to keep him from bleeding out until help arrived. If help arrived. It was the best he could do - the only thing he could do that slipped through Zelena’s commands. Several previous Dark Ones – including Fafnir and Cronus, whom Rumplestiltskin was coming to despise with the force of a million blazing suns – screamed against it, telling him to let the man bleed to death. The way they thought of it, the way they enjoyed it, was almost enough to make him vomit.

Four days, he thought. Four days of hell and counting …

He shut his eyes, pictured Bae and Belle’s faces – drowning out his predecessors’ comments – and took a page from Charming’s book. He could hold out. He could hold out a little while longer – he just had to remember what he was fighting to stay sane for.

Oz, June 2013

The silver slippers deposited Ruby and Dorothy in a sea of red. Loads of red – scarlet, crimson, cherry, rose, maroon. Red earth, red fences, red grass. Even the sky had a slight red tinge. Although, as Ruby’s nose informed her shortly after their arrival, it may have been because there was a storm on the way and therefore a normal weather phenomenon rather than an actual red sky.
“You’ll fit right in around here,” Dorothy quipped, eying Ruby’s cloak.

Ruby chuckled, then noticed the road beneath their feet. “Uh, don’t take this the wrong way, but isn’t it supposed to be the Yellow Brick Road?”

“That’s in Winkie Country,” Dorothy explained as they started off along the road. “That’s the East. This is Quadling Country, in the south. Fuddlecumjig should be just over the hill.”

“Fuddle-what?” Ruby exclaimed.

Dorothy grinned, amused. “It’s a village. They’re usually pretty friendly, depending on how they’re assembled at the time. Jigsaws, you know.”

“Uh –”

Ruby wasn’t sure if Dorothy was having her on or not; the Cheshire grin on her face could be taken either way. “They’re made from actual jigsaw pieces.”

“Right. Talking jigsaws.” Ruby nodded, still not convinced it wasn’t a joke. “Got it.”

“Too weird for a werewolf?” Ruby sputtered; Dorothy shrugged. “Toto mentioned it.”

“You speak dog?” Gods, this woman was full of surprises.

“Not exactly. It’s more like an understanding,” Dorothy tried to explain, waving as they passed a bearded man fixing a fence. The man’s donkey waved back. “When you’ve been friends as long as Toto and I have, that’s just what happens.”

“And, uh –” Ruby swallowed – “It doesn’t frighten you?”

“What, the wolf thing?” Dorothy laughed, reaching up to remove the ribbon holding her hair in a ponytail. “I should take you to the Forest of Fighting Trees while we’re here.”

“Thanks. I’m good. So how come we couldn’t go straight to Glinda’s palace?”

“She’s got it warded against all kinds of magic, both light and dark. That way no-one can approach without warning. She’s a little paranoid.”

“I’ll say,” Ruby agreed. Even Regina allowed other magicians to teleport onto Tower Castle’s grounds, if not the castle itself. “How long?”

“To get there? Maybe a day if we push it. Glinda’s wards won’t stop us from leaving, so that’s not a problem.” Dorothy grinned. “You up for it, Wolfie?”

“Are you, Slippers?” Ruby shot back. Then she stopped and stared at the thing that had appeared in the road ahead. “Uh …?”

“Oh, a Hopper. I wonder what it’s doing out of the mountains?” Dorothy remarked, watching the bizarre one-legged creature live up to its name as if it were something she saw every day. It bounded over the fences as if on a pogo-stick. When it was gone, she laughed again, grabbed Ruby’s hand and pulled her along the road. “Come on! As far as Oz goes, this area is relatively free of things that’ll want to eat us.”

“Oh, that’s not what I’m worried about,” Ruby said, perhaps a little overconfident in the terrors she could inflict as a wolf. “I feel like I’ve just landed in a children’s book.”
“Well, you’re not far wrong,” Dorothy agreed with a chuckle. She’d begun to skip along the road, her blue dress fluttering like a butterfly amongst the sea of red. Not altogether unpleasant, Ruby thought as she found herself skipping along the road with her new friend.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

“When was the last time you saw your husband, Mrs Tumble?”

Emma offered the distraught woman another tissue, which she took with a soft thank-you. “Uh, it would have been around eight last night. I went home to put the kids to bed. Aaron said he would probably be late. That’s not unusual. I waited for him until half eleven and then I went to sleep. But he wasn’t home this morning, or at the pub.”

“Can you think of anywhere else he might have gone? Any friends he might have stayed the night with, or if he might have taken any of them home to help sleep off the drink?”

Renée shook her head. “No. Aaron would have let me know if he had.”

“Okay, Mrs Tumble –”

“Do you think he was taken by the Witch?” Renée asked.

“I think, given the current climate, that’s a distinct possibility,” Emma told her frankly. It would have been worse to lie. “It might be a good idea if you and your kids lie low for a couple days. Get someone you trust to come in and help. Use a verbal password if you have to and don’t trust anyone you don’t recognise.”

The door to the station opened, and Henry walked in. Emma waved and gestured for him to wait while she finished talking to Renée Tumble.

“I don’t understand. What would the Witch want with my husband?”

“He may have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and got bit by one of her monkeys. It has happened before.” Emma fidgeted with her ring and tried to think of what else to say. This sort of thing wasn’t her speciality. She was the punch-the-bad-guy-in-the-face, not the comfort-the-worried-relatives. “Look, is there anyone in town you can call to come and stay with you for a couple days?”

Renée dabbed her eyes and nodded. “My sister. She lives just down the block.”

“Good. Give her a call. Just make sure you’ve got someone in the house with you and don’t go anywhere after dark. I promise I’ll be in touch.”

“Okay. Thank you, Sheriff.”

Emma gently shut the door behind Renée, wishing she was better at the reassurance part of being sheriff. Definitely a quality she would want to look for in any potential deputies. When this crisis was over, and she actually had a chance to look through the files Archie had given her, that was. In the meantime, she would just have to make do.

“Hey, kid,” she greeted her son, who had taken a seat on the sofa next to the cells. “How’s your English assignment going?”
He had that sneaky look about him, the one he got whenever he was planning something or suspected his parents weren’t telling him everything. Emma swallowed. This could get interesting. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah, actually.” Henry sat forward on the sofa. “What were you guys talking about in the diner this morning?”

“Stuff. Magic stuff, curse-breaking stuff,” Emma told him. It wasn’t exactly a lie. “Belle thought she might be on to something and wanted to see what the rest of us thought.”

“No, it’s more than that. Something that you’re not telling me. What was that thing Regina gave to you in her office?”

Emma narrowed her eyes. “Did – were you eavesdropping on us?”

At least he looked guilty about it. She sighed. “Henry –”

“Mom, you and Dad have been keeping secrets since the day we got here!” Henry emphasised his sudden outburst by practically jumping off the sofa. It struck her then just how tall her son had become in the last two years. “That’s not like you. Nobody was telling me anything and what they did tell me wasn’t making any sense. I’m sorry for spying, but it was the only way to find out what was going on!”

Emma sighed again. She looked over at her desk, where the memory potion sat next to the stack of files. “I’m sorry, too. You’re right. We have been keeping things from you and we shouldn’t have.”

“Then tell me what’s going on!”

“I can do one better than that.” She grabbed the potion and a chair, plunking herself down in front of Henry. “You should sit down.” He did, and she told him:

“We’ve been to Storybrooke before. You, me and your father. In fact, you grew up here. We already broke the curse in the book when you were ten. There is a curse, we didn’t lie about that, but this is a new one. And the reason you don’t remember any of this is because a year and a half ago, Regina sent us out of Storybrooke to live new lives in the outside world. There was a bad guy who tried to take over the town. To stop him, Regina had to destroy the first curse and take everyone back to the Enchanted Forest. But you were born in this world, which means you would have been left behind. The price of your dad and me staying behind too was to have our memories erased. Everything you remember until we moved to New York was made up by Regina.”

If she was hoping for a sudden revelation, she was sorely disappointed. Henry just looked even more confused. “Mom, that’s crazy.”

“It’s the truth,” she assured him, holding out the potion. “Here. This will give you all of your old memories back. Drink it. I promise everything will make sense then.”

She held out the vial, and after a moment he took it from her. “Regina made this?”

“Yeah. Well, she’s the only magic-user besides Tink who’s been even remotely helpful so –”

“She’s the Evil Queen.”

Emma wasn’t sure where he had learnt that, but supposed – given the town’s current attitude towards Regina – that he had to have found out sometime. “She used to be. But trust me, she would never, ever hurt you. You’ll understand in a minute.”
Henry scrunched up his face – way, way too much like his father – and looked down at the potion, turning it over a few times for a better look. Then he grabbed her hand.

“Sorry, Mom.” He quickly locked the handcuffs in place – one around her wrist and one to the cell bars – and then darted away while Emma tried to figure out exactly what had happened. “But I can’t trust you right now.”

“Henry!” she protested, attempting to pull her wrist through the cuff and failing. “What the hell?”

“You’re being controlled, Mom,” he said by way of an explanation, though she had no idea what he was talking about. “It’s not your fault. You don’t even know.”

“No, Henry, I’m not – NO, DON’T!”

He smashed the potion on the floor, blue liquid and bits of glass flying everywhere.

“What are you doing?!”

“Mom, it’s okay. I’m gonna fix this. You’ll be safe here.”

“What? No!” Emma shouted, still trying to get loose. He turned to leave. “Henry – Henry!”

“I’ll come back for you soon. I promise. It’ll all be okay!”

“Henry!” The door shut behind him. “HENRY! Oh, crap.”

The one good thing to be said about the Fisherman’s Wife was that the landlord did not tolerate brawls of any sort. So when a few of the patrons, either leftovers from the night before or suspiciously drunk before lunchtime, started to get riled up at the mention of Hook’s name, Neal and Robin found themselves being tossed out by the hulking bear of a man without a fight. To be fair, he probably could have crushed both of them between his thumb and forefinger so there wasn’t much question of how said ‘fight’ would have ended. Neal still shot him an indignant look when he landed rather painfully on his backside. The landlord made a rude gesture and slammed the door in their faces.

“Ah, sod the lot of ye! And wash your filthy hands!” Robin shouted back. “I swear I’ve slept in barns cleaner than this place.”

Neal grunted in agreement. “At least we’ve got a bearing on Hook’s last known location.” He let out a long sigh. “You know, living in New York was nice. People were simple, life was peaceful.”

“So why’d you come back?” Robin asked, brushing himself down.

“I’d forgotten what this was like.”

“It’s fun, isn’t it?”

Neal wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. “Eh.”

Robin finished picking the dirt off of his pants and asked, “Are you thinking of going back to – what is it, New York? – when this is all over?”

“I don’t know,” Neal said truthfully. “Don’t get me wrong, I like Storybrooke. I like being able to see the stars at night, and being closer to family is good. It’s just, you know, I’ve spent so long running away from this crap – I’m not really sure where I fit into all of this.”
At least Robin nodded understandingly, instead of insisting that they belonged in Storybrooke and they should stay for that reason alone, which had been more or less Snow’s response when Neal brought up the same topic. “How does Emma feel about it?”

“About the same, really. I think the only reason either of us wants to stick around is Henry. He makes things kinda complicated.”

His phone rang inside his pocket. Neal pulled it out. “Speak of the devil. Hey, Emma. What’s up?”

“Uh, kinda got a little problem,” she said quickly, so the words almost blended. “Actually, no, it’s a big problem. Really, really, really big problem.”

**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

Richard was certainly pulling out all the stops, wasn’t he?

David had to cringe at the thought of how much the elder king’s profligacy must have cost. While David was there with Regina, Blue, half of the dwarves and a small guard contingent, Richard had brought out at least half of his army and no shortage of creature comforts for himself and those closest to him. Finely decorated pavilions, rich food, enough wine to make David’s nose sting. He’d even had a jousting arena set up, where younger knights and squires had enjoyed a bout or two while waiting for the real fight. David could have fed the entirety of Carolingia for one winter with it all, it was so excessive.

As for his opponent, Richard was comfortably lounging in a high-backed chair in front of the royal pavilion, decorated with Richard’s emblem, the three gold lions *passant guardant* on a red field. He held his broadsword loosely in one hand, and a silver goblet in the other. David held his gaze, refusing to be intimidated.

He stood on his end of the arena, Grumpy on his left holding his sheathed sword, and waited for Richard. The elder king seemed happy to let David stand there, in the summer heat, for ten minutes, until he tossed the goblet to his man-in-waiting and signalled to the announcer. The horn blared, and all attention was on the two kings in the field.

“You can still call it off,” Grumpy whispered to him as the announcer read the terms of the duel and displayed the agreement bearing both kings’ seals. “Let Regina take care of him.”

“I made a deal,” David reminded his old friend. “And I intend to stick to it.”

Grumpy made a noise but wisely remained silent. He handed over David’s sword and helmet without comment. The announcer then called for the duel to begin.

There was a reason David didn’t often wear a helmet into battle, and especially not in the middle of summer. His armour felt like a pair of elephants sitting on his body, and if he hadn’t been wearing gloves, he would have lost his grip on his sword. He hoped Richard felt equally uncomfortable, and that this would be a short fight.

He circled the arena, keeping an eye on the other king, who wore a bucket helm moulded into the likeness of a lion’s roaring face.

“Is the outlaw truly worth so much trouble?” Richard asked, his voice muffled by his helmet. “Agree to hand him over now, and you can leave without disgrace.”
“Not happening,” David growled.

“You would risk your kingdom for a criminal?”

“For a good man. Yes, I would.”

“Suit yourself.”

And Richard lunged, his sword connecting with David’s. David held his ground even as Richard shoved his shield against him. The elder man was strong, but David knew a trick or two, and side-stepped, Richard’s weight throwing him off-balance and away from David.

Yeah, this had better be a short fight, David thought as beads of sweat rolled down his nose. He couldn’t wipe them away as Richard recovered quickly, swinging again and David was forced to parry. He feinted a blow at Richard’s left side, then brought his sword against Richard’s knees. Which Richard blocked. Distracted by the sword, he didn’t see Richard swing his foot, kicking dry earth and driving it into David’s face. He stumbled back, then felt something heavy slam into the side of his helmet, and he fell to the ground.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2013**

Snow felt the first twinge just as Belle’s phone rang. The younger woman ducked off to take it while Dorothy and Tink continued to argue over particulars of the magic-inhibiting cuffs.

“That’s not going to be strong enough –”

“Blue once used a spell like this on her own sister. If it can hold a senior fairy –”

“Yeah, senior fairy!”

“The fae are not that different.”

“Have you ever gone toe-to-toe with one?”

“That was Regina,” Belle interrupted, giving both women a stern look. “She got held up at her office and says she’ll be around as soon as she can.”

Tink snorted. “Right. ‘Got held up’. Good for her, she needs the distraction from working all the time.”

“I’m pretty sure this is actual work, Tink,” said Belle.

Dorothy looked from one to the other, confused. “I’m sorry, did I miss something?”

Her stomach twinged again, and Snow cringed. She shifted in the armchair, trying to get comfortable. Between Henry’s textbooks, Emma and Neal’s belongings, and the spread caused by the three women, the loft was suffocating. She would have gone for a walk if she’d been able to leave, but without Regina or Tink to accompany her, the risk was just too high –

“Snow?” Belle asked, noticing her discomfort. “Are you all right?”

She shifted again in the chair. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”
Under other circumstances, Emma and handcuffs were a combination Neal would have found interesting, to say the least. But now was not the time to entertain such thoughts, not with their son having apparently lost his mind and run off to who-knew-where.

Still, he couldn’t stop a grin from breaking out on his face. Emma didn’t seem to be so amused.

“Don’t laugh. This is not funny,” she chided, pointing to her desk. “Keys are in the top drawer.”

“I take it he wasn’t too keen on the memory potion,” Robin observed while Neal set about releasing her. He carefully picked up a shard of broken glass. “Any idea where he went?”

“None.”

“We can get GPS on his phone,” said Neal. She rubbed her wrist, which was red and painful-looking where she had tried to slip out of the cuff. “How come you didn’t magic them off?”

“Because –” She did a double take, looking from him to the cuff and back again. Neal finished the sentence without her saying anything.

_Because you didn’t think of that until I mentioned it._

“Never mind,” he said. She was only a novice after all, and from a world without magic. It would take a long time before it became her second nature. He pulled out his phone to track Henry’s. “All right. Let’s see where he went.”

“You don’t he did something foolish like go after the Witch, do you?” Robin asked.

Neal sincerely hoped not – but sadly, his brilliant, passionate and entirely too hard-headed son was exactly the type to do something reckless like that. This was the boy who’d stolen a load of dynamite to try and destroy magic, after all. Nobody could ever say he wasn’t Neal’s son.

Which also meant that they didn’t have a lot of time to stop him.

Emma collected her things and then froze, colour draining from her face. “Oh, God. No, no, no …”

“What?”

“He took my gun.”

The issue with the town planning committee forced her to stay longer at her office than Regina would have liked. After calling Belle to let her know that she’d be late, she argued with Miss Ginger over the phone and set about signing the things that needed signing. Then there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!”

It opened.

“Henry.” She gasped, stood and pushed the papers aside. Had Emma convinced him to take the potion? Her heart beat against her ribs; she couldn’t stop smiling. Her son had come straight to her when he remembered – why was he shaking? What was he clinging to inside his pocket? What had happened? “Did you –?”

He drew his hands out of his jacket and the next thing she knew, she was staring down the barrel of a gun.
“Henry. What are you doing?”

Hands trembling, Henry clenched his teeth. “Undo what you did to my parents.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 23: A Curious Thing. In Storybrooke, Neal and Emma band up to save their son from the potentially disastrous consequences of his actions, Zelena’s games continue and Hook does something regrettable. In the Enchanted Forest, the Merry Men’s fate is decided, Ruby and Dorothy return with Glinda’s wand and Regina gets struck by a hair pin.
A Curious Thing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warning: graphic depictions of violence

Storybrooke, 31 January 2014

Henry’s hands continued to shake as he held the gun high. But he hardened his jaw, looked Regina straight in the eye and stood his ground. “Undo what you did to my parents!”

“He, please,” Regina begged. She moved to walk around the table; her son only held the gun higher. “Please. Put the gun down. I can explain –”

“No!”

Regina winced at the fear in her son’s voice. She didn’t know what had happened that it had come to this, but Henry was clearly terrified. But this wasn’t a night terror she could soothe away with warm milk, a hug and a bedtime story. This was her worst nightmare come true.

“What was really in that vial you gave to my mom?” Henry asked, his voice cracking. “A sleeping curse? Poison? Did you run out of cursed apples, Your Majesty?”

He spat the words like a curse, and – though it was long displaced from her chest – Regina’s heart shattered. So he had learnt the truth, and jumped to a terrible conclusion. “Henry,” she all but sobbed, trying to reach for the son who had no idea who she really was. “Please. Please listen to me.”

“No! I’ve had enough of the lies!” he cried, hands quaking as if to shake apart. “Now undo what you did to my parents!”

“Oh, she didn’t do anything to them, dear,” said a new voice. Regina whipped around to see Zelena lounging on the sofa, a crystal flute in hand. She sneered at Regina. “Oh, don’t stop on my account. I was just enjoying the show!”

“Don’t you dare touch him!” Gun or no gun, Regina stepped in front of her son and called up every horrific spell she could think of to throw at her sister.

Zelena scoffed and threw the flute to one side. It shattered against the wall, and she got to her feet. “And what do you plan to about it? We both know you can’t stop me.”

Regina prepared to cast the spell, and Zelena’s trap sprung. Her own magic turned against her and Regina was blasted sideways, along with her desk, out of the window. She landed on the turf one storey down, heard a crack in her arm where it hit the ground and another in her leg when one half of her desk smashed on top of it. Agony hammered everything she could feel. There was blood. There was pain. Regina didn’t care. She craned her neck to look through the shattered window, where Zelena carelessly flicked the gun out of Henry’s hand and disappeared, along with her son.

“No!”
“You. You’re the Wicked Witch.”

Zelena smiled, showing too-white teeth, as Henry stepped backwards until he hit the wall. “You can call me Aunty Zelena. And you’re coming with me.”

“Like hell I am!” Henry pulled the trigger.

And nothing happened.

“What the –” Safety, safety! he realised. Wait – how do I release the safety?

He didn’t have time to look for the latch, or the button, or whatever it was on Emma’s handgun. Zelena waved her hand, and the gun flew out of Henry’s hand, out of the broken window to follow Regina. There was nowhere for him to run as Zelena reached out, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and the world was yanked away in a storm of green clouds.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

The impact knocked David’s helm off and he blacked out for a second. He came around in time to see Richard’s sword coming down on top of him and he rolled to avoid the blow. Then swung his own sword up to cut Richard’s thigh.

“Aahh!” the elder king grunted. He limped away and David got to his feet, shaking dirt off his face. Richard turned back, sword at the ready and David lunged. He swung at Richard’s helm as the elder king swung at David’s knees, and he flipped over, barrel-rolling to the other side of the arena. Richard was on him before he could right himself, bringing his armoured foot down on David’s shield arm.

“Aahhh!”

Something in David’s shoulder popped and he cried in pain again. But he had no time to be in pain, so he deflected another blow and twisted free. He fought the urge to scream every time his bad arm hit the ground. Richard hammered blow after blow, so David rolled the wrong way, kicked at his knees, and sent the elder king toppling down. He twisted free of Richard’s legs and – ignoring the agony and a second pop in his arm – got up again.

He held his sword ready, but couldn’t make his shield arm move properly. Richard noticed the weakness and growled, “Does His Highness need a respite?”

It was not surrender, since they had agreed to a term of one respite each. “Five minutes?” David asked.

Richard bared his teeth. “Three!” And he limped away, blood seeping from the wound in his leg. David gingerly held his arm, and staggered back to his post.

“Damn, you’re one hard-headed idiot,” Grumpy remarked as he forced David into a chair and undid the buckles of his shield. “Happy’s gone to get water.”

“Thanks.” David gasped as Grumpy lifted his armour to get a look at his arm. “Is it broken?”

“Dislocated. But it looks like it already popped back in by itself,” Grumpy told him. “You’re gonna have a nice bruise by this afternoon.”
Happy rushed over with a canister, and David hurriedly gulped down the contents. He swallowed some before he realised that it didn’t taste like water, and spat out the rest. “What was that?”

“Water,” Happy explained, “with a little healing infusion, courtesy of Regina.”

“I told you, no magic!”

“Well, for once I agree with the Queen,” Grumpy growled. He pushed the canister back to David’s lips. “Drink it. You’re getting back to Snow in one piece if I have to curse this entire damn realm myself!”

“This is not a fight to the death!” Why do I have to keep reminding everyone of that?

Grumpy snorted. “Really? ‘Cause it seems to me that you’re the only one who got that memo.”

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

Using a GPS in a town that didn’t technically exist was a feat in and of itself, but as it turned out Emma didn’t need it. Her phone rang all the way to the mayor’s office, where a small crowd had gathered around the glass-covered lawn. Leroy and the dwarves – who had alerted Emma, Neal and Robin to the situation – held them back. Happy shouted to get their attention and then pointed to a figure lying still amongst the wreckage.

“Regina!” she and Robin shouted simultaneously.

As they got closer, Emma let out a sign of relief when she saw that Regina was still moving. Her left arm was bruised and lay useless on the ground next to her as she tried to sit up, and a piece of wood from her broken desk had impaled her right calf. Robin was at her side in an instant, using his scarf as a makeshift bandage to hold the debris in place.

“Easy, easy!” Emma held Regina’s uninjured shoulder and forced her to lie back. “What happened?”

“Zelena – aahh! – showed up,” Regina told her amidst gasps of pain. “She took Henry.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know!”

Emma turned to Neal and gestured to his phone. He got the hint and started the search.

Meanwhile, Regina was making things difficult, as usual. Robin had stabilised her leg but now she was trying to get up, against his advice.

“Help me up!”

“No. You’re bleeding, and your arm’s broken. You’re in no condition –”

“I don’t care! She took my son!”

“And we’re going to get him back,” said Emma. She spotted her handgun lying in the rubble and fished it out, careful not to cut her hands on broken glass. “But Robin’s right, you’re not coming.”

Regina tried to get up again and screamed when she fell back on her bad arm. Emma had half a mind to hog-tie her and drag her to the hospital, but that would have been a waste of time they could be
using to find Henry. When she continued to protest, Emma held her good shoulder and said, as forcefully as she could, “Regina, you’re injured. All you’ll do is slow us down. We’ll get him back. I promise.”

She resisted for a moment longer, then fell back against the grass and nodded. That seemed to be about all she could manage.

Emma nodded back and then turned to Robin. “Call an ambulance. Get her to the hospital.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“I think so,” said Neal, swiping his phone. “They’re out of town. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s taken him to the farmhouse.”

Rumplestiltskin turned the spinning wheel, creak of the old wood drowning out the voices of his predecessors. Their newest trick, in light of the fact that he had decided to stop reacting when they provoked him, was to refer to him in the third person, as if he wasn’t there.

He needs to get the dagger, said Amos, his southern accent reminding Rumplestiltskin painfully of Belle.

He’s weak, said Zoso. He won’t dare to go against her.

Rumplestiltskin growled and continued to turn the wheel. The Dark Ones were all much the same. Power-hungry, cynical and wrathful. And to a one, they blamed Rumplestiltskin for their current predicament.

He was almost grateful when Zelena commanded him to magic out of the cellar.

Not sure which of them I’d rather take, he mused as he landed in the field and prepared a snarky comment, which he promptly forgot upon seeing who Zelena had with her.

“Let me go!”

“Henry!” Rumplestiltskin cried, forced to watch his grandson writhe and twist with Zelena’s hand around his neck. No! Not him! Not Bae’s boy! “What are you doing with him?!”

Rather than answer, Zelena thrust the struggling boy at him and commanded, “Hold him.” Of their own accord, his hands clamped down on Henry’s arms and his grandson stilled, gasping in pain. Zelena ignored them and checked her pocket-watch. “I’m upping the ante. Snow’s baby will be here in a matter of hours, and I need a distraction.”

Henry attempted to twist out of Rumplestiltskin’s grip – he could do nothing to let him do so. The more Henry struggled, the tighter Rumplestiltskin had to hold him, until he was using his own body to keep the boy in place.

“Lock him in your little maid’s old room.” Zelena snapped the watch shut and then threw a set of keys at him, which he caught in one hand. “Don’t let him get out. And if anyone comes to rescue him – kill them.”
As much as David resented that Regina had gone behind his back and tricked him, the infusion had lessened the pain in his arm. He could wiggle his fingers and shift his elbow without overwhelming agony, so he buckled his shield with some help from Grumpy, refused his helmet – it was only going to bother him – and stood, holding his sword high. The minimal guard he’d brought along cheered.

One of Richard’s men had bound the king’s leg, but he still seemed hesitant to put much weight on it. David took note of the weakness. He hated to admit it, but Grumpy had a point – Richard was fighting dirty, which meant he needed every advantage he could get.

The announcer signalled, and the duel resumed.

David launched forwards, thrusting his sword forwards. Richard deflected with his shield and David side-stepped to avoid his sword, only for Richard to slam his shield against him. He stumbled and swung again. Richard easily parried the clumsy blow and repeated the shield trick. David fell against the arena barrier. His shield became tangled, and as he twisted out of it, Richard brought his sword down on him. Then he kicked the elder king in the knees, bringing him down again.

But Richard was on his feet just as quickly as David was, and he sneered behind his mask, jabbing his sword forwards. Just to tease him. Then he jabbed for real, and David pressed forwards to catch Richard’s sword by the hilt and wrenched it out of his hand. With both swords, David swung. Richard ducked. He tossed Richard’s sword away and hammered on the other king’s shield for all he had, faked a blow to the left and then thrust above Richard’s shield. The elder king had seen it coming and shifted so the blade slipped between his arm and chest, then twisted so that David was forced to let it go.

Richard didn’t bother to keep it, instead throwing the sword away and taking hold of his shield with both hands. David ducked one blow, braced for a second and grabbed the shield himself. He had no way of getting Richard to release it, so he spun and forced the shield over Richard’s head. The elder king cried out as his arm twisted beyond the normal range. For a second, David thought he had him, but Richard used his free arm to elbow him in the face and he fell back, collapsing against the arena barrier.

He heard Richard coming, and front-rolled to avoid him. He’d recovered David’s sword, and he brought the blade down again. David used his arm braces to deflect it, swung his good arm at Richard’s face – he tried not to feel too good when it connected with a satisfactory thunk – and as the elder king stumbled back, David swung again, this time to drive his fist straight down on Richard’s bent knee.

“Aaaahhhh!”

Richard tripped, his bad leg unable to support his weight. David pulled his arm back for another blow but stopped when Richard held out a hand.

“Respite,” the elder king croaked. “Respite. Please.”

David panted and kept his arm aloft.

“Now’s not the time for chivalry, David!” he heard Regina shout.

And if he had been anyone else in the world, David might have listened to her. But he wasn’t anyone else, he was David of Carolingia, the shepherd who became a prince, and he let his arm fall to the side, nodding agreement.
“Five minutes,” he said, and turned away.

Happy and Grumpy both shook their heads at him as he staggered back to the post, but Regina’s eyes widened. “David, look out!”

He turned. “Whoa!”

He dodged Richard’s blow, then swung upwards and hit him squarely in the jaw. Richard’s helmet flew off and he let go of the sword as he fell to the ground in a daze. David claimed his blade back, and held it with the tip pointed at Richard’s head as the elder king struggled into a sitting position. He panted and looked David in the eye. He’d lost, violated the terms of the duel and everyone had seen it. And he knew it.

“How do you yield?” David asked.

Richard’s stare did not waver, but a moment later he bowed his head and muttered, “I yield.”

But David wasn’t finished, Regina’s nagging voice at the back of his head telling him not to take Richard at his word. “Swear to it,” he ordered, still holding the sword steady. “By your God.”

David himself wasn’t particularly pious, but he knew enough about Richard to know he believed. An oath sworn in God’s name was binding to him, whether he liked it or not.

I think I’ve spent too much time around Rumplestiltskin, David thought and he chuckled to himself.

“Swear that the Merry Men go free!”

Richard sighed. “I swear by God.”

“And me?”

“You have won,” Richard admitted wearily between gritted teeth. “There will be no war between us.”

“Good.” David let his sword fall to the ground with a clang as the announcer declared him the winner and his guard cheered again. Grumpy and Happy rushed forwards to help him stumble out of the arena, guards still cheering, and Regina brought over another canister of what was probably not entirely water. But David had one more thing to deal with, regarding the man who had just appeared next to his chair.

“You,” David barked, pointing an accusing finger at the outlaw, “are not supposed to be here.”

Robin merely shrugged. “Call it a cost of dying guarantee.” He smiled appreciatively and held out a hand, but before David could shake it the outlaw had captured him in a great bear hug. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Aahh!”

“Oh, sorry.” Robin danced back as David cringed and accepted the canister from Regina, this time swallowing the lot without guilt.

“Come on,” said Grumpy. “Let’s get you home.”

David chuckled. A warm bath and a soft bed had never before sounded so good. “Definitely. Oh, wait – my sword.”

But when he turned back to look for it, the blade was gone. Looking across the arena, he was fairly
sure Richard had only taken back his own and David couldn’t see any sign of his.

“Don’t worry about it,” Grumpy insisted. “That wasn’t your good sword, anyway.”

“Yeah. Fair enough.”

In the shadows behind King Richard’s grand pavilion, Zelena – suitably disguised as a servant girl – grinned as she watched the shepherd prince stumble away with his dwarf entourage, the bothersome outlaw and her sister. She was so close, she could practically reach out and claim Regina’s heart –

But now wasn’t the time, Zelena knew. She had just over seven months to claim it if the rumours about the snow princess’ baby were true. A child of true love, just the thing Zelena needed to complete the spell. Regina could wait until then. And she already had her prize for the day.

She held up the shepherd’s sword with gloved hands and smiled. Yes. This will do perfectly.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

Shortly after Emma and Neal disappeared in the yellow bug, the ambulance turned up to carry Regina away. The dwarves tried to hold the crowd back, but in spite of their best efforts, people continued to panic. Belle stayed with Snow while Archie and Ruby joined the dwarves in trying to calm the crowd.

“What the hell was that?!”

“Was that the Evil Queen?”

“Where did the sheriff go?!”

“What was that smoke?!”

“Everyone! Everyone, please!” Ruby shouted, holding up her hands in a placating gesture. “Remain calm! Sheriff Swan is following the person who caused this –”

“Who was that?!”

“We have reason to believe that it may have been the Wicked Witch –”

There was uproar. Belle cringed as people screamed, shouted and hurled insults. *This is so bad,* she thought. Beside her, Snow gasped and rubbed her stomach.

“Snow? Are you okay?” Belle asked. That had been happening a lot for the past couple of hours …

She was distracted from further questioning as Archie climbed on top of a bench and shouted at the top of his lungs. “SHUT IT!”

It had the needed effect – though whether from the shout, or shock at hearing the usually mild-mannered psychiatrist so cross, Belle wasn’t sure – and the crowd shut up.

“Right!” Archie declared, getting down from the bench. “Ruby?”
“Thanks,” said the werewolf, giving Archie an appreciative look. “Okay! Everyone needs to head home! Emma is on the trail of the Witch right now, but we need your cooperation! Go home, lock your doors and stay there until you hear from the mayor’s office or the sheriff!”

A couple of people looked like they might protest, but a toothy glare from Ruby sent them packing. Belle smiled proudly at her friend while the crowd dispersed. Then Snow grabbed her by the shoulder, almost doubling over in pain. “Snow …?”

“Well, this town has officially lost its head,” said Leroy as he joined them. Belle pulled out her phone and started to count. “How we doing, sister? Tink and Dorothy finish those cuffs?”

“I think so,” Belle told him. 34, 35, 36 …

“They’d better,” Leroy grunted. “With Regina out of it, we’re in deep trouble.”

“We’ve got bigger problems.” Belle continued to count as Ruby ran over to join them and gave Snow a concerned look. “I think the baby’s coming.”

Killian arrived at the town hall a few minutes after everyone else and fought his way to the front of the crowd, where the cricket conscience and the wolf girl gave out directions and tried to install some measure of control in the town’s eyes. Behind them, the lawn was a mess of broken glass and wood. Killian looked up to see that a window on the upper level – where the queen’s office is – had been shattered, the framework bent and hanging loosely by the hinges. The dwarves who hadn’t been turned into monkeys had already started on the clean-up.

As the crowd began to disperse per the wolf girl’s instructions, Killian grabbed the nearest person – the dwarf who never stopped smiling – by the lapels and demanded, “What the hell happened?!?”

“Hey!” The dwarf pushed him away and then brushed himself down. “Take it easy!”

“Apologies, mate,” said Killian, trying to get back on track as quickly as he could. Feigning calmness – which, given that his heart was beating a quick march on his ribcage, was not easy – he asked again, “What happened?”

“Uh, not sure,” said the dwarf, with a glance at his cleaning companions. “The Wicked Witch showed up and knocked Regina through the window. Sheriff Swan got her cleaned up and then ran off after the Witch.”

“Why?”

“The Witch took her boy.”

Killian faltered. “She took Henry?!” Oh, God no! To his dismay, the dwarf nodded. “Where did they go?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere out of town, I think.”

The farmhouse, thought Killian. It was the only location that made sense. He took a swig of rum, hoping the alcohol would burn off the heavy weight of guilt in his chest. It didn’t.

This is all my fault. He took another swig, still feeling no better. “Thanks, mate,” he said to the dwarf before running off. If he was fast – or bribed some trusting soul into driving him – he could possibly
catch them before something terrible happened.

“Henry! Henry!”

Rumplestiltskin gently prised open one of the barn windows, just enough to see through, when he heard a distant someone shout his grandson’s name. The boy in question was locked in the storeroom, prevented from leaving by a simple spell – since Zelena had not been specific in how Rumplestiltskin was to keep him there – but Henry hammered on the walls undeterred, screaming to be let out. Oh, how Rumplestiltskin wished that he could.

But now he had another potential catastrophe on his hands as he spotted a familiar yellow car parked some distance from the farmhouse, and two figures storming up the drive.

“Henry!” Bae shouted. “What have you done to my son?!”

Oh, Bae. Rumplestiltskin sighed and held his head in his hands. Please. No.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

It was two days after the duel, and as far as Regina could tell, David was more or less recovered. His arm was still in a sling, he had a nasty bruise on the left side of his jaw, and a giant Cheshire grin on his face as he lounged in the library with his wife. Regina couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy watching the two of them, David’s hand on Snow’s belly and her hand on top of his. She’d never know what that was like.

For some reason, Robin’s name popped to mind when she thought that but Regina quickly shoved the schoolgirl fantasy aside. He wasn’t interested in her, not when he was no doubt still mourning the bookworm.

The bookworm whose help Regina could have really used at that moment as she sifted through her collection of magic books. Research had never been her strong point. David and Snow were supposed to be helping, but they seemed to have other things on their minds.

“Regina, will you please tell your stepdaughter that we are not naming our son Leopold!”

“It was my father’s name!”

“People will make fun of him!”

“My father was a king!”

“Which is exactly why nobody made fun of him.”

“You don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl, yet,” said Regina as she plunked an armful of books down on the table. “And you’re supposed to be helping.”

David made a face. Snow tapped his hand. “All right. What about my mother’s name? What about Eva?”

“Yeah, see, I don’t know how well that’ll work with a boy.”
“It could be a girl.”

There was a knock at the door and Robin peered around, looking sheepish. “Oh. Sorry. Didn’t realise I was interrupting.”

“‘Gina!”

“Whoa!” Regina unwittingly giggled as Roland ran past his father to hug her around the knees, using the nickname she’d used since the day he was told she’d saved his father from the gallows. “Hi, Roland. Don’t worry, you’re not interrupting anything.”

Snow and David threw her identical looks, and Regina felt her cheeks begin to heat up. She glared at them. “Well, seeing as how you two are obviously busy, I think I’ll leave you to it.”

Neither of them was fooled as Regina tried to leave the library with her dignity intact, her hand clasped in Roland’s and his father smiling happily. “You’re welcome.”

She made a face and he chuckled. “What brings you up here?” she asked.

“Roland wanted to visit.”

“Papa, it was your idea.”

Robin went red as his son looked at him, slightly confused by his father’s behaviour. “Anyway –”

He was cut off by a loud, heavy bell and Regina sighed. Constant interruptions …!

“What is that?”

Regina shrugged. “I got sick of the klaxon,” she explained.

“Ah.”

“Anyway. That’s the friendly alert, which means that Dorothy and the wolf – uh, Ruby, should be back.”

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

“Henry!” Emma shouted as she and Neal strode up the drive. She went first, with her gun held out in front of her. In retrospect, it had been stupid to rush after the Witch with only one gun, mediocre magic skills and two pairs of fists between them, but there was no time to turn back. And no chance that she could convince Neal to stay out of it, not with their son in danger. “Henry!”

A flock of spooked chickens fluttered out of the undergrowth, and they both jumped at the sight of the flustered poultry. When they had recovered, Neal tapped her on the shoulder. “In the barn,” he whispered. Emma checked the driveway one last time before changing direction, trying to appear casual in case somebody was watching. She spotted movement in one of the windows.

“Henry!” Neal shouted. “Are you in there?!”

“STAY BACK!”

They stopped on the gravel driveway and looked at each other at the sound of Rumplestiltskin’s voice. “Papa?” Neal called into the dark building. “Is that you?”
“Please stay back!” Rumplestiltskin shouted, his voice echoing inside the barn.

“Papa! Is Henry in there?”

“Yes, he’s here! Don’t come any closer!”

“Papa –!”

“Bae, please!” Emma had never heard the absurdly self-confident pawnbroker sound so desperate before. “She’ll make me kill you!”

“Did she hurt Henry?!”

“No! He’s fine! Please, go!”

Then there was a cackle behind them. Emma whirled a second faster than Neal to see Zelena standing on the drive, decked out in elbow-length green gloves and feathered hat. She grinned at them, far too pleased for Emma’s liking.

“I’ll take her,” she muttered to Neal. “You get Henry.”

“Right.”

Emma held the gun high, aiming for Zelena’s chest. *Quick and simple.* The Witch snorted and sauntered up the drive.

“Do you really believe you can hurt me?”

Emma shrugged. “Dunno. But I can give it a shot.” And she fired.

The bullet impacted a magical shield which rippled like a floating pool of water. Zelena cackled again, flicked her wrist, and suddenly the gun was in her hand. She turned the weapon over as if to study it. Meanwhile, Emma spotted a shovel and shut her eyes, concentrated, and sent it flying toward the Witch. She sent it flying back, and Emma ducked to avoid it.

Zelena tutted. “Amateurs,” she remarked. She stepped forwards. Emma tried to step back, but her feet stuck to the ground. She looked up; the Witch’s eyes were like headlights blazing down at her, and she was a deer stuck in the light. “Ironic, isn’t it? You’re probably the one enchantress in all the realms who has a hope of standing up to me. And yet, by bringing us here, whoever cast the curse has just given me the one weapon I can use to kill you.”

She snickered, put her finger to the trigger, and fired.

“*Emma!*”

The ground five feet in front of Neal exploded as he tried to reach the barn. Damp earth and grass rained down on him and he brought an arm up to shield his face.

“Papa!”

“Bae!” his father pleaded again. “Tell me that you’re not here to rescue him!”

“What?!”
“Tell me that you’re not here to rescue Henry!”

“What?! Of course I – aagh!”

Another explosion blasted more wet dirt into the air. That one had been closer, and Neal felt the blast singe his hands. He looked up to see that his father now stood in the barn doorway, his hair matted, his face unwashed and pale, and his outstretched hand shaking. He was missing on purpose, Neal realised, along with the fact that his father had been ordered to kill him.

*Just one of those blasts would do it*, he thought, looking at the car-sized holes in the slope. *So why doesn’t he?*

*Because she gave him a specific order, and he’s exploiting the loopholes.*

*Tell me that you’re not here to free Henry!*

“I – I just want to talk,” he said, holding his palms out towards his father. Rumplestiltskin visibly relaxed, though Neal couldn’t help but notice how he kept his arm raised. “How’s Henry? Did she hurt him?”

“No.” Rumplestiltskin shook his head. “No, he’s fine. He’s locked in the storeroom.”

“Okay.” Neal gingerly took a step forward, then another when he wasn’t blasted to pieces. “Papa –”

“Bae, please. You need to leave.”

“Not a chance. *Not without my son. “Papa –”*

His heart wrenched as his father’s face contorted in pain, his whole body shaking now. Rumplestiltskin gagged and just for a moment, his eyes gaze flickered to somewhere over Neal’s shoulder and back to Neal in an instant. He pulled a straight face, but Neal hadn’t missed it. He glanced back.

“Emma –” he murmured. Somehow, Zelena had gotten hold of her handgun, and Emma couldn’t seem to move out of the way. Without thinking, Neal bolted as the Witch raised the gun. He barreled straight into Emma, and as he tumbled to the ground with her, he felt a sharp pain pierce his chest.

“Aaahhh!”

“Neal!”

**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

Dorothy and Ruby were still waiting in the courtyard, talking to Tink and Grumpy’s beau – whose name Regina felt she really should remember by now – by the time Regina, Robin, Snow and David made their way down.

“Did you get it?” Regina called as she came down the steps just behind Roland. Dorothy nodded, fished about in her bag and produced a slender piece of wood about the length of Regina’s forearm. It was coloured silver, with three shades of blue twisting along its grain. *A wand.*

“Will this do?”
She handed Regina the wand, and blue sparks erupted from the tip. Power thrummed through her hands, more power than she had ever felt before. She remembered seeing fairy wands on display in Rumple’s castle. This one held more magic than the lot of them combined. If this was Glinda’s wand, she was beginning to understand how Zelena had got to be so powerful.

“It’s perfect.”

“Excellent!” said David. “How soon can we go after her?”

“It’s all ready to go. We just need to –”

“Screeeeee!”

The alarm bell went off again as a dozen flying monkeys poured into the courtyard and landed in a circle around the nine of them, a dozen more not far behind that who skimmed the few people left behind and sent most of them screaming up the stairs. Regina summoned fire to her hand and launched it at the nearest. It was extinguished before it got close to the target.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Did I interrupt something?”

Regina growled as the Witch approached, cackling like the witch she was. She even had a conical hat and a broomstick. Seriously, how stereotypical did she want to be? She had a familiar blade clasped in one hand and a dark shadow appeared behind her. Regina gasped. So the blue bug had been right. Rumplestiltskin was alive.

“Rumple.”

Her old mentor – returned once more to the scaly, overdressed imp – shuddered at the mention of his name. There was something wrong with him, Regina realised. He kept rubbing his temples and shook like he was about to throw a fit. He looked ill.

Zelena raised the knife and he stilled, tensed like a bowstring at full draw. Then she turned back to Regina. “Do we have to make this messy?”

“Well, you could surrender,” Regina suggested. Zelena only snorted in amusement.

“Hmm. That’s a yes, then.”

And with that, she raised a hand and Regina fell backwards, Glinda’s wand clutched to her chest, and bumped her head on the cold stonework. She groaned, her vision a kaleidoscope of colour. Zelena clicked her tongue, and the monkeys pounced.

“Roland, on my back!” Robin barked at his son as he drew his hunting knife – the only weapon he had on hand, but it would have to do. There was no chance that Roland would be able to escape the monkeys, either, so he would have to make sure his son stayed close.

The monkeys pounced. Robin slashed as a great white beast launched itself at him, and he was struck by the memory of doing much the same thing with a sword almost exactly one year ago. The white brute still had the scar. And apparently, he hadn’t forgotten who gave it to him.

Robin really hated that monkey.
David had his sword, Snow a knife, and they stood back-to-back as the monkeys descended on them. He had half a mind to tell her to run, but that would have been a waste of time. Besides, where was there to run?

A grey simian pounced and David caught part of its wing with his sword, sending it careening to the floor. It got up and snarled at him, snapping yellow teeth. Three more joined it while a fourth swooped and Snow had to pull him out of the way.

_They’re trying to separate us_, David realised when he saw that they were now a good yard or two away from the others. Robin had Roland on his back fighting two monkeys at once with nothing but a short hunting knife. Dorothy was having better luck, two furry heaps lying a few feet from her with crossbow bolts sticking out of their hides. Ruby, cloak-free and in all her furry fury, had taken down another but three more leapt on top of her. And Rumplestiltskin had turned on Astrid and Tink, who fought him off bravely, but David knew that wouldn’t last long.

But why aren’t they attacking us? he wondered as two more of the brutes joined the first four and formed a circle around him and Snow, but did nothing remotely threatening beyond gnashing their teeth and occasionally swiping at David’s sword. His question was answered a moment later, when Zelena strode through the gap between them. David turned his sword on her. “Stay away from my wife! Oooppphhh!”

Zelena had sent him sprawling, though thankfully not onto his bad arm. The grey animal leapt while he was still dazed, wrenched his sword out of his hand and then sat on him. While he was grateful that the monkey seemed disinterested in killing him, the stench was overwhelming enough that David didn’t think he’d ever get rid of it.

Meanwhile, Snow had discovered that her feet would not move, no matter how hard she tried. Zelena chuckled. She threw the knife, but the Witch _poofed_ away and reappeared less than an inch from Snow’s face. Cold green fingers took hold of her neck.

“Now, let’s see if this has all been worth it, shall we?” Zelena chuckled again and laid her free hand on Snow’s stomach. Then she laughed. She sounded practically _giddy._

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” the Witch commented with a huge grin, her icy hand still splayed across Snow’s abdomen. “Perfect.”

“What do you want with my baby?” Snow grunted.

“Oh, that’s nothing for you to concern yourself with, dear,” said Zelena. She’d taken her hand away and reached into her gown, drawing out a long black hairpin. “I’ll take good care of you while you’re asleep, I promise. You won’t feel a thing.”

“Snow!”

Regina blacked out. When she came around, it was to the drooling jowls of a salt-and-pepper monkey with its claws digging into her shoulders.
“Hi,” she said, and blasted it away.

She groaned as she got to her feet, woozy from the blow to her head. Glinda’s wand was still in her hand, though, which was a good thing. Then Regina did a double-take. *Well, what does Zelena want, if not the wand?*

The courtyard was a mess – she spotted half a dozen of Zelena’s brutes lying in heaps on the floor, downed by Dorothy or torn to shreds by Ruby. The werewolf finished off one, then leapt to Robin’s aid. He had Roland, poor boy, clinging to his shoulders while his papa fought two at once with a knife that was no longer than his forearm. As for the fairies, they were preoccupied with Rumplestiltskin.

That was where Regina would have taken her fight, if she had not seen David go flying on the other side of the courtyard and get sat on by a monkey. *Then* seen Zelena advance on Snow, magically glue her feet to the floor and raise something that glinted in the light. Regina didn’t pause to think things through in her muddled state of mind, and just *acted.*

“Our Snow!” she shouted as she called to herself whatever it was that Zelena held in her hand, watching with no small amount of satisfaction as the Witch turned around, frustration and surprise engraved on her sickly emerald features. But then Regina gasped as she felt a prick and a hairpin emerged from her cloud of purple magic, embedded in her palm. She had enough time to register the familiar swirl of her own magic hit her bloodstream, heard somebody shout her name, and then fell to the floor as the sleeping curse took hold.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

“Neal! Neal!”

Emma pulled her hand away from his chest to find it covered in red, sticky liquid. His jacket was stained as well. He coughed. Red froth came out of his mouth.

The gunshot echoed in her memory. A picture of the Witch, standing in front of her, holding a gun, *firing* the gun …

*Oh, God.* Emma gasped. Her hands shook, flicking drops of blood. He’d been shot. *Neal had been shot.*

He coughed again and took raspy breaths that wracked his whole body. She pressed her hand into his chest in a vain attempt to stop the bleeding.

“You’re okay. You’re okay. Just stay with me, okay? Stay with me …”

“BAE!”

Somewhere in her peripheral vision, Emma became aware that Rumplestiltskin had run at Zelena, and then flew backwards into the barn wall with a flick of Zelena’s hand. Gravel crunched as the Witch moved. Emma tore her scarf off and used that as a bandage, but Neal’s breathing only got worse. *No. No, no, no …*

She stiffened as she heard a click. Then looked up to the Witch’s contorted, victorious face some two or three feet away, holding the gun level with Emma’s head. Emma ground her teeth together. “Fine. Do it.”
“With pleasure.”

“No!”

Cold gripped Emma’s heart, and she screamed a horrible, alien noise that was like listening to an audio track a few seconds behind the video, as she felt tearing deep inside her chest, every muscle and tendon between her ribs having decided to spontaneously explode in wrenching agony. Worse than being shot. Worse than breaking three bones in her hand when she was ten. Worse than childbirth. Something inside of her ripped open, and she fell forwards onto Neal as the cold let her go. The pain in her body lessened but didn’t vanish.

“Here,” said somebody behind her, a male and vaguely familiar, but surrounded as she was by pain and Neal’s blood, Emma didn’t care. She clung to Neal, relieved when she heard a beat still pounding in his chest. “Just let her live. Please.”

Emma watched, still half-lying on Neal, as Zelena snickered and caught something in her hand. A heart, Emma realised, but not a normal heart. This one was almost pure white, with streaks of red where the arteries would have been on a diagram. Is that my heart? What the hell?

“Well, never let it be said that I don’t keep a deal,” Zelena chortled. She held Emma’s heart and murmured something. It vanished in a green cloud. “You’ll live to regret this, Captain.”

She tossed the gun onto the ground next to Neal, inches from Emma’s hand. Then a tinkle, like the sound made by windchimes blowing in the breeze, played from Zelena’s pocket. It was being made by a pocket watch, which Zelena flipped open and then grinned at.

“Well, it looks like you’re about to become a big sister,” she remarked as if it were part of a perfectly ordinary conversation. “Seems a fair trade. A husband for a brother.”

Then she cackled, turned on her heels and with Rumplestiltskin unwillingly pulled with her – his eyes full of agony and fixed on Neal – vanished in a great green storm.

“Swan,” said the person behind her. She felt a hand grip her arm and try to pull her away from Neal.

“No!” she screamed, yanking her arm back and holding Neal close. His breath was coming in short gasps now, but at least it was still there. The person tried to pull her back again – this time she rounded on them and threw a punch, not caring who they were or where she hurt them. She just needed to hit something.

“Swan! Stop!” Hook shouted, trying to stop her flailing fists with his good hand only. “Stop!”

“You – you –!” Emma screamed and tried to hit him again. The world of curses and terrible afflictions did not seem enough for him, and if she’d had the power, she would have called all the plagues in all the realms down on him at that moment. If she couldn’t do that, then she would settle for knocking his teeth out.

“Stop!” Hook cried again. This time he caught one of her arms with his hook. It scratched her wrist, and though the itch was nothing compared to the weighty emptiness inside her chest, the distraction was enough for him to seize hold of the other arm and force her to settle. “Stop.”

Tears blurred Emma’s vision. Forcing herself to take deep breaths, she wrenched herself free of him, sick to death of wobbly-legged, rum-soaked pirates. On the ground, Neal moaned and coughed up another mouthful of blood, and she snapped out of it.

“You wanna help?” she spat, wishing that he would just disappear and never return. “Get Henry.
He’s locked in the barn. Then help me get him in the car.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 24: The Witch in the North. In the Enchanted Forest, Zelena forces Belle to help her with something and David finds a door. In Storybrooke, the hospital becomes quite crowded, Hook tries to defend his actions and Henry’s memory returns.
Snow stared as Regina hit the stonework, the hairpin still stuck in her palm. She didn’t have time to contemplate what had happened, though, as a moment later Zelena screamed in pain. Snow wrenched herself free – as free as she could with her feet still stuck to the floor – to see a large knife protruding from between the Witch’s shoulder blades. Ten yards away, Robin was now entirely unarmed against his monkey opponents, but he didn’t seem to have thought of that.

Zelena stumbled forwards, green magic swirling around the hand not holding her chest. But before she could attack Robin, an arrow appeared alongside the knife. A second one hit shortly after, this time going straight through Zelena’s left ribcage. Snow fell back as the glue holding her feet released, and looked behind her to where Dorothy stood, crossbow loaded for a third shot. She fired, but Zelena was done. Snow watched as the green storm carried her away and the bolt bounced harmlessly off the stonework. The Dark One followed her a moment later, as did the remaining monkeys, the flock daring one last screech at Tower Castle’s defenders before taking to the air.

Strong hands took hold of Snow’s shoulders. “Are you all right?” David asked, worry etched into his features. She nodded. “The baby?”

“Okay, as far as I can tell.” It was hard to know when she wasn’t yet showing, but Snow felt fine, which most likely meant that the baby was fine too.

She didn’t think she was the one to worry about at the moment, anyway.

As soon as the monkeys had vanished, Robin (with his cling-on now on the ground instead of on his back) had run over to the limp form that was Snow’s stepmother. He turned her onto her back. Regina looked as if she had been pulled from a frozen river, all the colour having drained from her cheeks, and it didn’t look like she was breathing. Robin pulled the hairpin from her hand.

“Be careful!” Snow shouted. The outlaw gave her a look and put the pin safely to one side. “What was that?” she asked Tink, who was the most likely to know.

“Poison?” David suggested.

“No.” Tink picked up the pin, careful to avoid the ends. “A sleeping curse.”

“The Witch put Regina under a sleeping curse?”

“It was meant for me,” said Snow. Now there’s irony for you.

David gulped and looked from her to Tink to Regina and back to Snow. “But – but you’ve already been cursed before.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be put under one again,” said Tink. She drew her wand and, after muttering something in a language Snow didn’t recognise, tapped the hairpin. It disintegrated into a fine ash which blew away in the wind. Satisfied, she put her wand back and then pointed to Regina.

“Question now is: what are we going to do with her?”
“All curses can be broken with True Love’s Kiss,” Astrid interjected, pink glittered raining off her from excitement. “We just have to find hers.”

“That’s going to be a problem,” said Snow. She hated to disappoint the young fairy, but the truth meant her idea held no merit. “Regina’s True Love died when I was just a little girl.”

She briefly wondered if Henry’s kiss would work, like Emma’s had on him during the first curse, but shook her head sadly at the idea. Henry was trapped in another world and, according to Regina, had no memory of his adopted mother. So that plan was out.

As she’d expected, Astrid was downcast and stopped glittering. Snow reached out to squeeze the young fairy’s arm – it was a good idea, but facts were facts – and then bent down to retrieve Glinda’s wand from where it had fallen onto the floor. “Tink, can we still use this to track Glinda even without Regina?”

“As she said, it’s all ready to go,” Tink affirmed. “We just have to pour the potion onto the wand.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” said Snow. “I can’t imagine that Zelena will stay down for long. And who knows? Glinda may know of a way to help Regina.”

“What will we do with her in the meantime?”

“We’ll put her up in her chambers,” said David. “At least she’ll be comfortable for the time being.”

Her husband bent down and – after saying Robin’s name twice to catch his attention – had the outlaw help him carry Regina upstairs. Robin’s little boy looked rather upset, so Snow put a hand on his shoulders and stayed with him.

“Is Gina dead?” Roland sniffled. Poor boy, Snow thought. First the monkeys, now this. Remarkably, Regina had become rather fond of the small boy in the past few months. Snow smiled to herself. Until Henry came along, she’d never really thought Regina to be the maternal type – or maybe it had just been her bottled-up rage at Snow that had been disguising it all these years.

“No, sweetie, she’s sleeping.”

“Then why won’t she wake up?”

“Because –” Snow paused, and tried to think of how to explain it to him. “Because it’s a cursed sleep. She won’t wake up until we can break the spell.”

“But we can break the spell?” Roland asked. “You’ll find a way?”

Snow smiled. Apparently Roland was as fond of Regina as she was of him. “We’ll find a way.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2013**

The pain came in waves, so on the way to the hospital, Snow was forced to stop every few minutes to catch her breath and scream in agony. Belle did her best to support her and ignore the pain of having all the bones in her hand crushed by Snow’s surprisingly strong grip. Thankfully, Ruby
arrived a moment later with a wheelchair. As she steered Snow into the ward, Belle collapsed into a chair in the admissions room and massaged her hand to work blood back into the tissues.

“Belle?”

She looked up. Robin was standing there, hands in his pockets and looking concerned. *That’s right, he came here with Regina*, Belle thought. She smiled to show she was all right. With everything that had been going on since they’d come back to Storybrooke, she’d had hardly any time to catch up with the outlaw whose life she’d once convinced Rumple to spare. His penchant for green clothing seemed to have crossed over, though hopefully (for Emma’s sake) his outlaw days were over.

“Hey. How’s Regina?”

Robin shrugged. “I dunno; the doctor kicked me out of the room. She took a fair beating, though. Guess that’s what happens when somebody throws you through a window.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, gesturing at the doors that Ruby and Snow had just disappeared through.

“Snow’s having the baby.”

“What, now?!”

“Well, fairly soon.” She frowned – Robin had gone pale, blue eyes widened like saucers. “What’s wrong?”

“The baby’s on the way,” he said while staring at the doors. “That means Zelena must be too.”

“Oh, bollocks.” Belle could’ve slapped herself, both for the common expletive and for not coming to that conclusion herself. “We’re in trouble.”

More than usual, she realised as Robin nodded in agreement. With Regina injured and the fairies still refusing to help, that left them with Tink as their most powerful magic-user. And since Emma and Neal had gone after Henry, Snow was in labour and David still missing, they were down on leadership as well. Belle felt her heart begin to race. *This doesn’t happen very often.*

“Okay, okay, okay,” she said as she got to her feet and exhaled forcefully. “Get a grip, girl! We can do this. Tink said she’s finished the cuffs. If we can just get near enough to put them on her –”

“We might stand a chance.”

“Right. I’ll get Tink over here.”

“Here.” Robin handed her his phone. “Call Alan as well. We’re gonna need all the arms we can get.”

He then climbed on top of the coffee table with a pile of magazines on it and waved his arms for attention from the two dozen or so people scattered around the admissions room. “Right! Excuse me! Everyone, please listen! All right, look, we’ve got a bit of a situation. The Wicked Witch is on her way here, probably right at this second.”

“What?” shouted several people.

“She’s after something in the hospital,” Robin continued. “And it needs to be defended. Now, I’m
not asking anyone to risk their lives –”

“Why should we believe you?” a greasy man near the back yelled. Belle cringed and hid her face before he noticed her. Part of her had rather hoped never to run into the former sheriff of Nottingham again, only partially out of lingering embarrassment over some extremely poor decisions Lacey had made.

“It’s nice to see you too, Keith,” Robin answered, clearly less bothered than she was. “But if you seriously think I’d try to rob a hospital, you’re even dumber than I thought.”

A few people sniggered. Belle was one of them.

“So if we’ve established that I’m serious, and the Witch is on her way, that leaves you with two options: either clear out, or find something that you can fight with.”

It was probably fortunate, if one wanted to start looking for the minute blessings in one’s sorry life, that Regina had opposing limb injuries. She could have her arm in a sling and still limp on her bad leg with the help of a crutch. Doc had been adamant that she stuck around for x-rays, proper setting of her arm and wrote her a prescription for antibiotics, but she had the necessary ingredients for a simple healing potion at home. Not one that would fix everything straight away – that was inherently dangerous, particularly in an unstable condition which was why Regina hadn’t demanded to be taken straight home – but one that would keep infection at bay and allow her to walk unimpeded.

And the sooner she did that, the sooner she could join in the search for her son.

The thing she couldn’t figure out was what Zelena even wanted with Henry. As she limped down the corridor, she tried to puzzle it out and came up blank. Presumably, she had three of her four ingredients, and they already knew what the fourth was. And if she intended to ransom Henry in exchange for the baby – well, then either Regina was overestimating Zelena’s intelligence or Zelena was underestimating them all.

She opened the door to the admissions room and was going to ask Robin for a hand in getting home, only to find that he was otherwise occupied. The admissions room had turned into an obstacle course. Tables and chairs had been overturned where they could be and arranged around and on top of each other to make bulwarks. Pot plants had been moved out of the corners and into positions that might hide a defender. She spotted two of Robin’s friends with Dorothy behind one, all armed with crossbows; three of the dwarves with their pickaxes behind another; Tinkerbell enchanting pieces of paper to fly around the room like giant, razor-sharp snowflakes; two young Pridelanders she didn’t recognise throwing an assortment of kitchen knives into a wall (hopefully for practise); and about a half-dozen others with whatever weapons they could scrounge up in a world that was a little short on swords.

At the centre of it all was Robin and Belle. Regina chuckled, impressed; those two made quite the team when the opportunity presented itself.

“Hey,” she announced as she headed over to them. Robin sat on the top of the nurse’s desk, prepping a crossbow and shouting directions to the people around them while Belle was doing something with the computer. “What’s going on?”

“Snow’s having the baby,” Belle explained.

“We’re getting ready for a fight,” Robin added. He grinned cheekily. “Even if all we’ve got are
sticks.”

Regina cocked an eyebrow at his lame joke, then caught onto what Belle had said. “Wait, she’s having the baby now? Is anybody with her?”

“Ruby is, yes.”

“What are you doing?” she asked the bookworm.

“I’m trying to figure out how to initiate a lockdown. I think I’ve got it, I just want to be sure.”

“That won’t keep her out,” Regina said. “Storybrooke is not exactly prepped for terrorist attacks.”

“I know, but it’s the best we’ve got. Tink’s got the cuffs finished; we just have to put them on her.”

Regina nodded in grim agreement. The painkillers muddling her thought processes were a weighty reminder that she’d already been thrown through a window today, and she’d like to avoid repeating the incident. She was just going to have to trust Emma and Neal to bring Henry home safely. “All right. Do it. I’ll grab Tink and we’ll do what we can to impede her magically.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it?” Robin asked with a concerned look that was appreciated, but not needed. She offered him a smile.

“I’m not going to sit by and do nothing while my sister threatens to destroy my town. At the very least, we can stop her from teleporting straight into the hospital.”

Belle bit her lip. “That won’t keep her out either, will it?”

“No. But it should slow her down.”

Though slow her down for what, Regina didn’t know. So far, every time she’d gone up against Zelena she had lost, badly, and there was no reason why the next incident would be any different. The cuffs were useless without a way to put them on. And, as Regina knew well, no sorcerer with a teaspoon of self-respect would allow someone to get close enough to try a trick like that.

But, despite the fogginess in her brain and the jolt that travelled up her bad leg every time her foot touched the floor, Regina wasn’t yet ready to roll over and give in. Not when the Witch had threatened her son. They’d just have to make it up as they went.

**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

“Unfortunately, the drawback of locator spells like this one is that we’ll have to follow it on foot,” Tink explained to the assembled Council. Snow watched her shake the glittering blue bottle with an increasingly sick feeling. “So we need to get everything ready to go before we do this.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Blue?” Snow looked around the room and wondered where her family fairy had gone. She hugged her belly as the sick feeling increased. That was to be expected, of course, but it hadn’t felt like that when she’d been pregnant with Emma. In fact, it didn’t feel like nausea at all. Just a horrible, sick feeling in the vicinity of her gallbladder.

Tink shook her head. “Uh, no. Blue sends her apologies. She’s been called away on some, I don’t know, important mission or other and doesn’t know how long she’ll be.”

“What kind of important mission?” Ruby asked, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. Snow shot her
old friend a look.

“I don’t know. I’m not exactly Blue’s favourite at the moment,” said Tink, rolling her eyes and sighing. “Well, ever, really. I’m lucky even to know that much. But regardless, we’d best do this sooner rather than later.”

“So we’d better decide on who’s going,” said David. He stepped up and scratched his head with his good hand. “All right. I’ll go. Thomas can manage things for a week or so. Dorothy, you know Glinda best. Ruby –”

“You really think it’s best for you to take off again?” Grumpy chimed in. “What if the Witch comes back?”

“She’s hurt pretty bad,” Dorothy offered. “I can’t imagine that she’ll have another go at us so soon.”

“She will,” said Snow. She rubbed circles on her still-flat stomach, remembering Zelena’s cold touch and the glee in the Witch’s eyes. “She will if there’s something here that she wants.”

David grunted in agreement, but Snow had a feeling he’d missed her meaning. “Which is why I think it might be best if you –” he looked to Tink – “stay back on this one. With Regina down and Blue otherwise occupied, you’re all we’ve got. Ruby, Grumpy, I want you and the rest of the dwarves to set up defences on the castle. Around-the-clock watch, sentries on the border, the works. Don’t leave anything to chance. Robin –” David stopped, looking around the room. Snow did as well. The outlaw was nowhere to be seen, not even the flicker of a shadow that was usually the only indicator of his presence.

“Where is he?” she asked the room at large. No-one seemed to know.

For the second time in a week, Robin was somewhere that he shouldn’t have been.

He should have been with the Council, discussing the search for Glinda. He had no doubt that David would want him to go along, partly because he was easily the best tracker they had on hand, and partly because the king was probably worried Robin would get himself into trouble while he was gone. He had made it halfway up the tower, but then caught the scent of the honeysuckle plants Regina seemed so fond of and, almost of their own accord, his feet carried him to her room.

There were no guards – what was the need for them? – so Robin slipped through the doorway unnoticed. He kept to the shadows, his hood up to shield his face even though there was only one small candle burning on the nightstand. The windows were cracked open, a narrow stream of daylight pouring through the gaps; enough for Robin to take stock of the room. He’d been to Regina’s workshop many times but her private chambers were … well, somewhat lifeless. It was grand, certainly, as befit a dowager queen, outfitted with a gilded mirror as tall as Robin’s shoulders, a fine collection of jewellery and rich, embroidered curtains around an oaken four-poster bed. It was all perfectly put together and neat, without so much as a speck of dust, but bore no personal touches, nothing that seemed like Regina at all.

Because it’s just a place to sleep.

His eyes zeroed in on where Regina lay on top of cotton sheets, long black hair fanned around her head like a shiny black cloud, and arms folded across her chest. Robin snickered; the dwarves had
done a good job at arranging her as perfectly as the room, so one might be fooled into thinking she was merely asleep. But he remembered the many mornings he’d gone to wake her in her tent to find a tangle of blankets and a pillow in some odd location, thrown aside sometime during the night.

By God, she was beautiful. The real her, not this facsimile.

He knew the tales of True Love, of course; there wasn’t a soul in the Enchanted Forest who didn’t. But until he’d met Marian, he hadn’t really believed in it. It just seemed too fantastical, too incredible … too much like a fairy tale. And then Marian died, and he’d gone back to disbelieving.

But then he met Regina.

It was so ridiculous, really. The Evil Queen and the most wanted outlaw in history. Robin could have laughed. He knelt beside the bed, taking the time just to watch the candlelight shimmer on her face, and reached for her too-cold hand. All this time, he’d been denying how he really felt, convinced that it would never be. But what if it could? What if she felt the same?

But even if she does, will it be enough? said that annoying, pessimistic voice that sounded too much like his grandfather. Robin dropped his gaze. Snow had said Regina’s True Love had died long ago. Robin loved her – truly did, now that he admitted it willingly – but that didn’t mean they shared the love that made legends. They were both so broken, so lost, and too prone to darkness – for Robin knew he was no saint, whatever his intentions may have been. Could the truest form of love survive in such a hostile world?

He didn’t know the answer. That only left one option. He had to find the Good Witch, and convince her to help.

“I’m sorry, Regina,” he murmured, even that quiet whisper echoing about the lifeless chamber. “I let you down. But I’ll find a way to wake you. I promise.”

As he expected, she had no answer for him. He sniffled and rose to leave, giving her hand a gentle squeeze though he knew that there was no way she could even be aware of his presence. Then he leant over her prone form and, taking a deep breath, tenderly pressed his lips to hers.

A shining wave of rainbow magic whooshed about the room, a golden ray of sunshine that warmed Robin’s heart like a pint of butterscotch rum. He jumped back from shock as Regina’s eyes opened, and she gasped as if coming up from deep water. Then she met Robin’s gaze.

“You?” she gasped. She unsteadily pushed herself into a sitting position, and his heart did a backflip. “Uh – I, uh –” he stammered, just then realising how close they were. His fingers were still wrapped around hers, but when he tried to pull away – cheeks flushing like the Agrabahn sun – she tightened her grip. She grappled with his sleeve, pulled it up, and gasped for a second time when she saw the tattoo Robin hated so much.

“That was you all along?”

“But, what –?” But whatever it was could wait, as Regina kissed him again, and it was the best kiss of Robin’s life. Though the hole left in his heart by Marian’s death would never heal, he felt alive in that moment, his whole being filled with love and joy. In all of his wretched life, somehow God had deemed him – both of them – deserving of a second chance. They should have been doing this the whole time – Robin could have kicked himself for not admitting it sooner.

The need for air forced him to pull back. “I love you,” he said breathlessly, holding her close. She giggled happily.
“I love you too.” And she leant in to kiss him for a third time.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

“Impending!” Leroy declared, dropping the spyglass he’d been using to watch for the Witch and ducked behind the pot plant with his brothers. Robin ground his teeth.

“Right! Into position, ladies and gents!” He hefted his bow and peered through the tiny gap between the stacked chairs. Beside him, Alan did the same and Vitani, the young Pridelander woman, bared her sharp teeth. Across the room, Prince Frederick and his wife were ready with their swords and Vitani’s brother Kovu. Robin signalled, and as he did, the doors rattled as the Witch tried to break through the lock-down. “Aim true, lads, for Little John!”

The hospital doors blasted open. Arrows and knives flew through the smoky air. The Dark One, under Zelena’s orders, wiped out the first wave with a flick of his hand. Robin reloaded as the twin Pridelanders launched and were thrown back, tumbling over the top of the admin desk. Then there was another wave of magic, and the chairs came toppling down on top of him and Alan.

The first line had fallen. Tink grimaced as she watched the Witch easily beat down the two young Pridelanders and continue on down the corridor. She clutched one iron cuff in her gloved hands and glanced over her shoulder where Regina stood, partially hidden by a rack of scrubs. Tink took a breath. They had one chance to make this work.

*One.*

She could feel the Witch attempting to get through the wards keeping the door shut; felt every blast, every blow as if it were impacting her own body.

*Two.*

The door buckled. Tink grimaced, took a deep breath and signalled Regina.

*Three!*

As the Witch attacked again, Regina dropped the wards and sent a wave of magic outwards. It hit the Witch full-on and she hit the wall opposite with a grunt of pain. Tink chuckled. *You weren’t expecting that, were you?*

While the Witch was still fazed, Tink teleported to her side. Regina attacked again but the Dark One raised his hand and the scrubs came to life, easily engulfing his former student like a rack of pale blue octopi. Tink grabbed hold of Zelena’s wrist, then went flying as magic surrounded the Witch and blasted outwards.

“Nice try, little bug.”

Somewhere outside the delivery room, Ruby heard the crashes. She held Snow’s hand and rubbed
her back as the contractions kept coming.

*That’s too close,* she growled to herself as she listened. Another blast, the smell of something burning, and the lights flickered. “What the hell was that?”

“Doesn’t matter; this baby is coming,” said Dr Whale.

Snow screamed again. “Ruby?” she whimpered.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t go.”

Ruby held her oldest friend close, squeezing her shoulders and nuzzling the top of her head. “Hey. I’m right here, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

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When Tink went down, Belle did something very stupid. Being magic-less, she was supposed to wait for the young fairy to get one cuff on before she tried to get the other, but that plan was now out of the window. So she tried the next best thing.

Zelena hadn’t seen her, and she had Rumple’s dagger clasped in the hand she had just raised against Tink. Belle forced herself to breathe, counted to three and then leapt out of hiding. She fixed both of her hands on the dagger, ignored the bite of the blade digging into her palms and twisted.

For a second, one glorious, incredible moment, she felt Zelena’s grip falter and the knife began to slip free. But then the Witch recovered, her hand became iron-like around the handle and she shoved Belle to the floor.

“Haven’t you learnt your lesson yet?” Zelena sneered, waving the dagger like one would wag a finger at a naughty child. “This is more powerful than your True Love.”

“Hey!”

An arrow flew at Zelena. She waved the dagger and a wave of magic pushed both the arrow and Robin, the shooter, into the wall, where the arrow lodged, trapping Robin by his jacket. Zelena cackled.

“Not again, outlaw.” Blue eyes turned back to Belle, and though she was stuck on the floor, she hardened her stare and met Zelena face-on. The Witch sneered at her again.

“Your taste in women has really gone downhill,” she remarked to Rumple, still with her eyes fixed on Belle. “Come, dearie. Chop-chop.”

She watched as Rumple reluctantly followed the Witch down the corridor, his face pale and body hunched over from pain. *I’m sorry,* she read in his eyes.

*It’s not your fault,* she tried to tell him in return. She could only hope he’d get the message.

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**Enchanted Forest, June 2013**

Sleep no longer came easily, not with the nightmares waiting for her on the other side. Most nights
Belle resigned herself to long hours of restlessness, her cowl pulled over her head to block out the
glow of Cogsworth’s crimson eyes. Her monkey guard was always there, chittering whenever she
wasn’t working or sleeping. Or rather lying in bed, trying not to think of dark, deserted corridors, or
glowing eyes, or worst of all, Rumple stuck in Zelena’s cage muttering nonsense.

If only she could have found something to help him. If only she could get close enough to do the one
thing she knew would work. If only that one thing wouldn’t, in all likelihood, get them both killed.

She lay in the darkness, failing to sleep for the eighth night in a row – or was it the ninth? – when she
yelped, feeling a clawed hand grab her by the shoulder.

“Cahahhhhaah?” Cogsworth chittered, seemingly taken aback by her fright.

“Hi,” said Belle. “If this is about the book on Nagi’s theorem, I was going to get to it in the morning
after – OW!”

The black monkey seized her wrist, clawed fingers dug in tight, and pulled her to her feet. Then out
of the door, and down the stairs. He was hopping awkwardly with his razor-like wings outstretched
to fly but confined by the narrow stoneworks. Belle still had to hurry to keep up with him.

They came to the Great Hall’s open doors. Cogsworth pulled her through. A pair of identical brown
monkeys slammed the doors shut behind them, and he finally let go of her wrist. Belle rubbed the
tender skin. It could’ve been worse, she supposed as she inspected the injury. No broken skin, but
she would probably have a bruise or two.

As for why he’d brought her here when Zelena usually summoned her by magic, though …

Oh, Belle thought, letting out a small gasp as she caught sight of the Witch.

Well, Zelena had looked better, as little as that might say. Belle approached gingerly, wondering if
this was how Androcles had felt. Twin arrow shafts jutted out of her back, one of which had gone
straight through and its head protruded from beneath the Witch’s left breast. She had collapsed into a
chair, half bent-over and drew in rapid, rattling breaths. A bloodied knife lay on the table beside her.
From the sizeable stain on the back of Zelena’s dress, Belle gathered the blood was hers.

She nervously cleared her throat to announce her presence and prayed that Zelena would think
before turning her into a snail, or worse. Thankfully, as Zelena turned cold blue eyes on her and
magicked the blade away, it didn’t look as if that was her intention.

“So.” Belle grimaced and held her hands in front of her, trying to rein in her cheekiness. “How’d it
go?”

“Shut up,” Zelena growled. She clicked her fingers and a dappled monkey fluttered down from the
rafters, a polished silver tray balanced on its paws. “This,” Zelena instructed, pointing to a vial of
blue liquid, “and then this –” (red powder) “– and then this –” (gold liquid).

“Before or after I pull the arrows out?”

Zelena snarled. “Mind your tongue, bookworm, unless you wish to watch your lover in screaming
agony.” She drew the dagger from her corset to emphasise her point.

Belle eyed the dagger and calculated her chances of seizing it. Not good, she decided. Instead, she
steeled herself and looked Zelena in the eye. “You don’t have to threaten him to get me to help you.
You could just ask.”
“And you would have complied?” the Witch snorted.

Belle had a closer look at the arrow that had gone through, and then broke off the flights. “Yes. Hold still.” And she pulled the whole thing out, head first. Zelena seized up, and Belle wondered how her teeth didn’t break from holding in a scream. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Zelena either ignored her or didn’t believe her. Belle decided that she didn’t care. She should have realised that reason would be nothing but a waste of perfectly good air anyway.

“Now, anyone else I’d worry about doing more damage by pulling the other one out. But I gather you can fix it?”

“Just … get the head out,” Zelena grunted, letting a sliver of desperation slip out from between gritted teeth.

So Belle did. For a moment, she considered breaking the tip off – that seemed to be the part that Zelena was most concerned about – but then thought better of it. Her wounds were nasty, but hardly enough to kill her. And Belle was worried about what might be done to Rumple if she refused.

“There,” she declared to a Witch who was in too much pain to hear her. Sometimes, Belle wished she could do what Rumple, or Regina, or hell, even Snow and David on occasion, could do, and shut off her conscience for just five minutes. “Do I mix the liquid with the powder?”

“Yes. It should form something like a soup. Colour of violets. Keeps – ahh! Keeps infection out.”

“Hmm.”

Belle stirred the mixture a little slower than she normally would have. Looking past Zelena, she spied Rumple in his cage, a basket full of straw by his side and his wheel turning furiously.

*Is this how you felt when you took on the curse to save Bae? Torn between two evils?* Belle wondered as she watched her True Love work his craft.

*She’s injured,* she thought. *Badly. If there was ever a time to take the dagger back –*

*There’s no way you’d be able to finish the job,* her pragmatic self reminded her. *Even if your conscience didn’t get in the way, you’re half her size and unarmed. You would be killed in an instant. She’s got magic, Rumple and hundreds of monkeys on her side. You need to stay alive. For him.*

Belle sighed and shut her eyes as she dabbed the violet gunk over Zelena’s wounds.

*If there is any chance at all,* she vowed.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

It was like being wrapped in Christmas paper, Regina thought. Particularly clingy Christmas paper, with hands it couldn’t keep to itself.

She eventually managed to unravel the spells around the scrubs – she hated to admit it, but Rumple had been going easy on her and it still took longer than she would have liked – and freed herself. She found the crutch, awkwardly got to her feet and took stock of the situation. Tink was on the floor, bleeding from a rather nasty gash in her forehead. The fairy’s magic was already taking care of it.
Robin was stuck to the wall, and Belle was trying to help him down. They both seemed to be all right, though a little shaken.

_So Zelena got through._

Regina swore under her breath. A quick survey of the admissions room found no lingering spells, traps or anything else that might harm them, so she hurriedly limped down the corridor to the delivery room. Only to have to duck as a door blasted open, somebody screamed, and Whale collided with the wall. Ruby followed, landing with a thud next to the doctor.

A moment later, Zelena emerged, her cold eyes blazing. Rumple was right behind her. He really did look terrible.

Inside the room, Snow continued to scream. So did the bundle in Zelena’s arms. It was too close. Regina sighed and quenched the magic building in her good hand. Anything she did to Zelena would only put the baby in danger.

Zelena bared her teeth in triumph, and Regina watched as her wicked sister disappeared in a cloud of green smoke, taking Rumplestiltskin and Snow’s newborn with her.

People were still picking themselves off the floor by the time Regina got back to the admissions room. She saw that Belle had succeeded in freeing Robin – he caught her eye, she shook her head solemnly, and he stamped his foot in frustration – and that Tink was on her feet, helping Belle and the on-call nurse tend to some of the injuries. As far as she could tell, no-one was too badly hurt. Prince Frederick seemed to be the worst of the lot and all he had was a dislocated shoulder.

_Zelena must really be desperate if she let us all live_, Regina thought. A hand took hold of her elbow, and she twisted to see Robin at her side.

“She got the baby, didn’t she?”

“Yes.” Regina sighed.

“But we’re still here,” Robin observed. “So maybe we’ve got time before –”

He didn’t finish the sentence as the hospital doors burst open and a couple of paramedics rushed in, rolling a stretcher between them. There was no stopping them, or the head of blonde hair right behind them, as they barged straight past the collapsed fortifications. Regina gasped as they passed and she caught sight of the man on the stretcher, an oxygen mask over his face and a frightening amount of blood staining his shirtfront.

“She limped into admissions, where Emma stood amongst the carnage, her face like ice and suspicious red stains on her hands and jacket. Regina wondered if she’d even registered the state of the admissions room. “What happened?”

Emma just shook her head. A second later, the doors opened again, and Hook barged in.

“Swan, please listen to me! I had to do it! I didn’t have a choice –”

Emma sniffled, pushed past Regina and marched after the paramedics. “Just leave me alone and SHUT THE HELL UP!”
The door slammed shut behind her, but that didn’t deter the pirate. “I had to do it! She was gonna kill you! Swan! Swan, please!” He made to follow her, but Robin got to the door first and held it shut. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about!” Hook protested, trying to shove him aside.

“Really? ’Cause she sounded pretty certain to me.”

“Get out of my way or else I –”

“Just, hold on a second,” Belle interjected, taking hold of the pirate’s good hand before he did something rash. Regina limped over to join them. “What happened?”

Hook stammered, looking from Belle to the door to his boots. When it became apparent that they weren’t going to stand aside, he said, “I took her heart and gave it to Zelena.”

“You did what?” Regina shouted. Of all the dumb-ass, pathetic, stupid, lowlife –

“He was going to kill her!” Hook repeated. “I had to do it! I didn’t have a –”

He got no further, as Regina ran out of adjectives and punched him in the face.

Enchanted Forest, July 2013

The others had been … surprised, to say the least, when they found out that Regina was awake. Even more so when they found out who woke her, though she certainly didn’t miss the knowing grin that Alan shot them when he knew they were looking. Snow was overjoyed – and probably already planning a wedding, which was one reason Regina was grateful for the excuse to get out of the castle – and Tink had just barely refrained from completely geeking out. Thankfully, there hadn’t been enough time for word to spread of her ‘accident’ and so those who knew were mostly limited to those who had been there for the fight. That meant, for the time being, Regina had Robin mostly to herself.

Of course, two weeks’ hard trek through the north-east Midlands and, over the border, the Infinite Forest wasn’t the ideal start to their courtship – not with David, Snow and Dorothy along for the trip – and certainly not what Regina would’ve had in mind under different circumstances. But the situation was what it was, and they still had to find and defeat the Wicked Witch. Especially now that they knew – or at least Regina had her suspicions, and she believed Snow might have come to the same conclusion – what Zelena was after.

There was one advantage to it all, in that nobody was around to judge that Regina and Robin slept entirely too close together for an unmarried couple. Not that Regina really cared what anybody thought, but upon exiting the sleeping curse she now had a genuine appreciation for what her past actions had forced Snow – and Henry – to endure. The first night had been the worst, when she’d woken after only a few hours to find a huge burn covering most of her forearm. The burn itself was easy enough to take care of, but trying to sleep afterwards was a waking nightmare in and of itself. After one particularly restless night, Robin had foregone all propriety and held her until she fell into a dreamless sleep. Since then, his touch had been the only thing to keep the nightmares at bay. And being away from the castle, with the two people who understood the situation better than anyone else in the world, meant that Regina didn’t have to tolerate judgemental stares and gossip if she wanted to sleep near the man she loved.

It was certainly poetic, Regina mused as she led her horse across a narrow stream several hundred miles into the Infinite Forest. I put Snow under a curse and never bothered to learn what she went
Up ahead, Glinda’s wand hovered above the nose of David’s horse, restrained so that they didn’t accidentally lose it in the depths of the woods, hopefully leading the way to its owner. As the sunlight began to wane, David pulled his horse to a halt.

“We should probably start thinking about making camp. It’s going to be dark soon.”

“We’ve got to be getting close,” said Dorothy. “One more hour.”

“David’s right,” Snow answered (predictably). “I don’t think we’ve got an hour.”

The Charmings slid from their horses as Dorothy sighed but didn’t protest. Regina noticed that Robin stayed mounted. “I’m with Dorothy,” he said. “We should keep going.”

“Robin, we don’t know how much further we have to go,” David protested as he began to assemble his camping gear. He spread his arms and turned in a circle. “There’s nothing here.”

“That’s not true. There’s something over there.”

Regina followed his pointer finger to a dark patch of trees. She turned to look at him and ask what he was talking about, when her eye caught a glimmer of light reflected off something metallic in the shadows.

The others had spotted it too. They each gave Robin a look, to which he merely shrugged and said, “Told you.”

Regina slipped out of her saddle and proceeded on foot with David close behind. She heard him draw his sword as they approached the object. Though what good that would do against a six-and-a-half-feet tall rectangular block of cedar wood with a lotus-shaped glass window in its centre, she didn’t know.

“What the hell is that supposed to be?” asked David.

“Well, I could be wrong,” Regina mused as she checked for trace magic or traps, “but it appears to be … a door.”

David rolled his eyes. “A door to what?”

“To Glinda,” said Dorothy, coming up behind them with the wand – now vibrating dangerously – clutched in her hand. Regina nodded in agreement. There was only one reason why the wand would behave like that.

“So, now what?” Snow asked.

“Well, we can stand here watching the grass grow,” Robin suggested. “Or we can try knocking.”

Which was what he did, or rather would have done, if the door hadn’t opened first.

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

“Regina, stop!”

She didn’t really want to. Beating the crap out of the pirate seemed far more appealing, even if her
two semi-functional limbs made it awkward. Hook fell to the floor, hands raised to protect his face, so she raised her crutch to strike again –

Only for Robin to grab hold and wrestle the crutch away from her. “Stop,” he repeated, standing close enough to keep her from doing further damage to the pirate, and from falling over due to balancing on one leg. “He’s not worth it.”

Regina took a shuddering breath, nodded, and Robin gave the crutch back. He was right, after all. They had enough casualties as it was. She planted the foot of the crutch against Hook’s chest, not enough to hurt but enough to make sure he stayed down.

“Get out,” she spat, jabbing him sharply on the sternum. “Just – just get out.”

She didn’t watch him go, just leant heavily on her good leg and ran a hand through her hair. Somewhere in the midst of things, she felt Robin and Belle watching her. Probably a few others were as well. She was so tired. So sick of fighting.

“We might have one last shot at her,” said Robin. She appreciated that he was trying to be proactive; it took some of the pressure off, but not nearly enough. “Just need to figure out where she went.”

“The farmhouse, probably,” Regina offered. “But that’s not going to do us any good if –”

She broke off with a splutter, having just spotted a head of scruffy brown hair seated in one of the fixed chairs, his face in his hands and shoulders shaking uncontrollably. She felt a hand on her arm, but it could have been worlds away for all Regina cared.

“We’ll take care of it,” said Belle, giving Regina’s arm a gentle squeeze.

“Okay.”

Robin gave her one last concerned look – which she tried to respond to with reassurance, but from his grimace, she gathered she didn’t quite pull it off – before he left with Belle, and Regina limped over to her son.

“Henry?”

He started, raised his head and hurriedly wiped away the tears. Regina’s heart clenched. Oh, Henry. “Mayor Mills,” he sniffled. Reddened eyes took stock of the sling and the crutch, and a fresh wave of tears burst forth. “I’m – I’m so – I’m so sorry! I’m sorry, I – I –”

“Hey. Shh,” she murmured, her hand reaching for him on instinct. “It’s all right. I’m all right. You were trying to protect your parents.” He was still crying. "Henry - did she hurt you?" Because if she did, I swear, there is not a realm or time that is safe for her -!

Henry shook his head and wiped his nose. “No, no. She didn't hurt me. It’s – it's all so confusing. I don’t – I don’t know what to do! My mom, she’s – and Dad –”

He started crying again. Regina had to fight every instinct not to hug him.

“I don’t – I don’t understand,” he said finally, when he had got a grip once more. “Was – was it really a memory potion? The thing you gave to my mom?”

She nodded.

“Then – then what – what did I forget? What did I need to remember?”
Her leg had started to hurt, so Regina gingerly lowered herself to the floor and sat cross-legged, her good hand on Henry’s elbow. “What did Emma tell you?” she asked. If they were going to get anywhere, she needed to know what he knew.

Henry sniffled. “Um, she – she said that we’d been to Storybrooke before. That I really grew up here and not in Tallahassee. That we’d already broken the curse but somebody cast a new one, and I just didn’t remember. That – that two years ago, you sent me, Mom and Dad away and erased our memories. And gave us new ones to replace them.”

Regina nodded. “It’s true.”

“Why?” Henry demanded. “What did you want us to forget?”

“Henry –” Regina shifted, stretching her bad leg and raising herself by sitting on her good one. “Do – do you remember, when you were about, maybe five or six, you used to get a pot, put it on your head, and ride your hobby horse around the house, saying that you were a knight?”

“Yeah. How did you –?”

“Do you remember building a fort out of sofa cushions, and your mom would pretend to be a dragon guarding the castle? And you’d pretend that your marbles were priceless treasures, and you’d been sent by King Arthur to come and claim them from the dragon?”

Henry stared. “How do you know about that?”

“Because I used my own memories to fashion your parents’ new ones,” she told him, never breaking eye contact. She had no idea if he would believe her or not – but she had to try. “And – and edited yours so that when you remembered those things, you’d remember Emma, not me.”

“Why would I –?”

“Because I adopted you as a baby. I’m your mother too.”

“I’m your mother too.”

Regina’s words rattled around Henry’s already aching head. Starbursts appeared like a light show in his field of vision. He felt like someone had shoved needles through his temples.

“No. No, no, you’re lying –”

He could remember clearly playing the very game she had just described, could remember his dad laughing in the kitchen, could remember that his horse’s name had been Buddy, could remember his mom hiding behind the sofa cushions and jumping out with her hands curled like claws –

But then why did his dad sound so distant, like he wasn’t even there? And there hadn’t been off-white panelling in their apartment – no, it had been … a colour of some sort … and he was sure his mom had never dyed her hair black …

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Henry. I love you.”

_I love you._

“No matter what anybody tells you,” she said, her eyes full of fear, _“I do love you.”_
“Oh, my God –”

He hid his face in his hands once again as bits and pieces came back, slowly at first and gaining momentum –

“My name’s Henry,” he told the blonde woman standing in the doorway. Mom! “I’m your son.”
The yellow bug, going back to Storybrooke with Emma.

“I found my real mom!”


_The taste of poisoned apple in his mom’s turnover. The mirror room. Waking up, both of his moms crying. Losing Emma again to the wraith._

“You’re going to go home with David … I don’t know how to love very well.”


“Villains don’t get happy endings,” she said, her voice breaking. He reached out to hug her, for the last time.

“You’re not a villain. You’re my mom.”

Regina’s voice – his mom’s voice – broke through the onslaught of memories. “Henry?”

He peeked out from between his fingers. “Mom?”

Regina gasped, relief and love and joy breaking out over her face all at once. She pulled him into a hug, squeezing so tight that he was almost afraid she might break.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he sobbed, unable to fight back the tears. “I’m so sorry! This is all my fault –!”

“Shh. Shh. It’s okay,” she murmured, pulling back to look at him properly. “You’re safe. Right now, that’s all that matters.”

“But – my dad –”

“Hey. He’ll be all right.” She smiled and wiped a tear from his cheek. “I promise. You’re not gonna lose him again.”

Henry nodded, wiped his nose on his sleeve and hugged his mother again. _I’m still sorry, Mom_, he thought. _I’m so sorry!_

He’d just have to hope that it wasn’t too late.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 25: The Course of True Love. In the Enchanted Forest, options are explored and a decision is made. In Storybrooke, Zelena has her final ingredient … but not for long. (Warning: major character death to come)
Just in case, I’ll explain the memory thing: so what happened with Emma and Neal is that when they saw the dreamcatcher, it was a contradiction of something in their false memories (that the dreamcatcher had been destroyed) that couldn’t be otherwise explained. That allowed some of their real memories to come back through. They both then experienced reminders of particularly emotional events (Neal’s encounter with August; Emma meeting her mother for the first time) that then broke the memory spell. Ironically, Emma and Neal’s decision to tell Henry about magic actually worked against them in this regard – magic meant that Henry had a believable explanation for why things seemed so weird, therefore the spell couldn’t be broken. It was only after his constructed beliefs had been shattered that his memory could return. I hope that worked; I’d love it if you could tell me what you thought of it!
The Course of True Love

Warning: Major Character Death

Storybrooke, 31 January 2014

This could not be happening.

Emma paced the hallway outside the surgery. The nurse wouldn’t let her in, wouldn’t let her see Neal, wouldn’t tell her anything about how he was doing, what was happening, whether or not he’d make it …

Not again. Not after everything we’ve been through!

She slid to the floor, her knees too weak to hold her up any longer. She’d had enough experience in hospitals to know it was bad. When the nurses wouldn’t say anything, it was bad. But she’d overheard bits and pieces –

“Bullet came dangerously close to his heart … tension pneumothorax … get a crash cart ready to go just in case …”

No!

“Please,” Emma begged. To God, to fate, to the freakin’ alien overlords if they could hear her – she didn’t care. Somebody. Anybody! “Just bring him back. Please. Just let him come back to me.”

Enchanted Forest, July 2013

As the door opened, magic rippled outwards from the opening until a quaint cottage became visible, two storeys high with smoke puffing from the chimney. There was a pie cooling on the window – apple, Regina realised as her mouth began to water – and the smell of freshly baked buns radiated through the open door. She held back as the others tentatively inched nearer the door, thinking of the Blind Witch’s sweet house, but ultimately couldn’t find any trace of black magic, or anything that set off Regina’s internal alarms. For a second, she thought that itself was alarming – sorcerers always left traps, even the good ones. But her stomach won out in the end, and she followed Snow into the little abode.

Though the door was open, the fire lit and some sort of tart cooking in the oven, there seemed to be no-one home. Regina didn’t recognise any of the paintings on the walls – pictures of strangely coloured landscapes, with a castle situated on a cliff overlooking a red-tinged forest – or the species of poppy growing in a window box, the smell of which made Regina feel rather sleepy. The others were being affected as well – she prodded David before he fell asleep where he stood.

“My apologies about those,” said a voice to the left. Regina jumped, calling up a quick spell (just in case) and turned to face the speaker. A white-haired woman of maybe fifty, whose lined face still bore the tell-tale marks of youthful beauty, descended the stairs, her pale hand holding up the skirts of a cherry-coloured house dress with the grace of someone who had been raised in a grand palace. She smiled at them, sparkles appearing in gentle blue eyes, and waved a hand. The poppies
disappeared. “I can forget how they affect humans sometimes.”

She seemed harmless, but Regina knew as well as anyone that appearances counted for nothing. She turned to Dorothy, who was grinning like someone seeing the dawn for the first time. “Glinda,” said the warrior woman, rushing to greet the newcomer with a hug. “Oh! It’s been so long!”

“It has, my dear,” Glinda agreed. As she stood back and held Dorothy at arm’s length to inspect her, Regina quelled her magic but kept her defences up. Just in case. “You’ve grown!”

“Well, I’m not a little girl anymore,” said Dorothy, almost shyly. She then seemed to remember that there were others in the room. “Oh. Glinda, this is King David and Queen Snow of the Midlands, Queen Regina, and Robin of Locksley.”

“Yes, I know. And I know why you’ve come,” said Glinda.

*Now isn’t that interesting?* Regina frowned. “Do you, now?”

Snow elbowed her in the ribs and gave her a look. *Be polite!* it said.

“Yes. My old apprentice, Zelena, has come to the Enchanted Forest.” Glinda gestured to the table that had just appeared in front of the fire. “Please, sit down. Cider, anyone?”

“Please,” Robin, David and Dorothy accepted. Snow politely declined – she wasn’t fond of apples, something Regina was probably responsible for – while Regina chucked the idea back and forth before tentatively accepting. Two weeks of trail mix had weakened her resolve.

“Yes, I’ve known about Zelena’s return for some time,” Glinda told them as she poured four glasses and put a tray of buns on the table. “She arrived a few weeks before you did.”

“You knew?” Snow asked around a mouthful of bread. “How?”

“I trained Zelena as a young girl, when she still had goodness within her. I know her magic well.”

“Could you stop her?” asked David. His face fell as Glinda shook her head.

“I’m afraid not. My magic is not enough to best her; it never has been.” Glinda sighed. “Sadly, the girl I once knew is long dead, destroyed by the envy that has overtaken her heart.”

“She’s working on a spell to travel back in time,” said Regina. “Do you know why? What does she want?”

“What she doesn’t have,” said Glinda. She put her bun down and pointed to Regina. “You. Your life.”

“Me? What have I got to do with it?”

“She blames you for ruining her life. For taking everything away from her.”

“Taking everything away from *her*?” Regina repeated, her voice rising. Robin laid a hand on her shoulder; she set hers on top and took a breath. “I never met her before one year ago.”

“I trained Zelena as a girl, but she also had another mentor whom I believe you’re familiar with,” said Glinda. “The Dark One. Rumplestiltskin. He trained the two of you at the same time, but separately, in the hope that one of you would cast his curse. As I understand it, you got the job after Zelena became … *problematic,* I suppose is the best way to put it. You have to understand, she was abandoned by her birth parents as a baby and her adopted father was, well, horrible to her. The way
she looks at it, the Dark One chose you over her. Jealousy, you see. It’s a dangerous thing.”

“The Dark Curse was hardly all it was cracked up to be,” Regina defended. Glinda shrugged.

“Be that as it may, that’s not how she looks at it. Zelena’s intention is – has been for a long time – to travel back in time to where she believes it all went wrong. To when she was abandoned as a baby. She believes that if she can correct that ‘error’, as she puts it, then the Dark One will choose her to cast the curse and she’ll get everything you ever had.”

“Then she’s crazy,” Regina observed. As if it was news. “Though I suppose that’s what you get for having a love child with a scarecrow.”

“Actually, it was a fae,” said Glinda. “One of the very few who’ve broken into our realm since the Blue Fairy sent them into exile eight hundred years ago.”

“She’s a fairy?” Snow gaped.

“No. She’s half human, half fae. Slightly different thing to a fairy.” Was it Regina’s imagination, or did Glinda look a little offended by that? “I don’t know that much about her father, except that he, uh, how shall I put this? Conveniently disappeared right around the time her mother discovered that she was pregnant. Then I believe there was some business with a prince in the Northern Kingdoms, and she ended up abandoning Zelena in the Black Forest. A tornado carried her to Oz when she was just a baby.”

“So she wants to go back in time to stop that from happening?” Regina repeated to clarify things. Glinda nodded.

“It’s my fault, I’m afraid. I couldn’t dissuade her from the path of anger. And then I mistakenly put my faith in a false prophecy instead of in my apprentice.”

Dorothy perked up. “You mean the prophecy about the light sorceress who would rid Oz of its greatest evil?”

Glinda nodded. “I – I may have accidentally led her to believe that was you, and as a result, I put your life in terrible danger. I’m sorry, my child.”

“But someone could defeat her if they had enough power?” Snow suggested. “A light sorcerer?”

“If there is one powerful enough, I’m afraid I don’t know of them,” said Glinda. “Such magicians are few and far between. I’m one of only a handful, and as I said, my magic isn’t enough. I can’t even leave this forest.”

“You’re trapped?” said Dorothy. Glinda nodded.

“Zelena’s work. It could be much worse.”

“What about the fairies?” David interjected.

“If they could, why hasn’t Blue already done it?” asked Robin.

“Fae magic is similar to the fairies’, with an added touch of darkness that Rheul Ghorm’s lot find … difficult to tie down,” Glinda explained. She tore a bun in half and continued: “The last war cost the fairies dearly. And Zelena’s father, having broken free as he did, was apparently one of the more powerful ones. If she inherited his power, even a fraction of it, then it’s possible that Rheul could contain her for a time, but trapping her or killing her – that requires a human kind of magic. A fairy
couldn’t do it.”

She sighed and looked around the table. “I’m sorry I don’t have a better answer for you.”

“That’s okay,” said David. “It’s something, at least.”

Regina looked out of the window – the day was almost done, long shadows engulfing the Infinite Forest for another night. “Yes, thank you. But we should probably be going now. We’ve been gone too long already.”

“Of course.” Glinda rose and bowed politely. “Once again, I’m sorry I can’t help you. Zelena is … well, a menace.”

As they all stood, Dorothy reached into her pockets and retrieved Glinda’s wand, holding it out for her to take. “This is yours. We used it to find you.”

“Thank you.” Glinda claimed it back and hugged Dorothy once more.

“Are you sure there’s nothing we can do for you?” asked Snow.

“Short of undoing Zelena, I’m afraid not,” Glinda told her with a strained smile. “Don’t mourn for me, child. This life is not as bad as it could be.”

Still not much of a life, Regina thought. Though she supposed, as she stepped into the nighttime woodland, a little cottage in the woods didn’t sound like such a bad way to spend her years once she was past her prime. With some chickens, a goat, and a stable out the back for a horse – or two, she added, and maybe a pony for Roland. So long as he and Robin were in the picture, it sounded almost perfect.

Zelena first, she reminded herself.

Rendered invisible by a cloaking spell, the Violet Fairy – also known as Ione, though she (unlike others) preferred her colour distinction to her given name – waited until the royals and the girl with the odd accent had been swept up in Queen Regina’s magic before she fluttered away from the windowsill. She became her full size, dusted herself off, and entered the cottage.

“How did it go?” she asked, shutting the door behind her.

“Quite well,” said Blue. She pocketed her wand (hers, not actually Glinda the Good Witch’s - Blue had travelled to Oz about a day ahead of the werewolf and her friend to plant it in the Witch’s palace) and turned back to her normal self, abandoning the guise of the former Guardian of Oz, who was, in reality, trapped in an ice cave in the far north of Arendelle. “I believe they fell for the ruse.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t want them to find the real Witch,” said Violet. Blue patted her shoulder in that motherly way she did – a little too often, in Violet’s opinion.

“Because Glinda wouldn’t be able to provide them with the answers they needed. But they would have sought her out regardless, and the journey was too risky.”

“If you say so,” said Violet. There was something that Blue had left out, as she often did. Violet knew that the only reason Blue would do that was because she didn’t need to know – she just had to trust that Blue knew what she was doing, as always.
Ruby found Emma quite easily. She just followed the sound of somebody punching holes in the wall.

“Emma?”

Well, there were holes in the wall all right. Several. Ruby supposed she should be thankful that Emma wasn’t yet at a stage to be throwing fireballs around the room, or she would have become known as werewolf flambé. As for the sheriff herself, she stood with her forehead against a wall, shaking and beating bloodied fists against the plasterboard.

“We need to go,” Ruby announced, careful to stay where Emma could see her.

Emma sobbed and shook her head. “No. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh – I realise this is a bad time,” she said slowly, padding closer. “But, uh, we need your help. Zelena took your brother.”

The sobbing stopped, and Emma jerked around to face her with wide, bloodshot eyes. “What?”

If the admissions room had been this much of a mess ten minutes ago, Emma hadn’t seen it. Tables overturned, chairs stacked up like walls and half a dozen people covered in cuts and bruises, looking like they were prepping for a riot – armed with bows, kitchen knives, the dwarves’ axes, slingshots cut out of what had probably been elastic bandages; whatever they could get their hands on. Robin seemed to be leading the charge while Belle was helping tend to the wounded, and Regina was with Henry off to the side. He’d clearly been crying – and Emma kicked herself for not checking on him sooner – but nonetheless leapt out of his chair when he spotted her.

“Mom!” he cried, wiping his nose on his sleeve. “Is Dad –”

“He’s in the surgery. I don’t know anything more than that,” she said, fighting to keep panic out of her voice. She hugged her son and then to Regina, who had limped up behind him, said: “Thanks.”

That was all she could manage.

“It’s not a problem.”

“Mom.” Henry pulled out of her embrace and wiped his face again. “I remember.”

She stared at him for a second, mind blank, and then realised what he was talking about. “You – you do? How?”

“Not sure, but I – I’m sorry. For everything.” He sniffled. “For not believing you. For handcuffing you. For taking your gun. This is all my fault.”

“Hey.” She held him by the shoulders and bent down so that she could look him in the eyes. “This is not your fault. Okay? This is Zelena’s doing.”

“Uh, speaking of whom –” Regina interrupted.
“Yeah, I know. Ruby told me.”

Henry frowned. “Told you what?”

“Zelena’s taken your uncle,” she told him after a moment’s hesitation. “But we’re going to get him back. I promise.”

He nodded, and once more Emma marveled at how her son could have such undying faith. Especially when she didn’t really believe it herself. She smiled at him, brushed his fringe off his face and kissed him on the forehead.

Warmth filled her empty chest as rainbow magic filled the room. Oh, right. Amidst everything else, Emma had actually forgotten about the curse.

“Did it –?”

“Yeah, it did.” Regina rubbed her forehead with her good hand. Like everyone else in the room, she looked about on the verge of fainting. Henry reached for her; she squeezed his arm reassuringly. “I’m okay. It’s just a bit to take in.”

“So, what happened?” Emma asked. Regina shook her head. “Later. Right now, I think I know how we can beat Zelena.”

“Really?” Emma turned to Henry. “You need to stay here, okay? Stay here, and if anything happens, find a closet and lock yourself in. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mom.”

She squeezed him once more, then let go and went to join the group – consisting of the Merry Men, Ruby, Dorothy and Tinkerbell (with a disturbing amount of purple bruising on her forehead). Plus her and Regina, that made for two experienced magicians – one with two broken limbs and one with a likely concussion – one amateur, a werewolf and four ordinary humans. Against the Dark One and someone who had taken Regina oh for three thus far.

Emma sighed, and tried not to think of Neal bleeding on a stretcher. Their army was rag-tag, but it would have to do.

“There’s nothing in the world more innocent than a newborn babe,” Zelena cooed sickeningly, bouncing the boy in her arms as Rumplestiltskin scraped a shovel on the barn floor. “And you, my sweetie, are the most innocent of all. The product of True Love.”

She set the boy down in the basket she’d prepared earlier, facing the west wall. The outlaw’s broken sword was to the east, Regina’s heart to the south, and a golden lump that supposedly resembled a brain – specifically Rumplestiltskin’s, and made from his own spinning – to the north.

“Dig!” she barked at Rumplestiltskin. He felt the order charge through him and his feet continued on their predetermined journey in a circle around the room, the strange symbol carving into the floor behind them. She watched, hawk-like, with his dagger in her hand; he could feel the stomach-turning glee she got from watching him relegated to menial, back-breaking labour emanating through the blade straight into every pore of his scrawny frame. “You still think I’ll fail?”
“I think destiny is destiny,” he answered simply. “And the one thing no-one can escape, no matter how hard they try.”

Gods knew that he’d tried.

“You’re wrong,” Zelena spat as his unwilling feet brought him closer to her. “I can, and I will change it.”

“That’s irrelevant, dearie.” He stumbled as the commands ended – his task completed – and her will forced him to stop mere inches in front of her. “No matter what you change of your past, one thing will always remain the same: what you are.”

He could kill her now. Just bring his hand up, plunge it into her chest, watch her scream in agony as he tore her to pieces from the inside – for crushing her heart, if such an infernal organ even existed, was not punishment enough. Not for her. Not now that the curse had broken, and he remembered what she had done. How she had tried to trick Belle into killing herself to resurrect him. How she kept her locked in the library, had hurt her, left her with those damned monkeys.

Who had shot his son.

But then cold metal nicked his chin, and with it, another command that he stay still while she leant in, far too close. Rumplestiltskin had never hated that blasted knife more than he did right then.

“We shall see,” she hissed. When she licked her lips, he almost expected to see a forked tongue.

Cold fingers replaced cold metal raking his jaw. “This is your last chance to join me willingly,” she crooned. Too close. Far too close. “You can keep your son. Maybe I’ll even orchestrate things so that you can keep your grandson too. All you have to do –” she was near his ear now; Rumplestiltskin focused on the wall and started counting – “is choose me. Not my sister. Not the pathetic little bookworm.”

At last, she stepped back, but still too close, eyes glinting as she awaited his answer. Well, she could have it.

“No,” he growled. She wanted him willingly – so the choice was his, and so long as the choice remained his, the answer had been set in stone long ago. “I failed my family too many times to count. No longer.”

There was a particular tic Cora used to have right before she lashed out – one single muscle in the left cheek that twitched, rather like the way a serpent’s head twitched a split second before it lunged for its prey. Zelena seemed to have inherited it, and Rumplestiltskin was able to brace himself as she rammed the dagger hilt into the side of his head. He hit the floor and curled into a ball.

“Have it your way. Screaming agony it is, then.” She spat on the floor, near his face, and shoved him onto his back with a foot in his belly. “See you in another life, Dark One.”

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**Enchanted Forest, July 2013**

“Well, we’re screwed,” Regina observed. After returning to Tower Castle (much quicker when they didn’t have to follow a magic wand through a forest designed for disorientating travellers) and a good night’s sleep in a proper bed, she met with Snow and David in their chambers. Robin had wanted to come, but Regina had insisted that he get out, catch up with the Merry Men and play with Roland. The blue bug was there in his place, returned from whatever ‘vital work’ it was that she’d
been doing – and Regina couldn’t help but notice she’d refrained from giving too many specifics about. Snow quickly filled her in, and Blue had confirmed Glinda’s assessment. Zelena was too powerful for fairy magic to contain for long. They needed a human sorcerer, but specifically one powerful enough and, more importantly, light enough … well, Regina wasn’t going to kid herself into thinking that her blackened heart was up for the job. “So, any suggestions?”

“Actually, I had an idea.” Snow offered. She lounged on the sofa, with her hand on top of David’s, protectively guarding her belly. “Glinda said that a light sorceress could defeat Zelena. Magic born of love. So what about Emma?”

Regina frowned. It wasn’t often that they talked about Storybrooke – the memories were still too recent, too painful, so the three of them had almost come to an unconscious agreement not to mention it unless necessary. “What about her?”

“She’s the product of True Love,” Snow explained. “Rumplestiltskin said it himself, there is no greater magic.”

“One problem,” said Regina, raising a finger. “Emma is in the Land Without Magic. We’re in the Enchanted Forest.”

“So we figure out a way to go and get her –”

“Oh, right, that’s a fantastic idea,” Regina drawled sarcastically. “Crossing realms. That’s all we have to do.”

“There has to be a way –”

“If it were that easy,” Blue interjected, ruffling her wings so that fairy glitter sprinkled over the floor, “then the Dark One needn’t have spent two hundred years searching for a way to do it.”

“And he had good motive,” David added.

“A magic bean,” said Snow.

“Anton said the last of the crop was destroyed by Greg and Tamara,” said David. “There’s no way to reproduce it.”

“Jefferson’s hat –”

“Wrecked beyond repair,” said Regina.

“Dorothy’s shoes –”

“Are only capable of travelling between realms with magic, like the one the girl is from,” said Blue.

Snow stood up and kicked the armchair, grunting in frustration. “There has to be some way! The Dark Curse!”

“Whoa!” David jumped to his feet, holding his wife by the shoulders. “We’re not that desperate yet.”

“Yes, we are!” Snow near about sobbed. “She’s after our baby, David!”

“What?”

Snow burst out in tears and buried her face in her husband’s shirt. Regina sighed. “Zelena tried to put Snow under a sleeping curse because she wants the baby,” she explained for him. “A child of True
Love. That has to be her fourth ingredient, or why else would she go after Snow?”

David still looked sceptical. “But to put her under a sleeping curse –”

“You can still deliver a baby while under one,” Regina told him. “Makes things much easier, actually.”

No need to care for or otherwise sustain prisoners; the curse would keep them and the child alive. Then the malevolent sorceress could remove the child when it was ready to be born. Not that she knew from experience – it was second-hand knowledge, courtesy of Maleficent.

As Snow continued to cry, David rubbed her back and looked to Blue, so lost and desperate that Regina almost wanted to hug him. Almost. “Are you sure there’s no other way?”

Blue shook her head. “The Land Without Magic is the most inaccessible realm in known existence. It took the Dark One over two hundred years to find a way to get there. You can’t expect to do it overnight.”

“Maybe we can,” said David, turning to Regina with the sparkle of an idea dancing in his eyes. Uh, oh, she thought, knowing that look all too well. “After all, we’ve got Rumplestiltskin to copy from.”

For a moment, Regina didn’t understand – and was about to demand answers – but then the shoe dropped. “No. No! Absolutely not! No way, not in heaven or hell!”

“It’s our only chance.”

She turned on him, crying women be damned. “If you’re suggesting that I use Robin’s heart just to save your –!”

“I’m not,” David interrupted. “I’m telling you to use mine.”

If a scientist had wished to observe the sounds that grass made as it was growing, then the royal chambers would have been the room to do it in. Regina gaped, Snow lifted her head and Blue stood as stoic as ever. Eventually, though, the bubble had to burst, and Regina figured she might as well be the one to do it. “Wha – what?”

“You can cast the Dark Curse using my heart,” he explained. Then to his wife: “Well, you can.”

“No!” Snow shoved her idiot husband in the chest, a fresh wave of tears streaming down her face. “No! I can’t! I can’t – how – how dare you even think – no!”

She accentuated each syllable by thumping him with her fists, until she had descended past the point of coherency and David grabbed her wrists to make her stop. “It’s the only way,” he said, leaning in so that his nose touched hers. Regina suddenly felt awkward, like she was intruding on a private moment – which she sort of was, really. “We have to think of our baby. Of our daughter. They need you.”

“They need you,” Snow insisted. “I need you. There has to be another way.”

David paused, then asked, “Regina? How long would it take?”

“I – I don’t know.” She did a few calculations, listed off ingredients and tried to recall as much of the curse as she could, all while still trying to register what had just come out of David’s mouth. “It wouldn’t have to be as intricate as last time, but I’d have to recreate the bulk of the curse from scratch so … a few months?”
“Well,” he said, lifting his head to kiss his wife on the forehead. “That’s how long we’ve got to find another way.”

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

They were still in their proper timeline when they got to the farmhouse three minutes later. Emma took the lead, gun held out in front of her. Not that it would do a lot of good, but she felt better for it.

Regina had explained the plan. Emma didn’t exactly understand it, except that it involved her, Regina and Tink standing at particular points around the Witch while the rest of them distracted Rumplestiltskin and the flying monkeys. The experienced magicians could handle it – at the moment, all Emma cared about was getting her brother and back to the hospital. Back to Neal.

With that in mind, she ignored Robin’s advice that they should try to sneak in, and instead broke down the door with one kick.

“All right! Where is he?”

Trails of blue, purple, yellow and red smoke billowed throughout the barn; like four fires had been lit at the points of a square, with Zelena at the centre. Emma couldn’t see Rumplestiltskin, but the Witch had his knife so he had to be somewhere. And at the base of the blue smoke pillar, a baby cried.

Her little brother.

She fired on the Witch. The bullet didn’t get through the smoke, stopped as if a wall of thick goo had appeared in front of the Witch. Zelena snarled. “Get them, my pretties!”

Emma fired again as the monkeys descended. She clipped a grey one on its wing, and it crashed into the wall.

“Be careful!” she heard Robin shout. “Remember, these things used to be people!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll use a gentle touch!”

She shot again, aiming for the hindquarters of a white monster that had just dived for Robin. It veered off, but before she could shoot again, a weathered, weary face appeared in the way.

“Don’t make me do this, Gold,” she warned. He grimaced. She changed her aim but he swiped the gun away and then grabbed her by the lapels of her jacket.

“My son?” he asked, looking like he was about to break.

She swallowed, wondering what her best chances were. “He’s alive,” she told him. “He’s in the hospital in critical condition, but he’s alive.”

For the first time since she had known the deadly pawnbroker, pure and unrelenting relief shone on his face. It lasted for a second, and a snarl took its place. “Get the knife.”

Then he threw her against the wall.

“That’d be a lot easier if you wouldn’t try to break my back,” Emma snapped.
Regina had thought she’d recreated the curse within a reasonable margin of error. On the whole, four thousand displaced people and eighteen months’ worth of forgotten memories was not so bad, considering how much worse it could have been. If only those eighteen months hadn’t contained information that could have helped Regina defeat her damned sister (one thing she hadn’t known during the missing year) a little bit sooner. And saved her and Robin a lot of time, too.

And Snow …

But Regina couldn’t think about that now. A black monster bomb-dived Leroy and Happy; she chucked a fireball and it veered off course, smashing into a purple cloud and a dappled monkey. She saw Tink duck their talons and get into position.

It was something of a long shot, but it should work – if Glinda’s word was good (and Regina had her doubts about that, but she didn’t have any alternatives), then there wasn’t a way for any of them to take Zelena down alone. Regina didn’t have the power, Emma didn’t have the experience, and Tink didn’t have the humanity. But the three of them combined just might manage it.

That was assuming they could get into a triangle around the Witch. Given that Rumple had just thrown Emma onto her backside, achieving that was probably going to be harder than Regina first thought.

“Robin!” She ducked another monkey fly-over and pointed to the problem. He looked, thought for a second and chucked his bow aside in favour of tackling her old mentor, football-style.

I love you, she thought with a grin. From the other side of the room, Tink shot her a look. Regina shot one back. Not now!

Then Emma got into position, and the real storm started. Red and yellow smoke roiled in front of Regina’s eyes as three rainbow lines appeared in the dirt and grew flames. For the first time since the morning, Regina chuckled.

Maybe they could do this after all.

“Sorry about this, mate,” Robin said as he pinned the darkest sorcerer in three realms to the ground. Dumb move, but then Robin considered himself something of an expert in that area. Even with his knee fixed between Rumplestiltskin’s shoulder blades, he had no doubt that the Dark One could throw him off with one thought. Perhaps Zelena’s orders didn’t cover being tackled. Baelfire had called his father ‘The King of Loopholes’, after all. Still, that didn’t mean he would stay down forever.

There was an awful lot of smoke now – blue, purple, yellow and red, with a strain of rainbow that Robin thought smelt like freshly baked bread. Then a great thrumming, like a thousand cicadas singing all at once, filled the air, and a white light exploded. Robin couldn’t have described it if he tried. Like a choir of angels descended from heaven, or if a star had crashed to earth right in front of him. It was beautiful. The music of a thousand holy voices, a waterfall of peace and grace and loveliness that flowed like honey from on high …

Robin shut his eyes. It was a good thing he did, because a second later there was another explosion.
“Robin!” he heard someone shout through a fog of rainbow mist. He groaned, annoyed – he really didn’t want to wake up. It was Christmastime, and he was sitting on the hearth in front of his grandparents’ fireplace in Locksley with Jack and Eleanor. His father had just put the roast on, so the whole lodge filled with the smell of thyme and rosemary, and Jack was actually sharing his Christmas presents for once –

“Robin!”

“Huh?”

Oh, right, he thought. I’m not in Locksley anymore. Still groggy – but in no pain whatsoever – he opened his eyes. “Hey,” he said to the concerned (though stunning as always) woman looking him up and down for injuries. He was fine, and pushed himself off the ground, struck by the sudden urge to kiss her. Which he did, in spite of the fact that they were in the middle of a barn with eight people watching. “Did we win?”

Regina – whose leg and arm were now miraculously healed – grinned happily and looked over her shoulder. Zelena was indeed down, both wrists locked into the iron cuffs. Though he was pleased to note that Tink still stood over the Witch. There was no telling what tricks that slippery halfling had up her sleeves. “Indeed we did.”

“What was that?” asked Emma. She knelt by a basket, a bundle of cloths in her arms. As Robin watched, a tiny fist punched through and hit its big sister on the chin. A new soul amongst the living, he thought, feeling a smile break out on his face. Then he remembered something else. Oh, dear Lord. That poor boy …

“Is he all right?” Ruby called from the other side of the barn. She, Dorothy and the dwarves appeared to have enjoyed the same fate Robin had. Emma nodded.

“Yeah. He’s just fine.”

“And Zelena?”

Regina huffed proudly and helped Robin to his feet before turning to her sister. Zelena wasn’t quite dead, Robin was sad to see, but judging from how red her skin was around the cuffs already, he guessed that Tink had done some fine work.

“Your spell’s broken,” Regina reported gleefully. “You failed.”

“This isn’t over!” Zelena growled.

She tried to get up, but Dorothy was at her side in a moment, a crossbow bolt pointed between her eyes. “I disagree,” the Kansas girl announced. She looked at Regina. “What are we doing with her?”

“She’s powerless now, right?” Robin asked, if only for his own peace of mind.

“Essentially, yes,” Regina answered with a nod and a squeeze of his hand. “I’m sure we can find some empty jail space for her.”

Zelena snorted. “You should just kill me.”

It wasn’t a bad idea, in Robin’s opinion. But Regina shook her head. “No. Heroes don’t kill.”

Well, sometimes –
“Hmm. So now you're a hero?”

“Today, I am.”

“Hey, guys,” Ruby called again. She turned in circles, as if looking for something. “Where did Mr Gold go?”

The moment he’d felt the dagger leave Zelena’s hands, Rumplestiltskin had called it to his side and left the barn. Oh, he had plenty of unfinished business to deal with there – but there was one thing that took priority over everything else, and (judging from the look in Emma’s reddened eyes) he may not have the time to wait on it.

So he shoved through the hospital doors and raced down the corridor, probably running into or over several people but he didn’t care. He’d crossed too many realms, suffered too many heartbreaks, had died and come back to life –

He was not about to lose Bae again. Not after all of that. Not to some stupid lump of machine-cut rock.

Somebody shouted his name, and a second later he collided with another person. Small, but surprisingly strong arms wrapped around his midriff, preventing him from running for his boy. He was about to shove them aside when he registered chestnut hair, the smell of coconut, beautiful blue eyes that had stolen his soul with nothing more than a look –

“Belle!” he gasped. You’re okay! Letting out a cry of relief, he threw his arms around her, breathed in her scent, cradled every soft curve, holding her so tight that no-one could have ever forced them apart –

Bae.

Though she whimpered in protest, he let her go, but kept hold of her arms. “Bae?” he asked. Please, all gods above – please –

Thankfully, she understood without question and tugged on his hand. “This way,” she said, and pulled him with her as she ran down the corridor.

Enchanted Forest, July 2013

Someone knocked on the window of her workroom. Regina looked up to see Robin grinning through the gap in the shutters.

“You can use the door,” she said as she got up to undo the latches for him.

“Where’s the fun in that?” He slipped through, soft-soled boots making the tiniest of thuds on the rug as he kissed her hand like a proper gentleman. Regina, though, had never been one for such formalities, and pulled him in for an actual kiss. Screw etiquette. He ended it sooner than she would have liked, a look of concern etched on his face. “Is – is something wrong?”

“No,” Regina answered automatically. She’d agreed with Snow and David to keep their earlier conversation between the three of them and Blue. Robin saw straight through it.
“Gina?” he asked, using the nickname Roland had given to her. She sighed. She didn’t want to lie to him.

“Can we – can we agree that if I tell you, it doesn’t leave this room?”

Robin moved his hand as if to form a cross from the points of his forehead, heart and shoulders. “On my honour.”

She held his hands as she tried to think of what to say. “We’re – we’re going to cast the Dark Curse again.”

“Beg pardon?” he asked, eyes wide and looking as if he knew what she’d said but hoped he’d heard wrong.

“Glinda said that only the most powerful of light magicians can defeat the Witch,” Regina reminded him. “The only one we know of is Emma. Snow and David’s daughter. But she’s stuck in the Land Without Magic, and the only way to get there is by the Dark Curse.”

“Uh –” Robin stammered, now worried. “How?”

“David – he has, uh … *volunteered* … to be the one … to be …” she trailed off. Robin nodded, then realised what she meant and frantically shook his head.

“No! No. There’s gotta be – gotta be some other way –”

“No unless you know how to get to a land without magic.”

“But David –”

“He volunteered,” Regina told him flatly. “I can’t talk him out of it. And we are fighting time now – the fourth ingredient is Snow’s baby. If we can’t stop her from getting it, everything we’ve ever known is going to be wiped away.” And though a part of Regina was tempted to go back and never cast the curse herself – and thus never have to suffer Daniel’s loss, or her father’s, or become the Evil Queen in the first place – she knew that time travel spells were taboo for a reason. Not to mention that she would never adopt Henry. Hell, who knew if she’d even be born if Zelena succeeded. “It’s the only way.”

Once, Regina would have given *anything* to see Snow forced to kill her own True Love. Now … now, things were different. Now she would give almost anything to spare her that pain.

“You’re sure?” Robin murmured. She nodded. “Then, is – is there anything I can do to help?”

Regina smiled. Of course he was going to be practical about this – it was one of the many things she loved about him. “Actually, there is.” She took a breath. “A rather key part of the curse involves collecting a lock of hair from the darkest souls in our world.”

“And?”

“And that’s not going to be as easy as last time, because I don’t get invited to their tea parties anymore.”

“Ah.” Robin chuckled and nodded in understanding. “You need a thief.”

“Well, I’d prefer a good barber, but I’ll take what I can get.” He pretended to laugh and playfully jabbed her in the ribs. “I suppose there is one good thing that’ll come of this.”
“What’s that?”

“I’ll see Henry again. Hmm. Next month, he’ll be twelve years old.”

“Almost a man,” said Robin. She nodded. *When did my little prince get so old?* “Do – do you think he’ll like me?”

“Are you kidding?” Regina snorted, snaking her arms around his midriff to hold him close. “That’s one of his favourite movies.”

“Movies?”

“Oh, right. I can see I’m going to have some explaining to do. Movies, cars, microwaves.” She grinned, suddenly wondering how Robin would look in jeans. “I’ll have to introduce you to ice-cream.”

“Ice-cream?”

“Roland will love it.”

Robin smiled. “That sounds wonderful.”

**Storybrooke, 31 January 2014**

“There we are. I think I’ve got the bleeder,” Whale announced, muffled by his surgical mask. Not an arterial bleeder, which was good – but if the ECG was any indication, the pressure from fluid build-up was affecting pulmonary function. If he didn’t drain it soon, then he didn’t fancy the odds.

“Nurse, another bottle of A negative.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“God, I hate this town,” Whale groaned. “First I get thrown into a wall after delivering a baby. Now this. Retractor. Come on, nurse, come on –”

Then the door to the operating room blasted open, and Whale nearly lost his hold. “Gold?” he said, staring at the man in the door. As if he needed any announcements – he’d done that himself already.

“What are you –?”

“Stand aside, doctor,” Rumplestiltskin demanded, pushing a nurse aside as he approached Neal Cassidy – whom Whale then remembered was his son.

“Gold –”

“I SAID STAND ASIDE!”

Whale did. He’d learnt long ago not to argue with cranky sorcerers – and this one had every reason (and then some) to be pissed off beyond any scope of human reason.

Rumplestiltskin didn’t waste time inspecting the various tubes and other pieces sticking out of his son’s body, or the bloodied swabs in a bucket on the floor, or the incessant beeping of the monitor, or how deathly pale his son was – no, he shoved most of Whale’s handiwork aside. As fine a doctor
as the man was (in spite of a rather loony, and slightly creepy, obsession with the dead), Rumplestiltskin wasn’t about to chance it. The monitor beeped faster as he laid his hands over Bae’s chest, calling up every healing spell he could think of – spells to stitch the damaged tissues back together, to replenish blood loss, to keep his son from slipping over the edge before he could finish his work –

It was close. So close. He felt the tug in his magic, felt the power drain away and flow into his son. The price would be high, and he had no way, no time to control it.

He didn’t care. Any price was a price he was willing to pay, if it meant his son would live.

He had to live.

The monitor stopped. Rumplestiltskin’s heart clenched, dropping into the bottom of an endless pit like the devil himself had reached up and torn it from his chest –

*Beep.*

A steady rhythm developed. A few moments later, Bae coughed. And then twice more. He groaned in pain, a clumsy hand reached for the mask covering his face. Rumplestiltskin removed it for him and he continued to cough, drawing in enough air to fill a dirigible.

Brown eyes cracked open. “Papa?”

“Bae!”

Rumplestiltskin wrapped his arms around his son and pulled him upright, into a proper hug. He was vaguely aware of their audience, but he couldn’t care less what anybody thought of the big, bad Dark One right then. His son was alive. The magic would demand he pay its price at some stage, but it didn’t matter.

Bae was alive. Rumplestiltskin was alive.

Things were going to be okay.

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There had been a few things to take care of at the farmhouse. Regina wanted to transport Zelena to the jail herself, and an inspection of the surrounding area led to the discovery of a half-conscious man Robin identified as Aaron Tumble, whose wife had reported him missing that morning. He’d been stabbed in the stomach, and had probably been there for hours, but some sort of preservation spell was keeping him from bleeding out. So while they called an ambulance – the crew had definitely earned their pay that day – Emma went ahead with Tink and Ruby to the hospital.

Her little brother was fast asleep now that the danger was gone. From the looks of things, Zelena’s spell hadn’t done too much damage, but Emma was going to let the doctor determine that. For now, she was happy to watch him sleep.

Perhaps the most surprising thing was that Emma hadn’t felt a twinge of jealousy from the moment she held her brother in her arms. She’d expected that she would – expected to resent the fact that he would get to grow up knowing who his parents were, where he came from, that he was wanted and loved – but she didn’t. Maybe it had to do with the fact that he hadn’t been in the world for half a day and he’d already been kidnapped by a homicidal lunatic. It seemed to run in the family.
It was also hard to feel jealous of such a tiny being who had broken Emma’s rule of avoiding babies at all costs and already held her heart – returned to its proper place in her chest as it was by Regina – securely in the palm of his hand.

She got directions from the nurse for the room that Snow had been moved to, and walked alongside Ruby until they got to the right number. There was a lot of crying coming from the room, and somebody who was definitely not her mother called for them to come in when Ruby knocked on the door. It was Doc, and he seemed to be trying to calm Snow from hysterics.


Snow looked up from crying on Doc’s shoulder, spotted Emma and then saw her son. She gasped and reached for him. Emma sat on the edge of the bed. “Mom?”

She was still crying, and not from happiness.

Somebody else knocked on the door. Emma turned to see that Regina was back, and she had Henry with her. Their mutual son rushed up and hugged her.

Emma hugged him back, but the look on Regina’s face had her worried. “Is – is everything okay? Zelena’s not –”

“She’s locked up. Tink’s guarding her right now,” said Regina. She sighed, eyes darting to Snow and the baby. “Emma … Henry … there’s something you need to know.”

**Enchanted Forest, 19 January 2014**

“It’s ready.”

Regina stood back from the fire in the courtyard and the stream of purple smoke billowing from it. Snow knew that she’d delayed for as long as she could, hoping Blue, or another magician, might find an alternative. But one hadn’t been found, and they had a week, maybe two before the baby was born. Nothing had been heard from Zelena in months, but that didn’t mean she was out of the picture. They couldn’t afford to wait any longer.

“I’m sorry,” said Regina.

Snow gave her a strained smile and then looked down at her hand, clasped in David’s fingers, over her extremely pregnant stomach. He stepped forward. Snow broke.

“No,” she said, gripping her husband’s fingers until her knuckles turned white. “I can’t do this.”

David gave Regina a look, and she stepped back to give them some privacy.

“It’s our only chance,” he murmured. He kissed her forehead. “This isn’t goodbye.”

“Our child is never going to know its father,” she sobbed, holding his shirt in clenched fists. He would never hold their child, never get to see them grow up – never even know if it was a girl, or the son he’d always dreamt of. But they couldn’t wait for that. Not just because the Witch threatened to take their child the moment it was born, but because Snow knew that if she ever held their baby, ever looked into its eyes, she’d never be able to let its father go.

“Of course it will. Through you.” He held her chin and wiped away the tears. “Through Emma, and
through Henry. I love you.”

Snow threw her arms around David’s neck. *I can’t do this*, she thought, holding him tight. *I can’t – I can’t – no!*

He stepped away, holding her hands while he turned to Regina, who was standing with Robin, come to pay his respects. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“I won’t lie,” said Regina, her hand over David’s heart. “This is going to hurt.”

Her brave husband, her True Love, didn’t flinch as their former archenemy tore the crystallised organ from his chest. Snow wiped her face and took it from Regina. “David?”

“Don’t say goodbye.”

“I love you.”

And with that, she crushed her husband’s heart – and hers along with it.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 26: There’s No Place Like Home, in which Rumple is reunited with his family (for good), Emma gets to see that Neal’s okay, Regina has a heart-to-heart with Zelena, Henry has a surprise for his parents and Neal gets his breakfast in bed.
Storybrooke, 31 January 2014

“David’s dead. He sacrificed himself so that we could cast the curse to come back to Storybrooke. I’m sorry. I couldn’t talk him out of it.”

Emma wandered the hospital hallways in a trace, those words playing over and over in her mind. My dad’s dead. The thought seemed so foreign, so alien – she’d never thought of that applying to her. Twenty-eight years she’d not had a father to miss, let alone mourn.

My dad’s dead.

She had known him less than a year, and for most of that, he had been her roommate’s boyfriend, nothing more. Outside of a storybook, she’d barely known him –

But he was still my dad. And now he’s gone.

She passed people in the corridor; they might have glanced her way or said something, she didn’t know.

He’s dead.

Somebody nearby had the gall to laugh. Emma jolted out of her trance – she knew that laugh. She heard it again, coming from an open door at the other end of the hallway, and sped up so that she was almost running. Then stood in the doorway, her heart racing.

Neal was okay. In fact, he was a lot better than he should have been. He was sitting up in a hospital bed with no tubes, tanks or IV lines to be seen, his father on the foot of the bed and Belle in an armchair. She stood when she spotted Emma and gave Rumplestiltskin a nudge.

“Emma?” said Neal. His smile diminished as he took in her appearance – terrible, she was sure, judging by the look of concern Belle wore – and he straightened. “What happened?”

He’s all right. Emma rubbed her eyes, and Belle pulled on Rumplestiltskin’s sleeve.

“Come on, we should give them some privacy,” Belle said as she tried to leave with him. “We’ll see you later, right?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

They left – Rumplestiltskin sparing his son one last glance – and Emma noticed that Belle shut the door behind them.

“Hey,” she said. What else was there to say? “How’re you feeling?”

“Okay. Pop patched me up. Said he came running after you told him I was here,” Neal told her with a gesture at the door. “Thanks for that, by the way. I thought I was a goner for a second there.”

A goner. Gone. Dad’s gone. Emma sniffled as pressure built up behind her eyes, threatening to release a torrent.
“Emma? What’s going on?”

She broke. He caught her as she more or less fell on top of him, threw her arms around his neck, and cried.

“He’ll be okay,” Belle tried to reassure Rumplestiltskin as she dragged him out of the room. One look at Emma’s face and she’d known it was bad – though what, Belle couldn’t figure. It wasn’t the baby – she could hear it crying when they passed Snow’s room down the hall. So what had happened?

Oh, dear Lord. She stopped in the middle of the hall when a terrible thought struck her. They hadn’t seen David at all since they’d come back to Storybrooke, and with her memories returned Belle knew for certain that it hadn’t been Zelena who cast the curse …

“Belle?”

“David’s dead,” she said, the theory becoming a certainty the more she thought about it. She hadn’t known him well, but enough to know that he had been a good man. One of the best. “He’s dead.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Rumplestiltskin drew her to him, and held her tight as she started to cry. It was all too much – first her father, then watching Zelena control him knowing there was nothing she could do. And as more and more of the last year came back, she remembered everything that the Witch had done –

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed, turning her face into his chest. “I’m so sorry!”

“Hey, hey, shh,” he murmured as he stroked her hair. “It’s not your fault.”

“I couldn’t fight her! I couldn’t get you out – I – I was screaming, for you to hear me.”

“I heard you, sweetheart,” he said, voice muffled by her hair. “I heard you.”

Doc had ushered Regina straight out of the room so he could check that Zelena hadn’t done any lasting damage to the baby. She knew Henry had gone to check on his dad, and Emma had gone … somewhere. Regina thought she should probably follow her, make sure she didn’t do anything stupid, and was about to when Archie poked his head out of the waiting room, spotted her and waved her down.

“Regina! Um, a word?”

She ignored the queasy feeling in her gut and followed the cricket into the room, where a small crowd waited. From the looks of things, an argument had taken place. Tink, sitting in a chair, was wringing her fingers. Beside her, Robin was looking shifty, his hands in his pockets and a touch of guilt on his face. Grumpy looked as he always did, but this time joined in his sour appearance by Happy, Ruby and the annoying dwarf who ran the pharmacy. And Dorothy, sitting next to the werewolf, wore a look that Regina associated with colicky horses – guts all in a twist.

“If it’s my lunch money you’re after, leave a call at my office.”
“What are we doing about Zelena?” Grumpy demanded as he folded his arms across his chest. “You’ve got her locked up for now, but as I understand it, that’s only a temporary measure.”

Regina fought the urge to roll her eyes. “I see. You’re the jury on her death row charges.”

“It is the quickest and easiest way to deal with her,” said Ruby. “There’s no telling whether we can keep her locked up forever. And if she gets out, you of all people know what’s going to happen. No offence.”

“We can’t just kill her!” Archie protested. Regina sensed that he’d been at this for some time. “We do that, we’re no better than she is.”

“You said that about her!” Grumpy snapped with a jab at Regina. “And look where that got us.”

“No offence intended, of course,” Regina retorted. “Who made you the foreman?”

Grumpy huffed. “Well, you’re obviously not going to do it.”

“If I may,” Dorothy interrupted. She glanced at Ruby and then stood. “I know I’m still something of an outsider here, but I’ve known Zelena longer than any of you. Yes, she’s maniacal and manipulative, but she wasn’t always. There was a good woman I knew once. And she doesn’t deserve to die.”

Regina looked at Archie, and then at the others. With the exception of Robin and Tink, they all seemed to be thinking the same thing – She sounds just like Snow.

Why do I get the feeling history is repeating itself? Regina thought, shifting uncomfortably. Unfortunately, she knew that Ruby was right – killing Zelena was the quickest and simplest way to end any potential threat to the town. But at the same time, Archie was also right – if they refused to show their enemies mercy, then where was the line between hero and villain.

And whether Regina liked it or not, the witch was her family. How could she deny Zelena the same opportunity to turn good that Regina herself had been given?

She sighed. There was one thing she missed about being a villain, and that was not caring about ramifications, morals or ethics.

“Tink. You haven’t said anything,” Archie pointed out. Tink grimaced.

“Well, uh, I do agree with Ruby about one thing. Killing her means we’ll never have to worry about her terrorising the town again,” she said, still pulling on her fingers. “But … she is a fairy. Half-blood or not, I can’t – I can’t sanction the murder of one of my own kind.”

“Robin? What about you?”

Regina met his eyes and tried to wordlessly communicate her reasoning. Of everyone in the room, he was the only one she truly hoped would understand. He cleared his throat and took his hands out of his pockets.

“Gina, what did Snow and David do after they won the Midlands from you?” he asked, speaking slowly like he was choosing his words carefully. “I mean, I know you were their prisoner for a while so …”

“They sent me into exile,” Regina said, letting a small smile show as she realised where he was going. “With a protection spell bought from Rumplestiltskin to ensure that I couldn’t hurt them again.
Not physically, anyway.”

“So why can’t we do that with Zelena?” Robin suggested. “Send her over the town line. Magic doesn’t exist beyond the boundary, does it?”

“That doesn’t mean she couldn’t come back,” Grumpy objected.

“Not if we keep her from doing so,” said Regina. “There’s already a cloaking spell in place over the town line so outsiders can’t find us. If we drove her out of town, say, Boston, there’s no way she could come back.”

“She has no curse memories, no knowledge of how this world works,” Archie continued to protest. “That’s as good as killing her!”

“It’s the best we can do. Ruby is right. She’s too dangerous to let her stay in town. But we are not killing her,” Regina insisted, looking to Grumpy in particular. “We’d be better than that.”

The dwarf huffed indignantly, but the others all nodded in agreement. “All right, it’s agreed,” said Ruby. “We’ll send her out of town.”

“After we’ve dealt with her flying monkeys,” Regina added. The werewolf sighed, exasperated, so Regina explained: “We still have to turn them back and we may need something from her to do it. If it takes longer than a week, I’ll take samples and we’ll send her over regardless. Deal?”

Ruby nodded. “Deal. Speaking of which, we should probably start on monkey round-up. Madame Mayor.” She pretended to doff an imaginary hat as she left the room, the dwarves, Dorothy and Tinkerbell on her tail. Archie shouldered his umbrella and copied Ruby’s gesture, leaving Regina alone with Robin.

It occurred to her that it was first time they had been alone since regaining their memories, and they had quite a lot to discuss.

“Thanks for that,” she said, giving him an appreciative grin.

“Not a problem. Much as I agree with Leroy, I realised that I couldn’t ask you to sign your own sister’s order of execution,” he said, walking up and sliding his arms around her. “Even if she is a bloody nutter.”

“No arguments there,” Regina agreed with a small laugh. She then kissed him lightly on the lips. “So …”

“So,” Robin repeated. “I believe we solved the mystery of the nightmares which are only caused by sleeping curses.”

“I believe we have, yes.”

“And, uh, this might just be my faulty memory –” he snickered, and she rolled her eyes – “but I seem to remember a promise about … ice-cream?”

She grinned. “I know just the place.”

**Storybrooke, 1 February 2014**

It was when the hospital staff waved her along with nothing more than a good morning that Emma
knew she had spent far too much time there in the last ten days. Still, it saved her a lot of bother and by the time she got to Neal’s room, the coffees she’d bought for them were still warm.

“Knock, knock,” she said to the open door.

“Hey!”

Despite having been completely healed by his father, Whale had adamantly refused to release Neal the night before on the grounds that he was concerned about residual infection, or some other such bull. He had eventually agreed to an overnight stay just to assuage the good doctor’s paranoia that the magic would suddenly stop working and he’d drop dead in the street. Nonetheless, Emma could tell that Neal hadn’t taken to his internment well. He had the puzzle pages from a dozen different magazines on his nightstand, a stack of scribbled-on napkins next to a collection of Jell-O cups and when she entered, he was in the process of turning yesterday’s *Storybrooke Mirror* into a fleet of paper planes.

“Breakfast?” he asked, eagerly taking the coffee and the bag she’d brought from Granny’s.

“I lost the bet, remember?” she said, waiting for him to remember and then laughing with him when he did. “So it seems I owe you one breakfast in bed.”

“I dunno if this counts. Technically, this is Granny serving me breakfast in bed.” He grinned coyly. “You’re just the delivery girl.”

She bopped him on the arm. “Shut up and eat.”

As they tucked into the pancakes-to-go (Emma hadn’t felt like bagels) and fought over who got the last blueberry muffin (Neal won), there was a knock on the door.

“Hey, Dad. Hey, Mom,” Henry greeted as he entered, a newspaper tucked under his arm and a hot cocoa in his other hand. He yawned, having spent most of the last night at Granny’s catching up with Regina, geeking out that she was dating freakin’ Robin Hood (seriously, couldn’t they have one non-fairy tale person is this family?!?) and making a friend out of little Roland – whom even Emma had to admit was pretty damn adorable.

“Hey, buddy. What’s that?”

“This?” Henry pulled out the paper. “Classifieds. I think I found us a place. Three bedrooms, out near the lake, all the furniture included. It’s got a yard too – hey, can we get a dog?”

“You’ve been looking at houses?” Neal asked. He glanced sideways at Emma.

“Yeah, why not?”

Emma bit her lip and chuckled softly at her son. He was probably the only boy in the world who could jump from living a life constructed by somebody else to looking at houses inside of a day. “Henry, can I see that?” she asked and reached for the paper.

“Sure. Okay if I go say hi to Grandma Snow and the baby?”

Emma nodded. It would do her mother good to see her grandson in his proper capacity again. As their son left, Neal cleared his throat.

“So … houses?”
“Can’t hurt to look,” she said with a shrug. “But I think this one might be a bit out of our price range, though.”

“No, I mean, you’re – you’re really thinking about staying?” he asked. She smiled – he sounded so hopeful. “You don’t want to go back to New York and chase bail-jumping adulterers up Fifth Avenue?”

“Nah. Costs too much in dry-cleaning bills.”

“Yeah, I remember.” He chuckled as she bopped him on the arm again. Then he turned serious. “But, uh, a house kind of implies that we’d be – you know? Not that I’m objecting – not at all, I loved living with you, though I’ll have to rage-proof the toaster –”

She put a finger to his lips, and he stopped, replacing the ramble with a sweet grin. “I, uh, had a bit of an epiphany yesterday. After you got shot,” she explained with a grimace, then took a breath and steeled herself. “That – that last year in New York – you know, that’s actually the happiest I can ever remember being. But then to have my memories come back, it was like –” she sighed – “Like going through all of that all over again. And I couldn’t – I couldn’t figure out which parts of the last year had been us, and which parts were Regina’s doing. And if it had turned out not to be real at all – no, just let me finish, okay?”

He nodded and let his hand fall back to his side. She took another breath.

“I couldn’t go through it again,” she confessed. “I couldn’t lose you again. But then – when you jumped in between me and Zelena – that’s when I knew. I knew it had all been real.”

Neal shifted so that he sat up straighter. “What – what are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” she said slowly, letting out a small chuckle as she reached for his hand, “that maybe we found Tallahassee after all.”

She tangled her fingers in his and gave him a shy smile, trying not to laugh at the completely gormless expression on his face. That look meant that he had no idea what to say – but in this instance, he solved that problem by kissing her.

“I love you,” he said when they broke apart, breathless but his whole face shining like a sun.

“I love you too.”

Their fingers were still entwined; Emma glanced down at their hands and then raised them to eye level, specifically to gaze upon the third finger of his left hand. “You’re still wearing your ring,” she commented casually.

“So are you,” he said with a nod at her other hand.

“Do you think –” she cleared her throat – “Do you think, maybe, after they let you out of here, we can do it properly?”

“Oh –” he stammered, his jaw having seemingly come loose from shock. “Are – are you asking me to marry you?” While she felt her face flush and bit on her lip, he glanced around the room as if he were checking for spying ghosts. “I thought that was supposed to be my job,” he whispered.

She chuckled, partly at his bad joke and partly with relief when she realised she didn’t feel the urge to run to Switzerland – at all. In fact, it felt good. He held her hand tighter.
“Well, can I – can I at least do this part properly too? I mean, as properly as I can when the nurse won’t let me out of bed?”

She nodded. Still looking like a gobsmacked goldfish – something she would never tire of doing to him – he let go of her hand, slid the wedding band off of his ring finger and then did the same with the ring on her hand. It wasn’t an engagement ring (just a plain gold band supposed to replace the ring she’d never owned that had been destroyed in a fake fire), but in a way, she preferred the simplicity of it. She didn’t need a diamond when she already had everything she’d ever wanted.

Neal, for his part, looked like he thought it was a dream as he tenderly held her fingers. “Emma Swan, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she answered without hesitation. And kissed him again.

Early morning sun broke through the gap in the curtains, right over Belle’s eyes. She groaned in annoyance. Sleep had been difficult enough during the night – she didn’t need the sun against her as well. She turned her head into her pillow and stretched out, searching for the warmth of Rumple’s slender frame, only to find cold sheets.

“Rumple?”

She pushed herself onto her elbows and looked around the room. The fire was down to embers, the door was shut, and she was definitely alone. Not something she was unused to, of course – Rumple was a terrible sleeper, if he slept at all. He’d explained that if he couldn’t doze off, he preferred to get up and do something – apparently his curse did not cope well with idleness – instead of waking her. So he was probably downstairs, spinning or reading or making breakfast.

As she got out of bed and found her dressing gown, still hanging on the door to the en suite bathroom exactly where she had left it over a year ago, she made a note to talk to Archie. He’d been a big help in the weeks after the first curse woke, and Belle had been having bad dreams then. She wondered if she could talk Rumple into making an appointment with him as well – though if she knew her True Love at all, herding cats would probably be easier.

On her way out, she stumbled over the pile of their clothes and blushed. High on emotion and a fervent need to hold each other after far, far too long, she felt as if the last night had passed as something of a dream. A really good dream. They hadn’t bothered with words, barely broke apart except for when they’d torn each other’s shirts off, and utterly lost themselves in love. It was something of a miracle that they hadn’t tripped on the way, though Belle supposed that – given how desperate they’d been at the time – they probably would’ve just made love on the floor if that was where they’d landed.

She kicked Rumple’s filthy jacket aside. Caked as it was with mud and other stuff she didn’t want to think about, it wasn’t even worth trying to salvage. Better to save time and chuck the whole lot in the fire, she figured. But when she picked up the pile – to move it to a less hazardous spot until they could get rid of it – something heavy fell out and landed with a thud on the floor.

It was the dagger. Belle stared at it for a second, panic rising in her throat. Hatred like she’d never felt before bubbled in her stomach for that accursed object, for what it had let her do to Rumplestiltskin. She couldn’t leave it on the floor, not when Zelena was still in town, but she couldn’t bring herself to touch it either. After a few moments of contemplation, she got a towel from the bathroom and wrapped it around the blade. Even with the layers of cloth between her skin and
the metal, she could still feel power thrumming through it. And that terrified her.

Thankfully, she found Rumple quickly enough. He had claimed the armchair in front of the living room fireplace, a half-filled glass of Scotch in one hand and the mostly-full bottle on the coffee table. He was staring at the crackling fire, his back to her. She knocked on a wall to announce her presence and winced when he jumped.

“Hey,” she said, rather weakly. “You, uh, you left this upstairs.”

His eyes darted from her face to the bundle in her hands, and he was up in a second, the Scotch forgotten. Whether he took the knife from her or she shoved it at him, she wasn’t sure. All she knew was that she wanted to be as far away from that thing as possible.

“Thank you,” he murmured as he unwrapped the towel and held the knife for himself, a whole range of confusing emotions crossing his face as he read his own name on the blade. A small bead of warmth burst in Belle’s heart. He would never be so vulnerable around anyone else, she knew. Especially given everything they had just gone through. She leant in to cuddle against his side – just to reassure herself that he was really there, and not going anywhere – but he thrust the knife back at her.

“You need to take this,” he said even as she shook her head. She couldn’t! “Please. I can’t – I can’t be trusted –”

“No!” Belle insisted, a little too sharply – a fact she regretted when Rumple visibly winced. She put a hand over his (careful not to touch the knife). “I can’t. Please. Not – not after watching what she could do to you with it.”

Please, she begged him, reaching up to brush some hair out of his face. Please don’t make me take it.

“I trust you,” she added.

“I didn’t kill him,” he said suddenly. She gave him a look; he shook his head. “Maurice. Your father. I – I didn’t kill him. But I – I couldn’t stop her.”

In truth, the possibility that Rumple had been the one to deliver the blow to kill her father hadn’t occurred to Belle until then. Even if he had, Belle knew the fault wasn’t his. It would have been Zelena’s for ordering him to do something he would never otherwise do. And it wasn’t his fault that he couldn’t stop her.

“I – I’m so sorry –”

“Hey. It’s not your fault,” she murmured, making sure he looked her in the eye as she said it. She needed him to know that she blamed Zelena, not him. “It wasn’t you.”

“I will never comprehend why you stay by my side.”

Silly man, she thought as she stood on her toes to kiss him. “Because I love you. Always have, always will.”

He kissed her, his free hand caressing her hair. Before they could get carried away – they did have a lot of time to make up for, after all – Belle broke it off. There was one thing they had to do first. To make sure no-one ever got hold of the dagger again.

“We can hide it in the shop,” she suggested. “The same place you put Pandora’s Box. No-one but
you can get to it there, right?”

“No.”

“Then let’s do it.”

He hesitated, a thought in his eyes. “Okay. But I – I’ll make it so that you can get to it, too. Just in case.”

“Rumple –”

“Please.”

He wouldn’t relent, so she nodded. That much she could agree to, even if she swore to herself then that she would never touch the knife. No matter how bad things got, no matter what it was that Rumple seemed so afraid of, she would not take his autonomy from him. She cupped his cheek and kissed him again.

They would recover from this, together.

It was almost afternoon by the time Whale finally deemed Neal fit for release – or rather, ran out of ways to keep him in the hospital short of actually chaining him to the bed. Although Emma would have had no problem obliging – either at the hospital or at home, she wasn’t picky; they did have a lot of time to make up for, after all, ten days or thirteen years depending on how you looked at it – there were other things they had to do first. Like cleaning out the loft so that Snow could bring the baby back to at least a semi-safe environment. Tidying the kitchen, moving all of their belongings and shifting the furniture to make room for the crib Marco had built. Utterly, completely mundane things, and Emma loved every second of it.

Henry, now that he had his memory back – and, thankfully, forgiven his parents for not coming clean sooner – was packing a bag to sleep at Regina’s for a couple of nights. He wanted to spend time with her, both to catch up and make up for trying to shoot her, and Emma couldn’t deny him. While putting the sofa to rights – she and Neal were going to take over the upstairs bedroom – she thought again about Henry’s suggestion that they get their own place. Things were certainly going to be cramped with the baby around, and Emma was long past the age of living under her parents’ roof. But then she had that thought and remembered that ‘parents’ was no longer a plural for her. It was going to be rough, she realised, but she didn’t want to leave Snow alone. Not with a newborn to care for, and not when David had just died.

“Hey,” Neal murmured as he joined her at the kitchen counter and put an arm around her. She’d stopped cleaning when she found a photograph stashed in the middle drawer – it was of her, Henry and her parents at Granny’s just after she and Snow had come back from the Enchanted Forest. The only photograph she’d ever taken with both of her parents. And there would never be another one that included her fiancé or her brother. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, though there was a little inflexion in her voice and she knew Neal wouldn’t miss it. “Just … thinking about David. Dad.”

Rather than reply, he squeezed her gently. “It’s a good picture,” he said after a moment of silence. “Hey, if you need to take a break –”

“No, I’m okay. Really,” she insisted. She gave him a smile – strained though it was – and tapped the
photograph on the table, then reached for the shoebox on the counter. It contained the things she’d kept in her pre-Storybrooke days – her baby blanket, some newspaper clippings, a tourist pamphlet from Tallahassee – and had been found beneath the upstairs bed during their cleaning. She put the photograph inside. Maybe one day she’d be able to take it out again. To show her brother, perhaps, when he was old enough to ask about his dad. But that day wasn’t today.

Neal, having watched the whole thing, gave her a smile and a kiss on the top of her head. “I’m sorry about your dad,” he murmured against her hair. She lifted her head and gave him a smile back. At the very least, she knew she didn’t have to go through it alone anymore.

“Is there anything else in there we want to keep?” he asked, pointing to the pile of papers in which Emma had found the photograph. She shook her head.

“No, chuck it. It’s mostly old bank statements and stuff.”

“Oh, what’s this?” he asked, pulling out an old flyer. Emma laughed. It was one of Henry’s sheriff campaign flyers that depicted her as a buff firefighter. She sighed. That seemed so long ago.

“Long story. Henry can tell you about that one.”

“O-kay.” He unfolded another sheet of paper; this one was handwritten and looked like a shopping list, except that Emma didn’t recognise the handwriting.

“Can I see that?” she asked. He passed it over.

“Everything okay?”

“Maternity meal recommendations,” she read, though it was difficult. It was like trying to decipher chicken scrawl. And dated to the twenty-sixth of January, six days ago. “I think Zelena wrote this.”

“So definitely in the out pile, then – Emma?”

She’d pulled out of his embrace to walk over to the sofa. There, she fished through another pile of reject papers and rubbish until she found what she was looking for – Hook’s note. They’d eliminated her parents, Regina, Robin, Belle, Ruby and anyone else they could think of in their immediate circles who could have penned the short letter, and concluded that Zelena wrote it. But now that Emma knew who really cast the curse, that didn’t make any sense at all. And comparing the handwriting on the note to the handwriting on the meal list – well, Emma didn’t need to be a graphologist to know that they didn’t match.

“It’s not her handwriting.”

“Sorry?”

She showed Neal both pieces at once. “Zelena’s not the one who told Hook to bring us back to Storybrooke.”

“But if Zelena didn’t write it,” said Neal, inspecting the writing with an increasing look of confusion, “then who did?”

**Enchanted Forest, 18 January 2014**

Great grey storm clouds gathered above the Border Ranges, thunder rolling like a pair of dragons
locked in mortal combat in the heavens. Blue watched from the window of her tulip. Soon, she thought. Queen Regina would have to see reason and delay no further, not with just under two weeks to go until Queen Snow’s child arrived.

She felt a twinge of regret, but it was no more effect on her heart than a bug had when it landed on a blade of grass. This was the way things had to be done.

“Come!” she called when somebody knocked on her petal door. It was Nova.

“Uh, sorry, I didn’t mean to – that is, I didn’t want to –”

Blue sighed internally. She held up a hand to stop Nova’s incessant chatter – the young fairy had a good heart, she knew, but still had much to learn. And some sense, as well, for though Blue pretended not to know that Nova snuck off most afternoons to spend time with that dwarf, she would have to step in once again if it didn’t stop.

“It’s all right, Nova. I was just watching the storm.”

“Oh, right, of course,” said Nova, pretending to slap herself on the forehead. Blue pointed to themissive in the young fairy’s hand.

“Is that for me?”

“Uh, yes, it came in a few moments ago with one of Queen Snow’s bluebirds.” Nova cleared her throat and passed it over. “Anything – anything else I can do?”

“No, thank you. You can go back to your studies.”

Nova nodded – a little too enthusiastically – and hurried off. Probably not to do her studies, Blue thought with a sigh. With a shake of her head, she broke the seal of the Midlands royal crest and read the short note.

It’s done, said the message in Queen Regina’s tight handwriting. Tomorrow.

That meant Blue with only one thing left to do. She rolled the missive up and placed it in her safe place, a secret fold in the tulip’s petals, before rolling out her toadstool and sitting at her writing desk. There were errors in Queen Regina’s work – to be expected when one recreated such an intricate curse from memory and in such a short space of time. Blue could have easily fixed them, but she knew that it would do no harm. The Wicked Witch would continue to be a menace, of course, but that wasn’t Blue’s problem.

No, she needed the Saviour – and that pesky boy, and their son – to return to Storybrooke. The rest of them wouldn’t be able to cross the town line – another error in Regina’s work – so she needed somebody who wouldn’t get swept up in the curse.

She wrote only as much as was needed. The pirate, though he had gone back to his old ways, was still very much obsessed with Emma Swan. Blue had no doubt that a man of his dubious character could find a way to escape the curse and bring the Saviour’s family back to Storybrooke, if only to serve his own interests. One day should be more than enough time. She whistled to summon a messenger bird, and tied the note to the gull’s leg.

“Find Captain Killian Jones of the Jolly Roger,” she told it, and released the bird into the storm.
“Congratulations, my lady.”

Blue had been alone in her office and started at the noise, its owner having snuck in without her even realising. She recognised the voice, of course. But what he was doing in Storybrooke – now that concerned her much more than how he had broken into the convent without anybody noticing. But she was hardly about to admit to that, so she calmly placed her pen down and turned in her chair to face him.

Seventy years had done nothing to line Faílinis’ face, which was still as bright and youthful and deceptively innocent as it had been for the hundreds of years Blue had known him. Nor had he lost his dress sense, having changed from leather skins into a tailored black suit, slacks and untucked white shirt. His daughter had his eyes, she realised with a jolt. He leant against the doorframe, hands in his pockets with a grin as crooked as his morals. Another thing his daughter seemed to have inherited.

“You did it. You successfully deported the population of Misthaven back to a land without magic, destroyed the quintessential True Love and blamed it all on a fae. And you even killed an innocent man to do it,” Faílinis continued, his grin widening. “Your sister would be proud.”

“What do you want, Faílinis?”

“Actually, I go by Jonathan now.”


“Oh, nothing much,” he said with a shrug. “Just to see the look on your face. The guilt.”

“I did what was necessary.”

“Yes, you did. And in true Rheul Ghorm fashion as well. You drove the ogres out of the Alps and gave them the means to fight the armies of three separate nations, all so that you could pick up the pieces afterwards.” He straightened and then walked to the far side of her office, selected a pen from her collection and pointed it at her. “You know what your problem is, Rheul? You’ve never had the guts to commit the murder yourself. Instead, you kindly suggested to a disgruntled king that he challenge your problematic prince to single combat. All in the name of diplomacy, of course, but accidents do happen. And when that failed –” he cackled and chucked the pen onto the desk, where it made a smudge on her weekly planner – “you actually broke your oath and lied to your goddaughter’s face, so the Evil Queen would feel she had no other choice but to cast the Dark Curse again. All because you made the simple mistake of allowing Emma Swan to be born.”

If Blue had been a lesser fairy, she would have raged at him. Instead, only a single cheek muscle betrayed her emotions. “The Dark One would have found a way eventually. All I did was maintain control of the circumstances.”

“You could’ve let him have the wand,” Faílinis sneered. “Hell, you could’ve given it to Snow. Told her the truth. Brought her daughter back to the Enchanted Forest yourself. But, of course, you couldn’t do that because you would’ve had to take the boy back as well.”

“Get out of my chair,” Blue snapped, for he made himself at home in her swivel seat. Instead of cooperating, he put his boot-clad feet on the desk.

“So, now what?” he asked, tapping a finger on the chair. “The father may be dead, but the boy lives. And Miss Swan … well, she grows more powerful by the day under the tutelage of the Evil Queen.
Hm. Not to mention the added complications of the outlaw and Mademoiselle Dark One. And the sleeping beauty as well, woken by her lovely prince and now happily married with their second little whelp to be born in a few short months.”

Blue stared. *No,* she thought. *It couldn’t be possible.*

“Oh, you must have missed that one while you were out playing with ogres.” He cackled again. “*And* you didn’t even succeed in keeping the Dark One on his leash. My, my, you *are* slipping.”

“He will self-destruct eventually. They all do, in the end,” she reminded him.

“I think you’re underestimating the resolve of the man behind the monster,” Faïlinis retorted, his smile warping into something supercilious. “After all, we both know where he comes from, the legacy he carries. Even if *he* doesn’t.”

He shifted quickly, on his feet within a blink of an eye, and leant in uncomfortably close to her face. Blue remained still, refusing to give him ground. “Let’s not be working at cross purposes, shall we? We both want the same thing. The Saviour gone. Fionn MacCumhail’s line *extinct.* You know what needs to be done. *So just do it.* Now, if you don’t mind —” he stepped back and turned in the direction of the door – “I have a daughter I’m long overdue to meet.”

The sheriff’s station was quiet when Regina dropped by to see her sister. Mulan, on guard rotation with the dwarves, was sitting in Emma’s office, reading *Digital Literacy for Dummies.* Regina grinned.

_I wonder if it was Belle or Neal who loaned her that._

“Oh any trouble?” she asked. Mulan put the book down.

“No. She quietened down a couple of hours ago.”

Regina nodded and steeled herself. She could already anticipate how this conversation was going to go. Like talking to a brick wall. Or herself not so long ago, if she wanted to be brutally honest.

Thick magic, a mix of Tink’s, Regina’s and some residual power of Emma’s, shimmered in various shades of green, black and white against the cell bars. Zelena reclined on the cot, the iron cuffs securely around her wrists, and she was reading the newspaper. Regina cleared her throat. Zelena noticed but took her sweet time in responding.

“Hello, little sis,” she said after a painfully long time. “What can I do for you?”

“I thought we should have a little chat,” said Regina. When Zelena continued to feign disinterest – or perhaps genuine disinterest, it was hard to tell with her – she continued: “I thought I should let you know that we’ve decided to let you live.”

Zelena raised an eyebrow. “*We?*”

“Certain influential people in town. But we can’t let you stick around. Instead, we’re sending you across the town line.”

“Hmm.” Zelena snorted. “You should just kill me now. I know you want to.”

“I don’t want to kill you.”
“Ha. Of course not.”

Regina threw her purse on the sofa and sat on the armrest, leaning against the bars with crossed arms. “It’s the truth. I don’t want to kill you. Because I know why you did what you did. I think we’re more alike than either of us would care to admit. Our mother ruined you, too. I know you don’t believe me, but I know what it’s like not to get the life you wanted. The life you thought you deserved.”

“Oh, boo hoo.” Zelena chuckled the newspaper aside and swung her legs over the cot so she was sitting up. “You know nothing. You got to be queen. You got everything. I saw it all.”

“You obviously missed the part where I lost the man I loved.”

“Mother did that for you. So you could achieve greatness.”

“She did it because she believed love was weakness. And she was wrong.” Regina clenched her teeth as Zelena rolled her eyes. If only she wasn’t family. “Not that long ago, I was a lot like you. I wanted to kill someone I believed had wronged me. And I failed. If I had killed Snow White, I wouldn’t be here today. I wouldn’t have my family. I wouldn’t have my son. So I’m going to do for you what Snow did for me, and give you a second chance. In a new world, with people who know nothing of your past.”

“And if I don’t want it?”

“I’m not giving you the choice. You have one week – or until we turn your monkeys back to who they were, and then you go to a place called New York. You remember the man you shot? Well, he’s offered to give you the key to his old apartment because he’s a better person than either of us, by far. So you’ll have somewhere to live at least. I suggest you learn how this world works before then, because after that, it’s up to you. You can either make the best of it, or you can waste the rest of your life because I guarantee you will never find this place again once you leave.” Regina stood and reclaimed her purse. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a funeral to attend.”

Later that evening, Emma sat in a booth at Granny’s with Snow and Henry on the other side. If she had to guess, over half of the town had come out to pay their respects to her father. She spotted Regina talking to Kathryn and the gym teacher; Leroy and Astrid (their hands intertwined) sharing ale (or juice, in Astrid’s case) with a few men who’d served with David in the army; and at least two kings. Richard was not one of them, for some reason. Archie had volunteered to help with the serving – he’d even put an apron on, which led Ruby, jokingly, to offer him a short skirt to go with it.

Henry was reading from the book while they waited for Neal to come back with pie. As she listened, Emma fidgeted with her ring. They hadn’t told anyone yet, not even Henry or her mother, and she took a sip of bourbon, trying to work up the courage.

“And that’s when the bandit landed on top of the Prince’s carriage and stole his pouch of jewels, terrifying his fiancé inside. As the Prince chased the thief through the treacherous forest, he leapt from his horse and tackled her to the ground. He was ready for a fight, but when he uncovered the thief’s face he was shocked: he’d been robbed by a woman!”

Snow giggled as Henry turned the page and tickled his baby uncle under the chin.

“So have we got a name yet or should I just keep calling him, ‘Hey There’?” Emma joked.
“Well, you see, there’s this sort of tradition back home where you reveal the name of a new royal at what’s called an announcement ceremony,” said Snow, smiling as Ruby joined them with lemonade for Snow. “We would have done it with you if we could have.”

“You’re not gonna hold him out of the clock tower like the Lion King, are you?”

“We can if you like,” said Ruby. “King Simba and Queen Nala are right over there.”

She pointed at the African-looking couple Emma had noticed hanging around the town hall. “You have got to be kidding.”

Snow shook her head. “Nope, that’s them. But I thought we might forgo all pomp and circumstance and just do it here. David would have wanted it that way.”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed. “He would’ve.”

Then Neal finally managed to work his way through the crowd with a half-tin of pumpkin pie cut into four slices. “Hey. What’re we talking about?”

“My mother won’t tell me my little brother’s name, and she’s using a fairy-tale tradition to buy time,” Emma told him, shooting her mother a look.

“No, I’m not. Leroy wants to say something first,” said Snow.

Neal was putting the pieces onto napkins when the bell above the door jingled, and the last arrivals piled in, including Rumplestiltskin and Belle, who waved at Neal but stayed close to the exit. Spotting them, Leroy signalled Snow and then stood on a chair. Neal put a comforting arm around Emma’s shoulders, and she gave him a grateful grin.

“Excuse me! If I could just have your attention for a minute, please!” Quiet abounded, and Leroy cleared his throat. “As you all know, we’ve come here to honour the memory of a good man. One of the best there ever was. Years ago, King David fought valiantly to free the nations of Carolingia and the Midlands from tyrannical rulers, though he could have chosen to leave it all behind for a simple farm life. He was never harsh on those beneath him, never asked anything of anybody that he wasn’t willing to give of himself, and died to end a deadly menace that threatened to destroy everything we hold dear. He was a brave man, a loving husband, and somebody I was proud to call my friend. He will be missed.” Leroy paused and (if Emma wasn’t much mistaken) disguised a sniffle by pretending to cough. He did let Astrid hold his hand, though, as he raised his glass. “To King David!”

“To King David!”

“To Dad,” Emma said as she clinked glasses with Neal and Henry, who said, “To Gramps.”

“Ah, and before everyone starts to get carried away again!” Leroy shouted over the din. “There is one more thing. Snow, if you will.”

He stepped down from the chair as Snow stood. “My husband gave his life to save our son,” she began, looking just like the fairy-tale queen she was as she articulated perfectly. Emma wondered if she would ever be like that. “I – I never imagined that I would have to do this without him. But I take comfort in the knowledge that David’s memory will live on. In me. In our daughter, our grandson, in every person in this room. And in our son.”

The baby shifted in his sleep. Snow looked down at him, eyes full of love, wonder and sadness. “We, uh, we had settled on a name, David and I. But in light of recent events, I’ve decided to make
one small change. So, people of Storybrooke, I would like to introduce you to my son, Jesse David Nolan. Prince Jesse.”

Emma joined in the applause along with Henry and Neal, fighting the urge to say, Finally! Instead, she waited until Snow sat down again. Jesse was awake now, his little fists flailing as he made gurgling noises. Emma reached over the table, and he grabbed her little finger with his whole hand.

“Hi, Jesse. It’s nice to meet you.”

Next to her, Neal cleared his throat. “Can I ask, what was the small change?”

“Oh. Well, we’d agreed that if it was a boy, we would name him for both of our fathers,” Snow explained. “Jesse for David’s father, Leopold for mine. But, uh, -”

“He’d love it,” said Emma, giving her mother a smile. Snow gave her one back. Then the door rang again, and she saw Regina walk through with Rumplestiltskin. They must have been chatting outside. Well, while we’re on a roll with the announcements …

However, Jesse had a remarkably strong grip for someone just over a day old, so she nudged Neal with her elbow and nodded in the direction of his father, wiggling her finger just in case he didn’t get the message.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, then took a breath and stood. “Uh, excuse me! Just, uh, one more thing. While we seem to be making a lot of announcements, uh, Emma and I have one as well. We’ve decided to get married.”

Both Snow’s and Henry’s eyes went wide as the rest of the patrons gave a cheer. Emma held onto Jesse’s hand, her face going red under her mother’s astounded gaze.

“Yeah, uh, we don’t have a date set yet, but it has been a long time coming. In fact, it’s a bit overdue,” Neal joked, looking as flushed as Emma felt. “So, uh, yeah. Man, I suck at speeches.”

Jesse finally let go of her finger, so Emma tugged on Neal’s jacket to make him face her. “You did great, babe.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Snow and Henry asked at the same time.

“I thought you two were already married,” Robin interjected, having come up behind Neal along with Regina, Belle and Rumplestiltskin.

“Yeah, that was, uh, something your girlfriend wrote into our other memories,” said Neal. Emma smirked as Regina blushed, then felt thoroughly embarrassed as her own face went hot enough to boil an egg when Neal slipped his hand into hers. “This is for real.”

“Well, I, for one, think it’s about time,” said Belle. She pulled Neal into a tight hug, then did the same to Emma. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Belle.”

After having the stuffing hugged out of her already, Emma was glad when Robin and Regina settled for shaking her hand, as did Rumplestiltskin. “Yes, I agree,” he said. “It’s about time.”

*God, that means I’m going to be his daughter-in-law,* Emma realised as he gave her a look of actual approval. *And if he ever marries Belle, I’ll have a mother-in-law who is technically almost three years younger than me.*
Emma had always wanted a family, though, so she supposed she could put up with a little oddness. And it was certainly never going to be boring.

Quite a lot of people came up to offer congratulations and after a while, Emma almost got lost in the crowd. She grabbed her glass, gestured to Neal that she was going to get a refill, but as she headed for the counter, she found herself face-to-face with Hook.

She hadn’t seen him at all since Neal got shot, and he’d handed her heart over to Zelena. She vaguely remembered shouting at him in the hospital. Judging from the red rings around his eyes and the overwhelming odour of rum, he’d dealt with his problems in his usual manner.

“Swan," he greeted, stumbling as he tried to block her, though she hadn’t actually moved. “I – I’d like to apologise. For what I did.”

“Apology accepted," Emma replied. Things had turned out okay in the end, and she really didn’t want to ruin the occasion with a grudge. Hook nodded and glanced over her shoulder, where Neal was now on the receiving end of another crushing cuddle, this time from Henry.

“So, this –” he coughed, still swaying. “You’ve – you’ve decided where your heart truly belongs?”

“I have.”

He nodded again. “In that case … fair day, Emma.”

And he left. She doubted it was the last she’d see of him – she was the sheriff after all, and drunken miscreants were a chief source of trouble. She thought of suggesting that Neal talk to him after he’d sobered up. Unless he had a way of returning to the Enchanted Forest – in which case, he could become a very rich man in a short space of time, as Emma knew there were a lot of people who wanted to go back – then he was stuck in Storybrooke just like the rest of them. Emma sighed. First thing tomorrow, she was checking the files Archie had given her. She had a feeling she’d need a deputy sometime soon.

But first things first …

She got her refill from Granny’s and headed back over to the booth. Neal, though he was disguising it for the sake of their family, wore a few tells Emma recognised as concern – a glance at the door told her who it had been caused by. Rather than tell him not to worry, she kissed him on the cheek, chuckling when he went red, and let him put an arm around her waist. Snow smiled happily, without a hint of grief for the first time in days, while Henry was almost bouncing off the walls like he’d eaten a whole jar of jelly beans. Emma was glad he was sleeping at Regina’s tonight – between the news that his adopted mother was dating a legendary outlaw, the birth of his uncle, and his parents getting married, she couldn’t see him going to bed on time. Neither would she or Neal, but for different reasons.

As she let herself relax against her fiancé’s side and joked with her family, Emma felt a spark. She looked down at her hand, where a little golden firework had erupted from her fingertips and was now doing cartwheels in the air. She grinned, an idea coming to mind.

The crowd fell into silence again as hundreds of little fireworks, coloured gold, blue, white, green, red and yellow, exploded above their heads. Some looked confused, others astonished and some worried, but when they all laughed when they realised the sparklers were perfectly harmless.

“Been practising, have we?” Rumplestiltskin commented dryly.

“Not really,” Emma said, watching her work proudly. “I’m just happy.” She grinned at Neal, at
Henry, at the strange little family she’d found herself a part of. “There really is no place like home.”

Chapter End Notes

So now you know who wrote the note – what do you think Blue is up to?
And yes, David is dead. I will say that this is not the last we’ll see of him, though (by which, I don’t mean flashbacks, AUs or visions. Seriously, this is supposed to be a show about happy endings - of course I'm not gonna leave David dead!). A note on Jesse’s name: the father of the biblical David (a shepherd boy who became king of Israel) was named Jesse.
Stay tuned for “Be All My Sins Remember’d” in the new year, which is Season 4 overhauled. Again, just want to say thanks to everyone who’s commented and left kudos. This has been – I don’t even have the words, guys, and I wish every aspiring writer could experience this kind of welcome.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!